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What students are saying on Facebook about their schools?

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Abstract

Social Networking has reached every corner of the mass population in recent years. Academic professionals have employed social networking sites (SNSs) to help them make their teaching more lively and multi-faceted. Results of using SNS in teaching have generally received positive outcomes. This paper examines the content of a forum-like discussion page on Facebook where students are free to write anything about their school. The page is setup by students from a particular school and participants are mostly the student population of that school. The page is an anonymous forum, thus, the content is not restricted to praise only. The theme of the forum is anything related to the school. By looking at what students are saying on the forum, it gives an idea of the kind of discussions or conversations that students usually engage themselves in. These are online “traces” that reveal attitude, social relationship and affiliation. The results of this paper show that student discussions are mainly involved in categories such as school policy, student conduct, reflection on teachers, reminiscence, and encouragement.

Keywords

Feedback; Social networking site; Education; Social learning; Learning Technology

Introduction

The web 2.0 technology has made possible a proliferation of social networking sites (SNSs) with its advancement on user content creation. One by one, the largest of those SNSs have gone publicly listed providing the financial and technological capital for their long term sustainability. The Wall Street Journal (2012) reports that the largest SNS, Facebook, has broken the 1-billion-registered-user mark making at least one in every seven persons in the world a Facebook user. According to a Pew Research Center report (Brenner, 2013), 73% of adults in America use social networking compared to just 15% seven years ago. The report also reveals that 40% of cell phone users have apps on their mobile devices that provide access to these SNSs.

In addition to those well-known sites such as Facebook and Twitter, there are also a slew of other sites that cater to various geographical, functional and recreational constituents. The site Orkut is developing quickly in two of the most populated countries in Brazil and India. Cooking enthusiasts can go to AllRecipes or BakeSpace to exchange recipes. Ardent travelers can logon to CouchSurfing or EveryTrail to share their travel experience. Data from the statistics site howmanyarethere.net (2013) indicate that there are some 200 social networking sites on the internet. The top 10 sites cover 2.3 billion users (Brookson, 2013) with a monthly active user (MAU) base of 1.8 billion (eBizMBA, 2014).

Given the far-reaching extent of social networking sites (SNSs), they have become no strangers to the utilization in academics and researches that try to incorporate them in the teaching-learning practice. Social media allows learners to manipulate their learning environment and actively participate in the learning process created by that environment (Wenger, 1998). SNSs promote involvement. Users generate the dialogs and discussions by themselves. This very nature of content generation naturally leads to learner-centered design and self-directed learning. In today's education system, promoting self-directed learning has been a challenging task in traditional school setting (Valjataga & Fiedler, 2009). The advent of SNSs presents a timely solution to this challenge and provides an alternative to the formal learning settings in a school.

Literature Review

From a social learning perspective, knowledge does not only exist in individual minds but also “in the discourse among individuals, in the social relationships that bind them, in the physical artifacts that they use and produce, and in the theories, models and methods they use to produce them” (Jonassen & Land, 2000). In addition to the experience gained from the interaction with the physical world, the buildup of knowledge is also seen as a fundamentally social activity (Littleton & Hakkinen, 1999). In other words, during discussions and conversations, knowledge and information are the most fundamental components. This knowledge or information is being

passed from one person to the other members of the discussion. This way of disseminating knowledge is far more efficient than someone trying to acquire the knowledge by himself. The reason for this efficiency is because during the discussion, the knowledge is being reinforced over and over again in the minds of the members of the discussion. When there is a discrepancy in the information, the discussion tends to correct them automatically since there are multiple sources in the discussion and the immediate correction of the discrepancy again makes the reinforcement of the knowledge that much more efficient.

Social networking sites, with their intrinsic capability to promote dialog and sharing, make it easy to find like-minded people and to proactively organize knowledge exchange with them. Anybody can initiate the discussion and everybody else is free to engage and participate. There is no limit on how deep the discussion can extend to and how many users can join in. Someone can enter the discussion when it first starts or he may enter in the middle or even at the end of the discussion. As long as he shares his thoughts to the discussion, he is adding value to the social learning process and making contribution to the formation of knowledge. The greater the level of participation is from the users to share knowledge and ideas related to mutual interest, the stronger they will feel being supported and involved, leading to the fostering of identity, belonging and attachment to the sites they are on.

Since SNSs have reached worldwide popularity, numerous researches have looked into their social, political, health, economic and cultural influences. In the context of education, the research quantity regarding learning, teaching, language and science impact of SNSs is also abundant (Christofides, Muise and Desmarais, 2009; Lampe, Ellison and Steinfield, 2008). The ultimate objective of using SNS in education is to establish platforms that will foster a high level of communication between all the stakeholders in an education system. Communication is the backbone of education. Everything from classroom teaching to school policy making depends on effective communication. With these new communication platforms at hand, schools can develop more open and adaptable channels between students and teachers and administration. The platforms can collect more constructive suggestions and form more flexible feedback systems in the schools. They can create an environment of open atmosphere to encourage inputs from different sources. Various components of the schools will essentially work together in a more collaborative and regenerative way.

