Get out of MySpace!

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ABSTRACT

To understand the student experience on social software, the research aims to explore the disruptive nature and opportunity of social networking for higher education. Taking four universities, the research: (1) identifies the distinction between the students’ current usage of social software; (2) reports on the students’ experience on opportunities and challenges of learning with social software; and (3) introduces principles as a guideline in using social software for learning. Quantitative research methods (web-based questionnaires) were incorporated to investigate the pattern of learners’ usage. Qualitative methods (student interviews) were adopted to clarify and further inform this relationship and their attitudes towards social software for learning. The results demonstrate a massive use of educational technology with distinct divide between the learning space and personal space. Student voices reveal that the central problem of such divide is due to the contrast perception and experience of ‘learning/studying and social life’. We argue that online learning and social personas may overlap but that learning needs to be designed so that it addresses the individual preferences to combine or separate the two domains. The paper concludes with a few principles of learning with social software grounded in students’ experience and Vygotsky’s paradigm.

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1. Introduction

There are vast opportunities for students, academics and the institutions in using social software for learning, teaching and assessment. Based on different schools of literature reviews, the University of Glamorgan summarises the benefits of how social software enhanced learning and teaching experiences in higher education (refer to Table 1). Dawson (2008) explores and demonstrates the relationship between student’s sense of community and the position within the formed social network. He provides recommendation to educators to embed computer-mediated communications in teaching practices for learner participation and progression in the curriculum. Hrastinski (2009) further asserts that online student participation is a complex process of taking part and maintaining relations with others. Online participation is supported by physical and psychological tools, and is supported by all kinds of engaging activities (p. 78). Social software may provide such a flexible environment for learner participation.

Higher education today seems to highlight the value of the emergence of social software (Dawson, 2006, 2008; Murugesan, 2007). However, the debates on individual privacy (Rosenblum, 2007) and students’ recognition/rejection of social software for learning may increase simultaneously. It is a common practice to provide personal information such as name and email, when a user signs up for social software. Educators and students may have reservation about this basic requirement due to the privacy and data protection issues. Cole (2009) further describes a ‘failed experiment’ that embed social software to support student engagement for a third year undergraduate module. She asserts that social software (e.g. Wikis) is perceived differently in an educational context, compared with ordinary personal usage and this discourages student adoption. Tams (2006) also reports that the students’ self-directed social learning have a limited influence on their self-efficacy. To understand these arguments, an investigation from students’ perspective is necessary. Using the analogy of a student interviewee’s assertion, “get out of MySpace”, the aim of this paper is to explore the disruptive nature and opportunities of social software from students’ experience.

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2. Research methods and samples

Adelman, Kemimis, and Jenkins (1980) identifies that case study methodology is able to effectively evaluate the flexibility of reality in the complex educational environments. This study incorporated a single analysis across multiple case studies with qualitative-quantitative interactive continuum methodology (Newman & Benz, 1998; Yin, 2003). Taking four anonymous universities, the research aimed to (1) identify the distinction between the students' current usage of social software; (2) report on the students' experience on opportunities and challenges of learning with social software; and (3) introduce principles as a guideline in using social software for learning. Quantitative research methods (online questionnaires on http://www.surveyshare.com) were incorporated to investigate the pattern of students' usage in four universities. Qualitative methods (interviews) were adopted to clarify and further inform this relationship and their attitudes towards social software for learning. There are 76 responses from the questionnaires and 14 students' voices from the recorded face-to-face interviews. All interviews lasted between 40 min and 2.5 h. The names of the interviewees as well as the institutions are anonymous due to the consideration of confidentiality and ethics. Tables 2 and 3 present the basic respondents' profile by gender and general disciplinary background (see Table 4).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
<th>The benefit of social software for higher education.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students</td>
<td>Academics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Widely spread, easy and free usage without much support from the University</td>
<td>All students' benefits listed at the left column</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enhance communication skills, widening participation and social engagement and collaboration</td>
<td>More flexible and user friendly than Blackboard in certain way</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encourage peer-support and review</td>
<td>Stimulate more interesting ideas in teaching and assessment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Create learning interest through community of learning</td>
<td>Meet individual's need than services provided internally by the University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Create educational engagement and sense of ownership when the learning process is published on the web. Able to retain access to their work, communication and learning history after they leave the University</td>
<td>Simple steps to get peers or other researchers to be involved in a research group or the same service for information and media sharing, and opportunities for instant feedback</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Blackey & Chew, 2009).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2</th>
<th>Respondents' profile – gender.</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender: (gender)</td>
<td>Number of respondents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0 Respondents skipped question #2</td>
<td>76 Responses total</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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<tr>
<th>Table 3</th>
<th>Respondents' profile – faculty.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The nature of your faculty: (faculty)</td>
<td>Number of respondents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science, Engineering or Information Technology</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Sciences, Art, Education, Law, Business and Accountancy</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medical, Health or Sport</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0 Respondents skipped question #3</td>
<td>76 Responses total</td>
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</table>

