7

This chapter focuses on social networking technologies as mechanisms for learning and support for women in formal online learning environments. Specific strategies for including social networking as an instructional tool are presented.

Social Networking Technologies as Vehicles of Support for Women in Learning Communities

Kimberly R. Burgess

Adult women students are stressed with the realities of conflicting role responsibilities and external demands that serve as barriers to academic success and persistence. It is argued that women learn best in inclusive learning environments characterized by experience, connection, and access to a network of peer relationships that provide much-needed support in managing the challenges (Preece and Houghton, 2000).

Most online instructional designs, however, reflect a male, patriarchal communication paradigm that focuses on data and rationality rather than relationships. Women (and some men) who are socialized to value relationships and connections are marginalized in these traditional approaches to formal online learning and communities. Whether the intention is to be gender-neutral or gender-absent, it seems as if the unique learning experiences of women are being ignored (Dines and Humez, 2003; Young, 1998).

Women have long since used social networking as a means of coping with their struggles (Gittler, 1999), educating and empowering themselves (Gajjala and Mamidipudi, 2004; Gustafson, 2002; Hayes, 2000; Youngs, 1999), engaging in broader social movements (Burch, 1999), and building international advocacy (Royal Tropical Institute, 1999). Internet communities that are designed and facilitated to be inclusive of women's experiences can be important social spaces where women feel supported.

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss how instructors of online programs can use social networking technologies to give women increased

access to social support systems, expand their networking opportunities, and contribute to a more satisfying learning experience. First, I discuss how women presently build social capital in their everyday relationships. Next, I explore how women network and build social capital online. Then, I present specific strategies for incorporating social networking as part of an online course. Finally, the various implications of using social networking to enhance women's learning online will be discussed.

Social Networking and Social Capital for Women

The social network is a form of social support, comprising personal contacts who help members build social capital by offering one another access to information and resources (Preece and Houghton, 2000) and, more important, higher social status (Bezanson, 2006; Crowell, 2004) and power (Chambers, 2006). Bezanson (2006) categorizes the resulting benefits of these contacts—the social capital—into three distinct categories: (1) bonding capital, which is associated with family, kinship, and frequent interactions with existent contacts; (2) bridging capital, which is associated with mobility and infrequent interactions with new contacts; and (3) linking capital, which ties patrons and clients together in a leveraging relationship.

The term *networking* is commonly associated with an "old boys" network, an invisible network of sponsorship by which novice male professionals have greater access to opportunities by way of their relationships with well-connected male veterans (Searby and Tripses, 2006). Women's interest in active networking has increased significantly for a few reasons, among them the need for a greater number of information resources in order to keep current in an ever-changing society and a desire to socially (but purposefully) interact with one another.

Some criticize women's tendency to rely too heavily on their bonding capital—those "strong ties" of female family members and close female friends that serve as a buffer against the consequences of life. Unlike men, who are able to use their friendships with other men and existing systems of patronage as "pathways to power," women are not as able to capitalize in an economic, social, or cultural sense from their same-sex relationships in the same manner (Chambers, 2006; Perriton, 2008). It is important for women to close the social capital gap by seeking and profiting from new relationships that serve as conduits of new information; "Connecting to people outside the immediate network, who knows someone, who knows someone, who knows additional someones, can form a domino/ripple effect for women" (Crowell, 2004, p. 16).

Women's Online Networks

It is obvious that a growing number of women are actively using the Internet for more than shopping or browsing. Websites that are focused on women, such as Glam Media (www.glammedia.com), iVillage (www.ivillage.com), or

WOWoWOW (www.wowowow.com), are sites specifically designed for women to discuss subjects such as culture, politics, entertainment, and family. They are repositories of information useful to women and do allow discussion mechanisms; however, these information sites, though frequently used, are not necessarily designed to build networks/contacts or increase social capital for women. Users have no say in the running of the community, cannot actually add to or dispute the knowledge contained therein, and are viewed as consumers of a product rather than as constructors of knowledge (Gustafson, 2002).

