

Social Networking as a Tool for Personal and Professional Realization: Ning, WikiEducator, WiZiQ, and Moodle

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***Abstract:** The function of the World Wide Web combined with easy and increasingly widespread access has emerged as a force for new modes of learning outside the control of the educational establishment. Not only is there increased access to facts, but a greater likelihood that the learner will encounter discrepant positions and information that force them to think critically, creatively and collaboratively. Different points of view are encountered as are diverse cultural worlds. And importantly, learners are exposed to opportunities to network and communicate and to engage in mutual learning activities. These activities are under the power of the learner and by their choice and will. They open opportunities for personal and professional growth and success. This presentation will focus on an illustrative case study in social networking that resulted in creating a professional development workshop for global community learners.*

***Keywords:** social networking, proceedings, MOODLE, NING, WiZiQ, Wikieducator*

1 Introduction

The evolution of Web 2.0 technology and its inherent constructivist nature has impacted the development of digital learning/teaching environments, personal networks and opportunities for collaborative projects among educators. Course Management or Learning Management Systems (LMS) have shifted dramatically from only content delivery environments to interactive, collaborative, self-managed learning settings. The former condition is best represented by the widely used course management system called “Web CT” (now Blackboard). The newer constructivist path is currently best represented by a dramatically different program called “Moodle.” It is instructive that WebCT was considered to be a radical innovation in its early days. But, in the face of competition from the open-source and multi-faceted Moodle, we can see WebCT as comparatively deficient in interactive and collaborative capacities. There is not only a difference in features, but the two programs support radically different pedagogies: a pedagogy of ready-made content delivery (Web CT) and a pedagogy of free expression, collaborative meaning construction and information exchange (Moodle, Joomla, Haiku, etc.). Social network services and tools allow educators and learners to create connections with the experts and/or with co-thinkers and provide opportunities for collaborative projects uniting specialists from all over the world.

2 Background, Definitions and Experience

Web 2.0 can best be understood in contrast to the static and isolated environments of Web 1.0, with its characteristic tools including word processing, static web pages and other modes of one way communication (from the publisher to the reader). Web 2.0 is an emerging application between knowledge creation and knowledge sharing. Accumulating collective knowledge serves as a positive feedback loop pushing to deeper levels in a spiral fashion (J. Bruner, 1967). In contrast to passive viewing of content in Web 1.0, Web 2.0 is concerned with active knowledge sharing and creation. This collaborative potential is created in Web 2.0 environments by a dynamic, permanently evolving, interactive web platform that gives free and open access to diverse participants. As a result, Web 2.0 facilitates numerous outcomes that can not be attained in Web 1.0 even if they were desired. These outcomes include individual and collective productivity; creative authorship and interaction with data published on the web; multi-modal interpersonal, group and public communication; active participation; and advanced levels of collaborative learning and social networking that provides for a sense of connectedness and relationship.

There is an evident generational learning gap when we compare Web 1.0 and Emerging Web 2.0 tools and services. While the emerging Web 2.0 tools remain tangential to the professional interests of Web 1.0-adapted faculty, they are immediately embraced and utilized by students. Learning Management Systems (LMS) have emerged that increasingly reflect student as opposed to teacher needs. In a sense, these new LMS attempt to buffer the distance between the skill sets of faculty and the learning sets of students. The LMS is effectively a “bridge tool,” connecting generations with diverse learning styles and capabilities.

My own journey into Web 2.0 began with working in a WebCT environment. Given my constructivist orientation, I was bothered by the gaps in this early bridge tool. I began to look for other that might help me enhance students’ engagement, collaboration and effective communication. I opened numerous accounts with Web 2.0 services and explored their potential in all night learning binges. As a result of my new learning, I began to fill in the gaps in WebCT. I asked students to design personal web sites using such tools as Google web, Freewebs and Weebly. I assigned students to write reflective learning logs utilizing Blogger.com. And I fostered on-line group collaboration and project publishing using yahoo groups and pbwiki/pbworks. I arranged online conferences and class meetings when I was traveling and teaching using the WiZiQ free web-based platform. I conducted surveys with SurveyMonkey and Zoomerang.com and created quizzes and tests with programs including Hot Potatoes and Quizlet. All these tools now are successfully integrated in some of the more recent LMS packages (Moodle).