Materials and Methods

The current investigation analyzes the content of a fans page of a school on the largest SNS, Facebook. The fans page is a like a mini forum created by students of a particular school. Participants on the page are mostly current and former students of that school and the topics are

usually limited to issues related to that school only. Posting on this mini forum is anonymous so that genuine discussions can be elicited and issues can be truly reflected in the discussions.

There are more than 1000 posts on the forum in about two months of its existence so far. Each post may generate multiple replies to initiate a mini discussion of the post. The posting has a post number as identification. For example, the first ever post on the forum is identified as #1 and the 100th post is identified as #100. The replies to the post, however, are not anonymous and are associated with the usernames of the repliers. If users want to have anonymous replies to certain post, they would just initiate another post and refer to the post number of the old post in the new post. As a result, to maintain anonymity of the contents used for this part of the research, only the posts themselves are used for the coding of the analysis, not the replies.

The approach to the analysis of the content is a sort of virtual ethnography. Hine (2008) introduces the methodology of virtual ethnography in which the techniques of traditional ethnography can be meaningfully transferred to the online world. Bosch (2009) borrows this technique to investigate the profiles of 150 Facebook users to generalize trends on the content of those profiles. She emphasizes the kind of “completely unobstructed observation” during her analysis of the content, which is essential in pure online observation (Garcia et al., 2009). Although the mini forum investigated by this research is public domain and anonymous, the author does not take part in participation by posting any comments, as not to generate any induced discussion.

The method to analyze the contents of the posts on the forum is to interpret the meaning of those posts and categorize them into similar trends and implications. The coding for this research does not involve background information on the users since the target of this analysis is not on profiles, but on posts. As a result, the coding is straight forward in terms of number of codes. However, the challenge in the coding for this research is in the interpretation of the posts on the forum and generating similarities and trends from their meanings, similar to what Guaman (2012) has done on her study of social learning on virtual communities.

Data Analysis

The content of the forum has been followed since its inception. Posts are grouped into different categories and the categories are given meanings and names. Out of the 1000+ posts so far, five dominant categories have been observed. They are School Policy, Student Conduct, Reflection on Teachers, Reminiscence and Encouragement. There are other sporadic posts but the majority of the posts fall in these five categories. Table 1 summarizes the percentage of the coding of the content in accordance with the categories. Examples of the original posts used to illustrate each category are inserted within the categories below.

Table 1. Summary of the coding of the content

Category	percentage
1. School policies	21%
2. Student conduct	15%
3. Encouragement	11%
4. Reminiscence	9%
5. Reflection on Teachers	8%
Total	64%

1. School Policies

Since the page is about things happening around the school, a lot of posts talk about how students feel about some of the school policies. Naturally, many of the posts reflect disagreement from the students on those policies. Post #901 describes how the student is discontent with many things around the school, one of which is the class grouping of the students.

#901 ... Class grouping: The good students are always grouped into Class A and always given priority. Why is that? Do students from Class A pay more tuitions than the rest of us? ...

The post also points out that the elimination system of the singing competition is too prone to unfairness. It reads:

... You have to have your personal connections. The primary round of the singing contest is not to test how good you sing, but how well you know the teachers....

Post #918 talks about the makeup exam policy from the school. The makeup exam system has been the topic of discussion among many students and teachers since it affects the number students who need to repeat their studies.

#918 ... Those students who failed are given chances to makeup for their failed exams until they pass. The school hopes by doing this, those students can eventually learn what they have missed. Is that really helpful? That would only put insurmountable pressure on the students and teachers.....

Since the mini forum is anonymous, students' comments about school policies are going to be a way for students to vent their dissatisfaction. Some of those comments may be well legitimate and worth considering by the school administration. These would be true opinions from the students and may be even from teachers who are the most affected by those school policies. As a result, these mini forums on social networking sites can become viable sources for suggestions and ideas on how to improve school policies to better serve their targets.

2. Student Conduct

Many students take pride in being a part of the schools that they study in. They would like to grow and develop together with the schools and their fellow students. However, when they see other students behave in ways that they do not feel appropriate and even in ways that would hurt the reputation of the school, they would voice their opinions on the forum. Post #1133 is from an alumnus of the school and he has the following to say.

#1133 ... At least what I'm seeing is that students now are not being very respectful to others. Although they may have discontents, this is not the proper way to express them. No one would care who the teachers are or who the principal is for a school. Students need to develop their own integrity....

