

Inside the Walled Garden—Social networking in ESL

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Abstract

Social Networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter have proven immensely popular among Internet users in the past several years. Facebook alone now has over 500 million active users. Indeed, if it were a country, it would now be the 6th most populous in the world! User-driven content has clearly become a major aspect of how we define and create social relationships while using the web. English teachers have now begun to explore the potential of using social networking sites to enhance language learning while providing a major creative outlet for students to express themselves in a second language. This paper provides a brief explanation of how ELGG software was used to establish a private social network for over 100 university level students. The paper reports on how this network allowed students to create and share their own content, express opinions and share their interests and ideas. The paper looks at quantitative data and reports usage statistics and qualitative data to report students' feelings towards using a university social networking site. In addition, the paper attempts to answer the questions; do private social networking sites allow learners to be creative? And can this form of interaction improve language learning motivation?

Key terms: Social Networking, Creativity, Motivation, ELGG Software, Online Community

Introduction

USA Today magazine recently reported that over seven percent of the world's population uses Facebook and it is clear that the popularity of social networking Internet sites like Facebook have exploded in recent years. Online social networks allow individuals to create and develop their own virtual identity and connect to other people. One of the reasons for the success of these sites is that they allow people to easily keep in touch with friends, and create real-life friendships with people who have similar interests. English teachers are just starting to explore the potential of social networking sites and are attempting to discover how social networking can enhance language learning. The aim of this paper is to discover what 110 university-level students' thought about using a private social network. More specifically, would students enjoy using a private social networking site? Do private social networking sites allow learners to be creative? And can this form of interaction improve language learning motivation? Although this is a small scale study with several limitations the authors hope is that it will encourage other researchers to explore the potential that private social networking could have on our English language classes.

Social Networking

According to Barnes (1954), who first coined the term, a "social network" refers to an intricate web-like structure of social relationships wherein each individual represents a node or center of connection. Social networks can be tied together through dependency, common interests, or any other sort of relationship that can be imagined. Social networks have always existed in any social structure although the Internet has made social networks much more accessible and less dependent on physical location. Social networks on the Internet allow individuals to create and develop an online identity, which serves as a node of connectivity. Searchable databases within an online social network allow individuals to find others with similar interests or ideas, which leads to the creation of "communities within communities" where social relationships and bonds can grow rapidly among individuals in the network.

Defining Creativity

Guilford (1950) was one of the first researchers to put forward a list of cognitive processes involved in creativity. Guilford (1967) later developed a comprehensive model of human intellect focusing on divergent thinking, the ability to produce many different ideas in response to a problem, as the prime cognitive component of creativity. Current research suggests that creative intellectual abilities tend

to center around one factor called 'idea production'. In the term 'idea production', the notion of 'idea' is to be taken in the broadest possible sense: it can be any verbal proposition, but it may also be a gesture, a drawing, or a musical phrase. 'Production' is meant as a process distinct from recognition, identification, selection or comparison (cited in Ágnes & Kormos, 2004).

Motivational Conditions

In recent years, there has been a considerable amount of research dedicated to L2 motivation and the role it plays in the process of language learning. Despite this wealth of research there has been an "absence of a consensus on a definition of L2 learning behavior" (Oxford & Shearing, 1994, p.13). Most researchers seem to agree, however, that motivation is crucial for learning a second language and "during the lengthy and often tedious process of mastering a foreign/second language, the learner's enthusiasm, commitment and persistence are key determinants of success or failure" (Dornyei, 2001, p.5). Oxford and Shearing remind us that motivation can directly influence students in many ways, ranging from how often they interact with native speakers, how well they perform on tests, how proficient they become in the language and how long they continue to study or maintain their skills after they complete their language studies (1994, p.12).

Learning a foreign language is a process that involves many years of study and recent studies in Japan have investigated how learner motivation can fluctuate in Japanese learners of English. Hayashi (2005) investigated motivational change among almost 500 students and reported that their motivation fell considerably after entering university. A study conducted by Sawyer (2007) found similar results as motivation was high before the university entrance exams and then dropped when students entered university.

Over the last 20 years there have been many articles and books published that offer practical applications for teachers in their classrooms. Many of these publications provide useful techniques and strategies for teachers to employ in their classrooms, but as Dornyei (2001, p.25) reminds us, motivating someone is more likely to involve a series of nuances that might culminate in a long lasting effect rather than one of these strategies instantly changing a student's mindset. Dornyei also recommends that, before the teacher attempts to employ motivational strategies, three motivational conditions should be in place. First, the teacher should behave appropriately and have a good relationship with the students. Second, there should be a pleasant and supporting atmosphere in the class and finally the learner group should be cohesive and there should be appropriate group norms (2001, p. 31). Dornyei suggests that motivation is more likely to occur if these preconditions are in place.

