

Exploring the potential of social network sites in relation to intercultural communication

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Abstract: This paper reports on the results of a project which used a social network site to support students on a year abroad and to foster informal learning, particularly in the area of intercultural communication. The project employed a peer mentoring structure to solve the problem of role conflict, in which users of these sites may feel some tension as the academic and social dimensions – two contexts usually kept fairly separate – of their lives collide. This paper describes how students used the site, reports on the benefits of the project to both students and mentors, and sets out some recommendations for increasing the sustainability of social network sites as pedagogical tools in other educational contexts.

The educational potential of social networking sites

To date, scholarship on social networking sites (SNSs) such as Facebook and MySpace has for the most part focused on areas other than the educational uses of these technologies. As boyd and Ellison observe, much of the research in the area has centred on impression management, ‘friending’ behaviour, networks and network structure, the relationship between online and offline connections, and questions around privacy (2007). Work has been done on the effect of instructor presence on Facebook (Hewitt and Forte, 2006; Mazer et al., 2007; Szwelunik, 2008), the creation of MySpace pages in terms of the acquisition of new forms of digital literacy (Perkel, 2008), the use of Facebook as a social tool to aid with the social aspects of the transition from school to university (Madge et al., 2009), the difficulties and benefits of SNSs for university students (Thelwall, 2008) and the identity-work students do on Facebook as they negotiate the expectations of peers, tutors and the university as an institution (Selwyn, 2009). Aside from this, however, there is relatively little scholarship on

how such sites have been, and could be, used to enhance learning at university level. As Dutton states, more empirical detail is needed in order to ground enthusiasm for using social software in factual detail (2008: 29), and to move from what Selwyn and Grant term 'state-of-the-actual' towards 'state-of-the-art' (2009: 82).

It is perhaps not surprising that it is the social rather than the pedagogical aspects of these sites that have attracted the most attention, given that their central purpose is largely understood to be the management and navigation of (often pre-existing) relationships, rather than a means by which to share interests, complete tasks, or simply communicate with others (boyd and Ellison, 2007; OFCOM, 2008). It also seems likely that one of the reasons for this gap in the literature is the difficulty of establishing online communities on an SNS in which meaningful and sustainable educational activities occur, rather than those that are more tangentially related to education. In his study of over sixty-eight thousand Facebook wall postings by students at 'Coalsville University', for example, Selwyn found that education- and university-related exchanges made up only a small proportion of the overall volume of contributions. Of the postings that did relate in some way to educational activity, most were structured

by the rhythms of assessment schedules or timetabled teaching provision rather than a desire for forms of continuous learning or *ad hoc* educational exchange. Much of students' 'educational' use of *Facebook* was therefore based around either the *post-hoc* critiquing of learning experiences and events, the exchange of logistical or factual information about teaching and assessment requirements, instances of supplication and moral support with regards to assessment or learning, or the promotion of oneself as academically incompetent and/or disengaged (2009: 170).

Other studies came to similar conclusions about the difficulties of sustaining educational – as opposed to social or logistical – interactions in a university context. Oradini and Saunders reported that only a small minority of students at the University of Westminster used the university’s home-grown SNS for educational activities, and those that did were not able to maintain these activities with much success (2008). Madge et al. found that, at least according to student perceptions, Facebook was useful primarily for social purposes and secondarily for informal learning, but emphatically not for formal teaching activities involving staff-student interaction or formal assessment (2009: 148). A minority of students in this study used Facebook to discuss academic work with other students on a daily basis (10%), in comparison to 23% who made daily use of it to find out about social events. However, one encouraging finding was that as students became more habituated to university life, they were increasingly likely to use Facebook for informal educational activities such as organising meetings for group project work, and asking others about revision and coursework queries. Almost half of the respondents reported using Facebook for some kind of informal academic activity every week (148-149). SNSs, it appears, are platforms that can sustain learning, but only some kinds of learning, and only under certain conditions.

