

Adult Learners' Perceptions Of Using Social Networking Tools In Their Learning Processes

Authors: Elizabeth Ochola¹, Dorothy Omollo², Norbert Basweti³

Abstract

Social networks are increasingly gaining importance in higher education by offering learners opportunity to virtually interact with colleagues and lecturers. The ability to leverage Social Networking Sites (SNS) for meaningful learning activities has the potential to benefit the modern adult learner who has to balance a career, family obligations, and the goals of attending college. This paper is a case study that highlights the use of Google Plus and Whatsup in the learning processes of MBA students at the University of Nairobi. The participants of this study were drawn from the MBA evening class of 500 students between ages 19 and 49 years. The research used a single quantitative and qualitative case study approach to explore the benefits associated with incorporating social networking functionalities within an adult's learning experience; the preferred social networking sites and why? Adult learners experiences in utilizing social networking services; the pros and cons of using the social networks in learning. The findings reveal positive uptake with a few challenges including: computer illiteracy, resistance to new technology, concerns for privacy and information overload from lecturers' posts.

Key Words: Social networking tools, Adult learning, perception

1.0 Introduction

The influence of emerging technologies and the methods for information exchange continues to proliferate through electronic social networking sites (SNS). Popular online tools such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Google have changed user experiences through provision of a platform for unlimited information mining and peer-to-peer content sharing relevant to specific needs (Wheeldon, 2010; Brabazon, 2006). The users have the ability to collaborate on anything from business and political discussions, to music and commercials. The adoption and inclusion of such tools in everyday life begets the opportunity of continuous connectivity for a modern knowledge society seeking information on the go (McCarthy, 2010). This alternative approach to information exchange has not only affected the way we communicate and conduct business, but has also expanded opportunities for teaching and learning outside of the formal class setting (Lamanauskas, Slekiene, & Ragulienė, 2012).

¹ PhD Student (Communication Studies- Moi University); MA Linguistics and African Languages), Assistant Lecturer, Department of Communication Skills and Studies, University of Nairobi, P O Box 30197-00100 Nairobi, Kenya.
Email: elizabeth.auma@uonbi.ac.ke or elizabeth.nyarose@gmail.com Tel. +254 721 553609

² PhD Communication Studies, Lecturer, Department of Communication Skills and Studies University of Nairobi, P O Box 30197-00100 Nairobi, Kenya.

³ MA Linguistics and African Languages), Assistant Lecturer, Department of Communication Skills and Studies, University of Nairobi, P O Box 37788-00100 Nairobi, Kenya.
Email: nobert.ombati@uonbi.ac.ke or nobersweti@gmail.com, Cell phone: +254 723 743 927

Social networking has enabled creation and sharing of online user generated content; allowing people to rendezvous, connect and/or collaborate through technology-mediated communication. The Social network platforms provide opportunities for social and professional groups to share various files and photos and videos, create blogs and send messages, and conduct real-time conversations in the Internet.

Understanding the users' perceptions of integrating SNS such as Google Plus and Whatsup into teaching and learning creates a case for their inclusion in adult learners' support; particularly where considerations of convenience are apparent.

Having the ability to leverage SNS for meaningful learning activities could benefit the modern adult learner who has a busy life and must balance the intricacies of a career, family obligations, and the goals of attending college.

This paper is a case study that highlights the use of social networking tools in the learning processes of adult learners. The paper sought to establish the perceptions of non-traditional adult learners' of using social networking tools for learning feedback and discussions. The participants of this study were drawn from a total of 500 students enrolled in the MBA program at the University of Nairobi.

2.0 Literature Review

Online social networking sites have evaded modern society on a global scale and are among the most visited sites on the web (McCarthy, 2010). The use of social networks vary from peer-to-peer synchronous messaging to full collaborative group activities conducted solely on the internet through applications that don't require specialized programming knowledge (LeNoue, Hall, & Eighmy, 2011). There are also no age boundaries, which makes it suitable for any generational demographic of users with PC's or mobile devices (Madden, 2010). This method of instant and convenient connectivity provides a prescription for conditional time and distance constraints, which at times impede knowledge acquisition and beneficial information.

2.1 Social Networking

Social networking is the interaction between two or more individuals or groups who have come together in a neutral setting to exchange information and share a common interest. Although these social networking interactions could occur as face-to-face meetings, or in any structural gathering edifice, its popularity is more prominent in online settings. These online settings, commonly known as Social Networking Sites (SNS) are community meeting places on the internet that are accessed from devices that enable internet connectivity. They are also defined as a collection of web pages that are linked together to allow members to communicate with one another (Malesky & Peters, 2012). Individuals and groups using this communication alternative can experience SNSs by registering with an online host such as Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, and Google Plus to name but a few. Also, users of online SNS are not bound by distance, so they can connect with and share content and other items of interest among multiple friends and organizations from around the world. A recent internet research study found that 69% of adults online are engaging in the use of SNSs on a daily basis and online social networking communities such as Facebook offer social support and close relationships (Pew Research Center, 2012).

