Comparison of the Use of Social Network in Education between North and South Cyprus

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to determine and compare the use of social networks in education of two private secondary and post-secondary schools in North and South of Cyprus with a focus on the possible differences and similarities. The use of social networks in education was investigated as new common classrooms in this study. A qualitative method of research was used to gain an insight deep understanding of the participants’ experiences, related to semi-structured interviews and observations. The study group consisted of 35 teachers interviewed by the researcher. The data was collected over the period between January and April 2013. Consequents showed that the two schools at both sides of Cyprus share common elements than differences, regarding the use of social networks in education. Significant difference between the two schools was that there was no school policy for using social networks in education in North although the teachers were positive to use social networks. However social networks were used for communication under the school policy in the South although the teachers were negative to use social networks in education. The similarities of North and South is to use SNs for communication, not for education and to avoid abuse of students for not knowing privacy and security matters and to promote teachers to spend more time and effort in eliminating inappropriate materials regarding lessons, and also to promote parents to appreciate the use of SNs in education. The difference between the North and South is that although using SNs for communication is school policy in the South, it is not a school policy in the North. Although North school teachers have positive perceptions for using SNs in education, the South teachers have negative perceptions.

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1. Introduction

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Education is an ongoing phenomenon of a person until death and it has political, social, cultural, and economic diversities. Education is a process which affects people to gain society standards, belief and way of living. Education is continuous, dynamic, comprehensive, multi-dimensional, scientific, objective-orientated, limitless and cultural. Production and sharing of knowledge is accelerated by the developing technology and according to the needs of individuals (Tiryakioğlu & Erzurum, 2011).

Education is important for modern life (Arap, 2010; Uzgören & Uzgören, 2005), in order to change the behavior of the individual via experience throughout life (Çetin, Çakıroğlu, Bayılmış & Ekiz, 2002). Education is an investment in changing attitudes of an individual. Formal education is a planned system at the schools however informal education is applicable everywhere and not planned. Education is a social and cultural process which is lifelong learning (Göksan, Uzundurukan & Keskin, 2009). Education aids students, communities and business life (Semerci, 2003).

The Internet becomes more widespread, common use of various applications originated from technology that has come into question. Among these, Web 2.0 applications like Youtube, Facebook, Twitter, Wikis and Blogs facilitate the following of the information, enhance the interaction between knowledge communities due to its attractive features as being interactive and anytime and anywhere (Odabaşı, Mısırlı, Güniç, Timar, Ersoy, Som, Dönmez, Akçay, & Erol, 2012). The global use of the Internet has developed in recent years and now impacts all aspects of society from business, education to social activities. (Leitch & Warren, 2011)

Education and technology play an important role in providing efficiency to human life (Seferoğlu, 2006). The most significant indications of the knowledge era are science, rapid technologic changes and globalization (Gedikoğlu, 2005; Karasar, 2004). Knowledge is the capital of human being. Nowadays, it is a necessity to communicate to large populations as there is huge demand for quick communication (Karasar, 2004). Advancement of the web technologies is correlated to increase of memberships of social networks. Online collaborative networks are a network that brings people together for a mutual aim (Acun, 2010).

One of the latest developments are online social networks. Nowadays, many social networks are appearing and shaping the way that people communicate, interact, collaborate, work and even learn (Gülbahar, Kallelıoğlu & Madran, 2010). Social networks started out as a hobby for some computer literate people and have become a social norm and way of life for people from all over the world (Flad, 2010). Sharing of the videos, photos, texts and sounds can be possible by using the SNs, at the same time, online games which are embedded in them lead to growth in interest in these sites (Kert & Kert, 2010). Nowadays there are many social networks as Facebook, MySpace, Twitter to provide communication to their users (İğman, Kiyici, Tercan, Kiper & İğbulan, 2010). Facebook assisted courses facilitated the aspects in sharing and cooperation; access to the lecturer; visualizing the course content for some students. However, there were also some students having negative opinions about the application (Keleş & Demirel, 2011).

Social networks are used not only for social networking and entertainment, but also for access to information (Tonta, 2009), for educational purposes (Gülbahar, Kallelıoğlu & Madran, 2010), for learning and for carrying out professional work (Tonta, 2009). Social networks have an important educational potential with their interaction and communication tool (Ekici & Kıyıcı, 2012). Globalization, educational requirements in whole life, and intense and fast improvements in communication technologies had deeply and widely effected the educational institutions (Karaca, 2008). Social networking can be transformed to educational networking (Eteokleous, 2012).