Finding ways to put SNSs to good pedagogical use, then, is a task that remains to be fully explored, but it is one that holds significant potential in the context of higher education, given the large proportion of university students who access these sites. An 2007 Ipsos Mori poll reported that 95% of British undergraduates were regular users (Shepherd, 2008), while in the US context, Ellison et al. (2007) found that 94% of the undergraduate population at Michigan State University were members. As Ito et al. remark, ‘The growing salience of networked publics in young people’s everyday lives is part of important changes in what constitutes the

relevant social groups and publics that structure young people's learning and identity' (2009: 19). The work done on the various social dimensions of SNS usage – demonstrating for instance how they are used for identity-work and the management of social capital – makes them all the more compelling for educationalists, particularly those dissatisfied with 'clunky' VLEs. As Selwyn and Grant point out, the shift from the static nature of Web 1.0 to the interactive, user-driven nature of Web 2.0 in which users can engage with each other, collaborate in new ways and create content is a model which, in providing 'access to education experiences which are based around active participation rather than passive reception', is much more aligned to active learning (2009: 80). However, taking advantage of the centrality of SNSs to many students' social lives by finding ways to incorporate learning activities into existing modes of usage is – as the existing literature suggests – not an easy task.

This paper reports on the findings of a research project which sought to capitalise on the ability of SNSs to address students' relational needs by drawing them into online interactions that might help them to learn from, and to support, one another. Undertaken with students studying modern languages at a 1994 Group university, the project explored the potential of an SNS for supporting students going on (or already on) their year abroad. It also investigated how effective a tool it might be for facilitating informal learning, particularly in the domain of intercultural awareness and communication. In the attempt to answer Selwyn and Grant's call for 'thick' description of contemporary uses of social software by learners *in situ* (2009: 83), the paper draws on data from questionnaires, focus groups, face to face interviews and content analysis of postings to the site to describe what students reported wanting in the way of support for their time abroad, the habits of technological use they reported, and, once the group was set up, the way students interacted on it and the topics that came up for discussion. The key research questions addressed are these: Given that students will come to this group

seeking practical and relational support, how could their participation be turned to educational advantage? How might substantive educational discussions best be generated? And what kind of techniques are effective in engaging students in discussions that will help to foster their skills of intercultural communication? In pursuing these questions, I also put forward some recommendations for those interested in setting up similar support mechanisms for other year abroad contexts, work that Topping (1996: 338) notes the need for in his call for further research into peer tutoring in distance education.

Situated learning and the problem of role conflict

The existing work on SNSs suggests that they are best understood in terms of Lave and Wenger's (1991) concept of situated learning, in which learning is seen as occurring through participation in communities of practice. Within this framework, SNSs are a learning context of particular interest, as the focus moves from individuals towards the network of social relationships in which they are situated. As Ito et al. observe, this perspective means that

relationships of knowledge sharing, mentoring, and monitoring within social groups become key sites of analytic interest ... people learn in all contexts of activity, not because they are 'internalizing' knowledge, culture, and expertise as isolated individuals, but because they are part of shared cultural systems and engaged in collective social action. (2009: 14)

If mediating technologies such as SNSs are understood not as 'determining' or 'affecting' individuals as external forces, but rather as themselves embodying 'social and cultural

relationships that in turn shape and structure our possibilities for social action and cultural expression' (Ito et al. 2009: 4; see also Bijker, Hughes, and Pinch 1987; Edwards 1995; Hine 2000), then it is correspondingly important to attend to the social relationships that underlie these technologies, rather than thinking of them primarily as tools with which to shape individuals or direct their action.