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<tr>
<th>Table 4</th>
<th>Respondents' profile for face-to-face interviews.</th>
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<tr>
<td>Interviewees</td>
<td>HEI 1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discipline</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science-based</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Science-based</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students (N = 14)</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3. Results and discussion

3.1. The students’ current usage of social software and the top reasons of using educational technology for learning

To identify the distinction between the students’ current usage of social software and reasons for using educational technology for learning, two questions were asked to the students: (1) How often do you use the educational technology listed below, within your learning process? (This would include preparing and submitting course work and assessment feedback) (2) What is your reason for using the educational technology mentioned in the previous question?

Not surprisingly, Fig. 1 demonstrates that Power Point and VLE are the most commonly used educational technology in the four higher educational institutions. Most of the student interviewees have registered with several social software such as Facebook, blog and MySpace. However, more than 70% of the respondents rarely or never use social software for learning according to the responses in Fig. 1 (refer to the figures in circle a). This phenomenon demonstrates a clear divide of social software usage for learning purposes and for social life privately. Among the usage of social software for learning, Wikis is in the first rank of all – more than 40% of the respondents always or often use Wikis within the learning process in Fig. 1 (refer to the figures in circle b).

Fig. 2 shows the reasons of why students would like to use educational technology for learning. There is more than 90% of the respondents agree or strongly agree with the reasons: (1) enjoy the use of technologies and online activities (refer to the figures in circle c: 94.74%); (2) the need for more communications platform with peers and students (refer to the figures in circle d: 96%) and (3) peer sharing and encouraging (refer to the figures in circle d: 93.34%). Interestingly, the nature of social software fits into these top three reasons of the technology enhanced learning experience. Nevertheless, there is a significant gap if we compared the ‘usage of social software for learning’ to the ‘reasons of using educational technology for learning’. It could be argued that such gap may be caused by the emerging social software that is new to educators. Other factors and issues may also appear to contribute to the obstacle. A further investigation for the challenges and opportunities of learning with social software are necessary.

3.2. The disruption – the challenges and opportunities of social software for learning

There are four main themes emerged from the students’ voices during the interview: (1) the separation of life and studying; (2) originality and copyright issues; (3) sense of information flooded; (4) time constraint based on their disconfirming experiences and (5) lecturers are not up-to-date and may not know how to integrate and make use of social software.

![Fig. 1. The responses of the current usage of social software for learning.](image-url)
3.2.1. The separation of life and studying

In the context of higher education, there is a general campaign and trend for life-long learning, inquiry-based learning, peer-assisted learning and learning in groups for social constructivists. On the other hand, there is an interesting argument appeared from the students’ voices in this research – they refuse to use social software for learning due to their separation of ‘life’ and ‘studying’ or ‘home’ and ‘lectures’. Learning is a ‘painful’ process whereas social life is pleasure to many students. One of them has a strong and disconfirming assertion:

Interviewer: “Do you think that social software can provide a more holistic learning for you if they were embedded in the learning module?”

Student C1: “No! Get out from my space! . . . social software is for fun you know, not for study!”

Many educational giants such as Dewey and Vygotsky claim that learning in a social constructive approach and working in group are substantial. One’s knowledge is developmentally constructed in socio-cultural interactions by languages and we cannot separate socio-cultural life and learning according to Vygotsky (Cortazzi & Hall, 1999; Chew, Jones, & Turner, 2008). In reality, students (or even educators) may have a clear divide between “life” and “studying”. A question was asked during the paper’s presentation of the last Computer-assisted Learning Conference (CAL, 2009) – do you normally separate social life and studying/work? More than a half of the audiences’ indicate an affirmative response. We have no intention to involve in the arguments of should we or not to separate social life and studying/working. All individual has different preferences. We would definitely argue that learning and social personas may overlap but that learning needs to be designed so that it addresses the individuals’ preferences to combine or separate the two domains. At this point, we would like to assert that the main disruptive nature of social software for learning is to challenge the divide between social life and higher educational process. It has provided an option of environment for both educators and students to fully make use of the social connection to enhance learning and teaching experience. Social software makes both educators and students to have further connection and communication with each other or with people outside the classroom. However, it is a challenge for educators and students to have a choice to combine or separate learning and social life, either partially or completely.

3.2.2. Originality and copyright issues

There seems to be some confusion over who is the original contributor of an idea that is published on social software such as blogs and Wikis. Students may have difficulties to identify the original sources and make academic references from there. Consider the following voices:

“...it (Wikis or blogs) is easy rather than the official references, only up to a limit l can trust the sources” ~ Student D1.