Women increasingly prefer to engage in various online social networks that are designed for users to meet, where they can realize positive social benefits: communication linkages, formed and sustained by the participants themselves to exchange information, transact resources, and build mutually profitable relationships. The Internet fosters various social opportunities for women to speak loudly as individuals, groups, or coalitions in advocacy for social, political, and economic interests, or place their histories as central to the conversation (Nath, 2006).

Social networking sites are interactive, user-driven, and spontaneous; they allow members who self-enroll to participate in discussion threads, share files, post links, and create knowledge by posting Web-based logs (called "blogs") of information and opinion. Participants are drawn together on the basis of mutual professional (for example, LinkedIn.com), romantic (Eharmony.com), or social (Facebook) interests. Members communicate constantly with each other via chat, e-mail, and other media forms.

Most important for this discussion, though, social networking sites include some form of networking function, where users can invite their friends to join, link with current users, and gain access to the contacts of others. Research has shown the potential for social networking sites in building those weak ties that are so crucial to access to information, resources, and opportunities (Ellison, Steinfeld, and Lampe, 2007).

Online social networks that allow relative anonymity, where members can assume virtual identities, can serve as safe places for women where members reveal their weaknesses, seek advice, and receive the emotional and academic support they find lacking in formal communities. In these social spaces, women can express themselves authentically, free from social cues and the hierarchy and domination of male-centered spaces. Via a social networking framework, women are seemingly able to carve out separate spaces for their discussions and experiences that are relevant to their own ways of knowing (Tiernen, 2002).

But these notions of safety are challenged in theoretical and literal senses. For one, previous models of women's learning have defined it as spaces where the experiences and knowledge of women are privileged and center, and where no men are present. Therefore, ensuring safety means eliminating men. Tisdell (1995) argues that elimination of male privilege does not in itself ensure a safe environment for all women, particularly for

those from marginalized experiences. Safety is subjective. Power and position matter. Ironically, striving toward this model of safety, she says, is essentially a "construction of white privilege" (p. 67).

Second, the ability that women have in online social networks to build their own social spaces, define themselves, and articulate their own thoughts and beliefs does come with its own hidden dangers. Campbell (2000) warns of women being frightened and silenced in online environments. Women who have published personal information and photographs in areas that do not permit restricted access have been harassed. In a username-driven environment, where in many cases there are no mechanisms for verifying true identities, there is really no way for women to ensure that they are in a truly protected space. Men have infiltrated women-only sites using pseudonyms, to the dismay and aggravation of the members.

Finally, removal of men may exacerbate the inequalities between men's and women's networks. Perriton (2008) argues that the pursuit of safety may actually work against women's desired benefits of networking. She is critical of the safety-in-numbers approach to women's professional relationships ("Women get wolves; men get mentors"; p. 9). She criticizes both the external push and the natural attraction of women toward women-friendly and women-only networks, under an assumption that women need a safe environment within which to develop and progress. Men, however, get one-to-one mentoring and coaching that lead to positions of strength within networks of influence in organizations.

Online Social Networking and Instruction

Identifying, creating, or linking women learners with any opportunity for them to share what each brings to learning expands their opportunities and improves their experiences. By incorporating social networking into the online course curriculum, instructors help women increase their social capital by (1) affording opportunities for women to expand their connections in terms of instrumental networks (help with daily events), affective networks (moral support), and access networks (job contacts and information); and (2) emphasizing the development of weak ties, which are instrumental for mobility and influence. In addition, women learn more about themselves and their own place in the world through establishment of collaborative relationships with a range of people, both men and women.

Instructors can include a number of activities to introduce learners to a social networking framework.

Create a Profile and Encourage Students to Follow. The first step in this endeavor is for instructors to choose a site meant to build professional contacts (such as LinkedIn) and a site meant to build social relationships (such as Facebook). Instructors could create profiles for themselves, keeping in mind that all current students, future students, and colleagues may have access to the information on the pages.