Given the centrality of the relational context, it is necessary to attend to one of the problems that stands in the way of using SNS for educational purposes: what Selwyn calls 'role conflict' (2009: 171) and Szweleńnik terms 'crossing the boundary' (2008). Role conflict occurs when students' social worlds and academic worlds collide, causing tensions to arise for students over which 'face' to present (Goffman 2005 [1967]). Takahashi discusses this in the context of Japanese students in terms of *uchi*, or in-groups: as the number of different groups on an SNS increase, the more users worry that their different faces may be revealed (2008). If students are asked to sign up to a group in which a tutor or lecturer participates, they are faced, for example, with the possibility that someone to whom they need to maintain one kind of image (that of a diligent student) may see evidence – photos, posts – of social behaviour that will reveal a different kind of image which they have put forward for friends. It is not only students who face this problem, of course; anyone with an SNS profile which is visible to both friends and work colleagues may have felt a similar discomfort over the mixing of their personal and professional lives. Hewitt and Forte observe that identity management is a significant concern for SNS users when the roles they occupy cross perceived social boundaries and bring organisational power relationships into visibility, citing one student's fears that Facebook could 'unfairly skew a professor's perception of a student in a student environment' (2006). Madge et al. found ambivalence among their student respondents on the question of whether or not Facebook was an appropriate place to carry out academic activities

(2009: 149-151). Generally students were not overly enthusiastic about their tutors using Facebook, and indeed some were highly negative about using the site for academic purposes. For those who did consider Facebook an appropriate forum for university-related activities, those they suggested were mostly about administrative matters at departmental or module level.

This project sought to find a way to build a learning community without infringing on a space perceived as belonging to students rather than academic staff, and to shift the discursive content from social to educational without asking students to 'cross the boundary'. For this reason, a peer-mentoring framework was chosen, in which input was not provided directly by members of staff, whose presence on the SNS would be likely to drive students away. Instead, peer mentors were chosen, and the content of the group – for example the kinds of discussions seeded, and the kinds of responses that were appropriate – was established through collaborative discussions between the peer mentors and the project director. The peer mentors were then responsible for starting discussions, answering questions and moderating the group. There was therefore a channel through which information and content could be conveyed, and a means of keeping an eye on the group such that it continued to function, but those giving this input and doing this moderation were still peers and therefore not sufficiently different or forbiddingly unknown to the extent that their difference would stand in the way of other students participating. It is worth noting that peer mentoring models can be observed operating successfully elsewhere on the web. Ito et al., for example, observed in their work that in interest-driven online groups – ie. communities not formally dedicated to learning – older and more experienced participants had an important role to play, providing they participated not as educators but as 'passionate hobbyists and creators', rather than people with authority over less experienced individuals (2009: 351).

The peer mentoring framework used in this project meant that attention needed to be directed not only to the substantive content to be conveyed, which in this case centred around developing intercultural competence, but also to the relationships which the peer mentors developed with students who came to the site seeking support and information. This, I argue, is a more productive focus for attention than concentrating on finding specific technological tools or applications through which to achieve particular aims. Indeed, in a survey done prior to setting up the SNS, 18% of students who had set up a profile on Facebook stated that they disliked Facebook applications. The most effective tools used by the group members were also the simplest, and the ones that facilitated discussion and social contact: posting to the wall, posting to a discussion group or sending a personal message. This supports Selwyn's view that computer-based learning needs to shift away from delivering commoditised information and move towards taking advantage of technology's relational potential (2007: 91). Relationships are central to getting learning to happen in the context of SNS: if educators get these right, they stand a better chance of creating the conditions of possibility in which learning can occur.

Methodology

The project was carried out with students at a '1994 Group' university in the UK studying for a modern language degree. Students on this degree are expected to spend the third year of their four-year programme abroad in a country where their language of study is spoken, usually carrying out one or more of the following activities: studying at university as an Erasmus student, doing a British Council language assistantship, or doing a work placement.

Face-to-face events held for previous cohorts of students in modern languages had demonstrated the benefits of bringing students together to discuss the year abroad. For the final year students, these meetings involved reflecting on their own and others' experiences of the year abroad; for the second year students, these discussions enabled them to find out practical information from those who had recently returned from abroad, and to learn from their experiences in other ways. It was a core aim of this project to discover whether an SNS could provide an online space which students could access remotely from their various locations around the world to facilitate these kinds of exchanges, and to allow reflection and learning to occur regularly during the students' time abroad, rather than beforehand or afterwards.

