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Cultural and Educational Aspects of Using Social Media: a Study with Undergraduate Students

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Abstract: Online social networks are a reality on global societies and have the power to influence all human activities. Specially, in the area of culture and education they can improve ways of groups’ constitutions and interactions, then resulting in improvements. An exploratory investigation was conducted to understand how different groups of undergraduate students built relations to interact and exchange contents for studying and leisure. Results showed important differences between students in classes from Computer Science and Communication Programs.

Keywords: Culture, Education, Social Media, Facebook.

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Culture can be understood as a “cultivation, care, attention and development”. The ability to guide yourself and to be in contact with others toward more intelligent solutions to the enormous challenges of the twenty-first century, so you can learn, you can share and can grow with others and for others (González, J. A., 2011). Human beings have built artifacts with different but specific meanings so that they can live
together, express their thoughts, feelings, desires, worries, and they can interact, learn and be able to contribute to a better place to live.

According to this understanding, Campos (2012) postulate culture as a construction of the reality by society in terms of relationship as a consequence of interpersonal actions.

Esta cultura inicia su nutrición al aprender a reconocer que lo que realmente conocemos son relaciones y relaciones de relaciones y que la construcción de la realidad parte de una acción interpersonal a partir de la cual construimos la sociedad (Ibid.:448).

The relationships built by individuals inside a group create opportunities for cultural exchanges over a variety of activities, like discussing about subjects of interest, collaborating on common projects, building knowledge, etc. It has been known that technologies can empower human beings and online social networks have created lots of new forms of integrating people by amplifying their connections and the way they communicate. New personal relationships are now established in cyberspace through virtual communities. They unfold from the usual exchange of messages between the participants in a group of people and its cohesion is maintained in accordance with the interests and motivations of the participants, by a non-systematic way, in the dynamics of the communities presented in cyberspace.

The developments of technologies, specifically digital technology, have increased social interactions, access to information, and built of knowledge as never before, then our possibilities to face the present and future challenges are becoming strong, as we can see in several areas of research like medicine, use of natural resources, astronomy and so on. Individuals are embedded in society through relationships that develop throughout their lives, first in the family context, after in school, and participating in the community where they live and work; relationships made by individuals, organized as social networks, give foundation and support for strengthening the social sphere. The very nature of man is united with others and supports the network society (Goulart, Ramos & Cruz, 2012).

A social network is a social structure built of nodes, generally individuals or organizations, which are connected by one or more specific types of interdependency. The most known social network is Facebook with more than 1.5 billion active users. On average, 700 billion minutes are spent on this social networking website per month (Facebook Users in the World, 2015).

According to Patrick and Gonçalves (2010), the social network Facebook is one of the most used around the world to meet, share, interact and discuss ideas of interest in common by the users. Founded in February 2004 by a Harvard student, Mark Zuckerberg, initially aimed to integrate students of the university into a platform for easy access and interaction among them. Recent data shows that Facebook has more than 1.5 billion active users and it is the most important worldwide social media (Statista, 2016). In fact, because of its massive presence on virtual space, Facebook
have been studied to map its influence on everyday life, especially on education.

The challenge of using Web 2.0 technologies in the classroom is to use them in a way that enhances learning, not simply because they are available. The nature of Web 2.0 moves beyond its predecessor “read-only Web 1.0” to include “participatory, collaborative, and distributive practices” (Greenhow et al., 2009). Knowledge acquisition is enhanced through social learning experiences, such as group work or collaboration. (Fewkes & McCabe, 2012).

Online social networks provide a virtual space for individuals or groups of individuals to create their own specific networks. In this virtual shared space, peoples own a profile which they can connect to others with mutual agreement and publish contents to be consumed by the online social community. Afterwards, they can share their stories and feelings by writing texts, uploading photos and videos with their connected and virtual friends. Some individuals in the virtual communities can have relationship outside virtual space, too. Truly, as mentioned before, online social networks are digital technology and it gives power to face-to-face relationships, enforce and turning them accessible anytime, anyplace and ‘any needed’.

Personal online networks can include everybody such as people from work, school, family, relatives and acquaintances. People can be informed and learn about happenings, events, ceremonies, sports, politics and so on. Online social networks not only provide platforms for online friendships, but they also enhance the relationship among offline friends (Praveena, K. and Thomas, Sam, 2014).

