INVESTIGATING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN STUDENTS’ ENGAGEMENT AND SOCIAL NETWORKS

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Abstract

Despite the latest advances in educational methodologies, many teachers often report high levels of anxiety, brought on by their students’ lack of engagement in learning. However, though the last couple of years have witnessed the proliferation of innovative technologies that are capable of motivating students and getting them engaged in active learning both in-class and out-of-class, many academic institutions have remained static and tied to restraining policies, systems and processes. Our objective in this paper is, therefore, to explore the potential role that social networks might play in promoting students’ engagement in the learning process. In this vein, on the basis of the survey that we conducted among students, it was revealed that these online communities can effectively boost students’ levels of engagement in learning. The majority of the surveyed students, actually, noted that social networks allow them to connect and interact with classmates and other learners, thus, making them feel a sense of belonging to their institution and to the learning community. Via these virtual spaces, students can discuss different topics with peers and get feedback or assistance on learning difficulties that they are having. Moreover, thanks to their dynamic and participatory nature, social networking sites were noted to enable students to share ideas and resources with each other and to allow them to work collaboratively towards common goals. Hence, using social networks as educational tools will not only help teachers overcome motivation barriers to student engagement, but will also enable students to enjoy learning relationships with others, and to feel they are capable and competent to achieve their own objectives.

Keywords: education, students, engagement, social networks, Facebook.

1 INTRODUCTION

Student engagement has long been recognized to play a key role in academic achievement [1, 2]. Evidence has, actually, proven that students who are engaged in learning tend to perform considerably higher than those who are disengaged. However, despite being a vital component of every teaching or learning activity, teachers have often reported being extremely stressed by the challenges of engaging or re-engaging students. In fact, due to the unprecedented global increase in the numbers of students over the last few years, inspiring a lifelong love of learning that is capable of engaging learners and meeting the diverse academic needs of 21st century students is perhaps one of the greatest problems that teachers encounter in the classroom. To solve this dilemma, more innovative methods or ways that can get students engaged in the learning process are needed.

On the other hand, given the increasing proliferation of social media platforms especially amongst students, the way education is delivered seems to have greatly been impacted. Many studies have confirmed that students are greatly immersed in these virtual spaces and have recourse to them for many reasons [3]. Indeed, students use these technologies not solely to interact or communicate with other people or to entertain themselves. They also make use of these online platforms to improve their learning experience in various subjects. In fact, many students consider them as valuable educational environments that enable them to deepen their knowledge in a variety of subjects and disciplines [4, 5, 6, 7]. Taking into consideration the rise of online formal and informal learning opportunities, our objective in this paper is to investigate the potential correlation obtaining between students’ engagement and the use of a popular set of social media platforms, namely social networks.

The remainder of this article is organized as follows. Section Two examines student engagement as a leading factor in academic achievement. Section Three explores the use of Facebook as an engagement tool. Finally, Section Four gives a brief conclusion.
2 STUDENT ENGAGEMENT AS A LEADING FACTOR IN ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

Student engagement is a concept that is challenging to define as it is a complex construct that is influenced by several factors. However, in its most basic definition, student engagement can be described as the degree of attention, curiosity, interest, optimism, and passion that the student shows when he is learning or being taught, which extends to the level of motivation he has to learn and progress in his education [8, 9]. Student engagement is generally claimed to be based on the idea that learning gets improved when the student is curious, interested, or inspired, and that the learning process is likely to suffer when the student gets bored, dispassionate, disaffected, or even disengaged.

In the last few decades, student engagement has grown in popularity given the increased understanding or awareness of the major role that particular emotional, intellectual, behavioral, physical as well as social factors might play in enhancing or hindering the students' learning experience and social development. In this respect, many research studies have reported strong correlations between what is termed non-cognitive skills or socio-emotional skills such as motivation, interest, curiosity, responsibility, communication, determination, perseverance, attitude, work habits, self-regulation, interpersonal and social skills, etc., and cognitive learning outcomes, namely improved academic performance, grades, information recall, skill acquisition, etc. [10, 11].

Given the multitude of factors that it is associated with, the definition or interpretation of student engagement often varies from one learning environment to another. Behaviors like attending classes, listening attentively to the teacher, participating in classroom discussions, handing in one's assignments on time, and following rules and directions may, for instance, be viewed as forms of engagement in one educational institution. In another, however, engagement may be basically perceived in terms of the student's internal states such as motivation, desire, curiosity and optimism.

Although the concept of student engagement seems to be clear-cut, it may take quite complex forms in practice. The three most frequently identified dimensions or forms of engagement in classroom-based learning are behavioral engagement, emotional engagement and cognitive engagement [12, 13, 14].

2.1 Behavioral Engagement

Behavioral engagement refers to the visible level of participation or interaction of students with the learning environment, teachers, peers, learning activities and co-curricular activities. It includes how attentive and active the student is both within the classroom and in school in general. Specifically, it draws upon the student's involvement in educational, social or extracurricular activities. As such, behavioral engagement is vital for reaching positive educational outcomes and preventing dropping out [12]. Indicators of positive behavioral engagement involve taking initiatives, effort, perseverance and intensity of concentration as well as focus. In contrast, indicators of behavioral negative engagement or disengagement incorporate procrastination, absence of resilience in the face of challenges, agitation, lack of efforts, distraction and reluctance [15].