In order to determine what technology would be best to use and what kind of support students wanted, undergraduates in two cohorts were surveyed: second year students who were planning their year abroad, and final year students who had returned from abroad. Students completed an anonymous survey about their attitude towards the year abroad, their use of technology and SNSs, and, following Ellison et al. (2007), their affective investment in SNSs. The second year students were asked what kind of support they imagined they would need while abroad, and the final year students were asked what kind of support they *did* need while abroad.

From these surveys, it was clear that Facebook was the most widely used SNS by both year groups, and so it was the platform chosen for the project. Ellison, Steinfeld and Lampe (2007) provide a good overview of Facebook's features, though in common with all technologies these will inevitably change in the future. Students also reported wanting regular contact with friends who had also gone abroad. 52% of final year students said they were in contact with

another year-abroad once a week or more often, rising to 76% for once a month or more often. Second year students were asked how much contact they wanted with others while abroad: 61.5% said they wanted contact with another year-abroad once a week or more often, rising to 89.7% for once a month or more often. Sustaining relationships with friends, then, appeared to be a priority for the majority of students, and this resonated with other findings from the survey which suggested a considerable amount of anxiety around isolation. Roughly one-quarter of respondents in second year listed loneliness, being away from family, or being away from friends among their top three worries in relation to the year abroad. Practical considerations were higher still on the list of anxieties among second year students: 36% mentioned money and finances as a concern, and 31% listed language competence. Practical advice and social support were thus the two main areas which the SNS was designed to address.

These survey results were used to develop focus group protocols to gauge students' receptivity to the idea of using Facebook to carry out education-related discussions, to judge the extent to which Facebook was a hospitable environment for peer mentoring to occur, and to determine which Facebook applications would best assist with educational objectives. Students were also asked about which aspects of the year abroad they were already using Facebook to engage with, and which elements of their time abroad could be ameliorated through provision of a virtual meeting place for discussion.

Following analysis of the survey and focus group data, a group of seven peer mentors were chosen from the cohort who had already completed a year abroad, in consultation with academic staff. These students were given a training session which covered the basics of online moderating, peer mentoring, differences between computer-mediated communication

and face-to-face communication, and intercultural exchange. The peer mentors set up a Facebook group, produced a description of the group in which they explained its purpose and introduced themselves, and were then asked to initiate discussions and spend time each week participating in these and responding to any questions. The mentors made the decision to keep the group 'open', meaning that anyone could join, and anyone could read the content of the wall posts and discussion threads. Activity on the group was observed over a period of three months. To avoid role conflict, the project director did not contribute to any discussions nor interact with any students on the group, although her icon appeared as one of the group's administrators.

Analysis of the working of this group is based on content analysis and corpus analysis of the text of the online discussions. Postings on both the wall and in individual discussion threads were coded for a period of 54 days, in the following categories: giving practical advice, relating own experience, asking for information, course-related reflection, culture-related reflection, group norm-setting and relationship-building, and general conversation unrelated to the year abroad. This was supplemented by phone interviews with the seven peer mentors after the mentoring was over, and phone interviews with four students who had been abroad during the mentoring period and who had used the group.

How students used the site

Content analysis revealed that students used the Facebook group for two main purposes. First, for human contact: this was evidenced by a large amount of chat and banter, much of it initiated by the mentors. Paul and Brier (2001) and Cummings et al. (2006) have explored

how students of university age use Facebook and other internet technologies to alleviate the ‘friendsickness’ brought about by moving away from one’s friends, so the fact that the context for this group was a year abroad (which, as noted above, produced some apprehension in students about loneliness and social isolation) would likely have heightened their motivation for using the site. The second purpose was to obtain information and advice, something seen in the fact that the most common thing that students did when visiting the site was to ask questions about practical information. Several students did share their experiences while abroad, as the mentors kept prompting them to do, but given the amount of encouragement, this was fairly minimal. These findings are in line with those of Ang and Pothan, who reported considerable difficulties in getting participants in an online community to share their intercultural experiences, even though these participants were researchers who were part of a project team, rather than students with no external motivation to take part in discussions about intercultural exchanges (2009).