During this period of exploration, I joined numerous professional networks that allowed me to connect with like-thinking and technologically passionate educators throughout the world. These networks supported my teaching experience and confirmed my thinking about the synergy between constructivist pedagogy and Web 2.0 tools, including Moodle. Among the most effective of these social networking sites were Tapped In, Ning, WiZiQ, Moodlerooms and Google groups. My new network of professional acquaintances, and soon friends, was entirely virtual, these were peers that I had never encountered previously in person and might never have met at all.

Illustrated by my experience are key concepts of social networking and online communities. We understand the term "social networking" to mean tools and services available on the Web that link people to each other to create an "online community." By online community I refer to a group of people that primarily interact with each other via communication media, such as letters, telephone, email, messaging tools, software or network (Tapped In, Ning, Google Groups, etc.) rather than face to face. In an online community, people come together for a particular purpose and are guided by policies and supported by software (Skype, WiZiQ, Gtalk, etc.).

Online communities have become a supplemental form of communication between people who know each other primarily in real life as well as between people who never met face to face but found each other in virtual reality. Among the tools employed separately or in combination by social software, we find text-based chat rooms and forums that use voice, video text or avatars. Significant socio-technical change may have resulted from the proliferation of such Internet-based social networks (Barzilai, 2003). The fluidity of communication and connection has created a different approach to globalization than the more formal mechanisms most often cited.

This is quite a different context than found in the classroom. There, working together in a free and engaged learning environment, professionals and learners simultaneously generate online materials reflecting what they have learned and show connections between their prior knowledge, the course content they offer/study, and their previous experiences. But even if it is the basis of new knowledge, the thrust of learning is not confined to these existent elements.

Socioconstructivist theories view learning as resulting from social interaction that creates a common level of meaning not previously shared. This outcome is achieved by fostering competent participation in the discourse, norms, and practices associated with particular "communities of practice" (Kuiper & Volman, 2008, p.244). As we move to virtual rather than face-to-face groups, our concern is often with social learning that is achieved by social networks rather than discrete groups. Social networking allows for communities to develop and spread even absent defined group membership. The network may define the community or visa versa. Students in an on-line class exhibit group processes but also social network dynamics. And their entry into diverse social networks on behalf of the class means that they become part of or visit extended communities as part of their learning.

Social networks are about cooperation and collaboration. These key concepts have become the focus of significant interest and debate in education. There has been some effort to differentiate the meaning of the concepts. Cooperation is defined in terms of five elements: working together with others, in a structured environment, under a strong leader, with participants having assigned roles and the work focused on the final product. In contrast, collaboration is process-focused, work is equally distributed, workers share a common goal, they are united by mutual interests and highly motivated to achieve the results. (Penitz, 1996; Myers, 1997). From a communication standpoint, in cooperation, workers share a task but direct their outcomes through a central node, a manager, editor or teacher. In contrast, with collaboration, communication networks are wide open, connecting any and all at different points of time. In a comparative sense, cooperation is more the province of groups and collaboration of social networks (Edelstein, 2009).

Collaboration is viewed by some as qualitatively superior to cooperation, involving the highest level of connectedness and communication among participants (Penitz, 1996), creating a "community of practice" (Carr et al, 2007) and equally contributing to a "collective intelligence" (Grant, 2006). It may well be that cooperation in a teacher-centered classroom is a necessary or at least useful step in developing the social skills necessary to support later collaboration. At its highest form, collaboration results in "mutual learning," where the different skills, experiences and discoveries of each participant spur individual and collective learning and understanding and, through synergy, contribute to a higher level of shared outcome than would otherwise be possible.

In sum, Web 2.0 is the realm of social networking, an environment conducive for productive professional communication, effective collaboration that boosts personal growth and professional development and enhances meaningful discourse, interinfluential partnerships and opportunities for joint creativity within sophisticated pedagogical projects.

3 New Generation of Social Networking: A Case Study

How it all started? I have already described my transition to Web 2.0 tools that better fit my constructivist orientation for advancing levels of student interaction and collaboration.