“...if everybody shared their ideas and who do you pick up which is the originally first voice up about certain topic? You know, and maybe certain ideas you came across from reading, not your personal thoughts, where you got your ideas from and things like that. That would be good to have it without this concern.” ~ Student D5.

Uploading and storing material for learning and teaching purposes to external social software sites is increasingly a common practice within and outside most case studies of the research. However, it is a good practice to verify those published materials on social software sites – to ensure they do not contain material which infringes someone’s copyright (Blackey & Chew, 2009).
3.2.3. Sense of information flooded and time constraint
It is exciting to see the diversity of views and discussions. However, it is not a recent issue with too much information that is available online. Students experience the sense of information flooded and time constraint as described next,

“It is certainly interesting to work with social software...there will be too much information perhaps.” ~ Student D3

“There are too many activities in the university...we are the ‘machine’ of organising / joining activities and the ‘machine’ of doing assignments...Unless you are very free or interested in them, otherwise you already very tired after all sorts of activities. You will have no energy or time to post any notes or join in any online discussion for learning.” ~ Student A2

Some students may not keen in additional “e-tivities” since there are so many physical activities to be involved. Only by individual interest or with extra time availability, students would go further to participate in online activities. In contrast to the massive take-up of certain social software such as Facebook among student cohort, the issue of time-consuming could be related to the attitude of separating social life and learning. Students may perceive Facebook or blog as personal and social pleasure and has nothing to do with the curriculum learning.

Lecturers are not up-to-date and may not know how to integrate and make use of social software

Social software is not the cause of an issue but the lecturer is. Students further expressed their wish list from a pedagogical perspective. For example, students hope their lecturers could teach innovatively, teach with educational passion and keep themselves up-to-date:

“I hope the lecturer can teach other than the conventional way, more things other than the subject area itself. I think many lecturers are not up-to-date!” ~ Student A2

“The problem now is not because of the technology...the problem is the lecturers themselves. The lecturers do not know how to integrate all these. Perhaps the lecturers know how to use them but it is useless if they don’t have passion in education.” ~ Student A1

Other than the challenges discussed above, there are also two main opportunities emerged from the investigations: (1) create community of inquiry that motivate learning experience and (2) independent learning experience for better employability. Social software especially the online communities were mentioned by students:

“...I think that’s actually good in creating a community feeling about learning...they could be more interesting.” ~ Student D5

“Wikipedia is an awesome tool. I use that a lot...as in giving background or giving you an idea and overall view...some of my courses also have programming and software writing, it’s very useful to get into e-community, forums and discuss. Basically you can post a question and they will answer you.” ~ Student D4

“It’s very easy to find information from Wikipedia because everything is there.” ~ Student D5

From the students’ experience, it appears that the “feeling” or sense of community is interesting and motivating. It could be argued that it is worrying about the academic integrity for Wikipedia or getting ‘answer’ from e-forums without further digesting. However, the peer-support from the community is very useful to students learning experience in a social community which they feel belong to.

3.2.4. Independent learning experience for employability
In the study, students highlight how social software enhances their learning experience – that is to promote independent learning for employability, for example:

“...it actually encourages you to find the knowledge by yourselves, not making you so depended to have a person telling you what to do and what to think which is a very important thing out from the university...I feel that one lesson I have learnt in the university is that, we don’t know everything, you go to find it out yourself, that is something you need in job...I can’t depend on a lecturer or a boss to tell me, just do this and it will works. That’s something that I like Wikipedia, e-learning...have a lot of resources.” ~ Student D4

“I think it can be beneficial...in the real working environment, you have to be more independent. It certainly a strength if you are able to be independent in your work and I think that will be part of your university life.” ~ Student D5

In the past, one may practice the tabula rasa where “students were assumed to be at a blank state – know nothing about the subject; lecturer preaches and students learn solely from the lecturer’s instilling. Students develop knowledge ‘deposited’ by lecturer”. Today, independent learning such as reflective, problem-based and inquiry-based learning is emphasised in higher education. Such skill sets are critical to enhance employability of a student. Table 5 summarise the challenges and opportunities.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Challenges</th>
<th>Opportunities</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social life vs. studying – “Get out of MySpace!”</td>
<td>Create community of inquiry that motivate learning experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time consuming – online/offline activities vs. personal interest</td>
<td>It appears that the “feeling” or sense of community is interesting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lecturers do not know how to integrate and make use of social</td>
<td>Independent learning experience for employability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>software vs. students expect for innovative and up-to-date</td>
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<tr>
<td>intellectual property, originality and copyright issues</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sense of information flooded</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Table 5
Summary of findings for research question [2].
alternately to design curriculum-only social interaction within the particular course and time frame (that could possibly divide “life and studying”) – if so, what are the available social software provide such varies and flexible functions?