These participation patterns can be understood in light of the framework set out by Matzat, who holds that individuals participate in online groups primarily for two reasons: relational (making new contacts and maintaining pleasant relationships) and material (for example obtaining information) (2009: 380). Central to the relational stability of the group in this case was the fact that there were strong pre-existing relationships among the student mentors, who knew each other well and were as comfortable engaging with each other on Facebook as they were in real life. Ensuring online groups are also established offline is a ‘frame stabilizing tool’ which Matzat puts forward as a way of increasing an online group’s success, as this helps to consolidate group identity and increase the group’s social embeddedness (2009: 381-82, 387). Indeed, this seems to be what makes Facebook so successful in the first place. OFCOM (2008) reported that over two-thirds (69%) of adult SNS users use it to communicate

with people they already knew and met with regularly, while only 17% use it to talk to people they did not know. Selwyn found that ‘in terms of education-related interaction, Facebook was used primarily for maintaining strong links between people already in relatively tight-knit, emotionally close offline relationships’ (2009: 170). Finding ways to make interpersonal links between mentors and those they are mentoring is another tactic that can be used to assist group cohesion.

Mentors also engaged in another tactic identified by Matzat as something which helps online communities succeed: use of indirect monitoring tools, which ‘provide opportunities and incentives for members to send relational signals that indicate accordance to the group frame’ (2009: 382). An example of this occurred in the following thread, when ‘Sarah’, a second year student, asked for information about a French university in the town of X, and received a reply from ‘Megan’, one of the mentors:

Sarah ne 1 been to [X city] plz tell me what it's like im thinking of going there! x

Megan Hey Sarah!

[X city] wasn't my Erasmus city, but I did go there as a tourist, since I lived in the [X region].

[X city] is a lovely city which is located in a very beautiful area of France. I have heard good things about the student life: the city's not very small and its cultural past always attracts a lot of visitors (especially visitors interested in Drama).

What are you doing there, teaching placement, erasmus...?

Good luck with everything!

Sarah thank u for ur reply. Im intending to study Drama there for a year, but
ive also applied for a teaching assistantship in [Y city]. I think im
gonna go for [X city]!
Sarah x

Megan No offence to the [Y region] (their dialect is really funny actually) but
[X city] is more interesting and much much much sunnier
:)
Have fun!

In this short thread, we can see that the linguistic behaviours modelled by Megan, the mentor, have the effect of changing Sarah's linguistic behaviour. As well as answering Sarah's question, Megan greets her by name, shows relational interest in her by asking for more detail about what she is doing, and uses orthographic conventions closer to more formal written genres such as a letter, rather than the textspeak Sarah initially uses. This has the effect of altering Sarah's language so it matches Megan's more closely: it becomes slightly more formal, with more conventional punctuation and fewer textspeak spellings, and also moves from being purely informational to relational, as she thanks Megan for her reply and uses her name to sign off. In terms of the metafunctions which Halliday lays out in his theory of functional grammar, Megan's example moved Sarah from a primarily ideational mode of communication (one in which information is sought) to one in which combines ideational with interpersonal elements (those which enact social relationship between speakers) (2004: 29-31). As Woods and Ebersole (2003) observe, transforming textual exchanges into a

learning community with a positive social dynamic requires intentional decisions in the realm of both verbal and nonverbal communication, so student mentors need to be trained in techniques of e-moderation to overcome the challenges a mediated environment can pose to productive discussions. Drawing mentors' attention to the way that they use language can be more – or less – oriented to social relations between participants, as well as to providing information, can help to bring cohesion to the community in an indirect way. Given what we have seen above about the importance of the relational dimension of SNSs, getting this right can be a powerful tool in increasing the attractiveness of the group by strengthening its relational interests (Matzat 387).