Post #188 points to a more serious situation of students being indifferent to a nearby accident. The post describes the lack of sympathy.

#188 ... One day on a bus, an elderly teacher slipped and fell when she tried to get on. ... However, all the students stood idly by without even offering a tissue paper.... Where is their sense of shame?

Post #1134 goes on to remind students that during times of hardship, it is important to equip themselves first and develop a sense of self-reflection instead of blaming the issue on others. Part of it says:

#1134 ... As students, you lack the self-reflection towards the difficulties the school faces. The problems have been enlarged and blamed on school administration..... but at the same time, have you been exercising your so-called righteousness yourselves?

The issue of student conducts on the forum is a chastising way to remind fellow students to look back and reflect on things that they have done in an incorrect manner. Although no names are mentioned usually, the popularity of the forum can spread the words quickly into those students involved. By bringing the issues to the attention of the whole school, students may need to think twice when they are about to go in the wrong direction again next time.

3. Encouragement

Another category of posts comes from students giving out encouragement to their friends and classmates. A little pat on the back and push on the shoulder may translate to positive energy for other students to carry on during endless hours of midnight study or after-school preparation for group projects. Many students use the forum as a way to release some nice words for fellow students in the form of reinforcement for their hard work and effort. Post #950 comes from a graduating student who wants to have a good ending to his last day of school the next day.

#950 ...In a blink of an eye, tomorrow will be the last 5 periods of class at school. After that, my last final exams of my high school life....wish all will pass the exams and no need to makeup.... Wish all a smooth graduation...

Posts #958 and #989 are both simple and straight forward one-word phrases for both graduating students, one for Junior 3 and one for Senior 3. They both contain simple meaning such as “god bless” and “add fuel”. They both wish fellow students a successful exam and a smooth graduation.

It is a warm feeling when encouraging words are coming from classmates and teachers, especially during hard hours of endless studies for tests and exams. When one finds out that fellow students are offering mutual support to each other and backing each other up in spirit, it makes the tough endeavors in the pursuit of knowledge all worthwhile. However, these words are not always comfortable to say in face-to-face situations when students are together in classrooms and schools. The forum, then, is a perfect venue for students to show their affections and care for each other.

4. Reminiscence

A big portion of the posts on the forum are students’ reminiscence for old times. Students grow older and eventually graduate and leave their schools. However, high school years are usually one of the most precious experiences in a person’s life. The friends gained from those years remain life-long friends since it is the most innocent period in the course of a person’s development. Things happened during those years remain vividly in a person’s long term memory even decades after they happen. Many students take to the forum to express their nostalgia about their good times from the past. Post #826 is a video about the weekly mass at the school. The students miss the solemnness and chastity of a high school mass, which they will not experience again after they leave school. The post starts with the link to the video and says:

#826 ... I miss the feeling of the school mass in the grand hall. Although it was not in a church, two thousand students and teachers all gathered around, in

uniforms and suits, with the music from the school silver band, it is an atmosphere that cannot be found again....

Post #858 remembers the worst weather during the annual sports days from several years back. Memories are usually the strongest when there are extreme conditions around the incidents. The post reads:

#858 ... A few years back, during the annual sports days, the temperature was the lowest in record for sports days and it was also raining..., but the cheering leading competition still went on...., everybody was soaking wet.....

Post #923 describes another group memory that is one of a kind experience. The last East Asian Games were hosted in the region and many high schools organized performances in the opening and ending ceremony. It was the sort of “event of the decade” festivity that drew the contribution from every sector of the community. The student remembers:

#923 ... the last East Asian Games... They gave us two pieces of bread and one bottle of water for dinner... good nutrients... but it was fun... the moment after the end of the finale was really really high....felt so happy....

Good times or bad times, what happens in the high school years is the experience that links people together for years and years to come. Even after they finish college, enter the work force, have their own families, the friends from their high school years will always be cherished and maintained. May be in ten or even twenty years, they can look back at the forum and see what they were doing for those good old high school years.

5. Reflection on Teachers

Besides the students, teachers are the other main component of a school. Students reflect a lot on their current and former teachers, either as compliments or criticisms on their teaching. Sometimes, teachers are remembered by their students years after they have graduated. Other times, what a teacher does in the morning is being discussed in the afternoon right away. The teacher student relationship is a very delicate balance. When a teacher is being strict on the students, it does not necessarily mean he is perceived in a negative manner by the students. On the contrary, many students appreciate their teachers for the way they force them and strengthen them. The true evaluation though, may only come after the students have grown up.

Post #915 is an example of the kind of reflection that comes years later. As an alumnus, the person expresses appreciation for his former teachers and recognizes their contribution and hard work towards their students.

