



Connecting and Reflecting with Ning

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This paper chronicles one instructor's experiences using a social networking site (Ning) to teach two graduate courses in education. It explores the decisions made in setting up the Ning and the affordances of teaching using a blended model of synchronous and asynchronous learning in UOIT's online graduate program. The focus is specifically on the benefits and challenges of using a Ning network and Ning's pedagogical potential for collaborative knowledge construction, the creation of a community of practice, which fosters social presence and multimodal communication.

Keywords: Ning, social networking sites, graduate program, education, digital literacies

Context

At UOIT, where the Faculty of Education has embraced technology and online learning, and where every student has a laptop and ICT use is ubiquitous, it has become much easier to tap into some of the web-based tools available. Web 2.0 tools have become an integral and necessary part of teaching, not only because they are more convenient now to access, but also because the conventional notion of literacy has shifted to reflect a multiplicity of literacies. Contemporary social interaction is characterized by changes in the materiality of texts as well as changes in the ways we make meaning. Kress and van Leeuwen (2001) suggest that in a digital environment "meaning is made in many different ways, always, in the many different modes and media which are co-present in a communicational ensemble" (p. 111).

Why Use a Social Networking Platform?

Digital tools have increasingly become tools of mediation and communication and many facilitate the kinds of sharing that are conducive to literacy education ideals. Although our Faculty has adopted Adobe Connect for use in our graduate program, an additional online platform increases teaching and learning flexibility in a variety of ways. First of all, an asynchronous model allows students to comment outside of the temporal restrictions offered by a synchronous session, which demands their presence for a specific time period. Given that our program is international and we have several students who study with us who live in different time zones, using an asynchronous tool for part of the course allowed those students to participate at times more convenient to them. This is important as our program continues to expand internationally. In addition, the majority of the students in the program were full time teachers with very busy schedules.

Second, a blend of synchronous and asynchronous interaction serves to reach a greater diversity of learning styles. Some students are quieter than others, but this doesn't mean they are not participating fully in their learning. Likewise, some students need more time to reflect before they contribute and the asynchronous model allows them to formulate their ideas with confidence before sharing them with colleagues and the instructor. Within the framework of a three-hour Adobe Connect session, there is limited time for everyone to contribute equally. Within an asynchronous discussion forum, there is no limit on the amount of time students have to post their comments, although discussion around a specific topic might be limited to a certain time frame.

There is simply no denying the popularity of social networking sites like Facebook. With over 750 million active users and more than half of these between the ages of 18 and 34 (Facebook Stats), it is safe to assume that our students, who predominantly fall within this demographic, are already familiar with many of the social practices of social networking tools. As Boyd (2006) points out, social networking sites have three defining features. They have a personal profile, they encourage networking through friends' lists, which are publicly articulated, and they allow for semi-persistent public comments, typically on a wall of some kind.

Ning as an Educational Tool for Teaching

The primary benefit of Ning over Facebook or other more open social networking sites is the level of privacy it affords. Although it comes with a price tag, Ning controls enable instructors to establish communities of learning that are accessible only to those who are invited and approved. Moreover, the instructor maintains a certain degree of control over the content that is posted and can keep the learning environment organized to promote effective and efficient use of the space. It is important to note that the graduate students who were using the Ning were predominantly teachers in local school districts, teaching in the K-12 sector, and preparing to become administrators at some future point. Social networking sites such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter are, unfortunately, still widely unacceptable sites in many school districts. Like Facebook, Ning members are able to "friend" other members, to send virtual gifts to friends, and to use the "like" button for photos or comments posted by others. Unlike Facebook, Ning networks are ad free.

A Ning offers educators the safety elements parents demand while still providing similar features to Facebook.

Members are able to customize their profile pages with their own design, choice of widgets and profile applications so their view on their own computers. In terms of the privacy settings, the network was for members only. Course members were able to invite other members but these new members had to be approved by the instructor as the designer of the network. Students did have the option of cross-posting their own status updates on Twitter and Facebook. In terms of moderation, the instructor did not feel it was necessary to approve students' posts, including the uploading of various media files, before they appeared on the Ning given that the participants were adults.