Benefits

The benefits of an SNS such as this one flow to a number of different parties: students being mentored, students doing the mentoring, academic and support staff, and institutions themselves. One clear advantage arising from the SNS was that it facilitated the transfer of useful information from final year students to second year students. The kinds of practical information that students who had been surveyed reported wanting – about accommodation, university bureaucracy, travel and so forth – was easily and quickly provided by mentors, rather than adding to the email load of staff members. In informal discussions, staff in modern languages stated that the number of queries that usually came their way had been reduced. This is a benefit not only for individual members of staff and their departments, but also for their institutions: as universities come under pressure to present themselves as places where global cultures and knowledges from across the world meet (Robins and Webster, 2002: 322),

online mentoring offers a way to direct students' learning while they are still abroad in a way that does not increase the time commitment needed from staff as much as it otherwise might.

As well as providing practical guidance, the SNS also addressed anxieties around social isolation and loneliness emerging from the survey responses of students in second year.

Researchers into new media have hypothesized that social network sites, and the network of loose social ties that users can build through them, can help augment what Robert Putnam terms 'bridging social capital' (Donath and boyd 2004). The expressions of thanks from students who received answers to their queries and help for their problems suggested that support from others – even in a mediated form – was valued, and that the SNS enabled students and mentors to build this kind of bridging social capital amongst themselves.

Another benefit was the development of the student mentors, something already well established in the mentoring literature around conventional face-to-face mentoring. Topping, for example, found that simply preparing to be a peer tutor enhances one's cognitive processing: 'by increasing attention to and motivation for the task, and necessitating review of existing knowledge and skills' (1996: 324). Other work stresses the importance of fostering in mentors the intention to transfer the skills they have learnt while mentoring (Terrion and Phillion, 2008: 591). If mentors leave training without transfer intention they will be less likely to perform these behaviours later on, on the job (Foxon, 1993), so the skills mentors learn from participating in an SNS need to be made explicit in order to enhance their transferability. Considering the online component of the mentoring context, the benefits to mentors can also be conceptualised in terms of enhancing their digital literacy and computer-mediated-communication skills, and preparing them for what the New London Group identifies as an 'emerging cultural, institutional, and global order' with a 'multiplicity of communication

channels and media' in which the capacity to engage with cultural and linguistic diversity is increasingly salient (63). Acting as online mentors helps develop in students some of the multiliteracies that are required to operate in the kinds of virtual environments that, as knowledge workers, they are likely to inhabit in their careers. It seems particularly apropos to help students in modern languages and area studies develop greater knowledge of how people interact online while increasing their knowledge and mastery of cultural and linguistic diversity, something which involves not only observing how others behave online, but learning appropriate online behaviours oneself. Madge et al. (2009) argue that as part of their interactions on Facebook, students have the chance to engage in a range of activities which bear on their employability skills, for example team working and organisation abilities (152). Moreover, as Collis and Moonen note, participating in, and contributing to, a professional community is now an established part of 21st-century digital working (2001: 28), so a peer mentoring setup such as this one can also work to prepare students in modern languages for life post-graduation. It can also help mentors to think more carefully about how they manage various online identities using linguistic capital, an increasingly important part of professional life in a world in which digital traces of one's identity can persist for some time.

Sustainability

As Perkel and Herr-Stephenson point out, understanding the everyday practices of individuals and attending to how they participate in their own social worlds is important to understanding online learning more generally (2008). This is particularly salient when considering the use of SNSs in educational contexts, given what we have seen of the problem of role conflict. Because the norms of communication and behaviour on any given SNS have a level of

complexity, just as they do in face-to-face situations, academic staff and advisors who are not habitual users of an SNS will not be nearly so well versed with its norms as expert users of the site will. It can be useful, then, for student mentors who fall into the category of expert users to be the ones who decide on how the site will function. Using this model will enhance the sustainability of such an SNS site from one year to the next, because although technologies change, and a group may need to migrate to a different platform, this can be accomplished with relative ease if mentors are trained in the underlying skills – mentoring and online communication – and given clear guidance on the substantive content to be covered. If this training is in place, then the mentors themselves will know when it is appropriate to migrate to a new platform, and how best to use this. While Facebook was the technology clearly preferred by students in this project, for example, in August 2009 OFCOM reported that the proportion of 15-24 year olds using Facebook had fallen 5% in the past year (2009: 289). The peer mentoring model is, then, a way of ‘futureproofing’ the resource, as students will be more likely than academic staff to know which technologies are most popular with their peers, and once a framework for online mentoring is established, the SNS can if necessary be migrated in future years to different sites or applications as students’ usage patterns change.

