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Social Media and Social Networks - What's in for Tertiary Education

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Abstract: Social media and social networks are already part of almost everybody's life. They are often used as a source of information, entertainment or a means of keeping in touch with family, friends and colleagues. However, they are quickly turning into education tools due to their popularity, relative ease of use and flexible nature. The article discusses the opportunities social media and social networks offer to teach and learn at tertiary level. After a brief overview of relevant theoretical ideas, the authors focus on a possible approach to making these part of the learning experiences of university students and, more specifically, in developing students' writing skills in Bulgarian and in English.

Keywords: social media, social networks, university education, electronically mediated communication (EMC)

Teaching and learning in the modern digital era

One of the effects of the omnipresent internet-based tools and means of communication today is the shift towards an Electronically Mediated Communication (EMC) [1] which links together people of various statuses and backgrounds from all over Europe (and the world). This change has been rapid and all-embracing – it has taken place across national borders, across occupations and interests and most of all, across languages. It is a rare occasion today for a person not to be a member of at least one social network, in fact, the number of people having a FaceBook, MySpace, Google + (or Netlog in the Bulgarian context), etc. profile is constantly growing. More and more people are turning to social networks to exchange personal and professional news or simply to keep in contact and updated about recent changes. There is also growing evidence that web 2.0 tools and social networks are being put to classroom uses by educators as well: see Grosseck (2009) [2] and Kusheva & Tsvetkova (2011) [3]. This is due to the fact that modern digital technology is accessible to a wider audience and that is actually facilitates the exchange of news, information and ideas. On the other hand, young people – secondary school and university students, even primary kids, take up a substantial share in the above-mentioned communities and are already used to communicating and sharing content using social networks.

Today's digital environment is characterized by a predominantly open-source nature and exploits connected, sensory thinking which is enabled by Web 2.0. In this environment, drawing on the expertise of others has become an important asset [4]. This means that acquiring knowledge and skills is related to new roles and relationships in the classroom where teachers/lecturers are no longer solely in charge of the educational processes. Nor are the learning materials used invariant and unchanging - they possess a dynamism of their own since they are complemented, additionally developed and sometimes even created by the collective efforts of teacher/lecturer and students as well as their networked partners, who do not necessarily belong to the particular group or class.

A number of researchers dwell into these new phenomena which have appeared due to the opportunities provided by Web 2.0 and point out that learning is more than ever a process enabled by joint effort: see Wilson, B.G. (1995) [5]; Brown, J.S.B. (1996, 1999) [6]; Davenport, T. & Prusak, L. (1997) [7]; Guzdial, M. (1997) [8]; Hewitt, J. & Scardamalia, M. (1997) [9]; Nardi, B.A. & O'Day, V.L. (1999) [10]; Looi, C.K. (2000, 2001) [11]; Siemens, G. (2005) [12] among others. What such scientists most often point out is the nature of learning which is assisted by modern digital technologies and which is facilitated by the ease of collaborating with both peers and experts when solving a particular task.

Social networks and social media

In her book "The Facebook Era" Clara Shih presents a brief history of the internet describing the four decades since the advent of computing: mainframe 1970, PC – 1980, internet – 1990 and Social Networking - since the beginning of the 21st century [13]. The author gives additional details in connection with the www: "The '90s were defined largely by the advent of the World Wide Web, developed by Tim Berners-Lee working with Robert Gailliao at CERN." [14]. According to Boyd and Ellison (2007) [15] *social network sites* are web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. The nature and nomenclature of these connections may vary from site to site. Some of the most popular social networks include *FaceBook*, *MySpace*, *LinkdIn*, *YouTube* and many others. Regarding the perspectives of *social media* and their applications Clara Shih states that: "From an individual's perspective, most of what's out there at any given time and junk. Although search engines and behavioural targeting have been an important first step in making the abundance of online media more manageable, it remains an uphill battle to wade through the volume of information and distractions on the Web" [16]. Lon Safko and David K. Brake take up a more flexible position and say that it is not easy to

explain what social media are and add that the term “Social media refers to activities, practices, and behaviours among communities of people who gather online to share information, knowledge, and opinion using conversational media.” [17]. According to Shih’s categorisation, for instance, websites which were mainly informative are part of Web 1.0, while *social networks* and *blogs* are manifestations of Web 2.0. (See Lon Safko and David K. Brake for a definition of a blog as a website maintained by individual regular entries or posts that include commentary, thoughts, and ideas, together with photos, graphics, audio, or video. Blogs usually have text, images, video, and links to other blogs and web sites that relate to the blog’s subject matter) [18]. Initially, blogs started as online diaries or as journals. Gradually but dynamically, blogs increased in number and became differentiated as personal, corporate, political, journalistic, etc. At the same time, they became incorporated in different blogospheres, parallel with official sites and thus they combine features of social media and social networks.

The aPLaNet project

aPLaNet (<http://www.aplanet-project.eu/>) is a European Union funded project to help language educators who are not yet using social networks to understand the following points:

- What are social networks for language educators?
- Why they should use them?
- How they can get involved?
- The project will help them join and use Internet Personal Learning Network (PLN) on social networks (SNs).

