
BLENDED LEARNING TEACHING: THE STORY OF A SOCIAL NETWORK WITH A HISTORY

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Context of the experience

Blended Learning as a teaching mode

Blended-Learning, which combines face-to-face and online work, has opened the door to a variety of possibilities that draw on the advantages of both face-to-face and virtual teaching. The work that is made possible has its roots in the classroom, but continues outside of it. This development of learning without walls, allowing students to connect how and when they want is the main teaching proposal for channelling the interplay between face-to-face and virtual spaces, the roles of students and faculty, the interaction among students and the interaction between students and teachers.

The selection of a virtual environment and its characteristics is a fundamental decision because of the characteristics and peculiarities that each option entails, and the effect it can have on issues of both the “visible” and regulated curriculum, as well as the so-called *hidden curriculum*.

As some authors have said, despite the significant use of social networks outside of the academic space, students and teachers are reluctant to participate in these spaces within the scope of formal education (Hamid, Waycott, Kurnia, & Chang, 2014). Specifically, in university teaching its incorporation is progressing slowly, (Dabbag & Kitsantas, 2012). The orchestration (Prieto et al., 2014) of these experiences in formal educational institutions requires a meticulous and complex planning process, involving a reconsideration of different aspects of teaching and learning processes.

This paper presents the developmental path of an academic social network used as a virtual space for Blended-Learning teaching in Higher Education. The key elements of the teaching proposal as well as its implications for students and teachers are analysed. Finally, lines of research that have emerged to better understand what happens in the social network are described

A social network as a space to complement the classroom. Why?

Outside the walls of the classroom, social media and specifically social networks are a source of informal learning for many people and are beginning to slowly gain momentum in the world of formal education. The relationship between these two axes, learning and social networks, has

led to various dynamics: learning with social networks, learning through social networks and learning in a world of social networks (Castañeda & Gutiérrez, 2010).

These spaces have brought forth new concepts, such as collective intelligence, prosumers, influencers, tags, likes, followers, and so on, which reflect the importance they have acquired in our daily lives. Educational proposals in a society with idiosyncrasies must establish a relationship with their context and prepare for a reality that already exists. We have gone from an economy where the important thing was tangible capital (machinery, raw materials, etc.) to a knowledge economy where knowledge is what generates value. In this scenario, some authors have indicated that value “is not what you know, but who you know. Who you know defines what you know” (Daly, 2010). Gallo and Adler (2014) also suggested the idea of “going where the students are” (p.215). Opening up to social networks makes it possible to erase the (artificial) barriers between leisure and academic spaces, and to maintain a permanent feedback loop between them (Siemens & Weller, 2011).

However, integrating social networks into education requires, or should require, a proposal providing critical and comprehensive answers which go beyond introducing technologies into a space, because artifacts (hardware and software) do not, by their mere presence, solve or enrich anything. Thus, as Dussel (2011) stated, it is necessary “(...) to introduce a more complex understanding of the context that surrounds us, a more rigorous language, and more complex arguments. With respect to this, social networks and the media in general are moving in the opposite direction: they are increasingly simple, for immediate impact and with scant rationality, less argumentative and more sensationalist” (p.41).

Despite all the opportunities, as well as the greater or lesser risks, they may entail for education (Manca & Ranieri, 2017), social networks are not all the same and not all scenarios are valid for educational practices (De Haro, 2010). Teaching with social networks implies, therefore, significant challenges for teaching, because it imposes transparency on processes that are generated from the interventions carried out in each situation. Integrating a social network into teaching involves pedagogical and technological challenges and also has political implications, since an open environment can give rise to questioning by students of teacher’s didactic proposals or the underlying educational conception (Manca & Ranieri, 2014).

It is not enough to simply consider a scenario for teaching and learning, instead it is necessary to rethink the questions of why, where, when, what and how, while getting around the ethical dilemmas (Kadushin, 2012) that will be encountered and that are even more pressing in the higher education context.

Some comments regarding social networks: pros and cons

There are a variety of social network classifications, but one of the best known within the educational field refers to horizontal and vertical social networks (Leiva, 2009, de Haro, 2010). The former (horizontal) are general and involves joining a large network that already has users. Vertical social networks are created by the users themselves, can be closed off to outsiders, and

Blended Learning Teaching: The Story of a Social Network with a History

Ana Rodríguez-Groba *et al.*

users are usually connected by a common (educational) interest. These are the social networks specializing in a specific topic (Leiva, 2009).

