

Adult Learners and Their Use of Social Networking Sites

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Abstract. The goal of this study was to explore the benefits associated with incorporating social networking functionalities within an adult's learning experience. Which social networking sites do they use most frequently? What are the intended purposes of their use? What kind of experience do adult learners have when utilizing social networking services? Why or why not are adult learners using the services provided by the social networking sites? This paper reports a survey conducted among adult learners to identify the answers for the above questions. We believe that the findings from this survey will contribute to understanding future learning design expectations and arrangements.

Keywords: Social Networking, Adult Learner, Education.

1 Introduction

Social networking services, such as Facebook and Google+, have flooded mainstream media with their ability to collaborate with many interrelated individuals and organizations. In recent years, the services provided by these sites and their concepts have been leveraged as a supplement for communication in the academic world.

Educators are always looking for new ways to convey information. Conventional digital methods, especially those that Fernando [1] note as “webinars, flash demos, and animated-to-death PowerPoint slides,” have become commonplace in today's information deliverance in academia. Newer applications in the Web 2.0 world, such as social networking sites, blogs, and wikis, have caught the eye of academia for its framework of information and collaboration.

Educational institutions are weighing in on the benefits of web-based social networking applications, as they offer robustness and compatibility with diverse platforms. In addition, these institutions are incorporating social networking theories within education, based on the benefits of enhanced collaboration. With these advancements, these new methods of information deliverance not only open windows of opportunity, but also create challenges for many learners.

The purpose of this article is to report the preliminary findings of a study we conducted among adult university students. We developed a survey to identify the most frequently used social networking services (SNS) among students, and reasons for which they use SNS. We believe these findings will contribute to the understanding of future learning design expectations and arrangements.

This paper is divided into five main sections. Following the brief introduction, we first review related literature on adult learner and social networking services. We then present the research design in detail. Section 4 presents the results and findings from the survey. The directions for future research is presented at the end.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Participation in Higher Education

Education can be divided into, but not limited to, three types: basic, secondary, and tertiary. For the purpose of this research, basic is defined as primary school, elementary school, middle school, and junior high school. Secondary is defined as high school, prep school, and vocational school; post-secondary is defined as college and vocational colleges; and tertiary is defined as education beyond college, including graduate school, post graduate school, and professional school [2]. Within this paper, secondary and tertiary will be held synonymous (definition and statistics) with the term “higher education.”

Adult learners “constitute a majority of students in higher education” [3]. Over the decades, there has been a noticeable increase in enrollment of adult learners in higher education.

2.2 Adult Learners

The adult learner’s plethora of needs and motivations to earn a higher education has increased the rate of enrollment in colleges and universities. According to US Department of Education[4], from 2000 to 2010, the enrollment of students below age 25 increased by 34 percent, while students 25 and over increased 42 percent. Future projections for 2010 to 2020 show an 11 percent increase in enrollments for students under 25, and a 20 percent increase in enrollments of students 25 and over. Vocational courses were dominated by 45 to 64 year olds, following 25 to 34 year olds. 52 percent of graduate students were enrolled part time.

Many researchers have tried to define the characteristics of adult learners [5][6]. The classification of learners enrolled in higher education can be disseminated into many categories, such as gender, enrollment status, and age. Dean [6] separates this distinction into the following criteria, where a person can meet one or all of the criteria to be considered an adult: (1) physical development and maturity, classifies an adult in their physiological milestone of growth and age; (2) legal age-related definitions, describing an adult by governing laws; (3) the social roles defined by society’s perceived notion of responsibilities that transition a child to an adult; and (4) internal factors which describes mental development stages achieved.

Advancements in technology, along with the ease of user interfaces, have changed the usage of computers from a novelty to daily life. Although there is progress, there are still many users, notably adults, who are not comfortable transacting online.

Badke [5] agrees that there are barriers that can inhibit an adult learner's progress, and concurs the transition of analog to "the digital world requires a whole new way of thinking.

Within this study, we refer to an adult learner as age 34 years or older. Traditional students are defined in two age brackets, 16-21 and 22-34 due to their small gap in continuous years enrolled in secondary to post-secondary school. This paper will focus on the experience of adult learners.

2.3 Social Networking Sites

Social networking site usage has grown in the number of users, the dollar amount of revenue, and the number of enhanced features and applications offered. According to Alexa.com [7], a website that tracks web traffic, the top 10 websites on the Internet include search engines and online collaboration tools. Examples of these sites include online encyclopedias, such as Wikipedia; media collaboration sites such as YouTube; and social networking sites such Facebook, Google+, and Twitter. Facebook ranks second and Twitter places the tenth for the most popular websites visited.

Social networking applications promote online interaction and communication by providing features such as free or low cost profile space, facilities for uploading content (e.g. links, photos, music), messaging in various forms, and the ability to make connections to other people. The types of relationships found on social networking sites include, but are not limited to, friendships, professional, academic, and location [8].