The phenomenon of online collaboration is not new, but the increase of social networking engagement on a global scale presents significant measures of interest. A study conducted by (comScore, 2011) found that "82 percent of the world's online population" has adopted SNS. It was also found that between 2007 and 2011, user

engagement with SNS increased from 6 percent to 19 percent, which positioned this medium as a primary outlet for communication. The report also showed evidence of people aged 55 and above being the fastest growing segment of social network users, thereby dispelling the belief that this type of activity is reserved for youthful populations. This growth is strongest in North America and Latin America, where SNS online users age 55 and over stand at 93 percent (comScore, 2011).

2.2 Social Networking Literacy among Adults learners

The pervasiveness of online social networking enables adult learners to interact with others on the internet in real-time, while learning new uses for web applications that can be used to enhance their digital media skills. Digital tools such as blogs, videos, and image editors can be incorporated into the collaborative online environment and used in conjunction with SNS. Therefore, users are not only retrieving and reading web content, but are also creating content and providing feedback to others (Solomon & Schrum, 2010). Fernandez-Villavicencio (2010) annotates ways in which society can become competent in information and media literacy by embracing social networks and other digital tools that allow users to find, produce, and share digital information. The acquisition of these digital media skills are critical in helping to meet information needs, as well as setting a foundation for continued lifelong learning (Fernandez-Villavicencio, 2010). The Partnership for 21st Century Skills (2011) and International Information and Communication Technology Literacy Panel (2002) have also advocated for the need to gain skills within the areas of information media and digital technology literacy. In so doing, the learners will improve their ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and communicate information, which are pertinent skills needed to meet the demands of a global economy (Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2011; International ICT Panel, 2002). Though adult learners have typically accumulated a wealth of rich experience throughout their lives (Toole, 2010), enhancing their digital literacy with the incorporation of SNS may in fact gauge their interest for continued learning in this format. This associated with the assumption that adult learners are motivated and have a readiness to learn as their lives present new tasks that are needed to adjust their role in society (Toole, 2010).

2.3 Social Networking and Adult Learning

Given the adult learners' need for flexibility and learning engagement outside of the traditional classroom, SNS could provide the supplement that keeps learners connected and informed on the go. Stanciu, Mihai, and Aleca (2012) found that students were open to SNS for educational support and collaboration with lecturers. The accessibility of content in this format could engage the adult learner, while offering convenient lecturers support. Junco, Heiberger, and Loken (2011) conducted a study that used Twitter to facilitate online discussion for pre-health professional college students. It was found that students were more inclined to engage in richer discussions pertaining to the course content, being that Twitter gave them more time to extend conversations outside of class. Besides, frequent feedback from faculty proved to be positive, in that it generated more discussion activity from the students and increased their sense of connection with the class (Junco et al., 2011). An undertaking as noted enables feedback at any time and from any place, allowing participating online community members to send updates from digital smart phones, tablets, and laptops that are connected to the internet. Moreover, SNS may also play a significant role in bridging generational gaps. A Pew Research Center study of older adults using social media stated that social spaces yield opportunities for varying generational backgrounds to share information, therefore bridging the divide (Madden, 2010). Activities such as photo and video sharing provide valuable connections and information updates through blogs that serve as outlets for personal health discussions that can be shared among friends and family. The study also showed a positive trend in SNS use with adults ages 50 and older, of which half were drawn to the benefits of renewed connections from their past and support networks (Madden, 2010).

The social network sites provide tools that focus heavily on building online communities bound to together with common interests or activities. In the field of E-Learning, the social network sites have been instrumental in addressing some of the challenges raised by educators with regards to technology assisted learning in the recent period. For example, the most cited issue around the lack of humanitarian aspect has been resolved by the use of Social networks that have facilitated the interactive side of learning, and to large extent helped to maintain the element of active participation in the educational process. The emergence of Social Network platforms has attracted people and enhanced interest toward e-learning. Researchers have established a consistency and coherence between the pedagogical approach and the option of using a social network in university education (Adriana G et.al:2014)

The advantages attributed to the effective utilization of interpersonal interaction in training are two-prong. For students: some degree of informal learning through informal communication, support for collaboration, feedback on thoughts and collaboration that is independent of space and time. For instructors: gaining feedback from students and constant communication with students and production of an effective instructional technology for their customers. It is therefore apparent that networking technology can be used effectively to foster a culture of learning, as a learning tool for both students and teachers. Furthermore, in the future, the social-networking sites will have the significant potential to expand teaching and learning out of classroom.

Scholars applaud social-networking tools for their capability to attract, motivate and engage students in meaningful communicative practice, content exchange, and collaboration (Mills, 2011). Social networking technologies such as Facebook allow members to participate in a learning environment where the learning process can occur interchangeably from both inside and outside of the classroom.

The question of human interaction in the learning process has been addressed through such virtual classrooms, chat rooms and video links meetings. The social networking platforms allow for self-pacing; each student (slow or quick) study at their own pace and speed and can access courses and make online follow-ups thereby overcoming the limitations of space and time in the educational process.

