THE EDUCATIONAL USE OF SOCIAL NETWORKING WEBSITES: FROM PROMISE TO REALITY

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The platforms supporting social networking activities on the Internet are applications for the creation, sharing and exchange of user-generated content that manifests in various forms. Users can freely express their ideas and opinions, and have opportunities to launch and participate in collaborative projects and virtual communities. Facebook (FB) is a social networking website featuring an explosive growth in the last years and an increased popularity among university students. For example, the number of Facebook users in Romania was 8.5 million in June 2016 (Facebrands.Ro, 2015) out of which 33% are young people of 15-24 years old. Recent research on the Facebook use shows that Romanian university students have large Facebook networks and spend a lot of minutes per day (Pribeanu & Lamanauskas, 2016).

The social networking websites are challenging the university students to broaden their horizon and enlarge their social networks. The shift of paradigm towards social learning brings in front various activities such as: meetings, active participation, critical thinking, information and content sharing, collaboration, and debate. Last but not least, Facebook is favoring the informal education: students learn to be, to act, and to participate in a learning community (Brown & Adler, 2008). Although the main usage of Facebook is related to socialization (Madge et al., 2009), the social networking acts as a vehicle for spreading out information and knowledge as well as a stimulus for the engagement with various curricular and extra-curricular activities.

Recent research shows that social networking websites have an important potential to support the education. The Facebook usefulness for students is a multidimensional concept that manifests in various forms such as: social usefulness, information and collaboration usefulness (Pribeanu & Lamanauskas, 2016). Social usefulness refers to the support for participation in collective actions and to present someone's work to other people. Information usefulness refers to the support for getting useful information regarding events and problems of interest as well as for sharing or exchanging various resources. Collaboration usefulness refers to the Facebook facilities for group discussions, the collaboration between colleagues and creation of new groups based on similar concerns.

The social networking websites are challenging the teachers to change the teaching practice and adapt to the university students' lifestyle. Several research networks exist that enable the presentation of a personal profile, resources sharing and exchange, various forms of collaboration. However, the two online communities (students' community and teachers' community) rarely intersect. Moreover, the weight of university colleagues in each social network is relatively small.

A recent study using a relatively large sample of Romanian university students (N=1210) shows the following structure of the Facebook network: mean number of Facebook friends 748 (SD=843), from which mean number of students 342 (SD=437), mean number of students in the same university 119 (SD=155) and mean number of teachers 6 (SD=11). This data suggest that the potential of Facebook usefulness for learning is poorly exploited. Why this difference between the promise and the reality? And what is to be done in order to change this?

First of all, teachers should be aware that one hour per day on Facebook is one hour less for study. They should fight for turning out a part of this time by enriching the teaching offer with micro-blogs, course pages, and debate on critical learning topics. Second, it is hard to integrate directly with the students' community. A possible approach would be to create groups of interests on various topics in order to attract students. Each group may have one-two students responsible with the liaison with the community. Last but not least, teachers should find ways to get involved in the informal education of students. Extra-curricular activities and events related to the university life could be valuable opportunities.

Clearly, social learning means engagement and without teachers' active involvement the educational use of social networking websites will remain only a promise.

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