In educational terms, several studies have sought to understand the possibilities and obstacles to the use of this media, but focused on different audiences. In general, the motivational factors stand out, allowing critical and reflective construction of knowledge and information (Zancanaro et al., 2012; Fernandes, 2011).

Therefore, the following questions arise: is there any appropriation of this social media by so-called ‘digital generation’ for exchange of cultural or educational content? In what ways can Facebook be used in teaching and learning processes? How do the face-to-face communities happen in contrast of virtual communities of the respondents when used for education and for leisure?

This paper summarizes the results of Scientific Initiation project, aims to investigate the presence of educational interactions among students on their use of Facebook in order to show the characteristics of this social network, as well as to see eventual advantages and difficulties. The main points to be investigated in this work are: (a) compare students’ participations in face-to-face groups and virtual groups; (b) identify the online interactions related to study and leisure.
Culture and Social Media

Social media is a digital technology that operates over the Internet and offers ways for disseminating messages in a decentralized manner. It is free of editorial control differently from the mass media communication age. This is called ‘many to many’ content production type and the main objective is creating an environment for relationships construction. “Social media can be conceptualized as collaboration spaces, information sharing, and collective construction of knowledge through the Internet interactions”. (Dotta, 2011).

Social media supports different ways of representing affective or professional relationships featured in network or community, that is, it’s a group of people who have some level of relationship or mutual interest. Its main objective is the relationship. The differentiating factor from social media to a social network is its goal. Both are not necessarily built on a digital form, but they can happen in online or offline configuration. We should remember that digital media favor their growth.

The development of information and communication technologies has enabled virtual communities to become more and more present in daily life. This is a mediated communication that allows the exchange of information instantaneously through the Internet. Therefore, it is no longer trend, but a habit in people’s lives with strong impacts on education and culture.

Duarte, Brito and Medeiros (2012) present another concept when doing a parallel between virtual and face-to-face social networks, as they identify people or institutions connected by one or more interdependent relations such as friendship, affinity, belief, professional interest etc. These networks are used for sharing ideas, information and emotions among people who have interests in common.

From these observations, the concept of social network postulates that a set of autonomous participants shares information and resources around values and interests common among them. Accordingly, people who are integrated to online networks consider the existing relations among them as informal and organize actions that originate socialization and mobilization implying on the development of networks.

By creating virtual social networks, via Internet, it was assumed a new model of social and cultural structure over a new context having a feasible social, economic and geographic coverage (Duarte, Brito y Medeiros, 2012). Because of that, the potential of network is the ability to make connections with different cultures in order to participate in documents, issue opinions, publish information and make use of the resources of this computer network, enabling, in this context, the integration among members through virtualized connections.

The social network acts as a union of peculiar individuals, interconnected among them and predisposed to contribute and criticize participations or actions from others. This way of understanding is also recognized by Raquel Recuero (2009:69) when referring to the virtual social networks as established by a “set of actors and their relationships.”
Along this same line of reasoning, it is argued that networks works out as a result of two or more partners publishing posts, liking, commenting or sharing other posts. Individuals are increasingly creating contents and making them public, both in a good or bad manner, with the help of the Internet, no matter their color, wealth, religion or profession, creating social and cultural links and ties that obviously would not exist without the network. Virtual communities are outside the dimensions of time and space. The messaging is almost instantaneous and allows people around the world to be connected simultaneously.

In accordance with the above, the network presents itself as a way of organization with a fundamental aspect defined by its horizontality, that is, the shape of interrelating subjects without hierarchy. This integration among the elements, actors and their connections, ensures that the distance between users can be minimized because, as a participant of this group publishes something, it propagates to all inside the network and access to that content is assured, as soon as someone is connected to the Internet with some device directed to read the information just released by the participant (Carneil, Marchi, 2012).

According to Silius et al. (2011:24), “the most important feature of the social media service in educational context is usability”, meaning that in order the network be used in educational contexts it is necessary that it should be easily understood and used by its members.