Selecting and Using ELGG Software

For our project, we followed the advice of Swanson (2009) and chose to use a social networking software package called ELGG due to its relative ease of installation and use, in addition to the wealth of online support and help from fellow ELGG users. ELGG is also free of charge and is "open license", which means that anyone can develop software that adds new features to ELGG. As a result, users can download these software packages (called "plugins") and customize ELGG to work in ways that adapt to the different needs of its various users. Most importantly, we wanted to create a social networking site that was private and inaccessible to users outside of our group of students. ELGG has a feature called a "walled garden", which prevents non-registered users from viewing student profiles or accessing the website in any way.

We installed, tested, and customized our ELGG site at the beginning of the spring 2010 semester at Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University, a small private university in Beppu, Oita. Although this task took several weeks, it was not very technically demanding. In addition to ELGG's basic features of allowing each user to display a photo of themselves and a basic profile featuring their interests and hobbies, we installed plugins that let our users create photo albums, make blog posts, embed YouTube videos, and send short messages to each other via a message board. There were countless other plugins available online which we could have used in our project but we ultimately decided to limit these features because we were concerned about making the site too complicated for our users.

After this initial work was finished, we selected 110 university students in three classes to participate in this study. First, the students created their own profiles and began learning to use our ELGG site (dubbed "APU Englishbook"). We taught short lessons

once a week during our classes which highlighted a specific feature on the website and how the students could use it. Many of the students were already quite familiar with using social networking sites such as Facebook or Mixi so a majority of the students found they could easily adapt to using the ELGG site. Some of the less tech-savvy students had problems using the site at first, but their classmates usually taught them how to use specific features if they did not grasp the concepts taught in class. As a result, we observed that our website quickly became popular among students.

As the semester progressed, we recorded details about web site usage and access. Over the course of the semester, the users, as a whole, accessed an average of 600 pages on the site each day. The students spent an average of 16 minutes on the website per visit. At the end of the project, the students, as a whole, had created 419 blog posts and uploaded 1700 images, many of which were commented upon by other users in the community. The site was busiest on Wednesdays and Sundays during the 8 p.m. to 9 p.m. period. Later on, we will address the implications of these statistics and what they could mean for how students used the site.

Survey Results

Before starting this project we surveyed the students to discover their feelings on using a private social networking site. We also administered a survey at the mid-semester point and the end of term to find out to what extent the students enjoyed the site. In the pre-semester survey we discovered that 67.1% of the students surveyed used a social networking site although only 34.2% had used one in English. Over half of the students wanted to try using a site in English and about three-quarters thought it would help them improve their English ability. At mid-term we asked students whether they enjoyed using the site and almost all the students (89.2%) reported that they liked the site. The students who said they did not enjoy the site reported factors such as not knowing how to use the site as a reason why they did not like it. Over 80% indicated that they had made new friends on the site; over half said they thought it had helped to improve their English ability and two-thirds stated they would like to continue using the site. The end of the semester survey results showed that the majority of students (89.7%) had enjoyed the site although less than half wanted to continue using the site. Almost 90% of the students surveyed at the end of semester stated that they felt to some degree more comfortable using other social networking sites like Facebook in English.

ELGG and Enjoyment

Overall we were quite surprised by how much the students used the site and how readily they adapted to using the software. From the results of the survey and the amount of usage we believe that the site was successful in terms of student enjoyment. Approximately 90% of the students said they enjoyed using the site and this is supported by the fact that students were using the site the most on Wednesdays and Sundays and in the evenings, times when students have no classes at APU. The amount of blog posts and uploaded images along with the number of messages students exchanged indicate that students were willing to communicate with each other through this site. We were also encouraged by the number of students that thought the site had allowed them to make new friends and improve their English ability.

ELGG and Creativity

Throughout the project, we hoped that providing the ELGG site for the students would give them a chance to be creative not only in terms of using language but in expressing their ideas, interests, and personality to their classmates. At the end of the spring semester, we asked the 110 students if they felt they were able to be creative by using the ELGG site. Only 5 per cent of the respondents reported that they did not feel the site gave them this opportunity. The remainder of the students felt the site gave them at least some chance to be creative.

To add further detail to what the students did create, we noticed that all of the students used the site to make their own individual profiles using photos of themselves or something they felt represented their own personality, hobbies or interests. As a whole, the students published 419 blog posts over the course of the semester, ranging from topics as diverse as their high school memories to their stress over impending examinations. The students also used the site to send public messages to each other, which took on a very informal tone in comparison with the blog posts. Students sent hundreds of short messages encouraging one another

to do their best, or made small talk, such as comments about the weather. Since each student had the capability to send brief messages to other participants, this feature was very popular and many of the students were creating new messages every day.