Another factor contributing to sustainability is the existence of alternative technologies that may do the job better. At the time of writing, for instance, Facebook allowed for very little flexibility in restructuring the way information and discussions are organised, so it was not easy for those searching for specific information to find what they needed. It is important, then, to be attentive to the structural limitations of the chosen SNS, and be attentive to what it does, and does not do so well. Gathering information or single discussion threads may be better done using a technology such as a wiki, which still allows for user contributions but

also permits creators to more closely customise the ways in which content is structured, and makes it easier for visitors to find what they need. Selwyn et al. point out that ‘[m]uch of the learning potential of web 2.0 is seen to derive from the co-construction of knowledge’ and the ‘constructivist ethos ... at the centre of practices such as folksonomies, mash-ups and wikis’ (2008: 10) but if the inflexibility of the technology is standing in the way of this co-construction, new platforms should be sought.

Hall (2003) observes that for learning communities to work, participants need to align their motivations and actions towards a particular end, something which ‘involves negotiating and establishing shared norms and values, and procedures and methods of working together’. This negotiation is important to do with mentors, and it involves making explicit that as they are the ones to decide what the SNS looks like and how it functions, there are salient features of the group that need to be discussed, and agreed on. Issues to be decided on may include the following: What degree of openness will the group have? How will content and discussions be structured? What kind of moderation needs to occur, and whose responsibility is it? What level of formality is it best to aim for? Mentors may assume, for example, that as they are in a leadership role of sorts, greater formality is needed than they would ordinarily use, so it is worth pointing out to them that informality is central to any educational uses of SNS sites (Selwyn et al. 2008: 21), and it is best not to make their interactions with others more formal but instead to make a conscious attempt to match their tone to the level of (in)formality that is found elsewhere on the SNS. However, what needs to be balanced against this is the need to retain the centrality of the peer mentors, and not to obscure this by imposing too many strictures and expectations on it. It is, as Ito et al. (2009) argue, precisely the lack of adult oversight and guidance that make these mediated spaces so attractive. ‘Among the reasons that youth participation in these networked publics is so high is that they are an alternative to

publics that the adult authorities in their lives have control over, and they provide opportunities for private conversation with peers' (23).

SNS sites as genres of participation and zones of proximal development

One problem that can arise in online communities is that of self-interested individuals who do not want to share information and who engage only minimally, or in self-serving ways that do not advance the collective aims of the community (Ecclestone 1999: 344). This behaviour was apparent in some of the students who were members of this group: they swooped in, asked a question, and did not re-engage when the answer was given. If the aim is to include as many students in a cohort as possible in discussions, ways need to be found to engage participants, which, as Hall observes, involves finding ways to include them 'in a sympathetic and symbiotic network' (2003: 157). To understand how a network of this kind might be generated, it is productive to conceptualise this kind of online group within the framework of what Ito (2003, 2008) terms 'genres of participation'. Such genres 'represent different investments that youth make in particular forms of sociability and differing forms of identification with media genres' (Ito et al., 2009: 18). If the learning done in an SNS is seen not as something done in a hierarchical teacher-student situation but instead understood as participation in a community of practice (Lave and Wenger 1991, cited in Perkel and Herr-Stephenson 2008: 8), we come closer to getting a grasp of what the investments *are* that students make when they come to a space such as an SNS, and how these investments affect the ways that students operate within mediated spaces (Perkel and Herr-Stephenson 2008: 8). As Selwyn et al. observe in their recommendations for the use of web 2.0 technologies in education, 'learner engagement with web 2.0 tools is rooted firmly in the realities of day-to-

