LUND UNIVERSITY

From an Architecture of Participation to a Structure for Nurturing Relationships: Swedish Teacher Trainees' Informal Learning on Facebook

Hanell, Fredrik

2012

Total number of authors:
1

From an Architecture of Participation to a Structure for Nurturing Relationships: Swedish Teacher Trainees' Informal Learning on Facebook

Wertsch (1998) states that mediational means are not always created in order to facilitate mediated action, and indeed, while Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) are designed solely for educational purposes, the social network site (SNS) Facebook was not originally developed to facilitate practices of learning and collaboration. But one intention when Facebook was created (by a college student) was to facilitate social connections and to nurture relationships. Arguably, these social aspects are vital when establishing a sustainable code of reciprocation necessary for learning partnerships to function (cf. Francis, 2010). Possibly, this explains why a class of Swedish teacher trainees prefer to engage in learning practices on Facebook, rather than on the VLE they are supposed to use for their academic work.

The purpose of the present study is to explore how, and why, a class of Swedish teacher trainees use a Facebook group as an informal platform for learning and communication related to their education. A socio-cultural perspective considering mediated action as the main analytical unit (cf. Wertsch, 1998) provides an analytical framework. In order to describe distributed collaborative efforts mediated by a SNS, the concept of distributed funds of living knowledge as described by Francis (2010) is employed in the analysis.

The main corpus of previous research suggests that Facebook to date has been of little educational use (e.g. Hew, 2011; Madge *et al*, 2009; Selwyn, 2009). However, some studies highlight educational potential of a tool that most students are using frequently and the possibilities to support new forms of communication between students and teachers (Lampe *et al*, 2011). To date, most studies relating to educational uses of Facebook have focused on "Anglo-American undergraduate students" (Madge et al, 2009, p. 152). With the present study, a different context is provided adding to the empirical knowledge of Facebook used in educational settings.

The main part of the study is conducted on Facebook. An ethnographically inspired method for data collection is adopted, including conventional participant (online) observation, with the ambition to gain as much insight into the online interactions as possible without disturbing the communication that occurs naturally. Information about the researcher and the research project was distributed to a Facebook group of teacher trainees and informed consent was given for data collection. Following the tradition of ethnography, observational notes and textual and visual data was collected and arranged thematically. Furthermore, semi-structured interviews were conducted with selected participants to gain further insights into specific issues regarding how, and why, teacher trainees use the Facebook group as an arena for informal learning and how Facebook can both enable and constrain communication.

Results from the study illustrate how teacher trainees, through communication in a Facebook group, activate the distributed expertise within a distributed fund of living knowledge; a collaborative problem-solving tool partly functioning as a large study group in a virtual setting. Three main types of conversations are identified: (1) *the bulletin board type* (eg. to find information about last-minute changes to schedule), (2) *the study group type* (study related questions) and (3) *the nurturing type*. While the

nurturing conversation constitutes a separate category, the voice from that type of conversation is vital for the other conversational categories to function. The nurturing, personal element of conversations appears to be important in the process of negotiating understanding and credibility. Through social software applications such as Like and Comment a structure for nurturing relationships is created (cf. Francis, 2010), possibly in a more efficient way than on a traditional VLE. In the Facebook group, an important part of being able to communicate issues and to tap into the distributed expertise of others is to know how to use the nurturing element both when you want to create trust and motivate others, and when you are assessing information. In conclusion, the study suggests that the now famous concept "an architecture of participation" (O'Reilly, 2004) should be supplemented with the notion of a structure for nurturing relationships.

References

Francis, R. (2010). *The decentring of the traditional university: the future of (self) education in virtually figured worlds.* London: Routledge.

Hew, K.F. (2011). Students' and teachers' use of Facebook. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 27:2, 662-676.

Lampe, C., Wohn, D.Y., Vitak, J., Ellison, N.B. & Wash, R. (2011). Student use of Facebook for organizing collaborative classroom activities. *Computer-Supported Collaborative Learning*, 6, 329-347.

Madge, C., Meek, J., Wellens, J. & Hooley, T. (2009). Facebook, social integration and informal learning at university: 'It is more for socialising and talking to friends about work than for actually doing work'. *Learning, Media and Technology.* 34:2, 141-155.

O'Reilly, T. (2004). *The Architecture of Participation*. Retreived February 28, 2012 from http://oreilly.com/pub/a/oreilly/tim/articles/architecture_of_participation.html

Selwyn, N. (2009). Faceworking: exploring students' education-related use of Facebook. *Learning, Media and Technology*, 34:2, 157-174.

Wertsch, J. (1998). *Mind as action*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.