As I joined new social networks, I experienced professional growth, receiving support as I employed emergent technologies. I also received support for my constructivist approach and progressivist educational philosophy, important both in influencing my teaching but also in what I instilled in my student teacher candidates. I enjoyed participating in workshops and soon found myself leading my own. Both activities connected me to "my soul mates," educators who shared the same system of beliefs about education, learning and teaching as I do. These connections became long term friendships and productive collaborations, mutually beneficial as sources of professional enrichment.

Four or five years ago, I was invited to lecture on WiZiQ, a free web-based conferencing platform similar to the fee-based Elluminate. My moderator during the session was Nellie Deutsch, a Canadian who resides in Jerusalem. Nellie is a high school English teacher who is working on her Ph.D. through Phoenix University studying online and blended learning. Before long, I began seeing Nellie everywhere I went on the Internet. Our interests led us to the same places, sites with sometimes exotic names such as Ning – MoodleMeet, Blended Learning and Teaching, Technology Using Professors, Digital Storytelling, Classroom 2.0 and Teaching English as a Second Language. We discovered that we both belonged to the same groups on Tapped In, the "Webheads" and the Web 2.0 Tools group. Soon we had exchanged e-mail addresses, and began supporting each other in our technology-based virtual activities and projects. Nellie invited me to do a WiZiQ presentation on the topic of "Teaching with Web 2.0," to co-lead Professional Development Workshops for educators at Surrey University about Web 2.0 tools and issues of online teaching and learning. Through Nellie and my social networks, I met other educators that joined my personal and professional networks. My lists of contacts grew on Facebook, Plurk,

LinkedIn, Twitter, Ning and TappedIn. Collectively these collaborators contributed immensely to my experience with emergent technologies, as I did for them.

This summer I discovered WikiEducator (WE), a new network in which Nellie was already a recognized and respected member. WikiEducator is a community project working collaboratively with the “Free Culture Movement” towards a free version of the education curriculum by 2015. During this learning experience, I took a “Learning4Content” course where I met a new group of talented educators from all over the world. Meanwhile, other educators discovered me as a resource for their research on such topics as Montessori, Web 2.0, Wiki and Moodle.

The WikiEducator experience, in turn, led to a new collaborative educational project with three other Web 2.0 collaborators. Besides Nellie Deutsch, I was joined by Gladys Gahona, a private teacher from Mexico and, for a short time, a fourth collaborator from New Zealand who soon dropped out. We co-developed and co-offered a free workshop “Moodle for Teachers” to WikiEducator’s participants worldwide. Numerous Web 2.0 tools were used to achieve our goals. WikiEducator was used to advertize, create an outline, schedule and register participants. WiZiQ was utilized for synchronous workshop sessions. And Moodle software was integrated into our Website for asynchronous content publishing and content delivery and for providing opportunities for the participants to learn, collaborate and practice their skills in becoming experienced Moodlers.

On the first day of our workshop, we had 28 educators join the WiZiQ session from 10 different countries. They registered and created profiles on the WikiEducator (WE) site. They also signed up and added their profiles to our “Moodle for Teachers” workshop, which was located on a website called “Integrating Technology: Exploring New Domains.” A global course was launched that not only utilized but was itself the result of virtual social networking.

The four facilitators met to plan on Skype. We used google documents to collaborate on the content of upcoming power point presentations to be presented on the WiZiQ virtual classroom platform. All shared responsibility for the teaching-learning adventure. Nobody assigned anything to anybody, yet each contributed what we had to offer. I designed the Moodle course content, created video-casts and the tutorials on how to use Moodle tools. Gladys initiated the design of the slides for the PPT via google docs. Nellie scheduled and described upcoming synchronous sessions on WiZiQ. It was a genuine collaborative effort that enriched all of us professionally.

It was fascinating to witness how this collaboration contributed to each other’s learning and professional growth. As an example, I suggested using Wordle, a Web 2.0 tool, for the warm up exercise during the first class. A Wordle is a tool that creates a cloud of concepts, words grouped by theme, within a colorful and creative layout. Gladys had no experience with this tool. But when she saw my Moodle concept map based on Wordle, she was inspired to create her own word cloud. She even challenged our team with a contest to see whose word cloud would be best for the next session. She quickly excelled in understanding the purpose and meaning of the tool and in considering words to use and their graphic display.

A number of other situations during our collaborative experience similarly showcased our talents and professionalism. Each collaborator created animated avatars using Voki for use in different aspects of the workshop. Each made a video tutorial for different

Moodle tools. Each generated questions for Forums and responded to the participants posts and questions.

