Expertise of the Students and Expectations from the Distance Learning System: Social Media Perspective

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ABSTRACT

The social media is in the minds of everyone today. It has influenced every aspect of human life. Almost every human being is directly or indirectly involved in it. Organizations, associations, forums or individuals use this platform to promote their cause or maximize their tangible or intangible benefits. This article looks at the various aspects how the distance mode of education can exploit this platform to achieve their quality goals.

Key words: Human and Material Resources, Correspondence Education, DEC, Open Learning

Introduction

Social Media refers to tools that provide platform for the interaction among people in which they create, share, or exchange information and ideas in virtual communities. In recent few years, there has been a rapid growth in the use of social networking and sharing tools e.g., Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube, Google+ etc. and social media in general, mainly for social, recreational, political and entertainment purposes. Many educators believe that these tools offer new educational affordances and avenues for students to interact with each other and with their teacher, guides or tutors. Considering the large dropout rate problem in distance education courses which have been documented in many research papers these tools may be of special interest for distance education institutions as they have the potential to assist in the critical "social integration" associated with persistence. However, as distance students are typically older than regular on-campus students, very little is known about their expertise with social media or their interest in harnessing these tools for informal learning or collaborating with their teachers.

The use of social media applications and social networking has been growing exponentially with applications in gamming, media, business and education. For example, Face book is now the second most frequented site just after Google in the world and claims over 750 million users (Poelhubber, Roy, & Anderson, 2011).

The term social software refers to a set of network tools designed specially to support sharing, collaborating and socializing resulting in the development of multiple forms of social capital. Educational social software is defined as "networked tools that support and encourage individuals to learn together while retaining individual control over their time, space, presence, activity, identity and relationships". Social software tools or functions include profiles, wikis, blogs, micro blogging (twitter), social bookmarking, wall posting, photo and video sharing and tagging, and calendaring. Social networking sites such as google+, Ning and Facebook typically offer a number of these functions in a single environment.

Social software is used primarily for informal and recreational use. It also offers new educational affordances that can be exploited in formal learning. Educational uses of Facebook are also emerging, including a large number of educational institutions having Facebook pages and communities of students.

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The essential characteristic of social software is that it scales well and gains strength from large number of users thus making them attractive and cost-effective for user in both campus and online education contexts. It has been noted that while educators have been thinking a lot about formal groups in education e.g., classes and structures to support collaborative learning, new types of "network" and "set-based" collaboration are also emerging. Larger bandwidth availability to a large public, the use of real-time web conferencing applications is also fast growing. These systems use real-time audio-video communication systems to simulate-classroom-based learning and in some ways, add functionality to go beyond classroom-based learning, including diverse collaborative functions such as document sharing, whiteboard, chat, polling, and application sharing.

Literature Review

Social media is often seen merely as a way to pass the time or stay connected to friends and family. However, its use is rapidly expanding into the educational sector. (Ferriman, 2013). It is used now in ODL system for making learning more analytical, flexible, interactive and collaborative for both the teacher and the taught. Most of the students now use social media sites for information sharing and personal interaction (Gupta, Singh, & Marwaha, 2013) as such making learning more effective. A survey conducted by (Sukati, Magagula, Chandraiah, Simelane, & Sithole, 2010) in University of Swaziland shows that overall there is no significant differences in the performances of students in the full time programme and those in the distance education programme so the authors recommended that the distance education is equally effective and should be promoted in order to ensure an increase in access and enhance quality. Distance Education deemphasizes the role of a teacher, or alternatively intends to impart such a role on the student that it becomes difficult task and is evident by students' constant desire for face to face interaction (Perris, Zhang, & Poon, 2001). Anytime, anywhere web based learning satisfy the students as it offers them opportunity to maintain the appropriate balance between job, learning and household duties (Cary & Gregory, 2002). Trend in distance education is largely towards the use of online technology, with a greater use of social media tools, for diffusion of education in society (Gupta, Singh, & Marwaha, 2013). Students take interest in using social media tools for virtual personal interactions, real-time learning, inter-group communications, which in return excites young and motivates them to learn (Mason & Rennie, 2007). The provision of socializing on the virtual platform helps in information sharing, collaboration and community formation and extension (Suter, Alexander, & Kaplan, 2005). Social media tools can be used effectively for communication and collaboration for academic purposes to remove the disadvantages of learning in isolation (Gupta, Singh, & Marwaha, 2013).

The number of students registering in online courses in higher education is increasingly steadily as compared to on-campus registrations. But ODL and online courses suffer from higher attrition rates than campus-based offerings. This phenomenon is particularly acute for the self paced and continuous enrollment increase flexibility for students and teachers, yet this flexibility comes at the cost of grater requirements for student motivation, self-direction, and discipline (Poelhubber, Roy, & Anderson, 2011).

In particular ODL system and in general the self paced models, students remain invisible to each other often resulting of increasing constraints on institutions when it comes to releasing personal and private information about students. Social media offer new interaction affordances as well as new forms of collaboration and the teacher and the taught become more directly visible to and socially present to each other. (Poelhubber, Roy, & Anderson, 2011).