3.0 The Study

The study incorporated social networking tools: Google Plus and Whatsup to support student discussions and lecturer's feedback outside of the classroom.

The social networking tools were to supplement students learning with online material and topics to generate interest outside the face-to-face sessions. Given that the technology skill level for adults could span from novice to expert, the assumption that all students would be comfortable with online social networking tools could not be made.

Therefore, a qualitative review of the student's experiences in using SNS in the learning environment was of interest. It was also the objective of the study to explore how adult learners responded to receiving information outside of the classroom setting, amidst their busy lives. Therefore, the research sought to answer the following research question: What is the perception of using social networking tools in the learning processes among MBA adult learners' in the University of Nairobi?

4.0 Methodology

The research used a single quantitative and qualitative case study approach involving post graduate Adult learners. A case study involves the process of gaining knowledge by immersing oneself into the setting of inquiry. It is bounded by a place and time and can put emphasis on individuals, groups, or organizations (Patton, 2002). The case was a group of MBA students in the evening class at the University of Nairobi.

The researcher used questionnaires to gain the participants perspectives on using social networking tools in adult learning.

A phenomenological approach was used to gain a full understanding of how the students perceived the use of social networking within their learning environment. This strategy augmented the research by exploring the group's experiences over a one-month period. The experienced phenomenon within this study involved the inclusion of Google Plus and Whatsup within the environment of adult learners in a university setting. Patton (2002) interprets phenomenology to be an analytical process of gaining meaning, structure, and essence of a groups lived experience with a phenomenon.

5.0 Findings

According to the findings, 64% of the students were non-traditional adult learners who worked full-time jobs in both formal and informal sectors. Only 36% of the MBA students were full-time; taking classes only.

Among the adult learners who worked full-time jobs, 74% had full-time home and family responsibilities with the remaining 16% having work and school only. Therefore, the students on full-time home and family responsibilities in addition to the full-time jobs were in the category of adult learners as opposed to the traditional college aged students (Cercone, 2008).

The majority (83%) of the students who participated in the study indicated that they were familiar with social networking tools. 70% of the respondents indicated that they participated in social networking with their lecturers and other classmates in discussing MBA related topics through Whatsup (43%) and Google Plus platform (37%) for discussions (58%) and feedback for group activities (52%) and for understanding course material (40%). However, they pointed out that the use of SN tools was a local arrangement with some of their lecturers and not a university initiative.

In terms of gender, majority of the students who applauded the use of SN in learning were male (64%) while 36% were female students. This infers that male students were more technologically empowered than female counterparts in the same class and therefore benefited more in use of SN in adult leaning.

The majority of the students (67%) indicated that the new way of learning through SN increased their rapport with their lecturers and therefore increased their chances of doing well in their exams by 30%.

Also, nearly all of the students (94%) had a preference for one-on-one lecturers' conversations for feedback purposes, in lieu of online communication with lecturers. Further, the generational divide in the class varied with 46% of the students between ages 18-29, 36% between ages 30-39, and 18% at 40 and older.

The majority (56%) of the adult learners had a positive perception on the use of social networking tools in the learning process. This is reflected by their support of the idea that the university should adopt the used of social networking tools in the adult learning of the various courses offered.

When students were asked to describe what they liked about using Google Plus for classroom postings, 70% of the respondents gave a positive feedback about the incorporation of the social networking tool in learning MBA course.

The Learners further indicated that use of Google Plus and Whatsup was a challenging, yet positive supplemental tool for the adult learning. The challenges facing use of Google Plus and Whatsup in adult learning was more prominent in the introductory stages of incorporating the tool, which was reflected by Learners' resistance.

In addition, competency in using the Google Plus and Whatsup was a challenge among the Learners while others had concerns of privacy.

Conversely, some of the positive attributes perceived from the use of the Google Plus tool and Whatsup included the flexibility in giving Learners feedback, Learners questions being answered simultaneously, through relevant examples.

It was observed that the Learners who did take advantage of these discussions and feedback opportunities often came to class prepared for quizzes and other activities. There was also the benefit of giving Learners instant update notifications. Many lot of the Learners in the class utilized cell phones, tablets, and laptops with integrated Google Applications. Their frequent use of these devices for personal and professional means also meant that they could receive notifications from the lecturers while at home, work, or out-of-town locations when the applications were enabled on their devices. When the lecturer would send feedback or discussions by way of Google Plus, there was some reassurance that they would eventually check the status updates.

6.0 Conclusion

The current global trends in learning environments incorporates both traditional and non-traditional adult learners, giving rise to the question on whether all adult learners' groups would accept the infusion of social networking technologies for learning support. The findings revealed positive adoption and use Google Plus and Whatsup by adult learners amidst challenges including; computer illiteracy, resistance to new technology, concerns for privacy and information overload from lecturers' posts. The application of SNS in adult learning environments presents opportunity for Learners to understand and gain meaningful feedback from the lecturers, while benefiting from the convenience of virtual access from any place and at any time.

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