As part of class assignments, students can be prompted to post relevant discussion threads in related Websites for a week and report on the substance of those discussions. For example, students in a women's studies class can participate in discussion threads on Salon.com, a political blog site focused on women's perspectives, and report on those interactions in the course framework. Instructors should advertise their profiles early in the course and encourage students to create profiles and connect with them via "friending." Most social networking communities have a function to pull contacts from users' address books to build the original network.

Facebook, for example, allows users to "approve" connections before they are made and gives users the flexibility to determine who gets to view their profile pages. Each "friend" allows you access to an even greater network of friends, with whom one can socialize in virtual space. Face-to-face introductions are often followed up with an online linking to solidify the deal. "Without Friends," warn Miller and Jensen, "Facebook is a cold, lonely world" (2007, p. 5). One way to ensure that students have a good initial pool of contacts is for instructors to partner with other colleagues and their students in the department, across the campus, and across professional networks.

Define Community Early in the Course. In such an explosive and dynamic enterprise, what were once forward-thinking ideas of what learning communities should be are now "woefully behind the times" (Wiley, 2007, p. 295). Most modern learning communities are instructor-centered and highly structured, as opposed to user-centered and spontaneous (Wiberg, 2007). Today's notions of "online community" should more aptly reflect the more open, connected, personal, and participatory characteristics of today's Internet (Wiley, 2007).

Including social networking as an instructional tool blurs the lines between what is "inside" and what is "outside." Facilitators should carefully design what goes on inside the course by incorporating and acknowledging the contextual realities of what is happening outside of the course. Early in a course, an instructor can use discussion threads to get students to self-define community and voice their expectations of what it can do for them. The first few weeks of a course can be used to inform and educate users on how engaging in networking and community can actually fill their perceived needs (Brown, 2001).

Students can self-survey and participate in reflective activities designed for them to identify their own areas where they might need social and professional support. Students could then be directed to research the Internet themselves to locate communities that are most connected to their stated interests and needs, and report on them within the course threads as examples and nonexamples of course expectations. Adequate communities should have (1) information sources that are frequently updated; (2) forums for special interest groups; (3) opportunities to participate in threaded discussions; and (4) the ability to link and network.

Create a Class Network. Restricting formal course interfaces to pass-word holders or registered students is counterproductive if the instructor's goal is to broaden prospective. Learners in close-knit groups are influenced by each other's norms and beliefs and do not freely criticize one another's views (Marsick and Watkins, 2001).

One class project every semester could be for students to create their own social network outside of the formal course interface. The Ning in Education Network (http://education.ning.com) offers space, training, and assistance for those who wish to create social networking sites to use with their classes or professional networks. One of the few I found in Ning specifically designed for adult educators focuses on technology in adult education. Sites such as this one have enormous potential for all levels of education. To build the network, instructors can partner with other classes. Another project could be for students to develop self-sustaining peer organizations to support one another after the course is over.

Blog to Reflect. Blogging has emerged in the past decade as a significant learning and networking tool (Karrer, 2007). Blogs are the personal diaries, reflections, and opinions of users. Participants with common interests contribute to and learn from the subsequent conversations between the blogger and the participants. Blogging allows participants to share their own unique perspectives and makes the blogger the center of knowledge.

Instructors in course interfaces that do not furnish a blogging feature for the instructor or the students can instead ask students to post blogs within the class's new social network space as described earlier, or on free blog sites such as Blogger.com. Instructors could ask students to be "blogger of the week" in the course forum, or encourage students to blog weekly about their reaction to course content as part of course requirements.

Model Networking in Course Activities. Online instructors can mentor students' development by encouraging their interaction with the broader academic and professional communities with which they plan to identify (Burgess, 2007). For this enterprise, instructors can research sites that are designed for professional interaction such as LinkedIn (www.linkedin.com) or Konnects (www.konnects.com). These networks are specifically designed to enhance professional opportunities and give users the capability to ask questions of the entire network. Students in the course can be encouraged to ask professional and academic advice of the members of the network and report on those discussions within the course forum. Instructors can also invite members of their own professional networks to visit the student-built social networking sites as special guests for chat sessions.

