Online Social Networking as a Tool to Enhance Learning in the Mauritian Education System

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Abstract

Social networking sites enable individuals to connect to each other to form online communities. In the last decade, online social networking (OSN) has become a fashionable means of communication among Internet users, particularly the young generation. It is known that the majority of adolescents log on their OSN accounts daily and stay log on for a prolonged period of time. Thus, social networking sites represent a potential technology that can be exploited to enhance learning so as to help students in their education. In this paper, the outcome of a major survey carried out among the secondary level students in Mauritius is reported. It is seen that most students are already using OSN for non-formal learning with 39% of the respondents stating that they make use of OSN to discuss school work. It is also observed that OSN acts as a platform for these adolescents to communicate and collaborate on school related projects or assignments. Most students agreed on the fact that OSN can be beneficial for their studies. It is also found that a small percentage of teachers are using OSN as a tool to facilitate teaching and learning. Therefore, a few recommendations are made in this paper with respect to the integration of OSN in the Mauritian secondary education system.

Keywords: Online Social Networking, Learning, Students, Education, Mauritius.

1. INTRODUCTION

Information and Communication Technology (ICT), has turned out to be one of the most fundamental elements of the modern society. Many countries are now recognizing the importance of ICT and integrating it in their core education policy. Mauritius is also following the trend. ICT is known to help expand access to education, strengthen the relevance of education to the increasingly digital workplace, and raise educational quality, thus helping make teaching and learning into an engaging process connected to real life. However, the experience of introducing ICTs in the classroom over the past several decades suggests that the full realisation of the potential educational benefits of ICTs is not automatic. The effective integration of ICTs into the educational system is a complex, multifaceted process that involves not just technological but also curriculum and pedagogical changes, institutional readiness, teacher competencies, and long-term financing, among others [1]. In the 2007-2011 National ICT Strategic Plan (NICTSP)[2] it is emphasised that education in Mauritius must be such as to inculcate in students acumen of tackling the untoward and staying prepared for challenges in an increasingly professional and knowledge-driven world. ICT must be used as a key enabler in this endeavour, and education must make the transition from “Education about ICTs” to “Education through ICTs” in a larger effort to make education more creative and less pedagogical and subject to rote. ICT would be a key enabler to effect this transformation. The NICTSP highlighted that the education process must imbibe in the students a spirit of lifelong learning and must instill in them capabilities that help them tackle real-life challenges. Schools and institutions must make the transition from being providers of well-defined educational services to becoming learning organisations that prepare students to acquire competencies like autonomous learning, collaborative working, authentic problem solving and an ability to adapt to a rapidly changing world.

Students in Mauritius are embracing ICTs at an unprecedented pace; Google is becoming a primary means of inquiry, Wikipedia is threatening the school library and social networking sites like Facebook and MySpace are exploding in popularity. Indeed, Online Social Networks (OSNs) have tremendous potential for enabling collaborations and social interactions [3]. Harnessing this potential for learning can be the spark to ignite educational transformation in Mauritius. Given the amount of time young people spend engaged with OSNs, it is important to understand its impact on their education. This paper presents the findings of a survey carried out in Mauritius, targeting the secondary level students aged between 12 and 18. The collected data are interpreted to determine the use of OSNs in the enhancement of education. Furthermore, a few recommendations are made with respect to the integration of OSNs in the secondary education system. The rest of the paper is organized as follows.

In section 2, the related works are reviewed, followed by Section 3 in which the methodology of the
study is described. Section 4 describes the findings of the survey and the results are discussed. A conclusion is made in Section 5 together with some recommendations.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The emergence of Web 2.0 technologies on the Internet has influenced the communicative behaviors of individuals, affecting mostly the younger generation [4]. ABBITT [5] stated that online social websites have gained a phenomenal popularity during the past few years, the majority of users on these sites being teenagers. This was confirmed by a survey carried out in America by Pew Internet in 2007 [6], stating that 89% of the respondents use OSNs to keep in touch with peers and 55% of online teenagers aged between 12 and 17 use social networking sites, with 48% of them visiting these websites daily or more often. The rising importance and availability of OSNs and their popularity among young people, who are mostly students, have aroused the curiosity of many researchers, pushing them to consider the use of OSNs in learning environments.

GROSSECK [7] proposed that a social bookmarking service like Delicious (www.delicious.com) can be used to improve the learning experiences. Delicious, as an OSN, is mainly used for discovering, storing and sharing web bookmarks. It offers web users many benefits, one of which is flexibility, that is, allowing users to create a personal library of resources which can be tagged, classified in different categories, published as web links and shared with others. Thus, based on these aspects, GROSSECK recommends Delicious to be used in the learning process as a support for lectures and group projects, a mechanism for building learning communities and for informal, formative feedback, as a part for professional development and for research. However, the author concluded that more interest and trust in the bookmarking service will be needed so as educators and students can adopt this technology in their educational activities. This approach can be used in education, as stated by DALSGAARD [8], in such a way that students may share information and resources that they are actually using which can include bookmarks, references and links. It is also very relevant for students who are working on related projects but are not collaborating, that is, by making use of each other’s resources.