Vygotsky asserts that the learning process is facilitated by a more-skilled peer or educator through socio-cultural interactions (Cortazzi & Hall, 1999; Jennifer & Monfries, 1995) – the Zone of Proximal Development. Principally we agree with Vygotsky’s claim. Based on the reflection from the research findings, we would further assert that, in higher educational context, both students and educators could also have a choice to either separate them or to combine their life and studying to a certain level (somewhere between X and Y in Fig. 3). We label this choice as the continuum of “socio-learning divide” as depicted next.

Certainly we do not argue that which point at the continuum would provide the better learning experience. This is left to the individual educator or student to decide. Our argument, at this point, in that social software has become part of the social life and educational ecosystem for students. However, how does the current social software design and development being attentive to individual socio-learning divide and supporting them by giving them a choice? We argue that online learning and social personas may overlap but that learning needs to be designed so that it addresses the individual preferences to combine or separate the two domains. Above all, how to make the students to believe in this / how to make the lecturers to practice this is a challenge.

4. Social software for learning – the institutional consideration

Cole (2009) discusses a series of insights ‘which help educators to understand the pitfalls of integrating social technologies in educational contexts’ (p. 141). Blackey and Chew (2009) highlight the key issues and considerations for using social software in learning, teaching and assessment based on various schools of literature review. The findings and reflections in this study challenge the current design and development of social software and the educational expectation that students/educators should either combine or separate social life and studying/working. With the consideration of socio-learning divide, we further suggest a few principles of learning with social software grounded in learners’ experience and Vygotsky’s paradigm. These principles act as a guideline for institutional consideration in using social software for learning:

1. Introduce and integrate community of inquiry (social life + study) in learning enhanced by social software, e.g. UoG Facebook (2009) provides a social group to potential and current students for both learning and social life.
2. Promote independent learning environment with social software, e.g. embed collaborative work using Wikis, reflective blog and discussion forum.
3. Provide more evidence from learner experience and expectation to support the lecturers’ ABC (awareness before change), e.g. consider further institutional research based on student expectation and experience to inform a stronger case for change.
4. Consider Intellectual property, privacy, originality and copyright issue, e.g. Consider to develop an institutional social software policy for learning.
5. Embed social software in learning, teaching and assessment may lead to many opportunities. As such, it is necessary for an university to commit to support academics as follows:
   a. Create the community of inquiry; promote social software for student motivation and engagement, both academically and socially, in the learning process.
   b. Provide support for academics at all stage of social software usage for learning, teaching and assessment.
   c. Evidences from learners’ experiences on social software are pertinent to the policy. This includes specific reference to how social software could contribute to improving learning engagement.
   d. Recognise the socio-learning divide and adopt social software that would support such divide.
   e. Consider a range of principles, considerations and terms of conditions for the usage of social software, and provide related information for a fair boundary in terms of students or academics being neither advantaged nor disadvantaged by the use of social software in education.

5. Conclusions

The study demonstrates a massive use of educational technology such as Power Point, VLE and Wikis with distinct divide between the learning space and personal space in four case studies. We would assert that the nature of social software fits into these top three reasons of the technology enhanced learning experience indicated by students in four institutions. Nevertheless, there is a significant gap if we compared the ‘usage of social software for learning’ to the ‘reasons of using educational technology for learning’. Five main issues derived from students’ voices during the interview: (1) the separation of life and studying; (2) originality and copyright issues; (3) sense of information flooded; (4) time constraint based on their disconfirming experiences and (5) lecturers are not up-to-date and may not know how to integrate and make use of social software. On the other hand, there are two primary benefits and opportunities brought by social software: (1) create community of inquiry that motivates learning experience and (2) independent learning experience for better employability.

Students and educators could also have a choice to either separate or to combine their life and studying to a certain level. We suggest this choice using an analogy of continuum of “socio-learning divide”. The findings illustrate that the central problem of such divide is due to the contrast perception and experience of 'learning/study and social life'. This gap was further exploited with the influential educational theorist of this learning approach, Vygotsky, who asserts that the learning process is facilitated by more-skilled peer or educator through
socio-cultural interactions (Cortazzi & Hall, 1999; Jennifer & Monfries, 1995). One shall not separate social life and learning according to Vygotsky. We further argue that online learning and social personas may overlap but that learning needs to be designed so that it addresses the individual’s preferences to combine or separate the two domains. The lecturers’ issues (i.e. lecturer is not up-to-date and do not know how to integrate technology with learning and teaching) were highlighted by some students. Social software is not about technology or computer system. It is an ideal that drive the student/educators to reflect their learning and teaching practice. We would urge that educator should be keenly aware of the learner’s personal characteristics and social milieu in addition to the teaching activities, and to design and facilitate such social and cultural experiences.

References