Build Sources of Future Capital. The relationships and friendships created in these learning communities and social networks extend beyond the course and serve as a foundation for future professional networks. A sense of camaraderie develops over time as the nature of the relationships between and among instructors and students evolves from casual interaction to long-time association (Brown, 2001).

Relationships developed as part of a social network take on a life of their own after the initial contacts are made via updates to profiles, links, albums, and events. Long after the course is over, instructors can continue to update their pages and announce brown bag events, new book releases, and new course offerings to keep former students interested.

Implications for Social Capital and Adult Learning

Including social networking as an online instructional tool has various implications for women's social capital and adult learning in general.

The challenge for instructors is not just to help women learners increase social capital but to help them acquire the tools necessary to turn that capital into wealth that furthers their progress within structures continuing to delegitimize and ignore their role in how knowledge is constructed. It is important that instructors not create or encourage participation in networks that reproduce current systems of privilege, which may unintentionally impede women's ability to capitalize on the social wealth they are acquiring (Preece and Houghton, 2000; Tisdell, 1995).

If, as Marsick and Watkins (2001) argue, learning "grows out of everyday encounters," then the everydayness of social networking activities has powerful implications for informal learning experiences. Just as in face-to-face social encounters, women who engage in social networking and who use the Internet to help solve daily challenges develop as autonomous learners and learn through others' experiences how to handle similar situations (Miller, 2006; Preece and Houghton, 2000). Women should be encouraged to design or participate in self-educating enterprises that help them manage their lives and persist in their educational pursuits.

Conclusion

This chapter has discussed incorporating social networking opportunities in online learning programs as a means of offering a sense of social support for women learners beyond the boundaries of individual courses. Administrators, designers, and instructors of online programs are encouraged to evolve learning communities toward social networking environments, where information, sharing, and relationships are not restricted to individual courses and limited to password holders.

Online social networks show the same promise as face-to-face social networks in supporting women to persist in learning activities. The popularity of Facebook, MySpace, and other networking media helps to make the case that for the most part, the Internet supplements social capital by sustaining face-to-face relationships while building new contacts at the same time (Quan-Haase and Wellman, 2004).

Because the idea of social networking as a means of learning and support in online education is so new, it will be some time before the application of

such a concept is understood empirically. Future research should focus on how learners make sense of their own identities and abilities as a result of the support gained from or through their online contacts.

References

Bezanson, K. "Gender and the Limits of Social Capital." *Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology,* 2006, *43*(4), 427–443.

Brown, R. E. "The Process of Community-Building in Distance Learning Classes." *Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks,* 2001, *5*(2), 18–35. Retrieved May 8, 2008, from http://www.aln.org/publications/jaln/v5n2/pdf/v5n2_brown.pdf.

Burch, S. "ALAI: A Latin American Experience in Social Networking." In W. Harcourt (ed.), *Women@Internet: Creating New Cultures in Cyberspace.* London: Zed Books, 1999.

Burgess, K. "Mentoring as Holistic Online Instruction." In S. Conceição (ed.), *Teaching Strategies in the Online Environment.* New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education, no. 113. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007.

Campbell, K. "Gender and Educational Technologies: Relational Frameworks for Learning Design." *Journal of Educational Multimedia and Hypermedia,* 2000, *9*(2), 131–149.

Chambers, D. *New Social Ties: Contemporary Connections in a Fragmented Society.* Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.

Crowell, L. F. "Weak Ties: A Mechanism for Helping Women Expand their Social Network and Increase Their Capital." *Social Science Journal,* 2004, *41,* 15–28.

Dines, G., and Humez, J. J. (eds.). *Gender, Race, and Class in Media: A Text Reader* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 2003.

Ellison, N. B., Steinfeld, C., and Lampe, C. "The Benefits of Facebook 'Friends.' Social Capital and College Students' Use of Online Social Network Sites." *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication,* 2007, *12*(4), article 1. Retrieved Nov. 9, 2008, from http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol12/issue4/ellison.html.