Directorate of Distance Education, University of Kashmir

Presently, the cumulative enrollment of the Directorate of Distance Education, University of Kashmir is around sixteen (16) thousand for various programmes offered by the directorate in open and distance learning. Every year the Directorate of Distance Education enrolls almost 100% of the intake capacity, though, unfortunately due to some genuine reasons this is very little percentage of the applicants applying for the courses offered by the directorate. The DDE has applicants and hence students from all over the Kashmir Valley as well as from Leh, Kargil and Jammu. There are lots of applicants from outside the J&K state applying for the courses offered by the DDE. The students applying for the courses are having diverse learning backgrounds and streams. Almost 60% of the respondents are from Arts background which is supported by the fact that near about 80% of the courses offered by the DDE does not come under the natural or allied science subjects. May be, the reason behind is, the conventional mode of learning in ODL system was not suitable for these types of subjects to be offered, as the science subjects or allied do need extensive teacher-student involvement in the teaching learning process and also due to the unavailable infrastructure in terms of labs and other equipments which is pre requisite for offering such courses. But if the current Web 2.0 technologies are effectively used in the ODL system, this lopsidedness towards the Arts subjects in the ODL system may get balanced. The world is enthusiastically accepting the ever changing trends in Information and Communication Technology (ICT) so is the case with the education system. The student community is most updated with these trends and is using various means to experience the latest trends and tastes. Almost 80% of the respondents use smart phones to access social media sites and near 25% use basic Internet-enabled phones. Also it is quite interesting that 80% of the respondents have satisfactory level of trust on information provided or uploaded on the social media applications. The need of the hour is to put the things into the right direction for the benefit of the students in particular and whole society in general.

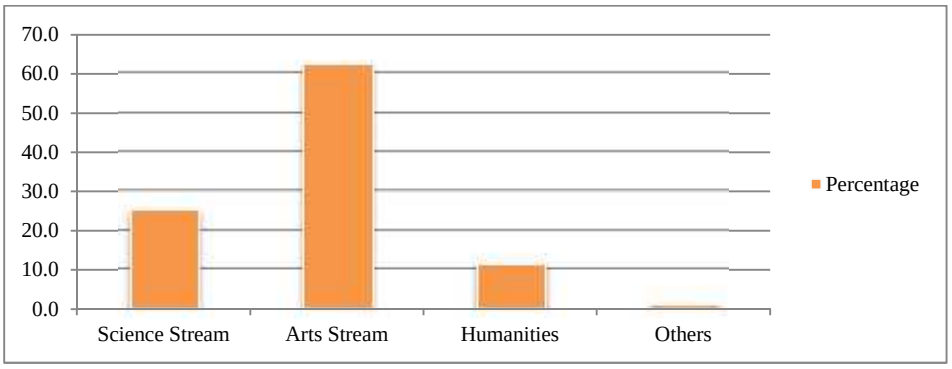

Figure 01: Percentage of respondents as per the (Background) Streams

General Usage and Experience of the Respondents

The responses show that 80% of the respondents use social networking applications and above 50% use video and photo sharing tools. It is also pertinent to mention that only 30% of the respondents use wikis, which are the major sources of online information. The reason behind might be the Wikis are less interactive as compared to social networking or other sharing tools. Tools like bookmarking, podcasting and virtual world seems very less known to the respondents.

By looking at the expertise level of the respondents of using social media tools, the respondents have average experience in social networking and almost advanced level of experience in photo sharing.

Analysis on basis of Gender

It is quite interesting to see almost same percentage of male and female respondents use the social networking tools while in photo sharing the males are quite above over the female respondents. It is also worth to mention here that above 50% of female respondents use video sharing which is encouraging. When it comes to expertise, the result is again same and it has been found that both male and female respondents have almost same level of expertise in using social networking tools. In video sharing the male respondents are a bit more experienced than the female respondents. Same case is being found in photo sharing also.

Area of Residence

Respondents hailing from urban areas use little more social networking sites than rural respondents. But it is interesting to know that respondents from rural respondents use more video sharing sites as compared to urban respondents. It is encouraging that a good percentage-one third of rural respondents use Wikis also.

When it comes to the experience, the rural and urban respondents have same level of expertise [intermediate] in using social networking tools. As the rural respondents use more photo and video sharing sites comparatively, in effect, have more experience.