The Benefits and Challenges of Using Ning

Based on a survey of the research on teaching in online learning environments, specifically social networking sites, Kear (2011) has identified the main benefits and challenges for instructors.

Convenience and Flexibility/Information Overload

As noted above, convenience and flexibility for the students because of busy schedules and geographical locations in different time zones were important factors in the decision to offer the graduate courses using a blend of synchronous and asynchronous communication. For the most part, a flipped classroom model was used by reserving the time we spent on Adobe Connect for group activities and group sharing so the majority of time the students were working in break-out groups, using the white board or notes pages to record their ideas to share with the whole group. The Ning network was used to post pre-recorded weekly comments, typically using SlideRocket, together with some guiding questions for discussion. This was organized through a different forum for each week, simply labelled according to the Week of the course and the topic we were examining that particular week. The discussion was threaded so that students could reply to a colleague's post directly and students could manage their discussions so that they were only "following" certain threads. Within the Weekly forum, students could also create sub-topics related to specific interests. For example, students interested in literacy or science or math education could start their own discussions, but these were open to anyone to follow

and participate in. For convenience, participants are notified via email whenever someone comments on a discussion that they are following.

The convenience and flexibility the use of a Ning network offered to students is important; however, the instructor also benefitted in similar ways. Email notifications made tracking efficient and the statistics tool allowed access to each member's statistics to see how many posts they had made, whether these were text based, videos or images, and be taken directly to every post through direct links. Because everyone was expected to be on the Ning for approximately three hours per week, each student's 'voice' was heard individually. As noted earlier, although students collaborated in small break out groups on Adobe Connect, there was no way for an instructor to hear all of those conversations nor can break out groups be recorded.

This kind of active engagement leads to one of the challenges of using a Ning network for both instructor and students. Reading all of the posts and responding where appropriate is very time consuming and creates overload. In total, there were 627 written posts; 141 URLs (links to videos, documents, websites & assignments); 114 embedded pictures & photos; 7 embedded videos/presentations; 31 attachments and 18 blog posts. One can imagine how this kind of volume translates into hours of reading, viewing and responding. While some of the students commented that they were spending more than the additional three hours of "class time" on the Ning each week, when surveyed they unanimously responded that they preferred the blended approach with the use of Ning. These observations support Hung and Yuen's (2010) suggestion that social networking sites like Ning work best when they are used in conjunction with other modes of delivery, particularly face-to-face or online synchronous interaction.

Learning with Others/Low Participation

Collaborative knowledge construction is one of the oft-cited benefits of online learning, but in order for effective learning to take place instructors must foster and develop an "affinity space" (Gee, 2004) or "community of practice" (Wenger, 2000, 2007). Social networking sites position users as co-authors and co-developers and tap into their collective intelligence. They are constructed to facilitate the collection and sharing of ideas and the statistics noted earlier attest to the Ning's capacity to encourage user-generated content. The Ning network fits within the social constructivist paradigm, which views the building of new knowledge as a social and collaborative activity. Creating a sense of community can be challenging and as Mason and Rennie (2008) point out, "online discussions can easily become disjointed with points being made in isolation from others and questions that have been posed never being answered" (91). When a question is posted someone else often responds before I have a chance; however, there were occasions when students created a new forum for their posts instead of posting in the established forum and their thoughts existed in a vacuum. Students who posted comments after the weekly deadline often got no feedback or follow-up from their peers who had moved on to the next topic. Mason and Rennie (2008) identify this as one of the potential disadvantages of online discussion forums, noting that, "collaborative work becomes very difficult to bring to a conclusion when some students have not contributed" (93).