Both types of networks are good digital literacy tools that strengthen students' aptitudes, skills and competences, while allowing significant and formative learning to be built (Belmonte & Tusa, 2010), and thus respond to the social and economic changes of the times. They make it possible to develop self-regulation, co-regulation or socio-regulation capacities (Fiona, Järvelä, & Miller, 2011) that improve self-perception of learning (Thoms, 2011) and tolerance towards peers, as well as reciprocity regarding knowledge and learning (Hew, 2011). The technological environment of a social network generates exchange and feedback conditions that enable the development of learning; as well as student acceptance of others by exchanging ideas and experiences (Hew, 2011).

Although the two types of network have both limitations and possibilities, our experience was carried out using a vertical social network on an institutional server, which sought to resolve issues such as student privacy, security, the mix of personal and professional life, social networks as a source of distraction, network obsolescence, intellectual property, adapting teaching proposals into a network created with non-educational objectives, the use of student data by companies and shallow relationships.

The Stellae Social Network: Creation and history

The Stellae Social Network was born in the late twentieth century for the purpose of enabling both face-to-face and blended-learning experiences. In 2006, the process began of integrating it into courses pertaining to various degree programs at the Faculty of Education Sciences of the University of Santiago de Compostela using the open source ELGG platform, hosted on an institutional server (<http://stellae.usc.es/red/>). This space contains discussion forums, blogs, micro-blogging in the central space, user profile details, friend lists, 140-character posts, an activities screen, personal wall, calendar, favourites and pages (see Figure 1). The platform allows uploading of texts, images, sounds and videos and users must choose who they want to share it with: private, friends, all users on the network or public. The last option allows the content to be fully open to the network and can be shared.



Figure 1. A student profile in the social network showing the available tools

The teaching proposal

Using a space such as a social network as an integral part of a teaching proposal requires consideration of the strategy, the meaning and the value it brings to the subject matter. As Bruner (1969) pointed out, this is fundamental to instructional design, referring to the planning, preparation and design of the resources and environments necessary for learning to take place.

The teaching proposal is based on the idea that students now spend more time engaged in various forms of informal and self-directed learning outside of formal education environments. They aim to take advantage of the Internet in general as a way of learning, and emphasis is placed on curricular design where decision making is influenced by students' opinions and needs (McLoughlin & Lee, 2010).

The idea of using social networks is characterized by breaking with the idea of the teacher as a figure that centralizes all knowledge in a unidirectional way. In the present case, the courses that use the network propose that students make an e-portfolio to record the evidence of their learning. As has been suggested (López-Fernández & Rodríguez-Illera, 2009), this instrument represents an improvement over conventional evaluation systems. The aim is to go beyond marks by putting together a collection of objects as evidence of the learning process and student achievements in order to reflect what they are capable of doing (Attwell, 2007). To this end, students must comply with a small number of compulsory activities, both individually and in groups. But the main activity is to explore the topics addressed in class through an open proposal based on students' own interests. Students organize, compose, restructure and integrate diverse resources (multimedia) to broaden their knowledge on the topics of the course. Thus, the social network itself becomes a swarm of exchanges on different issues by which students share visions and opinions.

Evaluation is based on a rubric that allows students to know the required criteria from the first day. A procedural evaluation is proposed, and at various points during the course (2 or 3 times) feedback on student work is given so that they become aware of the weaknesses and strengths in their process. At the end of the course, with all the evidence collected, students must write a composition demonstrating their understanding of the relationship between the various posts, group work, comments, and so on. Using the *pages tool*, elements can be built and connected to leave a record of how knowledge has been structured and integrated.

Analysis and evaluation of the experience

Over the years there have been a number of analyses and investigations delving into what working in this space with a teaching proposal involving portfolios and an open structure has meant for students and teachers. Some of the results from the quantitative and qualitative research carried out on this experience are shown here, as well as reflections by students and teachers who have participated in this teaching environment

Implications for students

The experience of working in a mixed mode social network environment, together with creating a portfolio, where the steps to be taken are not restricted, exposes students to new situations. After the first moments of uncertainty, students describe an intense journey involving a change of role from consumers of Internet content to prosumers, producers and generators of knowledge.