Social Media inside Cultural and Education Contexts

Social media, enhanced by the development of technologies, enables a new way to communicate and exchange information, whether or not it has educational or cultural nature; in other words, people say what they want and most of times published posts are useful. The numerous possibilities and resources available over the Internet can be used to cover many different issues, such as cultural, educational, economics, politics, among others.

In this way, according to Barros (2011):

Social networking brings a new dynamic in the relationship between users and those with their network. Facilities associated with the creation and sharing of content, new consumption and lifestyles, the use of social networks requires new and refined selection of skills, processing and interpretation of information, which is an pedagogical potential. (Barros et al.:12).

Social networks allied to educational content allow students to participate in educational communities through the creation, manipulation and sharing content online, according to Silius et al. (2011).

A virtual network is a social structure made up of individuals, organizations, associations, companies, or other social entities, also made up of people who are connected by one or several models of relationships and they can be based on friendship, family, commercial, educational or other driver. In these relationships, participants promote movements and flows, whereby they shared beliefs, information, knowledge, prestige.
Virtual social networks on the Internet, notably in relation to its function of social connectedness, are aggregative. Cardozo (2008:6) notes that: “these systems work out over the fundamental principle of social interaction, meaning that they seek to connect people and subsidizing their communications and, therefore, can be used to coin social ties”. According to the statement, it is possible to create a social integration through the virtual relationship and we cannot forget that the virtual integration through these networks provides a new way of cultural presence and that:

[... ] the environments that dwell in cyberspace are virtual, but even in this case they promote groups of participants to grow, communities to develop, and specific learning social networks to exist, so in conclusion virtual is not opposed to real (Ibid).

It appears, therefore, that virtual communities may have different configurations when compared to face-to-face communities. The social integration that occurs in the face-to-face communities occurs in specific time and in a limited way.

Method

The research is a study with an exploratory perspective focused on understanding some aspects of Facebook’s use by college students and formulates assumptions for further investigation. Data was collected using a pretested questionnaire whose goal was to identify:

a) Dimension and characteristics of students’ groups in face-to-face and virtual spaces;

b) Types of connections and interactions inside those groups;

c) Types of cultural and educational contents exchanged among them.

The sample was chosen by convenience and it was organized by two different classrooms with undergraduate students of final programs: one classroom from Computer Science Program with 53 individuals and the other from Social Communication Program with 84 students. Both classrooms were of Municipal University of São Caetano do Sul, Brazil, in the end of 2013. Questionnaires were applied inside classrooms and collected data was organized as a Microsoft Excel file. Graphical analysis was conducted with the plug-in called Node XL, whose specification is intended to produce visualization of networks. This tool allows to enter the information in a list of net, allowing easy generation of the graph and, then, to display the data.

Results

Analysis of the results was performed in order to identify relationships inside the groups and to compare its existence in the virtual versus face-to-face environments. Also, the educational and cultural use of the social
media Facebook was investigated. Data were collected and analyzed by classrooms.

**Computer Science Classroom:**

Figures 1 and 2 present the relationships among students in a face-to-face and over Facebook, respectively, when asked about to whom they study together. It is important to notice that only 58% of the students at this classroom participated in the survey. Therefore, some relations may not have been bilateral due to the fact that not all students in the class participated in the survey.

![Figure 1](http://nodeXL.codeplex.com)

**Figure 1**

**Face-to-face relationships to study together**

All respondents related to study in a face-to-face mode with at least one person of the classroom. Yet, it is clearly noted the occurrence of small groups with 3 students. In this classroom, the habit of studying in a face-to-face mode takes place in small groups of students, with a maximum of 5 members. In Facebook, it is noted a considerable difference in configuration. In this case, 22.2% of respondents using Facebook said to interact with 9.6% of the classroom and just 5.5% of total appeared to interact with 16.1% of the classroom, featuring a network with weaker points of relation.

Relations that occur both in face-to-face way and on the Facebook focused on studies in groups had weaker ties. The face-to-face meetings for leisure had 23 people cited and several unilateral relations. The collected
data pointed to 61.1% of the respondents related in a face-to-face way for leisure with up to 5 people.

Leisure relations occurred on Facebook was marked by unilateral relations and they can be classified as weaker. About the occurrence of relations of type leisure on face-to-face and on Facebook, it was noted the presence of only 6 people interacting among each other and they were points of relations with other small groups of the network inside classroom.