2.4 Social Networking Sites in Academia

The growth in higher education in conjunction with the changing student population requires an evaluation of the instructional methodologies provided to potential students. In the past, classrooms took place face-to-face in a physical classroom. However in recent years classrooms have progressed from an invasive analog scheme to a digital one, and institutions have begun to supplement courses with learning management systems and have since then, begun to supplement LMS' with online collaboration tools, such as Facebook.

Integrating classrooms with social networking applications can be seen as beneficial to students. Liccardi et al [9] note that the social interaction within an online framework can help university students share experiences and collaborate on relevant topics. Lockyer and Patterson [10] suggests that social networking sites provide informal learning, because of the ability to share ideas, provide peer feedback, and engage in critical thinking. But will the learners really use these SNS for learning purposes?

3 Survey and Participants

A survey questionnaire was created to collect respondents' past experience of SNS. The questions are grouped into four main parts: Demographics, Work Experience,

Computer Experience, and Social Networking Experience. Within Social Networking Experience, questions regarding the participants' general social network usage, reasons of using the social network sites, and experience in using social network sites for informal learning and formal learning.

The survey was distributed online to adult learners in several accelerated undergraduate classes at a mid-Atlantic university. Students were asked to submit the questionnaire on a voluntary basis. At the end, 43 completed questionnaires were received. Among 43 participants, 40 (93%) were female. Participants' ages range from 23 to 54 with the average being 38. The majority of participants (33, 76.7%) were part-time students, 39 (90.7%) were employed full-time at the time of the survey. Participants have been employed between one year and 30 years with the average of 7. The majors of the participants varied, including nursing, business, and computer science. 13 participants reported that they have never enrolled in a hybrid or distance learning course in the past. The majority (25, 58.1%) of participants rated themselves as intermediate computer users, while 16 (37.2%) were basic users who only knows how to surf the internet and some light word processing. The majority (38, 88.4%) of the participants reported to using a computer daily. 40 (93%) reported to have at least one social networking site account, such as Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, etc. For the ones that did not have a social networking account, they either do not know how to use it or not have time for it.

4 Results and Discussions

Among all the participants who reported to have social networking accounts, we've asked them to list all the sites that they have accounts with. The majority of them reported to have been using Facebook (36, 90%) followed by Google+ (12, 30%), Twitter (7, 17.5%), other social networking sites (5, 12.5%), and LinkedIn (4, 10%). When being asked about the frequency of using the sites, Facebook still takes the lead with 27 (67.5%) reported using it the most frequently. Even though some students reported to have a Twitter account, none of them reported to use it frequently.

When being asked about the reason of using social networking services, the majority of the participants reported to have been using it for sharing of opinions, for personal socialization, or widening their perspective in some way. Table 1 below shows the descriptive statistics of the reasons for using social networking services.

In addition to the general reasons of using social networking services, participants were also asked to indicate whether they are using different website for different purposes. For example, LinkedIn has been promoted as a social networking mainly for professionals while Facebook has been viewed more for creating/maintaining personal connections. Will the participants also view these different services as defined by the site itself? Ten (40%) of the participants chose Facebook and Google+ while only 5 (20%) selected LinkedIn as their choice for understanding business environment. Google+ has also been selected as the top choice (9, 42.9%) to "better your job prospects" with Facebook and LinkedIn tied in the second place, while no one selected

Table 1. Types of Content

	SA	A	N	D	SD
Understand business environment	1 (2.5%)	8 (20%)	15 (37.5%)	8 (20%)	8 (20%)
Create an id and sense of belongings to a community different from your real life	0 (0%)	12 (30%)	10 (25%)	11 (27.5%)	7 (17.5%)
Better your job prospects	3 (7.5%)	13 (32.5%)	8 (20%)	8 (20%)	8 (20%)
Keep yourself updated on current events	8 (20%)	21 (52.5%)	3 (7.5%)	1 (2.5%)	7 (17.5%)
Be part of a formal discussion forum	4 (10%)	16 (40%)	9 (22.5%)	5 (12.5%)	6 (15%)
Entertain yourself	11 (27.5%)	22 (55%)	4 (10%)	1 (2.5%)	2 (5%)
Stay in touch with family/friends/contacts you see a lot	17 (42.5%)	19 (47.5%)	1 (2.5%)	1 (2.5%)	2 (5%)
Make plans with your friends/contacts	10 (25%)	20 (50%)	3 (7.5%)	4 (10%)	3 (7.5%)
Build opinions	4 (10%)	11 (27.5%)	13 (32.5%)	6 (15%)	6 (15%)
Make new friends/contacts	4 (10%)	17 (42.5%)	6 (15%)	8 (20%)	5 (12.5%)
Stay in touch with family/friends/contacts you rarely see in person	15 (37.5%)	24 (60%)	1 (2.5%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Flirt with someone	2 (5%)	3 (7.5%)	9 (22.5%)	11 (27.5%)	15 (37.5%)
Share opinion for educational purpose	1 (2.5%)	19 (47.5%)	9 (22.5%)	5 (12.5%)	6 (15%)
Share opinion for work purpose	1 (2.5%)	15 (37.5%)	9 (22.5%)	7 (17.5%)	8 (20%)
Share opinion for political purpose	3 (7.5%)	7 (17.5%)	10 (25%)	14 (35%)	6 (15%)