Students tend to work with platforms that have very hierarchical teaching structures, focus on content, offer students a role with little relevance, incorporate hermetic proposals, do not provide any type of public projection, and have a very restricted and limited level of activity. Against this backdrop, a proposal is presented here where students are offered the ability to delve into the contents of the course from their own experience and point of view, proposing new documentation not contemplated in the initial program, opening debates on related topics, sharing their concerns as well as their enthusiasm in light of new findings. In this sense, it is pointed out that students start out with varying levels of self-regulation skills (Montes, Ayala, & Atencio, 2005) and thus encountered varying degrees of difficulty.

To this we must add that evaluation using rubric may be a novelty which some students confront a bit fearfully (see Table 1). Even so, after the initial adaptation, students tend to successfully channel the feedback and begin to understand the dynamics, as well as take advantage of the diverse knowledge elements that must be considered.

Table 1: Rubric dimensions. The descriptors for the different levels define the standards that should be achieved.

	1	2	3	4	5
Analysis of the learning process					
Continuity of development					
Use of the social network					
Analysis of the evidence presented and the meaning constructed with it					
Variety and diversity of the documentary elements presented as well as its coherence					

Implications for teachers

As with students, using a social network and creating a portfolio in a blended learning mode requires rethinking the role of teachers and restructuring certain elements of the teaching process. The use of a portfolio and an open teaching proposal such as the one presented here encourages autonomy and allows students to travel along different pathways. Evaluating a portfolio is much more complicated than merely giving a mark (Klenowski, 2005). This is often considered an obstacle for teachers supporting this methodological framework because they have to deal with a large number of documents associated with each personal space.

The use of a social network environment is also a challenge for the teacher, because it breaks with classical hierarchical schemes that are normal in other types of platform. The horizontal

nature of this space represents a challenge for teachers. It involves a clear and distinct role to support students in the face of the difficulties that arise in the process.

The teacher must manage the s public projection of teaching, because difficulties and differences of opinion between teachers and students may appear in the public network space and lead to debates, controversies and objections by the students to the teaching proposals (Manca & Ranieri, 2014). In this sense, empathy towards students and understanding their difficulties are vital, as is the need to channel possible conflicts without sacrificing the required academic standards.

Completed and emerging research

The research carried out on the social network has addressed a number of aspects that concern the teachers involved, for the purpose improving both teacher and student experiences.

- One of the improvement proposals involved the creation of the Softlearn tool to assist the evaluation of e-portfolios based on Learning Analytics. SoftLearn has three sections that try to facilitate the evaluation task; one to show learning pathways, another presenting various student statistics, and a third listing the content of the course in order to provide quick access to specific learning activities (Vázquez, Rodríguez-Groba, Lama, Gewerc, & Mucientes, 2014).
- The question of how self-regulation skills are built and which skills are necessary for this type of teaching (Gewerc, Rodríguez-Groba, & Martínez-Piñeiro, 2016) was addressed by creating proposals for improving student self-regulation in a mode combining face-to-face and online learning.
- Another line of research delves into the relationships and interactions among members of the network, the level of self-regulation and its relation to course outcomes. The findings of this research highlight the importance of participation (Gewerc, Montero, & Lama, 2014) and the need for a teaching proposal that encourages the participation of all students by helping those with weaker self-regulation skills.

Analysis and evaluation of the experience

The research carried out, which combines qualitative and quantitative methodologies, has made it possible to delve into the possible challenges, ranging from improving the evaluation processes for teachers and students to better understanding student interactions and to helping students make the most of both online and face-to-face social contexts.

In conclusion, we emphasize that using this type of environment in a formal education context requires adapting the teaching process to a perspective that does the following: encourage student autonomy and help develop their self and socio-regulated learning (Fiona, Järvelä, & Miller, 2011), conceive teaching content as something open-ended and in constant construction instead of being packets to be transmitted; understand the importance of collaboration and collective learning construction (Huber, 2008); participate in the concept of collective Internet intelligence, where everyone without distinction can make contributions and become content

producers, conceive the teacher's role as guiding the process and establishing the necessary scaffolding for each student to find their zone of proximal development and to achieve their objectives (Vygotsky, 1978).

The experience of teaching with a horizontal social network for over a decade has made it possible to analyse the changes involved in working in a blended learning mode. The implications for the various parties involved in these practices represent opportunities but also limitations, on which it is important to reflect.

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Blended Learning Teaching: The Story of a Social Network with a History

Ana Rodríguez-Groba et al.

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