The project partnership (consisting of the University of the West of Scotland, Paisley, Scotland (School of Computing), University of Sofia, Bulgaria (Faculty of Philosophy), the British Council, Barcelona, Spain, Fundatia EuroEd, Iasi, Romania, Centre for English Language & Training, Athens, Greece, Language School with the State Language Exam Rights PELIKÁN, Ltd, Brno, Czech Republic and coordinated by ISTEK Schools, Turkey) has been supporting a community of interested language educators from all over Europe networked on the aPLaNet NING (currently used by 773 specialists and the number is growing - <http://aplanet-project.org/>). The process of enhancing these educators’ digital, networking and more specific professional skills has been aided by a number of materials developed by the project partners such as a Teacher’s Guide which provides a detailed introduction to many

open source digital tools which can be put to use in language education, Mentor's and Mentee's Guides, a set of instructional videos, etc.

The aPlaNNet project and its impact on teaching communication and English to non-philologists at the Sofia University Faculty of Philosophy

A lot of specialities at the Faculty of Philosophy at Sofia University courses in communication skill and foreign languages (most often English) have on their curricula. Among them is the Library and Information Studies which offers Communication Skills and Academic Writing in year one (the focus is on developing useful skills for effective written and oral communication and is delivered in Bulgarian) and English for specific purposes (the focus is on developing students' skills to communicate effectively in English in professional contexts) in years one and two.

Among the numerous Web 2.0 tools and media, after analysing their plus points and downsides, we decided to experiment with using blogs and to use them in our work in developing students' writing skills. Below is a summary of some of the considerations that convinced us we should take up blogging.

Advantages of using a blog in language education	Uses which a blog can be put to in a language classroom
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It is close to students' way of e-communication • Students become actively involved. • Students can improve their reading and writing skills. • Students develop critical thinking skills. • A good blog provides useful links to external resources. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A personal or a class e-diary • An e-portfolio • A forum for exchanging ideas on a specific topic • A place to share the results of project work • A place to post students' compositions, etc.

What is important to bear in mind is that LIS students are not homogeneous in their language proficiency although an attempt is made in year one to compensate for the discrepancies in this sphere. That is one of the reasons why we engaged year one students in working in Bulgarian, while year two students worked in English. We also had to take into consideration what types of written texts our students would most often have to produce as well as their foundation skills in writing. This resulted in us aiming to develop such writing skills with LIS students which would help them to go through the following transition:

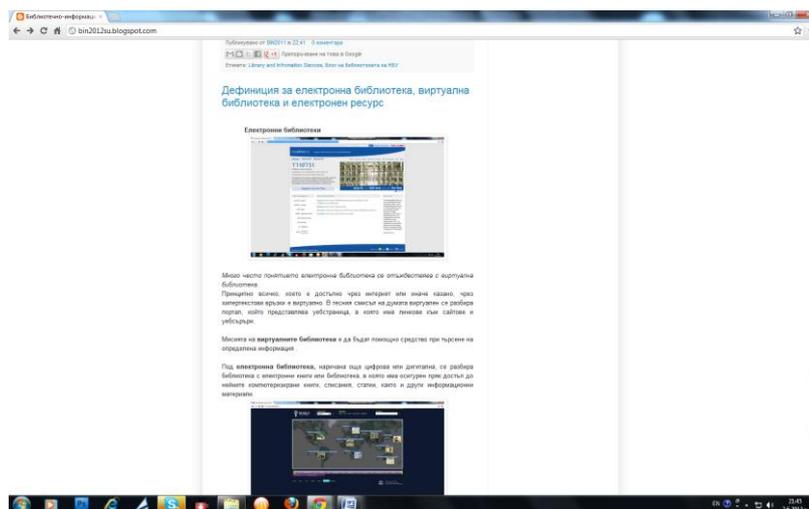
- from school to academic
- from informal to formal
- from writing to web writing
- from academic writing to academic web writing
- from academic web writing to professional librarian web writing

We developed a set of tasks and procedures which match the Web 2.0 Pedagogical Framework (as presented in Baxter et al (2011) [19] this framework deals with the general educational setting with the specific subject in focus and the particular Web 2.0 tool or tools (wikis, blogs, online forums, social bookmarking tools, etc.) employed in the process of learning this subject. It also accounts for the teacher and learner space paying special attention to the tasks (the assignments that the educator has set for the students/learners) and the activities (the students'/learners' interpretation of the task(s) set by the educator) as well as the importance of reflection with regard to the learning path and learning outcomes). The tasks and procedures were identical for the two groups of students (30 year one students and 39 year two students) with one exception. The stages we went through were

- instruction and explanation (introduction to blogs and blogging, to formal and informal communication in Bulgarian and in English, to different genres and their specific features in order to equip the students with clear guidance as to what and how they should achieve);
- setting up the blogs (entirely done by the students quite a number of whom are familiar with using different social media under the guidance of the teachers)
- group formation (the tasks were carried out in groups of 5-7 students whose work was organized by a group leader and who had to search the web for relevant information and collaborate to produce a short coherent text on a topic);

- task assignment (introduction to each of the tasks and distributing the workload within the group so that every participant could contribute more or less evenly);
- carrying out the task itself (this included web searching, drafting and editing texts, adding suitable images, making sure the texts comply with academic requirements for non-plagiarism and correct referencing of ideas, etc., exchanging drafts with the teachers and the other groups to come to a final polished version);
- posting the results in the form of group blog posts in the Bulgarian and English LIS blogs (completed web products).
- promotion and sharing the blogosphere (as connectedness in a prominent feature of Web 2.0, we made an effort to promote our students work in several academic blogs).

