

Facebook as a Learning Platform

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Abstract – In this paper we analyzed the need to introduce new, more modern approaches to traditional education. Sudden developments of interactive services that are specifically integrated into the social networks, especially on Facebook, represent an inexhaustible opportunity to use them in educational purposes. The paper analyzed the possibilities of using Facebook as an educational platform, through a concrete example of creating a separate group related to the course of Computing and Information technology. Emphasis is placed on the huge potential of educational applications, including complete e-learning systems, which are free to use on Facebook. As Facebook is naturally open for student population, educators must not miss opportunity and not use this extraordinary integrated system in the service of knowledge transfer.

Keywords – Education, Facebook, E-learning, Web 2.0.

I. INTRODUCTION

Exceptionally fast development of information and communication technologies and their impact on all spheres of life have caused various changes in approaches even when it comes to the traditional systems such as education. In recent years, we have witnessed how the Internet has become more interactive. Services based on Web 2.0 technologies have contributed communication to become versatile and easier to use, so that it is easy to say that the Internet has become the primary means of communication. There are many different products of this type of Internet such as social networks, blogs, forums, video and other services, which can be used for the purpose of transferring knowledge and online learning.

Modern concepts of learning require more open communication between learners and teachers, which is very simple if communication takes place through social networks. The greatest potential for these purposes has Facebook, because of largely familiar environment. As most of the students visit social network sites almost daily, many educational institutions recognized the opportunity to take advantage of this free resource through advertising and software packages for e-learning that are designed to function on Facebook. This gives students special opportunity to have an informal entertaining interest and follow their school work and events, all without leaving their favorite social network.

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II. RELATED WORK

Permanent migration of people spread knowledge beyond classrooms, but Internet is increasing the knowledge without movement of people and products. Distance learning makes it easier for learners and teachers to communicate and share knowledge. The main idea is that learners need computer and access to learning platform, but not without “adequate professional and technological methods, quality and organizational standards” [1].

E-learning, whether through applications based on LMS (Learning Management System) or CMS (Content Management System) e-learning systems or online learning through specific services such as Moodle [2], greatly contributes to the quality of education. Social networks bring together a huge number of users who try to connect in smaller online communities around common interests [3]. Students in a course or within a department are very much interested to exchange knowledge, experience, materials, and to informally socialize within their interest groups. Professors are also interested to use such communities to achieve communication and help students master materials more easily and acquire knowledge more quickly in course they attend. Learning platform provides videos and lectures are available to learners at any time; collaboration between learners is increased and learning flow of each learner is accompanied by the teacher.

Social networks are also designed to ensure privacy of information that is placed within a group. Teacher controls access to the group. A group must be closed in order to function properly so that all the attention of group members is directed toward the goals of education. Creating such a space for learning does not mean ignoring the traditional approach to learning in terms of classroom or laboratory, which is still irreplaceable. This virtual space should be accepted as a supplement and an excellent opportunity for additional work that contributes to a faster and easier learning and mastering the course materials.

Hamann and Wilson [4] found that students who participated in a web-enhanced class outperformed those students in a traditional lecture format. This suggests that Internet based learning modules actively engage students in a manner unique from the traditional class lecture [5].

Within Web social networks, such as Facebook, MySpace or Ning [6], it is possible to integrate applications related to e-learning. Applications can be adapted to the course to which the group is attached, and in most cases it enables uploading and downloading of materials, various announcements, and ability to communicate in real time, and video section where teachers can post their lectures or additional materials related to the topics of the course. In social networks, within the Interest groups, these relationships and their mutual interactions are important:

- Teacher-student,
- Student-student,
- Student-teacher and
- Teacher-lecturer, in the same course.

Another advantage of using social networks for education is the possibility that students who are away at some point while studying can use social networks as a distance learning platform and follow the course material, while being absent from school [7]. This ability to access materials and more open and direct access to teachers give chance for less active and shy students to freely communicate with the teacher by asking questions directly through the email system integrated into the social network or direct chat, in the moments when this type of communication is allowed by the teacher.

With the appearance of first Web social networks, such as sixdegrees.com and livejournal.com [8], educators realized the opportunity to create professional profiles related to their course, where they would provide information and post materials. Even then, there were some important rules for using social networks in educational purposes:

- Teachers regulate who can access the group,
- The group must be professional, closely related to the field of teaching, with no unnecessary elements,
- Teachers must communicate with students in a professional way,
- Teachers must control posted materials, especially if the students are allowed to upload materials within a particular section.