We have not as yet fully evaluated the workshop collaboration ourselves. Feedback from participants throughout the 5 week workshop was very positive and inspiring. It is evident that we can learn better ways to collaborate and to deliver our material. Yet, the fact that four strangers, linked only by social networking, could mount an apparently effective online course is impressive. It only begins to underscore the potential for such collaborations.

4 Conclusion

Such personal experiences, confirmed by observations of others' accomplishments and a growing literature, suggests that the Web 2.0 context is not only a rich environment for personal, social, and professional expression, but a platform for creative collaboration that advances the competence of networks as well as networkers. Tools such as Ning, Wikieducator, WiZiQ and Moodle offer spaces for participants (facilitators and learners) to come together as communities of learners, to examine subjects of common interest and to voluntarily collaborate within a community of shared practice by contributing to the collective skill and intelligence of the community. These tools allowed the networked team to form, identify shared strengths and interests, develop a common goal, share knowledge and feedback upon which a course product could be honed, create a Moodle site as a repository of shared knowledge and enriched experience and to jointly offer the course to a diverse and novel audience outside of any centralized institutional context.

Thanks to new technologies, specialists and educators from all over the world have an opportunity to get together in cybercommunities based on shared interests, exchange ideas, jointly work on projects, collaboratively write, edit and publish articles and books and design and co-teach courses. There are potentially few limits on what else could be accomplished.

Teachers and educators are using these new technologies to improve their pedagogical practice. They are engaging and extending their learners in ways traditional methods can't. In the process they're creating relationships, sharing knowledge and teaching participatory skills like teamwork, discernment, negotiation and collaborative problem solving.

Our personal experience revealed some of the issues that can appear during this type of collaboration: the challenges of coordinating times among people who are busy and also living in different time zones; the need to share personal agendas, styles and background; and interference with and by personal lives, prior professional commitments and the flow and pressures of life. But these challenges didn't interfere in the quality of the project that we voluntarily created.

In sum, with the evolution of emergent technologies, the synchrony of social networking and Web 2.0 has become a powerful combination. Educators and students alike are trained by Web 2.0 and other technological tools to be effective lifelong learners, communicators and collaborators in an evolving connected knowledge environment. The collaborative nature of Moodle and Web 2.0 tools not only makes it possible to find global knowledge quickly, but it allows for new knowledge to be

created collectively through a process of mutual learning and design. The existence of this body of collective intelligence can only be accessed through participation, communication and active learning. The boundaries between teaching and learning and between knowledge acquisition and knowledge production break down. Successful learning, professional development and growth in this technologically enhanced environment is enabled by the use of new technologies and tools. The point is to broaden the classroom, even erase its boundaries, and establish a basis for global education that actualizes our individual and collective potential.

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Curriculum



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Ludmila Smirnova is Associate Professor of Education at Mount St. Mary College in Newburgh, N.Y.,U.S.A. where she has taught for the past 9 years. At the Mount, she offers courses in *Curricular Planning*, *Methods of Teaching* and *Teaching with Technology* and serves as counselor to Kappa Delta Pi, the International Honor Society in Education.

She has become increasingly recognized for her leadership in the application of emerging Internet technologies to education. She has run numerous workshops on the application of Smart Technologies (e.g., Smart Board) and of Web 2.0 tools to the college and primary/secondary classrooms.

Prior to coming to the Mount, Dr. Smirnova was visiting professor at Ramapo College of N.J. for two years. In her native Russia, she was professor of education at Volgograd State Pedagogical University, where she also served as Dean of the School of Foreign Languages. During her 25-year Russian career, Dr. Smirnova was known for her work in innovative approaches to teaching.

Beyond the seventy books and other publications based upon her work back in Russia, Dr. Smirnova has written for and presented to a growing list of professional audiences in the U.S. and abroad. She has conducted numerous workshops and presentations on Web 2.0 “Read-Write-Create” technologies, including Moodle and Smartboard training on line and in colleges, public schools and conferences in the U.S. and Mexico. This summer she presented virtually at the Association for the Advancement of Computing conference in Hawaii in June and in person at the International Association of Technology, Education and Development **EDULearn09** conference in Barcelona in July, where she also chaired a session.