Twitter for this purpose. To keep updated on current events, the majority reported to use Facebook (22, 66.7%) and Google+ (17, 51.5%). Facebook also was selected as the top choice for formal discussion forum, entertainment, stay in touch with others, and make plans with friends. When being asked whether they would share opinions with others for educational, work, or political purpose, the majority also selected Facebook followed by Google+. Even though some participants have accounts on multiple social networking sites, they are not utilized equally. The use of the social networking sites are not always corresponding to the established image of the service

provided. Even though Google+ is a relatively new platform for social networking, it has gained popularity among adult students.

Seventeen (42.5%) reported that they have used social networking service to get informal learning by posting questions to solicit help from others. The reasons for not using it for this purpose ranged from "never thought of it", "never needed help", "wanted to keep question private", to "did not know it was allowed", "did not think would get a correct response", and "don't think social network is appropriate". 10 (43.5%) reported that they would like to try getting help through a social network if the question is related to their study.

For the ones that reported to have solicited help through social network, Facebook was their first choice. However, most of the questions they posted were not education related. The majority of them reported that they would likely to do it again in the future. They have reported getting help through a social network was fun, helpful while also noted that it sometimes may not receive well-constructed responses.

When being asked their preference of using social networks to share opinions for class related purposes, instead of posting questions on their own wall, they prefer more by asking questions to the instructor directly, check updates posted by the instructor, share resources found online with others, or using a group page for a group project.

For those who reported that they prefer not to use a social networking site for learning purposes, 22 (51.2%) reported to prefer not to mix their studies with personal life, while 3 (7%) think social networking is a waste of time, or don't have an account and don't intend to create one.

5 Conclusions and Future Work

This article explores the reasons of using networking sites, benefits realized by adult learners by utilization of social networking sites, and potential ways to incorporate learning activities through social networking for adult learners. Over the past decades, the participation of adults enrolled in higher education has increased due to psychological, technological, and environmental reasons. These drives, along with others, have changed what we know of the traditional student.

Many adults find themselves enrolled in programs where technology is the primary mode of information deliverance and collaboration. For many of these adult learners whom have not been enrolled in school for a long period of time, have difficulty with the transition from a traditional to a blended or purely online classroom. Traditional students are advantageous because they have had technology embedded in their daily lives. However, many adult students are not natives of technology, and find the transition from an analog to digital lifestyle challenging.

Although social networking has been popular for its entertainment and networking value, many schools and instructors have embarked on supplementing their courses with social networking sites; taking advantage of the online collaboration tools and additional functionalities. This survey confirmed that although adult learners may not

be expert users of computers, but may start getting into the arena. In addition, some adult learners have realized the potential benefit of "networking" by not only simply reading from others posts but solicit help from others as well. Moreover, it also indicates the potential of incorporating social networking for learning purposes.

Although many adult learners indicated their willingness of using social networking for learning purposes, there is still some resistance. For example, some respondents were concerned about the mix of study and their personal life, while some regard social network as a "waste of time" or simply don't want to create one account just for this purpose. It could be suggested that adult learners need to balance their work, home, and study while having the responsibly of financing their own studies. With this accountability, adult learners may not want the burden of using a social networking site when they have other priorities. Therefore, when designing social networking activities in classrooms (hybrid or distance learning), it is important to consider alternative approaches. In addition to their lifestyle, adult learners may not be as technologically savvy to use these types of sites, as Lockyer and Patterson [10] suggest lecturers may have to play a considerable technical support role in helping students who are new to such technologies.

The preferences collected in the survey also suggests that the incorporation of social networking in the learning process may focus on building the community within the class while have the potential to extend to outside world with the instructor's control. Students prefer to get information from the instructor or communicate with the instructor within a specific area (e.g. an established group).

The fact that adult learners in this survey view Facebook and Google+ as the sites for getting business information and establish connections rather than LinkedIn, suggests that they may view social networking sites differently from what the sites promotes. How to attract users to create an effective social network remains a question for the designer of SNS. In addition, companies may want to think about establishing and the maintenance of their presence on those sites.

Although participants expressed their willingness to utilize SNS for getting help from others, they have also identified potential problems associated with this kind of activities -- how to control the quality of the answers. If we ever encourage students' use of SNS for informal learning -or get to help from others- how do we ensure the quality and creditability of the answers? Educate students on how to evaluate the quality and creditability of the work is needed. Future work should involve the design of potential activities based on the findings from this study and assess if students with social networking site usage in their classrooms performed better than students that did not have a social networking site integrated in their course.

In conclusion, this study explored the adult learner's use of social networking sites, the reasons of using/not using the social network, and potential ways of using social networking sites for educational purposes. However, this survey had a relatively low response. Future studies in getting larger samples of the adult learner's opinion and a comparison between the adult learner and traditional students is needed.

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