Educators started using SNs in education due to the fact that SNs are mostly used by youngsters and students and that SNs provide rich interaction opportunities. SNs enable teachers to get information about their students and better communication. SNs have relation with constructive and pedagogical approaches, and supports active and social learning, and implementation (Keleş & Demirel, 2011). Online social networking can be regarded as a platform allowing teachers and students to communicate and collaborate on school subjects and projects outside the classroom. Teachers can post school related works on these online communities and students can further enrich their learning experiences by teaming up with their classmates to work on assignments and projects (Khedo, Elaheebocus, Mocktoolah, Suntoo, 2012).
Widespread use of information and communication technologies has changed learning environments. These kinds of changes forced learners in being online or blended learning environments as well as face to face. It has seen as a result of both lifelong learning and knowledge society which learners must have developed digital proficiency (Atici & Polat, 2010).

The social network tools via internet provide a wide range of opportunities for educational activities. As an educator, it is important to experience good examples of technology integration into curriculum with students (Gülbahar & Kalelioglu, 2010). Through the social networks, users re-define themselves, involve in various social relations and even re-shape their teaching or learning process. Providing new opportunities and conveniences in educational settings, the rapidly developing information and communication technology, play crucial roles for providing a learning environment for schools, as well as for the societies (Özmen, Aküzüm, Sünkür & Baysal, 2011).

At present, social networks are developing usually outside the formal educational activities (Acun, 2010); they have an important educational potential with their interaction and communication tools (Ekici & Kıyıcı). Most of the students are highly aware of social networking and have the ability to use computer and internet with Web 2.0 tools which are very important for education (Uçak & Çakmak, 2010). Social networks can be used in education processes for improving communication skills of students and teachers, expanding participation, empowering peer support, realization of collaborative learning. Social media also provides facilities which are enriching the learning and teaching processes with text, video, audio materials, supporting learning, teaching and evaluation processes (Toğay, Akdur, Yetişkin & Bilici, 2012).

Many educational institutions have taken advantages of social networking websites for maintaining their teaching and learning activities (Tinmaz, 2012). The introduction to the concept of social networking, the discussion turns towards the exiting definitions of knowledge, leading to the question of what and how we are attempting to accumulate, manage and share knowledge resources through applications of online social networking (Benson, Morgan, & Tennakoon, 2012).

Educators must have a clear vision and guidelines for doing so, or they will face serious technical and legal pitfalls. Schools have a role to play in educating students about safely and appropriately using such sites (Davis, 2008). Teenagers and young adults have especially embraced SNs as a way to connect with their peers, share information, reinvent their personalities, and showcase their social lives (Flad, 2010). In order to develop learning communities with increased student engagement, educators are increasingly adopting the use of social networks to supplement teaching and learning in both fully online as well as traditional classroom learning environments (Buzzetto-More, 2012). In this context, online social network environments are effective sites which can be used as constructive and social cognitive learning sites. Theoretical approaches are based on individual orientation, interaction with environmental factors and self-control (Kert & Kert, 2010).

There are many challenges facing the use of social networking in education such as privacy, real friendship, taking up time, flexibility, repeatability, convenience and accessibility and miscommunication. The privacy is one of the obstacles that faced the use of social networking in education. SNs have effect on health of individuals, due to spending a lot of time. Flexible learning expands choice on what, when, where and how people learn. Social networking is easy and quick in term of accessing accessibility, reviewing, updating, editing; anytime, anywhere. Scholars praise social-networking tools for their capability to attract, motivate and engage students in meaningful communicative practice, content exchange, and collaboration (Zaidieh, 2012).

Though many arguments can be made about the possible risks of adolescent social networking, it is important to point out the benefits of these websites as well in order to promote education, keep students updated with assignments, offer help to those in need, provide an outlet for teens to express. In general, the Internet and social networking sites can be a positive influence (Flad, 2010).

Social networking sites, as well as other new forms of communication technology, are also a concern to many school professionals because of the level of distractions during instruction time and have a negative impact on the learning environment. They create within the school such as forbid the use of handheld technology during school.
or that block certain social networking websites (Flad, 2010). Teachers are increasingly finding themselves in trouble for their use of social media in and out of the classroom. Teachers most frequently are getting in trouble for posting inappropriate contents during their personal time (Papandrea, Mary-Rose, 2012). Parent-child conflicts have also become more of an issue since the sudden escalation of online social networking and causes distress in the household and may ultimately lead to a barrier between parent, child, and communication about school work and grades (Flad, 2010).