According to Kear (2011), the benefit of learning with others cannot be fully realized unless students actively engage in the process; the problem of low participation needs to be addressed. While all of the students on the Ning participated according to expectations, a small group tended to take the lead and to post as much as three times as often as their counterparts. Although the quantity of postings is not sufficient in evaluating the strength of community development, the number and depth of responses does point to a level of engagement and/or commitment to learning. Lack of participation or untimely participation is more of a problem with fewer students. Some students post early and often, and become frustrated with those who enter the discussion late and do not have as much to contribute. This sometimes happens despite the fact that assessment is tied to activities in the online environment. Whatever the reason, Brady, Holcomb and Smith (2010) argue that using a SNS such as Ning "has the potential to increase student engagement" (152).

Engagement and Belonging/Impersonality

It has been well established in the literature around asynchronous e-learning environments that many individuals view these spaces as impersonal (Hung & Yuen, 2010; Mason & Rennie, 2008) and that individuals might have difficulty being social in these environments (Kear, 2011). Brady, Holcomb and Smith (2005) argue that SNSs may be the answer for online learning because of their potential to enhance the participants' "social presence" (Swan & Shih, 2005; Picciano, 2002). The decision to use a SNS, and Ning specifically, reaffirms the belief that it is critical for students to be able to articulate who they are and what values, backgrounds, beliefs, and experiences they bring to the learning environment. In this context, learning is viewed as a social practice that is culturally, historically and geographically situated, despite the fact that the Ning allows us to break down spatial barriers. Kear (2011) points to the importance of beginning from "an inviting place" where "contributions

should be friendly, supportive and informal” (73). The students’ seem to have an intuitive understanding of the social nature of learning, which is evident as they ease into their relationships with each other through casual talk. Scholars confirm that students with a higher social presence online are often more likely to be more engaged in these conversations (cf., Brady, Holcomb & Smith, 2010; Cobb, 2009; Swan & Shih, 2005).

The multimodal affordances of the Ning network draw us into performative relationships with and representations of our “content”. To use new media is, in part, to adopt a performative paradigm (Hughes, 2008). Every student took advantage of the multimodal affordances of the Ning network to augment their comments or to share their learning. Some used the Ning blog, others embedded links to their work on web-based technologies such as Bitstrips, Dipity, Glogster, SlideRocket. This kind of multimodal communication does make a difference in an online learning environment. And, this difference is not only in terms of having *more* ways of communicating; it is also a qualitative difference in the ideas that are communicated and the level of student engagement. Accessing information and communicating in a multimodal environment where image, text and sound can come together in one surround adds layers of meaning that might not be conveyed in a strictly print format.

Discussion

This instructor’s experiences using a Ning network to teach two graduate courses support the findings of recent studies (Brady et al, 2010; DeSchryver et al, 2009; Hung & Yuen, 2010; Kear, 2011) and confirm the value of this pedagogical tool. As an online learning environment, Ning can foster growth, connection and learning – but building in thoughtful, genuine interaction seems to be a key element in its successful use. This not only underscores the importance of finding tools that align with an instructor’s pedagogical goals and theoretical perspective, but also reminds us that how we use the tools is most significant. Even Adobe Connect, with all of its affordances, could be used simply as a lecture platform. Hung and Yuen (2010) suggest that, “hybrid communities mixing online interaction with face-to-face interaction may be ideal” (706). The combination of real-time communication on Adobe Connect, where we can see and hear each other and discuss ideas and issues in small groups, with the Ning network which offers flexibility, convenience and opportunities for more informal social sharing provides a kind of balance that furthers important pedagogical goals.

The multimodal features of Ning enable my students to express themselves through image, sound, gesture (emoticons, gift-giving), colour and various other elements of design. The increased number of ways available for students to communicate with each other does not simply represent a quantitative change. This shift from text-based computer mediated communication to multimodal forms of communication is also a qualitative change. Students can use the multimodal features of Ning to share their ideas and themselves in more creative and unique ways, and as Brady et al (2010) point out, social networking sites attract people, “hold their attention, impel them to contribute, and bring them back time and again” (154). Viewing multimodal communication as performance based and offered up to a wider audience for response is different than in a traditional graduate course where the dominant practice is to write scholarly papers in private and receive confidential feedback from the instructor. The focus here shifts from a model where there is one expert in the “room” to one built on the assumption that collective intelligence, collaborative knowledge construction and shared distribution is valued.

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