



## Use of Social Site Networks in Distance Education: “Learning to Learn”

### Abstract:

*The paper attempts to study and explore the use of common Social Site Networks or SSN in education, research and academic collaboration with a prime focus on the its usage through the platform of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) mode.*

**Keywords:** *Social Site Networks, education, research, Open and Distance Learning (ODL)*

### Introduction

Social Site Networks (SSN) allow people to explore and share common interests, nuances of music, delving into politics, networking the college student population and accumulating friends etc. They bridge online and offline connections. Social media which is defined as “the relationships that exist between network of people” (Walter & Riviera, 2004) has acquired a new dimension in this era of connecting and sharing through SSN. This is a social capital which one can take advantage of in terms of profession, friendship, research and studies. Within groups there can be closer groups or select groups in privacy settings for discussions. Although the concept is based on friendship and social ties, it has the potential to explore beyond to go into a more formal world of studies, peer group interaction and research. It is also a hosting site for web links and web connectivity.

Social Site Networks (SSN) are increasingly attracting the attention of academic and industry researches. People are integrating such sites with their daily practices, habits, and profession. This is fired by the increase in mobile and internet penetration and the craze for new tools and technologies by the common man. In 2015, a report by Internet and Mobile Association of India (IAMAI) and consultancy firm KPMG says that the number of mobile Internet users in India is projected to double and cross the 300 million mark by 2017 from 159 million in 2015 (<http://www.livemint.com>). SSN also provides space for new communication tools, connectivity, blogging and video sharing.

SSN can be defined as cyberspace to articulate views, shape and reshape public opinions, enter into dialogue or discourse on matters ranging from politics to art, culture and literature. The emphasis is also on videos and a loose type of Citizen Journalism. Private messaging is also a singular component by which friends can share, talk, suggest or advice.

Such ideation in turn provides base for logical and critical articulation of views, written to provoke, debate and generate newer ideas. Though this can lead to diatribes, a healthy climate for debate and discussion can also take place. It is a learning and teaching point in the cyber and virtual world. Since it is a virtual world, it is accentuating, spiraling and moving onwards. Friend requests or the desire to connect with one another is itself a motivation for learning and new ideologies. This ideation philosophy of Social Site Networks is its constant drive, continued flux and energy. It has an inbuilt resource of visual appeal, sensory impressions and provocation. It can go 'viral'.

SSN which provides this social platform to connect accompanied by attachment and pleasure, is a vibrant medium that can offer an alternative to learning. They can be profitably used for Distance Education students, for Research and Education.

## Literary Review

SSN are now being employed vigorously by organizations ranging from governments, social organizations, educational institutions to industries. The point is that they can be reworked for educational objectives. SSNs can appropriate new technologies in learning because of the one to one, one to many, asynchronous and synchronous interactive. Information sharing, web links, audio and video are all part of this process. Students in particular are more attracted to SSN which provides an impersonal platform to share their thoughts, ideas, queries and doubts. Facebook as part of Course Management system has the potential to increase student involvement in discussion and out of class communication between learners and instructors. (Albayrak and Yildirim, 2015). This is particularly relevant for students learning through distance education.

Studies on Open Education and Technology have been done considerably. Verma (2005), Dorothy (2005), Bansal (2005) etc have all highlighted the changing contexts of education in a globalized setting and due to emergence of new technologies. They contextualized the new learner in a Knowledge Society, spoken of Collaborative Learning, Learning on Demand and Lifelong Learning. Distance Education is both learner autonomy and learner continuity, technology supported education gives both autonomy and independent learning which is learner centric rather than teacher centric. Deb(2013) has attempted to show how Technical and Vocational Education can be imparted through ODL via the trainer network model, the trainer being present both synchronously and asynchronously. SSN can be corollary to especially the latter i.e asynchronous training.

Research has shown that Distance Education courses can be delivered more efficiently and effectively if communities of practice are developed (Barab, Duffy, 2000; DeSchryver et al., 2009) as well as encourage high levels of online social presence among students (Anderson, 2005).

## Use of Social Site Networks in Distance Education

Now that technology and the new media have become definitive tools for accentuated learning, the World Wide Web is an infinite repository for knowledge and information. SSN accentuates the transference of knowledge and information into a meaningful and understandable comprehension of realities. SSNs help to objectivize such correlatives through group formation, discussion, private messages and messenger related chats. It is peer group interaction even mentoring. The world of information is a focused and debated in knowledge transference ideation.