Below are two screenshots from the two blogs which illustrate the above points - the final blog posts comply with the requirements for a post (clear, logical, short, containing verbal and visual elements, hyperlinks, added to suitable categories and accompanied by suitable tags, etc.). They are followed by a screenshot which demonstrates how LIS students' blogs were promoted in the blogosphere.



Screenshot 1: Collaborative Student's blog (Library and Information Studies, year one)



Screenshot 2: Collaborative Student's blog (Library and Information Studies, year two)



Screenshot 3: Promoting LIS students' work in the blogosphere in Ivanka Mavrodieva's blog

To support the students while they were preparing for the final web products, a closed Facebook group was created as seen in the following screenshot.



Screenshot 4: *The closed LIS FaceBook group where students and teachers continue to communicate about tasks, challenges and achievements.*

The fact that group is closed helps put students at ease about their language skills and they readily share ideas, ask questions and comment on the processes of developing their posts before their final publication on the blogs. Observation and analysis of student responses have shown that the above-described activities contribute to developing students' communicative competence in English and Bulgarian, their general fluency and enhanced written interaction in particular.

Conclusion

The new digital era does indeed pose some challenges to both university students and their lecturers mainly along the lines of how exactly to take all the current digital tools and application on board and make them work in an educational setting. What the experiment within the aPLaNet project has taught us is that if a certain has been selected after careful consideration of its advantages and disadvantages (in both ICT and subject-specific respect), if meaningful and well-structured tasks which involve students in real collaboration and communication and which reflect both what and how should be achieved as a result, social media and social networks can be effective in reaching academic goals. An undeniable proof is that our students decided to continue enriching their blog with relevant up-to-date information about their studies. Those who are still uncertain about their language proficiency resort to the closed FaceBook group to have their posts discussed before being finally posted on the blog. These findings are in line with the findings of an empirical study quoted in [1], where the surveyed students “made the assumption that new communication technologies

were both a mechanism and a support mechanism for multilingualism” thus offering another proof of the huge impact new technologies are currently having on the motivation for learning languages and their actual use in real life and academic tasks.

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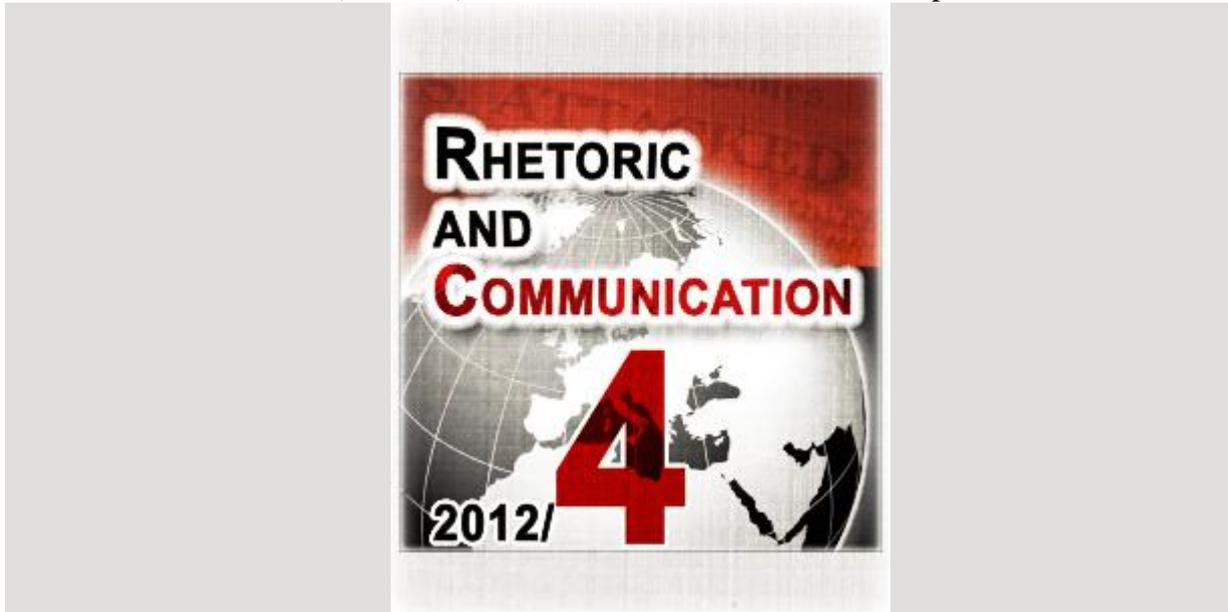
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