Do social networking technologies have a place in formal learning environments?

Erica Rosenfeld Halverson

Abstract

Purpose – This viewpoint essay seeks to discuss the promise and perils of integrating social networking technologies into formal learning environments.

Design/methodology/approach – The work is grounded in a new literacies perspective and brings insights from learning in participatory cultures to bear in the discussion of social networking sites in formal settings.

Findings – The paper describes three major design trade-offs in the use of social networking sites: privacy versus redundancy when participating in an SNS; whether goals for participation are endogenous or exogenous learning goals; and conception of identity in SNSs as holistic versus identity in formal learning environments as uniquely constructed in the learning setting.

Practical implications – These design trade-offs arise as a result of importing technologies for learners into environments that are better suited to technologies for learning. Therefore, the paper suggests that the goals for learning are more important than the use of any individual technology in the classroom.

Originality/value – K-16 school leaders and administrators should begin to think like designers rather than policy makers when determining whether and how to meaningfully bring social networking technologies into learning environments.

Keywords Networking, Worldwide web, Design, Learning, Schools, Literacy

Paper type Viewpoint

Recently, I was responsible for the design and implementation of a professional development institute at my university for graduate students, instructors, and faculty members who were interested in improving their teaching. I chose “Risk taking in teaching” as the theme for the institute as a way to get college teachers to think about moving their teaching practice forward. Part of risk taking, I surmised, involved thinking about how to meaningfully incorporate technologies into their college classrooms. In particular, I was interested in social networking technologies, given what we know about the amount of time and effort young people spend engaged with social network sites (boyd, 2008; boyd and Ellison, 2007; Greenhow et al., 2009) as well as recent popular education press focused on topics such as the use of Twitter in college classrooms (Perez, 2009; Young, 2009)[1]. Wanting to walk the walk as well as talk the talk I decided to create a Ning community, a closed social networking website, for our group to use. I thought that this opportunity would both demonstrate how technology could be meaningfully incorporated into a learning environment and provide the foundation for conversation about how these kinds of technologies could work in their own classrooms.

Despite general enthusiasm for using technology in the classroom and a lot of time and energy spent discussing the role of technology in the twenty-first century college classroom, I found many challenges associated with meaningfully incorporating social networking technologies into our work. While we can talk at length about the promise of technologies and their role in creating richer, more productive learning environments, when it comes to
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Despite general enthusiasm for using technology in the classroom and a lot of time and energy spent discussing the role of technology in the twenty-first century classroom, I found many challenges associated with meaningfully incorporating social networking technologies into our work. While we can talk at length about the promise of technologies and their role in creating richer, more productive learning environments, when it comes to actually using these tools, I have found that classroom design experiments are often far more complicated than finding the right tool and learning its technical ins and outs.

In this essay I discuss the promise and perils of using social networking technologies in K-16 classrooms. I will use my ning community design experiment as well as a ning community that was developed in one of the youth media arts organization that I study in my work on digital art-making and identity[2] to highlight three key design trade-offs that surface when social networking technologies such as these become a focus of design in a formal learning space:

1. Privacy versus redundancy - Instructors in formal learning settings are often obligated to protect students' privacy in the context of their coursework. However, the further removal of the classroom social networking site is from students' everyday social networking use, the less likely they are to become invested in the network.

2. Endogenous versus exogenous learning goals - There is no doubt that people learn from their engagement with social networking technologies. However, formal learning environments are designed with specific learning goals in mind. These exogenous goals are often inconsistent with the endogenous appeal of the social network site and what people learn from their participation.

3. Identity versus identity - Our understanding of learning from a sociocultural perspective is intricately connected to identity, so much so that identity and learning may be considered interchangeable terms (wenger, 1998). Research on social networking technologies has wholeheartedly embraced this perspective. SNSs favor a more holistic perspective on identity, while formal learning environments tend to focus on identity as it relates to the content and structure of the course.

I will return to each of these in a moment, but first I want to describe a bit about the backdrop for these design trade-offs.

Social networking technologies in the age of “new literacies”

Grounded in the shift from thinking about “literacy” as a print-based, consumptive practice to a multimodal, productive practice, known as “the new literacies” (flichtheith and knobel, 2003, new London Group, 1996), research in the past ten years on social media and learning has exploded. A new literacies perspective broadens the range of what counts as literacy to include a broad array of modalities. Current modalities include the interaction and creation of words, videogames, mash-ups, and movies, although the cataloguing of relevant artifact types is situated in a moment in time (ito et al., 2010). In addition to a shift in what counts as literacy artifacts, a change in how we understand the literacy process is also required. "Reading and writing" is redefined as "understanding and competent control of the representational forms that are becoming increasingly significant in the overall communications environment." (new London Group, 1996, p. 61). In other words, our focus has shifted from learning as consumption to learning as the production of knowledge.