day life within social settings such as school, university and home' (2008: 24). In the case of this SNS group, the genre of participation within which students operated was driven primarily by practical needs, and to a secondary extent by the desire for social interaction. Rather than seeing this as a problem, it can be used as an advantage. If students are motivated to participate because they want practical information, or social interaction with others, an SNS can gratify that desire with the requisite information and/or social contact, which will increase the likelihood that learners will stay for the more substantive discussions. In other words, it may not be a problem for an SNS to include material whose educational value is not immediately apparent – such as discussions that appear frivolous, or practical help with the details of accommodation, university bureaucracy and so on, because these are not only context-appropriate but they create a reward structure so that students will want to stay and participate at a deeper level. Guidance from tutors – or in this case mentors – comes best in the form of facilitation rather than management in forming communities of practice geared towards learning (Oradini and Saunders 2008). There is a further benefit to framing an online learning environment as a community of practice, in which students do not feel themselves under the burden of being assessed or even surveilled by academic staff. This less pressurised environment can function as what Winnicott terms a 'transitional space', an intermediate zone where cultural and creative activity can more easily occur. Such spaces offer students sites 'for the free exploration of their own and others' thinking, and for the unfolding process between the inkling of an idea and its fruition' (Creme 2008: 50). In the context of intercultural dialogue, this would seem an essential character to create in a learning environment, especially given the drawn-out nature of the learning done over the course of a year abroad.

Selwyn and Grant pose a provocative question in relation to social software, asking what it makes possible that was not possible before (2009: 83). The answer from this project is that a peer-learning resource on an SNS is not only capable of providing a learning environment in which users can interact in spite of geographical or temporal distance (Hamilton and Feenburg), but also allows learning to move away from what Selwyn sees as the ‘limited and linear models and relationships of higher education as they are currently being articulated’ (2007: 91), towards a different kind of model, one which draws on the knowledge of students who may have more relevant, and more recent, experience of being abroad than academic staff. This kind of peer input is not only appreciated by students themselves (Moust and Schmidt 1994), but is also valuable in reducing the load on course tutors and those responsible for pastoral care of students going abroad. In assisting their less experienced peers, more experienced students create a kind of virtual version of Vygotsky’s zone of proximal development – the distance ‘between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance, or in collaboration with more capable peers’ (1978: 86) – for the different forms of learning that occur while on a year abroad. As one mentor reported in a phone interview, students who are still abroad may not yet have the required distance to be able to reflect on what they are learning about the unfamiliar culture in which they are immersed, and it is only once they return that they begin to process what they have learnt. Discussions hosted on an SNS, then, can offer a zone of proximal development to students still abroad, by using peers as exemplars to raise issues which, without the scaffolding of questions and a space set aside for discussion, they might not yet have begun to articulate to themselves.

Conclusion

Given the limitations SNSs present to those who want to use them for pedagogical purposes – the fact that they are usually a space inhabited by students rather than teachers, and used for socialising rather than formal learning – it can be difficult to find ways to use them in a university context. Selwyn (2007) points to the discrepancy between the idealistic vision for ICT in universities and the low-level learning that tends to result. He recommends looking at the social construction of technology in higher education and considering how students engage with it in their day to day lived experience. This project has sought to get closer to the creative and transformative ideal envisioned by champions of ICT within higher education by looking carefully at how students use a particular technology, asking what social relations obtain (Monahan 2005: 8) and then using it with sensitivity in line with the way users are already engaging with it.

I return to the question posed at the start of this paper: can SNSs be used to create informal learning opportunities as well as offering practical and social support? This project suggests that the answer is yes, if such sites are conceptualised not as virtual versions of classrooms but rather as places where individuals come to participate in communities of practice. Finding ways around the problem of role conflict, and being sensitive to the limitations of an online space in which teachers cannot take the same directive role as they would in a conventional classroom environment, are key to getting such SNSs to work. A peer mentoring model is one way to use these sites effectively for educational purposes, providing that care is taken to shape the learning environment not by interacting directly with students on the site, but by working with peer mentors to train them in the principles of mentoring and e-moderating,

such that substantive intellectual content can be conveyed in ways that are appropriate to the mediated context.

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