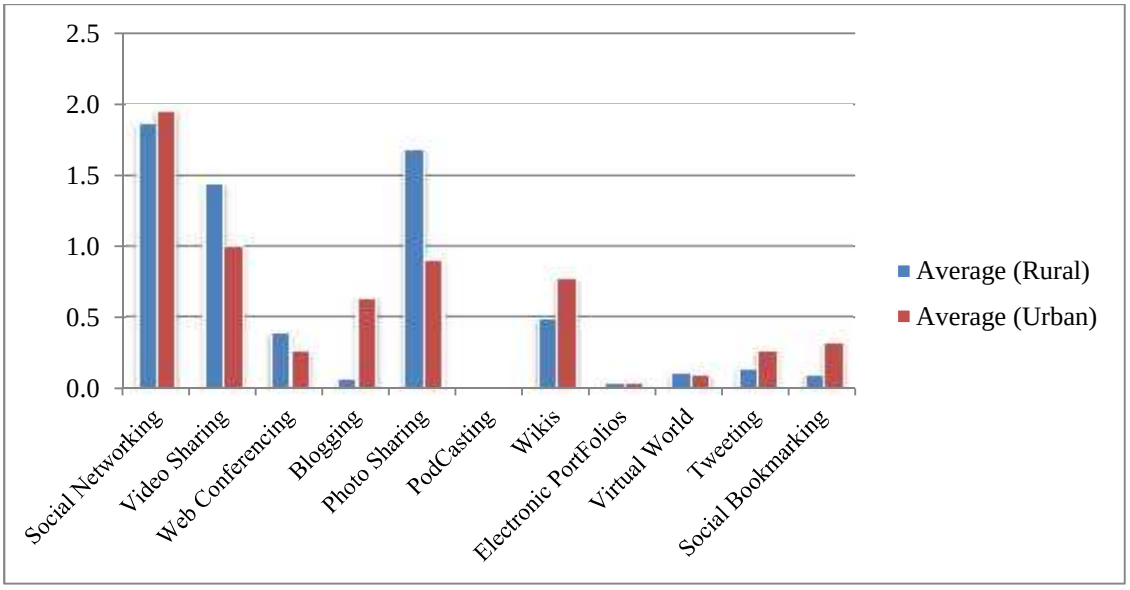

Figure 02: Expertise level of Rural and Urban Respondents

On Basis of Age

The younger respondents are in neck to neck with their immediate senior age group in case of using social networking tools. However, the younger generation is more prompt and active in using these social media tools in view of the fact they are comfortable in using the electronic gadgets such as computers, cell phones, tablets and personal digital assistants. The younger generation also encourages the seniors including parents, siblings and other relations to use these social media sites to keep in touch with their relatives and peer-groups. The age group-2 (25-32 yrs) uses a bit more video and photo sharing tools

as compared to their juniors. On comparing the experience, the age group-2 is slightly more experienced than age group-1 (16-24 yrs) in case of using social networking and video sharing tools.

Information Availability

Above 80% of the respondents either wants self learning material or lecture notes to be made available on the social media. Video lectures and power point slides also form the good amount of percentage the respondents are seeking from the DDE to be made available from these sites.

Conclusion

Our findings show that significant number of students use social media tools particularly the social networking, photo sharing, video sharing, and wikis. There is also no significant difference between the usage and expertise of these tools between male and female respondents. It is also quite interesting that being advanced technology, there is no big gap between the rural and urban students so far as the usage and expertise level is concerned.

In carrying this research activity, we conclude that social media tools will be beneficial to the students enrolled in ODL system. It will benefit the students in the following ways:

Social Presence: The notion that a sense of presence can be conveyed through technology and has been the object of many studies in the educational and media domains in this direction. The diversity concepts used to discuss the topic demonstrates this interest: social presence, tele-presence, transactional distance and transactional presence. It has been found that if medium is very visual and highly interactive, it will provide a wealth of information and more effectively convey a sense of social presence.

Transparency: this is the sense of allowing individuals to observe, compare themselves with, and emulate others is a feature of many social networking and web 2.0 applications. e.g., being able to observe the books purchased by others who have purchased a book in which you are interested provides important commercial and personal information to both consumers and online book retailers. Transparency in educational context has been elaborated by (Dalsgaard & Paulsen, 2009), who argue that transparency, or "students and teachers insight into each other's activities and resources" is critically important to create conditions under which students will volunteer and can productively cooperate with others in learning activities. Transparency is a unique feature of social networking services and a competent that has formerly been denied to distance education students, especially those distance students engaged in self-paced or continuous enrollment modes of distance education. Transparency affords students insight into each other's actions, ideas, backgrounds, understanding and contexts.

Collaboration: There is a question mark whether distance education students are interested in collaborating with peers? While certain researchers' show that some students are (Anderson, 2005), others argue that distance education students are attached to the individual freedom and flexibility that the self paced model affords. Indeed, flexibility is the main reason students choose distance courses.

Cooperation between students is often analyzed in terms of cooperative or collaborative learning theories, which almost always assume a group protection mode in which presence; common objectives inter-dependence, peer interaction, and information sharing are essential components. But some forms of peer collaboration are much more indirect and respect a desire for flexibility. It has been observed that where collaboration is entirely voluntary but encouraged through a sophisticated social networking environment, large number of self paced distance education students choose to collaborate to some degree in their courses. It is in this type of learner defined collaboration that we see the greatest potential for social networking in distance education.

It has been observed that most of the distance education institutes working in India does not provide on campus accessibility to social media sites because of some political and social reasons.

We highly recommend that not only distance education institutes but all higher educational institutes should provide accessibility not only to students but also their teachers to these social media tool so that they can share their knowledge and expertise with each other.

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