## Why SSNs?

The use of SSN in education and especially distance education has produced diversified impact on the learning outcomes. Such an impact can be seen at two levels, the outward level or the visible level and the inward level or the invisible level. The outward levels are the activities that can be seen on these platforms. They range from sharing thoughts and ideas, discussions, using videos, group formation to social interaction. At this level we can also see the formation of interest groups or discipline wise formation. This if it involves the participation of learners, academics and practitioners can be a game changer in learning. It provides a more general and open platform for open debate and discussion. It is a new avatar of traditional dialecticism. This is beyond text book learning or rote learning. The SSNs have transformed the learning process of the extant curriculum, syllabus or pedagogy. Another point is that these loose-ended or open information can be analyzed using the modern technology of big data and data analytics to generate new ideas and practical application.

At the second level or the invisible level the impact is more subtle and abstract. Firstly, SSNs have given a sense of empowerment and freedom. The meek, shy and the ostensibly weak are now using these platforms unhindered and sometimes irresponsibly. SSNs have provided an edge to those who are not comfortable participating in classroom discussion or doubting their ability (Junco, R., Heiberger, G., & Loken, E. (2011)). Secondly SSNs have given learners a virtual social world. It is a community altogether. There is an exchange of not just thoughts and ideas but feelings, emotions, solidarity and even

identification. Emoji are frequently used. Symbols like smiles, WoW, sadness underpin certain metaphorical realities of life. The impact here is psychological. Thirdly, SSN are accompanied with entertainment or infotainment. These have an added attraction, drawing learners towards using these sites. In some it has become part of their daily life. No wonder learners of IGNOU Regional Center Shillong spend at least 30 minutes every day on SSNs. SSNs have brought behavioral change in the context of learning.

### Research Study

A questionnaire was administered to IGNOU students on Facebook, pursuing different academic programmes of the University through Distance Education. Two years back a Facebook Page was created to bring such learners from different locations of the state of Meghalaya covering both rural and urban areas. The idea was to bring them on a common platform for sharing of information, alerts on examinations/admissions, information pertaining to scholarships, reimbursement of fees for students belonging to socially backward groups, peer group interaction etc.

The questions revolved around these factors:

1. How often does one use SSN sites in terms of minutes/hours (30 minutes to 2 hours)?
2. How do these sites help in study?
3. What kind of information/ videos/ educational content are shared via such sites and how?
4. How are SSNs useful in Distance Learning?
5. Suggestions to improve the use of SSNs (Facebook, Twitters etc.) in education

32% of the respondents said that they spend at least 30 minutes in using SSNs. They did not specify for what purpose exactly. 20.9% said that they spent at least one hour. Thus over 50% are spending substantial time on them. Here, educational challenges could be met in terms of browsing and identifying web resources for study.

- In a scale of 10 more than 50% marked 5 or above, saying that these sites helped them in studies.
- Regarding content sharing almost all spoke of it; ranging from 'stories' to study material, to educational links, videos and education based videos. This is good augury for both present and future trends. Some mentioned "assignments, mini notes and previous year's questions".
- 85% were of the view that SSNs were useful in distance learning by gathering knowledge/ information, the benefits of globalization, equity and access, beneficial to the 'distant' learner etc.

Regarding suggestions to improve use of SSNs for distance learning some suggestions stand out:

- a. "A message alert should be given to Facebook users on the inbox"
- b. "Important tips and advice, group discussions should be facilitated"
- c. "Make a group and include some faculty members"
- d. "Make it interactive, links to content which can supplement the information provided in the study material, real time information with regards to clearing of doubts, a student might have, be it related to the course content or anything related to payment of fees, exam information etc."

The above suggestions are a pointer to making the use of SSNS towards effective and organized study purposes for Distance Learners. Moreover it could be a very viable dimension of student support in addition to the study material already available to learners.

If SSNs are to be used for distance education, then they must be used in holistic fashion, both synchronously and asynchronously, organized, where there is tangible presence of the preceptor and guide to facilitate mobilization of learning resources.

Since its inception Distance Education has moved away from the traditional media to the new media. SSNs provide a creative base to meet the new and emerging challenges of information explosion, knowledge transference, the changing roles and contexts of the teacher, and above all making learning and distance learning learner centric, harnessing the creative and innovative uses of the technology, the world wide web and the future generation of transactional learners, negotiating with peers, teachers and the luminosity of the WWW. The SSN becomes a critical tool in this complex process of educational

negotiation and integration.