Based on the literature a set of questions were derived regarding the use of SNs in education as new common classrooms, the kinds of networking used, the use of SNs in and out of the school time, the reason of why teachers started using SNs, the age group of the teachers that use SNs, the lessons for which SNs are useful, the students learning affection of SNs, the teachers and students skills improvement by SNs, the policy and criteria for using SNs, the communication one to one and one to many with SNs, the advantages and disadvantages of using SNs and the sharing of information with parents, the perception on SNs and F2F in education. The specific purposes of this research was to compare the use of Social Networks (SNs) in secondary and post secondary education at two private schools in North and South of Cyprus.

2. Objective

The purpose of this study is to determine and compare the use of social networks in education of two private secondary and post secondary schools in the North and South of Cyprus and the importance of such comparison.

3. Method

A qualitative method of research was used to gain an insight of deep understanding of the participants' experiences, relying on semi-structured interviews and observations. The study group interviewed by the researcher, consisted of 35 teachers from two secondary and post secondary private schools; one in North and one in South. The data was collected over the period between January and April 2013 with a pregranted permission. The interview schedule consisted questions which were set up after a thorough study of literature on the use of Social networks in education. Each interview took approximately half an hour. The tape-recorded interviews was transferred to a transcript. Thematic coding was based on the relevant literature.

4. Findings

4.1. SNs as New Common Classrooms

Physics, Mathematics, Science and computer studies (ICT) teachers of North claimed that SNs are used during lessons and out of the classroom for sending and reminding deadlines of homework, getting answers, giving feedback and sharing selected youtube materials. The ICT teacher said that he used selected youtube materials, during the lesson at the technology lab which is equipped with smart-board, projectors, internet access and computers for year 11 and year 12. Physics, Mathematics and English teachers claimed that SNs could not be used for education but they could only be used as education tools. They prefer to use only traditional methods for education which was face to face. All the South school teachers said that they had to use school group facebook in order to send students homework, questions and reminders on assignments and exams, and for communicating with parents about the school activities. Most of the South school teachers especially ICT, French, English and Mathematics teachers stated that they did not use SNs for education because they did not like technology and believed that it would not be helpful for learning so they did not encourage students to use SNs. Science, Greek
and psychology teachers claimed that they used youtube during the lessons, yet they prefer face to face education. One of the teachers complained that even if they wanted to use SNs for education the school would not provide them the infrastructure.

4.2. Kinds of SNs used

Most of the North school teachers said that they used facebook as a class and email to post homework and to share selected youtube materials and videos to visualize their lessons, ask questions or answer the students’ questions especially during the exam period. The students under year 11 did not have the opportunities to use technology room or lab so they used SNs only out of school. Most of the South school teachers used school group facebook.

4.3. The Necessity of Using SNs

North school teachers claimed that SNs were useful in following technology improvement and communication with students, in order to attract their attention for lessons, in visualizing science experiments which they could not do at the school lab due to limited infrastructure and to guide senior students about undergraduate education in abroad. The case was similar for South school teachers.

4.4. Timing of SNs In and Out of School

North school teachers said that there were limited infrastructure and internet access in their classrooms especially for students of under year 11, so they could not use SNs in the school. They used SNs out of the school if the students had facebook and email account and if they got their parents’ permission to access internet or their parents could provide internet and computer at home. Most of the South school teachers claimed that they mostly used school group facebook out of school having inadequate infrastructure in most classrooms.

4.5. Age Group of Teachers

Most of the North school teachers said that although the age is not very important for using SNs, the teachers under 30 were more familiar with technology because they were born with it and teachers over 30 were more reluctant to use any form of technology because of not having confidence. Some of the older teachers had never used SNs for education, but at the same time there was a teacher over 60 who not only used SNs, even taught young teachers how to use SNs. Most of the South school teachers claimed that younger teachers were more familiar and confident to use SNs whereas teachers aged over 30 had negative thoughts and fear about SNs.

4.6. Lessons Where SNs is Used Most

North school teachers stated that SNs were useful especially for Language, Science, Physics, Biology, Mathematics and ICT lessons. Some teachers claimed that SNs were useful for all lessons summarizing, especially during exam period. Others said that SNs were not useful for Mathematics because they could not solve equations through SNs. South school teachers said that SNs were more useful for theoretical lessons. One teacher said that SNs were good for all the lessons, some South school teachers claimed SNs were not good for Mathematics and one teacher believed that SNs were not useful for any lesson.