HAGARDON [9] recommends that academic institutions take a look at Ning.com, another social networking site in which educators can create their own social networks around a specific topic. Halverson (2011) used this service to his advantage and created a closed social networking website on NING so as to investigate how technology could be used in a learning environment by the use of OSN in classrooms. Halverson [10] noticed that there were many challenges associated with incorporating social networking technologies in education and that the classroom design experiments were very complicated. Three key design tradeoffs concerning the privacy of students, the exogenous learning goals and identity were highlighted in his study of integrating OSN technologies in a formal learning space. Halverson concluded his work by stating that in order to bring the social networking technologies into the formal learning process, one should think in terms of the tradeoffs rather than finding out “what works” so as to make better decisions on how to use OSN technologies in schools.

A pedagogically relevant study has been reported by Casey and Evans [11] on the use of social networks to support classroom activities, which also took into consideration the use of the online community, NING, as an environment for learning and teaching. The research was carried out in 2010 throughout a whole semester and involved a population of about 150 students between 13 and 16 years old. New techniques for learning were uncovered and online tools were made available to the students organized in seven classes. These were used to deliver the school curriculum. The students’ interactions with one another and with their teachers were evaluated. Members on the NING community worked on online projects at the same time and a total of 77 groups were created by the end of the semester. Students were observed to support their peers online in solving problems and it was found that they valued learning from one another rather than only from the teacher. Parents also appreciated the use of these resources since the classroom work details were available to them for monitoring their children’s education. From this study, it was also found that the connections on the online social website provided new possibilities for learning since the participants accepted these new ways of learning to support their classmates. Teachers also had flexibility in assessing their students.

Loving and Ochoa [12] investigated the use of Face book as a classroom solution for students at the University of Florida. After much consideration about different features of Face book, they had chosen to use ‘Groups’, so as to promote communication, group discussions among students and posting of assignments on the social website. Students had the freedom to ask questions on the group about their studies. They observed that this method improved the level of communication between the instructors and students. The authors concluded that Face book was very useful especially in studies where students’ participation was required.

Greenhow [13] argued that OSN can serve as a support for learning and stated that new web technologies which students are already using are also appropriate for educational purposes. She presented two hypotheses: “(1) social network sites can serve as direct and indirect supports for learning, such as providing an emotional outlet for school-related stress, validation of creative work, peer-alumni support for school-life transitions, and help with school-related tasks; and (2) online social networking can
stimulate social and civic benefits, online and offline, which has implications for education.” Finally, she affirmed that to better understand the social and civic benefits on students, it is important to explore the personal social networks of students and their interrelationships between their online and offline worlds so that the factors which influence the social network membership across their learning experiences are discovered.

3. METHODOLOGY

This paper provides the analysis of a survey on the use of OSNs by secondary students in Mauritius. The target population chosen for this study was students between 12 and 18 years old. A sampling of 5% of the population (n≈80000) has been chosen, thus focusing on about 4000 students only. The survey questionnaire was designed to be quick and easy for students to complete, with several questions involving a choice of tick boxes. A pilot survey was carried out to evaluate the suitability of the questionnaire with the purpose of improving the survey questions. A total of 4545 responses were obtained and analyzed.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Online social websites have become very addictive for young adults and children who spend considerable amount of their time in maintaining social connections. It was found from the study that the majority of respondents are accessing these sites on a daily basis. The pie chart below illustrates the frequency of the use of OSN sites by the Mauritian students.

![Fig 1: Frequency of accessing OSN sites](image1)

It is found that many students are using these online communities mainly for communication (86.4%) and to keep in touch with their friends (88.3%) as shown in Figure 2. This confirms the study by the Pew Internet and American Life Project portraying that most youngsters use OSN sites to keep in touch with their friends.

![Fig 2: Purposes for which students make use of OSN](image2)

This research outlined another vital use of OSN sites by students which is discussing school work (39%). It can be observed that the Mauritian students are already using these online resources as a tool for their studies.

When asked whether they carried out any educational activity on OSNs and it was found that more than half of the student population (58.3%) use OSNs for educational purposes. Some of the activities students engage on their social networks accounts include discussing class activities (48.8%) and exam papers (32.7%), seeking help from friends (69.3%) and having group works online (39.0%). The data are illustrated in Figure 3 below.

