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FACEBOOK-MEDIATED LEARNING: REFINING A RESEARCH IDEA

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KEYWORDS

Web 2.0, social networks, facebook, learning, teaching, higher education.

ABSTRACT

Facebook (FB) is the most popular social network used by undergraduate students. Given its large number of users, could FB be an effective learning environment for these students? Could it contribute to promote and facilitate their learning? This paper presents a research project that aims to study the use of FB in education, and especially in the field of Higher Education.

INTRODUCTION

Nowadays Higher Education (HE) sector struggles with some issues like pressures to greater efficiency, changes in student population, and ongoing emphasis on better learning and teaching methods (Franklin & Harmelen, 2007).

Some aspects of those issues are related to the students. So, we must find ways to get more engagement and participation of students in higher education, and thus get better results.

Web 2.0 (O'Reilly, 2005) is a technology with deep potential for inducing change in the HE sector, allowing greater student independence and autonomy, greater collaboration, and increased pedagogic efficiency (Franklin & Harmelen, 2007).

Technology by itself is seldom a solution to teaching. Concretely in the case of web 2.0, to fully utilize this new innovative technology, new teaching practices need to be explored, towards enhancing education using social software (Szwelnik, 2008).

There are several social networks available in the Web. We can point out some examples such as Facebook (FB), Linkedin, MySpace, Hi5, and Twitter. Among all,

FB is the most popular social networks used by undergraduate students (Madge et al, 2009)

It can be argued that FB is more of a social network or space, rather than a learning environment. On the other hand, it holds many of the elements of computer-mediated communication tools (such as synchronous and asynchronous discussion and sharing pictures and video capabilities) (Kabilan et al, 2010). Therefore, wouldn't it be wise to investigate if this technology can (and how) be used for learning and teaching purposes? Still related with education, but in the HE Institutions perspective, could this Information Technology (IT) be used to improve efforts and performance of HE Institutions, as organizations they are?

As a result of a careful review of scientific literature, we have identified the following research questions:

- How can social networking technology be used in the teaching/learning process?

- How does the use of social networking technology in the teaching/learning process affect the learning process?

- How does the use of social networking technology in the teaching/learning process affect the outcome of teaching?

RESEARCH DESIGN

These research questions will be explored through a systematic study, where we will closely monitor the activities and interactions of FB communities. As we want to observe the perspective of HE teachers, the FB communities will be driven by teachers of this education sector. Each teacher will have his account and their students. We will seek to understand the perspectives, values and practices of participants in the research.

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In order to carry out this study, we intend to follow these steps: To find higher education teachers who want to participate in the research; At the beginning of the experience, conduct semi-structured interviews with them; Throughout a semester, the teachers will develop pedagogical activities using FB communities; During that semester, data will be collected from the experiences carried out by teachers; At the end of the experience, conduct semi-structured interviews with the teachers; Finally, to make a qualitative analysis of the data collected.

Empirical data will be collected through interviews and text from the wall postings of each FB community in the research. The interviews will be recorded, with permission of the participants, and then transcript to text. For the analysis of these empirical materials we will use the Content Analysis technique (Myers, 2009). This technique is based on the encoding of texts and definition of categories and relationships between categories and codes. In this way we look forward to contextualize the communication acts and, from that, to draw our conclusions.

EXPECTED RESULTS

Our work will contribute to increase knowledge on the use of social networking technology in the teaching/learning process.

For teachers, the work will result in a set of pedagogical practices of using FB for educational support. Although it may not be possible to generalize these practices, they can be used as inspiration for other teachers.

For students, especially to the new generation of students, the educational experiences that will be developed and their analysis will increase the knowledge on how to deal with the new generation of students, the ones that were born on the Web era.

For HE Institutions, developing teaching and learning methods based on digital technology resources will increase teachers knowledge about how to deal with the generation of "digital natives" who currently come to the universities, contributing to the engagement and participation of this generation in their learning, and thus obtaining better results in education.

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ELISABETE CARDOSO was born in Braga, Portugal and went to the University of Minho, where she studied computer science and obtained her degree in 1992. She worked for several years in small software companies and industries, and in 2001 she became professor at the University of Minho. In 2009 she obtained her MSc degree in Information Systems, and now she is preparing her doctoral project. Her e-mail address is elisabete@dsi.uminho.pt and her work can be followed at http://reflectingonmythesis.blogspot.com/.