It was used three levels of relations in order to characterize its strength, as follow: (1) friend – people who exchange opinions and personal issues; (2) colleague – people who share space and have some common objective but they don’t share itself; (3) unrelated – people who stay together sharing space just because the situation imposes it, but they don’t interact to each other.

The level of relation called ‘colleague’, from the options given to the levels of relations, was the one with higher concentration of points and lines of relation. The level ‘friend’ is characterized by the presence of a group of people isolated from the rest of the class and there was another small group with little relationship to others. Last, but not least, the level ‘unrelated’ had a unilateral configuration, where just one respondent was cited by 93.5% of the class, which means a friend of all.

The last part of the questionnaire included a specific question, as follow: “How do you participate on Facebook for studying?” The
question allowed more than one possible answer. The functionality most used by the respondent students was to send instant messages, item marked by 38.8% of respondents. The option of posting educational content was the less marked, only 11.1% of respondents. Recalling that this question could be checked more than once. Yet, 38.8% of respondents use Facebook for studying on different days of week and just 11.1% use Facebook to communicate for studying on weekend.

Social Communication Classroom:

Figures 3 and 4 present the relationships among students in a face-to-face and over Facebook, respectively, when asked about to whom they study together. Only 28.3% of the students at Social Communication classroom participated in the survey. As already stated, some relations may not have been bilateral due to the fact that not all students in the class participated in the survey.

![Image](http://nodexl.codeplex.com)

Figure 3

Face-to-face relationships for studying

Note that 43.4% had face-to-face way of interaction for studying with up to 15 people in the classroom. Therefore, the habit of studying together face-to-face occurs mostly in large groups. In the social media studied, 82.6% of respondents said to relate on Facebook for studying with 5 to 30 people of the classroom; higher value compared with the face-to-face community. Yet, 8.6% of respondents said to relate to 80 people of the classroom on Facebook for studying, consequently almost with all classroom.
From the respondents, 91.3% said to relate on a face-to-face way and on Facebook for studying with 3 to 20 people in the classroom, while only 4.3% of respondents said to relate to the whole classroom for studying in both communities.

The face-to-face relations for leisure have a group of people, formed for four members, isolated from the rest of the classroom. The leisure relations that happened on Facebook belonged to a group isolated from the rest of the classroom with only five members. It is also observed that some students had relation with several people in the classroom, unilaterally. Relations that permeate face-to-face communities and virtual communities get along, mostly with small groups of up to 5 people.

The level of relation called ‘colleague’, from the options given to relations’ levels, was the one with higher concentration of points and lines of relation. The level “friend” was characterized by the presence of a group of three members who are connected through the center of relations by only one unilateral relation. Last, but not least, the level ‘unrelated’ was the one with the lowest number of points involved. It is observed unilateral relations isolated from the rest of the classroom.

Regarding the last part of the questionnaire, as well as the Computer Science classroom, the functionality most used by the respondents...
for studying was by exchanging messages, item marked by 78.2% of respondents. The options “posting educational information”, “sharing educational information” and “liking pages of educational content,” were marked by 43.4% of respondents each. Recalling that this question allowed to be checked more than once. Yet, 52.1% of respondents used Facebook for studying every day; 34.7% of respondents used Facebook for studying on random days and 4.3% of respondents used on school days (Monday to Friday).

Final Considerations

From the analysis of this study, it is possible to observe that Computer Science and Social Communication classrooms had completely different configurations of interactions and relationships, when compared from face-to-face versus virtual connections, either by the difference in the number of students or by the inherent characteristic of the members. The social network called Facebook is the one with higher number of users, allowing the intense exchange of information and therefore can be combined with the learning process, as reflected primarily in the Social Communication classroom.

The leisure aspects pointed by collected data seemed to show computer science students being more isolated and concentrated on small groups. They did not appear to have social or cultural interactions outside school and they were focused on their academic activities. By other side, the social communication classroom seemed to have different ways to build relations and they had more connections, instead.

In general, all the students participating in the survey mentioned the common use of Facebook by almost all students, even though only part of them participated on online shared activities.

References


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