2.2 Emotional Engagement

Emotional engagement is associated with the student's feelings, attitudes and perceptions towards teachers, classmates, academics and towards the institution in general [16]. If the perceptions are positive, this can create or reinforce ties with an institution and positively impact the student's willingness, enthusiasm and interest to study and to work hard [17]. Nonetheless, if the attitudes are negative, this will result in feelings of frustration, boredom, anger, frustration and anxiety [18].

2.3 Cognitive Engagement

Cognitive engagement refers to the students' willingness and motivation to exert the necessary efforts to understand complex ideas and master difficult skills [19]. In other words, cognitive engagement is related to those moments in which students are taking interest and completely absorbed in learning tasks; their brains are analyzing information deeply and they are aware of their learning [20]. Cognitive engagement consists of innately internal psychological processes that are different from those of emotional engagement, in that the former operates as the mediating bridge between context and learning outcomes [14].
3 USING FACEBOOK AS AN ENGAGEMENT TOOL

Despite being originally developed for communication purposes, social networks have been widely used in various domains for multiple reasons. Millions of people around the world resort to these online platforms on a daily basis to keep in touch with others, to entertain themselves and to do a lot of other activities. Though social networks are used by people of all ages, it has been noticed that the great majority of users are teenagers (many of whom are students). The latter have recourse to social networks not only as communication or entertainment outlets, but also as educational platforms. In the present section, we examine the role that a popular social network (namely, Facebook) might play in engaging students in the learning process.

To explore the potential impact of Facebook on education and specifically on enhancing students’ learning experiences, an online survey was conducted among Moroccan higher education students to see how they perceive the use of this social networking website as a learning tool [7, 20].

Based on the findings of this survey, it has been revealed that most of the students who answered the questionnaire are impressively immersed in Facebook. In fact, more than 90% of the informants reported to have a profile on this social network. The subjects noted that they use Facebook not only to interact with friends and family members but also, and most importantly, to improve their learning in a variety of subjects. In an attempt to explain the students’ wide use of Facebook as a learning environment, analysis of the survey responses showed that a number of factors that incite learners to use this social network for educational purposes.

One major factor that motivates students to use Facebook as an educational platform is that this online community provides them with an ideal opportunity to interact with classmates and other members of the learning community. In this respect, results showed that 81.2% of the surveyed students noted that the people that they communicate with are primarily peers or classmates. Therefore, using this social network, students can discuss different topics with each other beyond classroom walls. They can also ask questions and seek help on problems that they might face while learning and can intervene to help peers having learning difficulties. This interaction, which can occur regardless of time and place, has commonly been found out to improve students’ engagement in the learning process and to enable them to get engaged in constructive discussion and to boost their academic achievement and performance.

In addition to increasing students’ interactions, Facebook also encourages collaboration between students. In fact, via this online virtual space, students can synchronously or asynchronously collaboratively work together to achieve common goals. Thus, rather than working individually on given assignments or projects, all students can collaborate to deepen their knowledge and understanding of a specific concept or skill, solve a problem or accomplish an educational task.

Thanks to the interactive and collaborative capabilities of Facebook, students can develop a sense of belonging to the institution and to the learning community, which, thus, influences both their retention and engagement. As a matter of fact, the surveyed students were found out to be active learners rather than passive consumers of knowledge. In fact, most of the respondents (i.e. 70%) are enthusiastically engaged in posting and uploading educational content on this social network. The subjects’ contributions on Facebook were in different forms. These may be comments (53.3%), links to educational materials (39.9%), announcement of various academic activities or events (35.3%) or answers to peers’ questions (33.9%).

Nonetheless, although the teachers’ contributions and interactions with students on Facebook have been reported to be very minimal or even not existing, a very large portion of the participants in the survey (i.e. 46.2%) have positive attitudes towards the use of this online network as an educational platform. This backs up the assumption that Facebook enhances student engagement and positively impacts their academic performance.

Since Facebook is all about participation, relationships and collaboration, it has the potential to promote students’ engagement both in-class and out-of-class by encouraging a feeling of belonging throughout the student lifecycle and involving students as partners in their study experience. Therefore, instead of viewing social networks as a distraction, teachers should leverage this social media platform in increasing student engagement.
4 CONCLUSION

Our objective in this work was to examine the correlation obtaining between students' engagement in learning and the use of social networks. In this respect, based on the survey that we conducted amongst Moroccan higher students, it was found out that these web-based communities can effectively increase students' levels of engagement. In fact, most of respondents reported that Facebook enables them to be connected to other students, hence, making them feel a sense of belonging to the learning community. In addition to promoting interaction and communication among students, this social network allows learners to share ideas and resources with each other and to work together on different educational tasks and activities. Therefore, embracing social networks as educational platforms is not only capable of helping schools and colleges overcome motivation barriers to student engagement, but can also provide students with opportunities to enjoy learning relationships with others, and to feel they are competent to achieve their personal objectives.

REFERENCES