## **Discussion**

SSNs are no doubt the change that is seen in the way learning is administered and they are going to play a monumental role in the future. Education and especially Distance Education needs to take a cue from the commercial world in channelizing the vibrant energy of social networking. Facebook's platform is efficient because it lowers barriers to entry and lowers costs for businesses to rapidly innovate new ideas. Scalability is accomplished with less wasted resources and monetized by collecting user behaviour and usage data for targeted advertising. Facebook advertising allows firms to reasonably scale up operations to reach Facebook users, (Wikipedia). Educational institutions especially those offering courses through distance mode can use such virtual information to reach the 'unreached' and to improve quality of delivery. The problem of affordability and accessibility is now narrowing. Internet data can be purchased at affordable costs. Distance learning as for now is still dependent on providing physical/printed course materials and occasional classroom contacts. This can be substituted with ICT supported device like Tablets, Smart Phones with pre-loaded content. Simultaneously, SSN can be deployed in such platforms for focussed learning. Such initiatives also narrow down the problem of exclusivity.

The deployment of SSNs in education must also take care of concerns associated with the use of modern communication technology. Concerns like the authenticity and accuracy of information shared in the media, rhetoric and persuasive ideology less concerned with education per se, or copy right issues for that matter. Once SSNs are incorporated as part of the system of delivery, awareness of issues and threats must also be incorporated.

In a small state of Meghalaya, India and specifically to learners of Indira Gandhi National Open University, Regional centre at Shillong, the impact is commendable. The Face book page opened by the centre saw massive participation with the number crossing 2000 just in 2 years. This is seen despite the fact that it is being used as adjunct to extant learning system. How tremendous the impact would be if formalised and streamlined as part of the educational structure and more vibrant e learning?

Many of the Regional Centres of IGNOU like that of Shillong and Jorhat are using SSNs effectively to generate student information, alerts about examinations, re-registration, availability of scholarships, introduction of new academic programmes, declaration of end term results etc. IGNOU Regional Centre Shillong is using SSN to provide an interactive learning eco-system and teaching or counselling and of course addressing student queries and support service matters. Some of the counsellors have created a specialised group for MCA/BCA learners in Facebook to ensure exclusive discussion on the subject matters. Even Whatsapp group was used by some of our study centres to reach out to students and ensure continuous interaction. Recently, the centre is sharing soft copy of study materials in Facebook for open access by all. These will grant true learner autonomy, in the scaffolding of the WWW and the internet – "learning to learn", an adjunct to e-learning.

## **Conclusion**

The use of SSNs as part of a formalized, teaching learning system can be effected when teachers take the initiative in the following respects:

1. Form organised groups of learners
2. Use synchronous and asynchronous methods of communication, chatting etc.
3. Upload relevance sites links and web resources
4. There must be continuity in such teaching and learning

As the responses in the study above clearly indicate learner's desire integration of teaching/learning pedagogy in terms of advice, counselling, information/references for study, revision of fees etc. Thus, the inputs will be academic and administrative; essaying at "Learning to learn".

## References

- I. <http://www.livemint.com>, (2015) ;Mobile Internet users in India to double by 2017, says study, Thu, Aug 06 2015. 01 51 AM IST
- II. Albayrak, D.; Yildirim, Z (2015). "Using Social Networking Sites for Teaching and Learning: Students' Involvement in and Acceptance of Facebook as a Course Management System". Journal of Educational Computing Research. 52 (2): 155–179.
- III. Barab Sasha, Duffy Thomas (2000), From practice fields to communities of practice, in Jonassen David, Land Susan (Eds.), Theoretical foundations of learning environments, Mahwah, NJ, USA, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, pp. 25-56
- IV. Junco, R., Heiberger, G., & Loken, E. (2011). "The effect of Twitter on college student engagement and grades". Journal of Computer Assisted Learning, 27(2), 119–132.
- V. Romesh Verma (2005), "Distance Education in Technological Age"; Chapter 14, Information Technology and Virtual University Approach, A S Guha; Anmol Publications Pvt. Ltd, New Delhi

## Annexure 1

- I. [https://drive.google.com/open?id=1\\_OLsImbUFbqDliqE-eE6I-5u5dCTneYq](https://drive.google.com/open?id=1_OLsImbUFbqDliqE-eE6I-5u5dCTneYq)

\*\*\*\*\*

**A S Guha**  
Regional Director  
IGNOU  
RC Shillong

**Isagahah Lawrniang**  
Assistant Executive (DP)  
IGNOU  
RC Shillong

Copyright © 2012 - 2017 KCG. All Rights Reserved. | Powered By: Knowledge Consortium of Gujarat