The new literacies movement has opened up the possibility that “participatory cultures” (jenkins et al., 2007), technology-focused social networks that revolve around production, are legitimate sites for learning. We now have rich descriptions of how people participate in and what they learn from participatory cultures, including videogames (lee, 2003; soules, 2008; steinkuehler, 2008), fan communities (jenkins et al., 2007), and creative production experiences (ito et al., 2010). However, these participatory cultures have been studied almost entirely outside the context of formal schooling, setting up a dichotomy between the way we think about learning in classrooms and learning in participatory cultures, especially when it comes to technology use. Halverson and Smith (2010) describe this dichotomy in terms of patterns for technology use. "Technologies for learning" used in schools and other formal learning settings are designed to work at scale — to be employed in learning situations regardless of the skill set or desire of the learner. By contrast, "technologies for learners put the learner in control of the instructional process. Learning goals are determined by the learner, and the learner decides when goals are satisfied and when new goals are in
order” (p. 51). The design trade-offs I describe below are what happens when these patterns of use collide.

**Privacy versus redundancy**

In their review of research on social network sites, Boyd and Ellison (2007) assert that the capacity to publicly display information — connections among people in particular — is a crucial feature of these spaces. This presents a huge problem for formal learning environments, schools in particular; protecting students’ privacy is often the number one concern of teachers, technology staff, and school leaders when adopting a new technology. SNSs are built for users to determine how private they want their online lives to be; formal learning environments cannot afford that luxury. Understanding this cardinal rule of technology use in formal learning environments, the Ning platform has become a popular tool for instructors who want to keep the functionality of an SNS without entering the broader socio-technical system of Facebook or MySpace.

In my professional development workshop, this choice meant that no one used the site. In the case of the youth media arts organization I studied, it meant the development of a robust asynchronous space for young artists and mentors to communicate about their artwork. What accounts for this difference? Ellison et al. (2007) determined that SNSs are most effective at reinforcing already existing offline connections, not forging new ones. The instructors in my workshop did not know each other before the session started and therefore had no social ties to draw from. Facebook users in the group were already regularly participating in an SNS and did not have the energy or bandwidth to participate in another one and non-users preferred our university’s course management system as a way to engage in asynchronous communication. By contrast, for the youth artists I studied, the Ning community became what Boyd and Ellison (2007) call a passion-centric SNS — an interactive, online forum to discuss the development of their artwork. And in fact, their Ning community mirrored the activity of more public online spaces for developing and sharing digital art (e.g. www.listenup.org).

What these two contrasting cases reveal are some design options for the use of an SNS in formal learning. Creating an internal SNS community meets the privacy needs of many learning environments but can lead to a lack of adoption; participants who already use SNSs may not see the need for a new site and non-users may not sufficiently motivated to develop new social ties in this way. In order to meet the needs of current SNS users, one design choice is to create a private group within an already existing site like Facebook. This would address the redundancy issue, and (mostly) maintain privacy, but would force non-users onto a platform that they may not be comfortable joining. This could be especially problematic in K-12 settings where parents may not consent to their children’s participation.

A third design option is to choose a specific SNS platform based on the instructional goal it is designed to meet. In the youth arts organization case, participants were working toward the creation of original digital art and the Ning community allowed participants to post and discuss work in progress; Participating in the Ning community was completing the task. The authentic nature of the tasks in the SNS toward full participation in the learning environment may be a way to address this design trade off.

**Endogenous versus exogenous learning goals**

The distinction I described earlier between technologies for learning and technologies for learners (Halverson and Smith, 2010) points to another design tradeoff to consider in the use of social networking technologies in formal learning environments. The sociocultural turn in research on how people learn has framed learning as an ongoing process, rather than a discreet activity that happens when other activities do not (Wenger, 1998). Formal learning environments are just one space where people learn; what sets them apart from learning more generally is that designers and/or instructors have their own exogenous learning goals for students. In my professional learning case, the goal was for instructors to redesign their own courses by incorporating “riskier” pedagogies. Unfortunately, this goal was not endogenous to the Ning community. In other words, participants could achieve the goal
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**Privacy versus redundancy**

In their review of research on social network sites, Boyd and Ellison (2007) assert that the capacity to publicly display information — connections among people in particular — is a crucial feature of these spaces. This presents a huge problem for formal learning environments, schools in particular: protecting students' privacy is often the number one concern of teachers, technology staff, and school leaders when using SNS. Unfortunately, many of the most popular SNS features (profile building, photo sharing, private messaging) are more difficult to link authentically with instructional goals. In the case of my professional development course, there were many features built into the Ning platform that could have supported the learning goal, customizable profiles allow participants to see who in the group may have relevant expertise, a variety of tools for sharing work with other participants, just-in-time chats with experts to name a few. The key, then, may be to promote features that are integrated with the learning goals of the environment. However, one of the affordances of open platforms is that participants are free to do as they please (Squire, 2006) and may gravitate towards features that do not serve the needs of the learning goal. Attending to which features users already see as interesting and important and determining how participation with these may be endogenous to learning goals could be another way to address this trade-off.