4.7. Skills Improved by SNs
North school teachers claimed that SNs improved teachers’ skills. Some teachers claimed that SNs improved their skills by accessing other teachers’ lessons through the internet and learning and teaching methods. South school teachers claimed that SNs did not improve their skills.

4.8. Policy and Criteria

North school ICT teacher believed that it should be forbidden to open any other computer programs or sites during computer lesson. Other teacher stated that she had her own self policy for communicating with graduates. Some believed that there should be a school policy for using SNs. South school teachers claimed that privacy, honesty and security were important policy issues.

4.9. One to One, One to Many Connections

North school teachers said that it would be possible to communicate both one to one and one to many between teachers and students. Some teachers said it was quite easy to send individual instant messages from facebook to students and to ask them questions and get answers. Some teachers said SNs are good for one to one dialogue with their colleagues, for sharing ideas about the lessons or news. North school teachers said that SNs are good for students who are not good at lessons and do not have confidence within themselves to communicate in the class. South school teachers said SNs are good to keep teacher in touch with students through SNs either one-to-one communication or one-to-many and even students who are not confident enough to participate.

4.10. Communicating with Parents Through SNs

North school teachers said that they prefer to communicate with parents through the schools in the formal way face to face (F2F) communication. In this way teachers talked with real parents and not somebody else hiding behind the computer. Some teachers were reluctant to communicate with parents through SNs because conversation could turn into an argument. They believed communication with parents should be done formally by school through weekly reports or emails. South school teachers said that they communicated with parents through email which was used as the formal communication way and they also had group facebook for students and parents. Some said that if the parents neglected their children, teachers could inform them about the students’ improvement with SNs.

4.11. Advantages and Disadvantages

4.11.1. Advantages

North school teachers said that SNs had a lot of advantages for education such as finding material from youtube, sharing with students and colleagues worksheets, power point presentations, links, and enrich their perception on the lesson. Some said that students did not have to take notes during lesson. Some said that SNs provided communication between teachers and students out of school times. Teachers said that students could learn anywhere, anytime and at their own speed and also retrieve lessons. Some teachers said that SNs should be promoted by the ministry of education or by the school not by teachers individually. Some claimed that there was not enough infrastructure to perform lab experiments, so they used youtube to visual the experiments. One said that SNs should be used in a more casual and friendly atmosphere to support communication between students and teachers. Furthermore they said that students felt more confident to contribute to the lesson via SNs. South school teachers said that they could find different kinds materials from youtube, videos, worksheets, power points
presentations, links and share them via the SNs. Some teachers said that by using SNs they saved time for students which not have to take notes during lesson. Some said that shy students were encouraged via SNs. Some said they informed parents about activities, announcements, events of the school. One teacher said “An advantage of SNs is that a teacher can see from pictures if a student smokes and try to convince them that smoking is a dangerous habit”.

4.11.2. Disadvantages

North school teachers said that students lost their concentration and wasted a lot of time by watching pictures, playing games and chatting. Some teachers claimed that student should first learn about privacy, security and then start using SNs in productive and correct way of education. Some said that they needed more effort and more time to select the appropriate materials from the internet. Teachers also claimed that parents did not give permission to their children for access to internet because they did not have economic power to afford it. Some teachers said that only year 11 and 12 students were given the opportunity to use the technology room. Two teachers were reluctant to use the SNs because of the information, photos security and privacy issues. One teacher said “We should be careful about privacy to avoid the example of the teacher who misplaced her inappropriate photos on facebook and she was dismissed from her job and soon after she committed suicide” and he added that “We can see many bad examples on youtube about student abuse”. Another teacher said “Once a student got my photos from facebook and changed it for having fun and they abused our facebook friendship, so I am afraid to use SNs after this experience”. South school teachers claimed that students created fake accounts, used bad words, had concentration problems and some got addicted using SNs without control. Additionally they said that students relied too much on internet, they did not pay attention to the lesson. Some teachers said that although they could share power point and youtube links with students, if parents do not give permission to their children to access internet it will bring difficulties for using SNs and students would not feel good. Some parents were against social networking but if SNs was used as compulsory parents would be able to follow the school’s decision. One teacher said there are many scandals because people share inappropriate pictures at facebook.