#915 ... Without the enthusiasm for education, teachers can't endure the hardship in teaching. ... I am really glad I did not do anything that would make their lives harder when I was a student. I would like to take this chance to express my gratitude towards all those who have taught me... Thank You.

Post #972 is another example of appreciation for teachers. It lists the fact that traditional ways of punishment and detention, which could have made the teachers' jobs easier, are being avoided and rejected by modern education. Yet, teachers are still coming up with more innovative and effective ways to practice teaching just the same.

#972 ... I truly tip my hats to all the teachers....Without any of the tools in traditional punishment and detention..... I would not have chosen teaching for myself. Teachers, you are truly great in never giving up on us. My respect to you forever....

Of course, not all reflections on teachers are going to be positive on a student generated anonymous forum. Students are bound to vent negative comments on their teachers since it is not traceable. Post #1019 describes a case of unfortunate situation where the student's absence due to sickness leads to the missing of a quiz grade. The student has some sharp words after the incident.

#1019 ...I missed school a couple of days ago due to stomachache. I did not see any doctor but I had a parent letter for proof. However, I got a 0 on my Chinese language quiz and did not even get a chance for makeup. It's as if the teacher deliberately did not want to pass students to make them repeat another year.....

Post #1061 reflects not any particular incident, but some general thoughts from a student on the stance of teachers when they teach. The student is obviously bothered by teachers' bias on topics that require independent opinions from the students such as History. His thoughts are:

#1061 ... When teaching subjects such as History, teachers need to maintain a neutral position on every event occurred..... It is the students who must exercise judgment on these events, not the teachers..... Remember, teacher influence is a powerful thing. Use caution on it.

Whether positive or negative, the comments regarding teachers on the forum can be used as constructive feedback to improve the teaching quality of teachers in the future. Sometimes, the words may be harsh and ill-advised, but it should be the underlying issues from the feedback that teachers can utilize and build on to try to do a better job next time around. The forum is an excellent source for direct information from the students since they are genuine and first hand.

Discussion

In the course of developing towards a more open atmosphere in a school, the most important element is still participation from the students themselves. To be an active participant in a social setting, students need to initiate conversation, establish connection and follow up on relationships with others. The platforms provided by social networking sites (SNS) are the perfect starting point for students to engage their participation in school related issues.

The results of this paper reveal that students have abundant opinions about their everyday studies and the school environment that their studies are taking place. These opinions would have stayed dormant in the past since there was no channel for these opinions to be expressed. The emergence of SNS creates exactly this channel and students are actively participating in this platform. Through this participation in discussions and dialog, students reinforce their sentiments towards their schools, while feeding valuable ideas to peers who might equally gain from their own participation. It is a positive feedback mechanism that maximizes the social outcomes. The perception of participation in a social setting can sometimes only be experienced by the participants themselves when they are actively engaging in the process. Everything else becomes secondary.

At the core a more democratic and open environment, participation is not only implied and encouraged, but also usually seen as a requirement. Students post their messages and get replies; share photos and videos and get 'likes' and links; create activities and events and receive feedbacks. It is the satisfaction associated with those contributions that drives users to stay connected with their friends and be part of the social circle. Through SNS, students not only have a place to speak their mind, but also a venue to form a collective effort in moving towards a more autonomous and self-regulated school atmosphere. They are actively making comments about school policies in terms of curriculum, exams, competitions and assessment. They are pointing to appropriate and inappropriate conducts by fellow students. They tell each other what they like and dislike about the way their teachers teach. They express a sense of belonging by remembering what they have experienced in the years during which they grow up. They are also providing mutual support for each other during good times and bad times. They are saying all these on SNS and it is worth listening to.

Although the content investigated by this paper contains both praise and criticism, the constructive elements from the posts on the forum are the most valuable contribution. Schools can designate staff to follow the discussions on the forum and devise strategies and policies that deem responsive to those suggestions in the forum. When students see their demands being catered by the school, they will come up with more constructive suggestions later and the cycle can generate a healthy exchange of ideas for improvements within the school.

Conclusion

Social networking site (SNS) has gone from a high-tech social gadget to a household commodity in less than a decade. People are talking on SNS about everything and anything. Students are no different. They are talking on SNS about their schools. This paper looks at the content of a school-related Facebook fans page on which students from a particular school are making posts about their school. The content is analyzed and coded into five categories. They are School Policies, Student Conducts, Reflection on Teachers, Reminiscence and Encouragement. The five categories almost make up 64% of the total posts on the page. These categories reveal that students have strong opinions about what happens in the school in their everyday studies. These opinions would not have been heard if not for the emergence of SNS. Schools should seize this opportunity to actively attend to the suggestions made by students on SNS and respond to them in a positive and constructive way as to foster a true student-centered learning environment.

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