**Identity versus identity**

One of the emergent themes in recent research on social media and learning has been young people's use of these technologies for "identity work" (Buckingham, 2003; Greenhow et al., 2009; Jenkins et al., 2007). In most of this research, identity is conceptualized as a person's "psychosocial understanding of who they are," accomplished as participants "try out" and explore identities through the production of online content, including SNS pages (Greenhow et al., 2009). By contrast, identity work in formal learning environments tends to focus on what I call "identity as": identity as scientist (e.g., Brown, 2004), identity as mathematician (e.g., Cobb, 2004), identity as student (e.g., Oyserman and James, 2008). This conception of identity challenges the broader concept of virtual identity in SNS use, while it can yet not make encounters but also and can make changes to their identity display, it is consistent across situations — identity is the same regardless of the context of an SNS and the psychosocial function participation in virtual spaces serves in the development and display of a functional identity. It would have been unacceptable, for example, for participants in my professional development workshop to include their favorite music, movies, and photos in their profile development? I was hoping the profile would serve to build connections across users in terms of their teaching expertise: in other words, the option to choose a specific SNS platform based on the instructors' interest was designed to meet. In the youth arts organization case, participants were working toward the creation of original digital art and the Ning community allowed participants to post and discuss work in progress. In the Ning community was the task. The authentic nature of the tasks in the SNS toward full participation in the learning environment may be a way to address this design trade-off.

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In his review of the role of video games in learning, Squire (2006) describes video games that have traditionally been used in classrooms as having goals that are exogenous to the context of game-based learning goals of the classroom. He argues for a move toward endogenous games, "in which the context and game play are inexactly linked" (p. 24). The same can be said for SNS use in learning environments. In order to successfully incorporate social networking technologies into formal learning, their use must be tied to attainment of learning goals. Unfortunately, many of the most popular SNS features (profile building, photo sharing, private messaging) are more difficult to link authentically with instructional goals. In the case of my professional development course, there were many features built into the Ning platform that could have supported the learning goal, customizable profiles allow participants to see who in the group may have relevant expertise, a variety of tools for sharing work with other participants, just-in-time chats with experts to name a few. The key, then, may be to promote features that are integrated with the learning goals of the environment. However, one of the affordances of open platforms is that participants are free to do as they please (Squire, 2006) and may gravitate towards features that do not serve the needs of the learning goal. Attending to which features users already see as interesting and important and determining how participation with these may be endogenous to learning goals could be another way to address this trade-off.
outcomes. Large-scale schooling structures – school districts, universities, online schools – often want answers to whether they should employ technologies at scale. Should all the teachers in my district create Ning communities for their courses? Should we offer a training course on Twitter for our faculty? Rather than answer these broader questions, I have presented the primary design trade-offs that emerge when thinking about incorporating SNs meaningfully into formal learning environments and encourage administrators to think more like designers in order to be effective policy makers. Designers should not put the cart before the horse, buying into a specific technology before they have determined what their goal is for their learners. If the goal is to present information and allow students to communicate with the instructor and each other, a course management site can likely serve that purpose. If the goal is to strengthen burgeoning social ties between classmates, then creating a Facebook group could accomplish this, despite potential privacy issues. I encourage readers to think like designers rather than policy makers, to think in terms of trade-offs rather than finding out “what works” in order to make mindful decisions about the use of social networking technologies in classrooms and schools.

Notes

1. For a comprehensive definition, history, and description of social network sites, see boyd and Ellison (2007).

2. My research work on youth participation in digital art-making is summarized in Halverson (n.d.) and Halverson and Gibbons (2010).

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References

About the author
Erica Rosenfeld Helsper is an Assistant Professor in the School of Education at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. She is a member of the Games + Learning + Society research group, where she studies how people learn to make art about the stories of their lives and the role this process plays in identity construction and participation in literacy practices. In 2010, she received the Jan Hawkins Early Career Award from the American Educational Research Association for humanistic research and scholarship in learning technologies. Erica Rosenfeld Helsper can be contacted at erhelsper@education.wisc.edu

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