![Fig 3: Educational Activities on OSN](image3)

The features that these students use to carry out the educational activities mentioned above are mainly communication tools such as chat and messaging to obtain help from friends (80.5%), using their profile status to ask questions to their connected friends (25.3%), creating or joining groups to make discussions (41.7%) and sharing of photos containing educational contents (16.2%), as shown in Figure 4 below.
Fig 4: OSN features used for educational activities

The students were also asked to rate how far do they agree with the fact that OSN is beneficial to their studies. Most students agreed to this (55.7%), while a smaller number of respondents (9.6%) did not. However, a considerable number chose not to give any opinion on this (34.6%).

Fig 5: Benefits of OSN to studies

Given that students use OSN for their studies, they were asked whether they had access to OSN sites at school. It was found that these social networking websites are blocked in most colleges.

Fig 6: OSN is blocked in schools

Due to the great popularity of OSNs it has been observed that teachers are also interested in using them as a tool to communicate with their students. The latter were asked how many of their school teachers use OSN sites. Most students (48.7%) stated that that some of their teachers use OSNs. Therefore, it can be deduced that secondary school teachers in Mauritius have adopted the trend of online social networks.

More than half of the students were connected to their school teachers on OSN (54%) but however it was seen that only a small number of teachers communicate school work to the students through online social networks (29%) as shown in Figures 8 and 9 respectively.

Fig 7: Students and teachers connected on OSN

Fig 8: Teachers communicate home works through OSN

According to the study made by Loving and Ochoa [12], it was found out that communication and discussions among students on OSN sites were very useful for their studies. To have such online interactions, it is important that students are connected to their classmates on OSN. In this survey, it was observed that most students (82.3%), shown in Figure 10, are connected to each other. Given the widespread use of OSNs among students, the relevant authorities may consider its use in the educational system in Mauritius.
Students were finally asked how OSN could help in their studies if it were integrated in their school curriculum. Some of the responses were as follows:

Table 1: Desirable Features of OSN to help in studies

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Option</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(a) School pages could be established so that communication becomes easier</td>
<td>57.2%</td>
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<tr>
<td>(b) Students can receive after-school homework help via social network website</td>
<td>68.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(c) Students can work on online collaborative projects</td>
<td>71.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(d) Homework can be assigned by teachers using OSN</td>
<td>51.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(e) Students and teachers can work together to solve academic problems</td>
<td>62.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The data is better illustrated in the bar chart below:

**Fig 10:** Desirable Features of OSN to help in studies

From Figure 10, it is seen that most students chose at least three options for this question, with the majority of them (71.9%) believing that OSNs may be used to conduct collaborative projects. Many of them (68.9%) would have liked to receive homework from such sites.

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study has shown that OSN sites are currently being massively used by Mauritian students who are spending much of their time on such sites. Moreover, the majority of the students are using OSNs to communicate about school work in an informal manner.

Online social networking can be regarded as a platform allowing teachers and students to communicate and collaborate on school subjects and projects outside the classroom. Teachers can post school related works on these online communities and students can further enrich their learning experiences by teaming up with their classmates to work on assignments and projects. These networks can also go beyond the classroom walls by uniting multiple classrooms from different schools, thus creating a richer environment for collaboration and knowledge sharing. As it has been observed in the study, the majority of students are already using OSN sites as a learning tool but only a few teachers are supporting them. It was also seen that most of the students were interested in the integration of OSN as a learning tool in their school curriculum. Based on the findings and analysis of this study, the followings recommendations are made.

- The Ministry of Education needs to set up a social media policy committee that involves the full range of institutional stakeholders. In addition, the committee should include individuals with a wide range of technology skills and also members who are regular users of social media. The committee should reflect on the fact that social media can be used in ways that are beneficial for teaching and learning.

- There is a need to explore strategies to incorporate social networking sites and social media in the classroom. Given the double-edged potential of online communication technologies, education professionals need to familiarise themselves with such technologies to be able to guide students on the proper use of OSN. With this knowledge, professionals can (1) support usage that leads to positive outcomes, (2) intervene to help students whose technology use has caused or may cause negative outcomes, and (3) intervene to help students who are at the receiving end of negative social media behaviour.

- Teachers should be provided with the appropriate knowledge and skills to deliver online educational services. The Mauritius Institute of Education with the collaboration of the National Computer Board may develop short crash course training...
programmes on online education delivery for the secondary school teachers.

- Based on the results of the survey carried out, Face book has been found as the most popular Online Social Networking (OSN) site among Mauritian students. Thus, the different features available on Face book may be investigated for their use in the Mauritian educational sector as tools to enhance learning.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This research has been funded by the Mauritius Research Council under the Unsolicited Research Grant Scheme. We thank the Mauritius Research Council for the funding. We would also like to thank the Ministry of Education for its support to conduct the survey and experiments.

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