III. FACEBOOK IN EDUCATION

Among the many social networks people can have access to, Facebook is probably one of the most popular one. It connects people with friends, relatives and associates by simply creating a Facebook account. Users can create their own profiles attaching any information of their interest [9]. This social network includes easy-to-use applications such as uploading videos, pictures, files while users get in touch with others in terms of friendship, business or pleasure. To create an account in Facebook is completely free. A person only needs a valid e-mail account, and fill out the Facebook registration page. Once the account is established, the information can be updated as desired [9].

We can see that Facebook has become the main channel of communication among youth and elderly population. First of all because it is free and because the constant improvement and addition of new services [10], then ease of use and accessibility from all known platforms, from mobile phones and other devices, the number has been increasing incredibly fast. Statistics show that Facebook has over 500 million registered users which highly contributed to its worldwide recognition as a brand in all areas of activity. This is why all major companies, associations, interest groups, including educational institutions use Facebook to present themselves and even show their activities on this social network.

Facebook has managed to integrate the most interesting Web 2.0 services that exist and are used separately on the

Internet, and now receive much more importance when collected in one place. Out of these services and features, these are the most significant ones:

- The Wall, which is actually a modern blog, with possibility to comment contents.
- The ability to upload images and place comments.
- Upload of video and audio materials, and upload of existing video materials from popular video services, YouTube being the most important one.
- The option to create separate groups within the profile, and their administration.
- The ability to use various applications within Facebook.
- Using the internal mail system.
- Using advanced chat system.

The mere announcement that Facebook made about integrating Skype system completes this platform and makes it unique on the Internet [11].

This enormous abundance of services is irresistibly attractive for use in educational purposes. As we said earlier, the best option for teacher is to create a separate group for his course, which will be separate from his private information and contacts. The teacher will then inform his students and individuals interested to join such a group. Facebook offers all administrative features, through which teacher regulates who can access the group and what type of materials and comments students may post. Teacher can use Wall, Email or chat system, and students can use all resources for mutual communication and cooperation, which is of great importance for progress in learning [12]. They can also make appropriate comments; ask questions, and make suggestions about all the materials that the teacher has uploaded. This is why this contributes to the quality of interaction between teachers and students.

IV. FACEBOOK AS A LEARNING PLATFORM

In order to examine issue which approve that Facebook is a good e-learning tool for IT students, a group for Computing and IT course has been created as closed group, which means that only members can see and add posts. The main page of the group is presented on Fig. 1. This group could be secret, which means that only members can see the group. In that case, administrators need to send invitation to every single student. Problems appear when they find out that there are two (or even more) people who had the same name and last name. For security reasons, it is better to allow users of Facebook to see the group and send invitation to join it. Given that Facebook has the ability to display to all students friends information that he has accessed a particular group, there have been few unauthorized requests to join the group that the teacher rejected in order to preserve privacy of this group and the pursuit of its primary objective and that is to assist target group in overcoming the material and raise education to a higher level. It is clear that even with a small group of students, better results in knowledge transfer can be achieved.



Fig. 1. The main page of the group

The Wall was used to post announcements, audio-video materials or links important for the course. There were some links which lead to additional resources, on Facebook and outside of it. Students have been invited to send messages and ask questions if any. The teacher has sent individual and collective mails to the students of the group to answer the question or to tell students about the dates when he will be online and when he can talk directly with them through internal chat system.

Facebook as social software platform contributes to e-learning through applications for a wide variety of academic purposes. These applications could be used and shared by students, teachers and librarians, to assist them in learning and administering.

Important part of learning platform is section where teachers can post their lectures or additional materials related to the topics of the course. There are a lot of Facebook applications on this field, but the most popular are YouTube Video Box and SlideShare. YouTube Video Box is tool for sharing videos on Facebook from an existing YouTube.com account. It is shown on Fig. 2. SlideShare (shown on Fig. 3.) is tool for sharing presentations from existing SlideShare.net account. In this way, teachers can ensure that lectures are held by prominent individuals, which allow students to follow world trends and tendencies.