Gajjala, R., and Mamidipudi, A. "Cyberfeminism, Technology, and International 'Development.'" In R. Gajjala (ed.), *Cyber Selves: Feminist Ethnographies of South Asian Women.* Walnut Creek, Calif.: AltaMira Press, 2004.

Gittler, A. M. "Mapping Women's Global Communications and Networking." In W. Harcourt (ed.), *Women@Internet: Creating New Cultures in Cyberspace.* London: Zed Books, 1999.

Gustafson, K. E. "Join Now, Membership Is Free: Women's Web Sites and the Coding of Community." In M. Consalvo and S. Paasonen, (eds.), *Women and Everyday Uses of the Internet: Agency and Identity.* New York: Peter Lang, 2002.

Hayes, E. "Social Contexts." In E. Hayes and D. D. Flannery (eds.), *Women as Learners: The Significance of Gender in Adult Learning.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000.

Karrer, T. "Learning and Networking with Blogs." *T+D,* 2007, *61*(9), 20–22.

Marsick, V. J., and Watkins, K. E. *Informal and Incidental Learning.* New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education, no. 89. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001.

Miller, J. "Finding Support Online: Parents Are Finding Comfort and Support in Virtual Hugs." *Exceptional Parent,* 2006, *36*(10), 42–44.

Miller, S. E., and Jensen, L. A. "Connecting and Communicating with Facebook." *Computers in Libraries,* 2007, *27*(8), 5.

Nath, V. "Empowerment of Women Through ICT-Enabled Networks: Toward the Optimum ICT-Impact Model." In N. J. Hafkin and S. Huyer (eds.), *Cinderella or Cyberella? Empowering Women in the Knowledge Society.* Bloomfield, Conn.: Kumarian Press, 2006.

Perriton, L. "Women Get Wolves, Men Get Mentors: Leadership Development Viewed from a Social Relations Perspective." Paper presented at the Engendering Leadership Conference, Perth, Australia, July 21–24, 2008.

Preece, J., and Houghton, A. *Nurturing Social Capital in Excluded Communities.* Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2000.

Quan-Haase, A., and Wellman, B. "How Does the Internet Affect Social Capital?" In M. Huysman and V. Wulf (eds.), *Social Capital and Information Technology*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2004.

Rosser, S. V. "Using the Lenses of Feminist Theories to Focus on Women and Technology." In M. F. Fox, D. G. Johnson, and S. V. Rosser (eds.), *Women, Gender, and Technology*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006.

Royal Tropical Institute. *Women's Information Services and Networks: A Global Source Book.* Amsterdam: Royal Tropical Institute, 1999.

Searby, L., and Tripses, J. "Breaking Perceptions of 'Old Boys Networks': Women Leaders Learning to Make the Most of Mentoring Relationships." *Journal of Women in Educational Leadership,* 2006*, 4*(3), 179–195.

Tiernan, J. M. "Women Veterans and the Net: Using Internet Technology to Network and Reconnect." In M. Consalvo and S. Paasonen (eds.), *Women and Everyday Uses of the Internet: Agency and Identity*. New York: Peter Lang, 2002.

Tisdell, E. J. "Creating Inclusive Learning Environments: Insights from Multicultural Education and Feminist Pedagogy." Information Series No. 361. Columbus, Ohio: ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career and Vocational Education. Center on Education and Training for Employment, 1995. (ED 384 327)

Wiberg, M. "Netlearning and Learning Through Networks." *Educational Technology and Society,* 2007, *10*(4), 49–61.

Wiley, D. "Online Self-Organizing Social Systems: Four Years Later." In R. Luppicini (ed.), *Online Learning Communities.* Charlotte, N.C.: Information Age, 2007.

Young, S. L. "Where Silenced Voices Speak Out: The Hidden Power of Informal Communication Networks." *Women and Language,* 1998, *21*(2), 21–30.

Youngs, G. "Virtual Voices: Real Lives." In W. Harcourt (ed.), *Women@Internet: Creating New Cultures in Cyberspace.* London: Zed Books, 1999.

KIMBERLY R. BURGESS is an assistant professor of postsecondary education at Troy University, Albany Site, Albany, Georgia.