A SURVEY OF STUDENT ATTITUDES ON THE USE OF SOCIAL NETWORKING TO BUILD LEARNING COMMUNITIES

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ABSTRACT

Post-secondary students are increasingly receiving instruction by distance learning. This mode of learning can result in the students learning in isolation, with bad results in learning outcomes. The same type of isolation can occur for part-time students and those who are working while taking classes. In such circumstances, we believe that it would be beneficial for instructors to facilitate the formation of small learning communities by distance learning mechanisms. One mechanism that can be exploited for this purpose is social networking sites, given their popularity among the student population. We are currently developing innovative approaches to building learning communities for distance learning students using social networks. As a preliminary step in this research, we have conducted a survey of our target student population. In this reflection paper, we present the results of our survey and our reflections on the how the results will guide our future work.

KEYWORDS

Social networking, learning communities, peer support.

1. INTRODUCTION

In order to support students in distance learning as well as part-time students, we are committed to building a system for developing learning communities among such students. Research has shown that a shared learning experience is vital for student success [1, 2, 3]. Our intuition is that social networking sites can be leveraged for such purposes due to their widespread acceptance among the target students [4, 5, 6]. In order to affirm our intuition, we performed a survey of the target students. The results of the survey and our comments are presented in the following section.

2. STUDENT SURVEY AND COMMENTS

In order to justify our research in using for distance learning with social networking , a survey of the target audience – students in a traditional Masters degree program in Computer Science was carried out. The survey was meant to gauge their interest in using social networking as part of their study routine, as well as preferences for such use. 15 students replied to the survey. The comments on the results follow the survey results shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Survey of Students

1. In general, which type of class organization would you prefer?		
Traditional, face-to-face. 80%	Distance learning. 7%	No Preference. 13%
2. Do you use social networking services (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, Google+, LinkedIn, etc.)?		
Yes, often. 67%	Yes, seldom. 33%	No, never. 0%
3. In preparing for exams, understanding homework, etc. what is your predominant study mode?		
I study by myself. 87%	I study in a group with other students from the class. 13%	

4. If you answered "I study by myself" to the previous question, would you study with other students in a group if there was a convenient way to do so online?		
Yes. 69%	No. 31%	
5. If you answered "I study in a group with other students from the class" to question 3., estimate the typical size of the study group.		
1 other student. 25%	2 other students. 50%	3 or more students. 25%
6. If you answered "I study in a group with other students from the class" to question 3., do you also typically interact with members of the study group using a social networking service?		
Yes. 50%	No. 25%	Not sure. 25%
7. Do you currently use social networking services as part of your study routine for classes (e.g. exchanging information about a class with another student in the class via Facebook)?		
Yes. 20%	No. 80%	Not sure. 0%
8. Would you be interested in using social networking services as part of a study routine for classes in future?		
Yes. 47%	No. 33%	Not sure. 20%
9. As a platform for using social networking services as part of your study routine for classes, would you prefer an existing system (e.g. Facebook, Google+ or Twitter) or a service created specifically for that purpose?		
Existing service. 27%	New, specialized service. 53%	Not sure. 20%
10. If using an existing social networking service as part of your study routine for classes, which would you prefer?		
Existing account on the service. 50%	New account on the service dedicated to classes. 43%	No preference. 7%
11. If you answered "Existing account on the service" to the question above, would you be willing to grant an application access to your data on the service in order to better allow class interaction to be supported?		
Yes. 44%	No. 44%	Not sure. 11%
12. If an experimental system for using social networking services for study was available, would you be willing to use it?		
Yes. 73%	No. 13%	Not sure. 13%

The students who completed the survey were all enrolled in traditional (not distance learning type) Master's degree-level Computer Science classes. This is reflected in the response to question 1, where the respondents overwhelmingly prefer traditional, face-to-face classes. The respondents also overwhelmingly study by themselves, however, in responses that are promising for this research, they all use social networking services, and they are interested in studying in a group online, if there was a convenient way to do so. Most students who study in groups do so in groups of 2 or 3, and a fair number of those who do group study using social networking services to interact. The respondents demonstrate a certain amount of reluctance to mix personal and study use of social networking as only 27% would prefer an existing service over a new specialized service and only 50% would want to use an existing account of a social networking service rather than a dedicated one. The remaining questions are promising, in that students do not currently integrate social networking services in their study routines, but would be interested in doing so if a system was available, at least on an experimental basis.

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