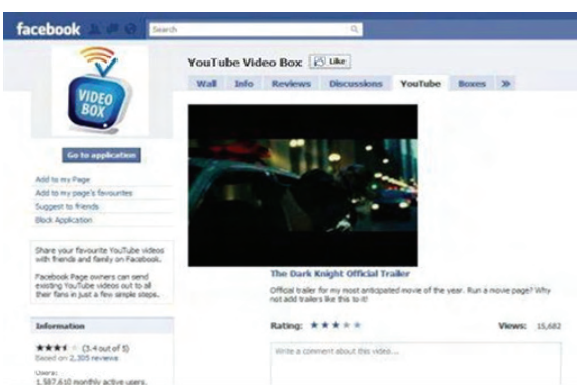


Fig. 2. YouTube Video Box tool

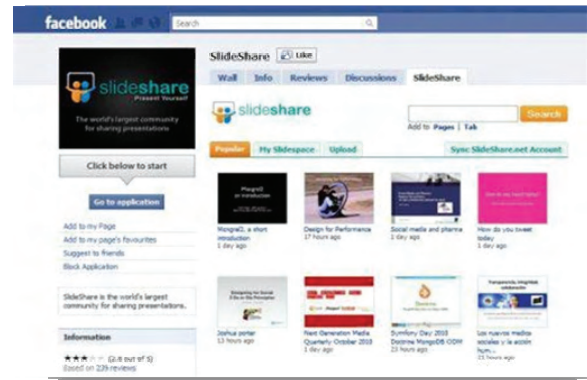


Fig. 3. SlideShare tool

To analyze the effectiveness of increasing education quality with the use of groups on Facebook, we monitored and surveyed 34 students. The goal was to make approve that Facebook could be successfully used to master the materials faster and in a more detailed manner by students. Also, through survey, the personal opinion and experience of students were presented.

Surveyed included a several yes/no questions. Some of them are:

- Q1: Do you download and share the documents, video and audio material that the professor uploads into the group?
- Q2: Do you think this group made studying easier?

On these questions all students answer “Yes”. This means that students are interested in this kind of learning. They have pointed out the importance of sharing general information, such as mid-term and exam grades, changes in the schedule and other info that the professor shares on the wall or sends via group email.

Online discussion helps students to exchange opinions and thereby eliminate the uncertainties about the material that can eventually occur. Usage of group to discuss, chat with professor and as a primary source of learning is shown on Fig. 4. Even 64.7% of the students actively participate in discussions on the group. Activity of the group can be valued equally as the activity in class, as an active student publicly expresses his opinions and showing interest in the material. Also, it activates the other students to discuss.

Results of monitoring show that 23.5% of the students chat with a professor. 29.4% of the students use the group as primary source of learning. Such a small engagement may be justified by the fact that this type of learning coupled with traditional classroom learning, with direct communication with the professor.

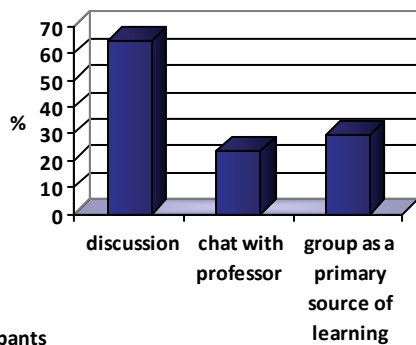


Fig. 1. Usage of group to discuss, chat with professor and as a primary source of learning

These results indicate remarkable advantages in terms of improving quality of knowledge transfer, in a completely new, more interactive and interesting way. In fact, the education policy should implement use of such resources that social networks like Facebook offer.

V. CONCLUSION

It is noticeable that the Internet through the development of Web 2.0 services is becoming more sociable and more communication-oriented media. The development of social networks, especially Facebook and its integration of many popular services in one place, led to the expansion of ideas of using this virtual space. Educators of all profiles have seen their chance, that in addition to traditional means of knowledge transfer, they can also use Facebook, at least, as a complement and easier way of uploading information and materials related to the course they teach in a modern and highly accessible way.

The authors of this text are convinced that the traditional ways of knowledge transfer remain dominant, but with a great need to implement new technologies, where Facebook has a great potential and power. Through excellent multimedia capabilities offered by Facebook and the possibility of creating special closed groups, it is possible to develop and use specialized e-learning applications that are integrated into the very social network. The authors believe that this new approach of using Facebook for educational purposes has great potential and that only in the years to come it will experience the full expansion.

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