Another feature of the board that allowed students to be creative was the photo album, where students could upload and share their photos with other students and make comments. Students uploaded roughly 1700 images throughout the semester and most of these images were commented upon at least once. Students also created 15 "user groups", which were small groups of students who shared a common interest and who created a separate forum dedicated to sharing comments and having discussions about their particular interest. The topics of these various user groups ranged from sports, such as tennis or soccer, to music and culture.

Throughout the project, we noticed that students continually used media to create or flesh out their own online identity, which would in turn help them find students who shared their interest and this would help create a new friendship with a classmate. Overall, we gained the firm impression that the ELGG site did, in fact, help students express themselves in new ways and to create bonds with people if the student was willing to spend the time to use the site and spend some time interacting with other users.

ELGG and Motivation

Although it is difficult to determine whether the ELGG social networking site could help to improve language learner motivation we would argue that it helped to create the basic motivational conditions in our classrooms for the following reasons. First, the site allowed the teacher the opportunity to develop a good relationship with the students in the class. The number of images and the amount of personal information that each student posted initially made it easy for the teacher to learn about students' hobbies and interests. Also, unlike a regular profile, this site constantly evolved and as students posted more information the teachers had the opportunity to learn more about the students and teach to their individual personalities and preferences. The site also allowed more interaction with students and allowed the teachers to show their interest in the students. Replying to or initiating comments showed students that the teachers were available outside class.

Second, we believe the site helped to foster a pleasant and supportive classroom atmosphere. We reported above on the variety of different photos, discussions, and blogs that were posted on this site. Most of these were highly personal, discussing feelings they had about issues in their lives that would have been considered too intimate to reveal in a formal classroom setting and to a degree showed how comfortable students were sharing information with each other. There were countless examples of students posting encouraging comments to each other that offered support, and many of the posts, videos and images were humorous indicating that the site allowed students to show their sense of humor and personalize the site. Finally, there were no instances when students were rude or tried to ridicule each other. All of the above indicate that this social networking site was a pleasant and supportive environment in which to interact.

The final reason we believe the ELGG project helped to foster motivation is that the site helped to create more cohesive learning groups. Dornyei reminds us that whether or not a class becomes a cohesive learning group is not just a matter of good fortune (2001, p.43). Factors such as the amount of time students can spend together and having a shared group history can be a factor. In the walled garden the students had the opportunity to spend unlimited time together outside of the classroom. As we mentioned earlier, the majority of logins were at the weekend or in the evening when students took the opportunity to interact with each other and learn more about one another which we believe helped the groups to create a closer bond.

Conclusions

Reflecting back on the experience of using social networking software as a tool for creativity and motivation in our EFL classes, we have drawn some tentative conclusions. First, the survey results throughout the semester revealed that the students felt that the ELGG site gave them the opportunity to be creative. In the broadest sense of the word, the students' act of creating online identities, publishing blogs, and commenting on photos, etc., were indeed a form of idea production. Because the students' participation on the site was entirely voluntary, the results of these creative endeavors were their own rewards and came directly from the students rather than being forced upon them by teachers through homework or assignments. For the most part, students

seemed to sense the site gave them the opportunity to “play” with their friends using a medium that allowed them to share ideas and images in a creative and free manner. In this respect, the site did not actually make the students more creative, but it did give them the opportunity to create, which may be why the site was so popular among our students despite the lack of extrinsic motivating factors.

Secondly, although no definite link between student motivation and the use of the ELGG site can be made, it appears that the ELGG site did help to create or facilitate the pre-conditions needed for increased motivation. Student surveys indicated a high preference for using ELGG and the content of the site showed that students did indeed communicate with and find out more about each other through images, videos, messages, and blogs. This constant communication seemed to create a much more cohesive learner group and also helped the teachers quickly make inroads towards helping the more reticent students speak English in class. Lastly, the use of the ELGG site to send messages of support to friends fostered a pleasant atmosphere, which is a vital component for creating motivated students.

Because the study of using social networking sites in the EFL classroom is just beginning, the potential benefits of using this technology have yet to be fully determined. We can suppose, however, that social networking has indeed allowed our students to talk to each other in new ways and discover things about their classmates that they otherwise would not have known in a traditional classroom context. Throughout our experiment, it was clear that using ELGG seemed to change the texture of our classroom in a very positive way and that the potential benefits were extremely dependent on our students’ willingness to accept and use the ELGG site. Had our student group been different in its attitude or orientation towards adopting this use of technology, the results may have been completely different. Because social networking sites are entirely dependent on their community for content and growth, this seems to pose a special problem for making broad and definitive statements about using this technology in the EFL classroom.

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