4.12. The Perception On SNs and F2F In Education

North school teachers said that “F2F is the most important way of teaching but we need to use blended education. We feel, we touch, we understand students’ problems and emotions with F2f, but with SNs we just have a screen in front of us and we don’t know if s/he plays games”. Some teachers said that SNs provided them opportunity to connect with other teachers, labs, different fields and countries and share their knowledge and experiences throughout the world and carry out F2F education to a better level. Most said that F2f has social importance and improves students’ social capability. SNs are not being used during the lessons efficiently. South school teachers said that traditional F2f method was the best way for improvement. One teacher said that each one of the teaching methods provided different relationship between teachers and students and combination of F2f and SNs would be the most appropriate system to be used.

5. Conclusions

SNs are not commonly used both in North or South schools. However SNs are used by some teachers for individual purposes in North. In South there is an official policy to use SNs in schools. Either way there is limited infrastructure and limited use of SNs out of lesson due to parents’ negative perception that cannot afford internet expenses. It was very interesting to see that both school ICT teachers did not believe SNs were useful for education and South schools’ language teachers did not like to use SNs at all. In both sides some students did not
have self-confidence to communicate F2F to use SNs and vice versa. North and south school teachers find SNs useful only if combined with F2F education and feared to use Facebook.

Teachers of both schools used SNs as a guide for undergraduate education information overseas for year 12 students. SNs were useful to communicate with their students, to draw attention to their lessons, to visual science experiments, to wish them good luck for the exams. The use of SNs was obligatory at the South school, for teachers to communicate and inform their students about homework, exams and activities and also for posting materials. Both school teachers under 30 years of age were more familiar with technology compared to the teachers over 30, although there are exemptions.

Both school teachers had common beliefs that F2F education was the best traditional teaching way with using five senses but when there is a screen between the students and the teachers when using the SNs in education teachers could not know if the students played games or did other activities while online. Both the North and the South school teachers had common beliefs that blended education to carry F2F education to higher level although SNs were not used in education. SNs provide both one-to-one and one-to-many communication between students and teachers for both sides. Students who have not enough confidence to participate to the lessons, they feel more comfortable to participate through SNs.

SNs are useful for language, science and theoretical lessons but not for mathematics or computer studies according to both school teachers. North school teachers insisted that SNs were useful for all kinds of lessons. However in the South there was a contradiction. There was not a policy or criteria for using SNs for North and South school teachers. However, South school teachers insisted on security, privacy, formal communication, sharing appropriate photos, and efficiency and productivity of SNs in education.

There were general worries in North and South schools’ teachers for security and privacy problems but there is a demand to have updated computer knowledge use of internet facilities for teachers and students in both sides. There was concern for the loss of students’ concentration and time and parents’ negative perceptions to SNs and internets in general.

North school did not use SNs for the communication with parents and the South school had school policy to use Facebook for the communication with parents. SNs would be a real time saver if used in education appropriately to provide unlimited sources and materials for teachers and students in North. SNs improved and enriched teachers and students’ perspectives in the North school teachers. SNs could be the best way to extend education time and also to remind students of their homework in North.

6. Discussions

There are parallel findings between the research of Gülbahar & Kalezioğlu (2010) and this research and that the social networks provide a wide range of opportunities for educational activities.

Buzzetto-More’s (2012) research is parallel to this research that educators are increasingly adopting the use of social networks to supplement teaching and learning online as well as traditional classroom learning.

Zaidieh’s (2012) research has common findings that SNs have effect on health of individuals due to spending a lot of time with social networks but at the same time SNs provides flexible learning, expands choices as what, when, where and how people will learn.

Flad’s (2010) research has common arguments with this research that there are possible risks of adolescent social networking. It is important to point out the benefits of these websites to promote education, to keep students updated with assignments, to offer help to those in need, provide an outlet for teens to express.

Kert & Kert’s (2010) research have similar findings with this research that online social network environments are effective sites which can be used as constructivist and social cognitivist learning sites based on individual orientation, interaction with environmental factors and self-control in online interaction.
The research of Dwyer, Hiltz and Passerini (2007) and this research have common findings that trust is not a necessary factor in the building of new relationships on SNs, yet trust is very important for face to face relationship.

The research of Zaidieh (2012) shows similar to this research results that there are many challenges facing the use of social networking in education such as privacy, real friendship, taking up time, flexibility, repeatability, convenience and accessibility and miscommunication.

Ministry of Education policy should be effective in application of face to face education and teachers should have training on SNs safety and security in order to have competency and comfort in using SNs. ICT teachers could be a very important link between teachers and students and the safety of use of SNs in education.

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