On-Line Social Networks: Innovative Ways towards the Boost of Collaborative Language Learning

Caridad González Arroyo

Spain

glez.caridad@gmail.com

Abstract

On-line social networks are modifying the space-time of the scenarios where the communication process was occurring until now. They have deeply changed the traditional functions of the issuer and the recipient. The field of education cannot be unaware of the innovative, revolutionary way of communication which new technologies are affording us. Teachers must use it in order to turn it into a great ally in the learning process.

On-line social networks can be defined as a dynamic exchange between people, groups and institutions within complex environments. Their intrinsic characteristics turn them into an ideal means of improving the educational process: interaction between their users helps communication, the variety of used and exchanged contents stimulates learning and the fact that they are under-construction, open systems imply that attention never declines.

A special mention should be done to the most important characteristic for the field of education: its collaborative character. Collaborative teaching and learning help the exchange and development of knowledge aimed at achieving academic goals. The main benefits are:

- *Increase in motivation.*

- *Each individual learning increases group learning.*

- *It helps to fix what has been learned.*

- *Decrease in the anxiety that individual problem-solving situations generate.*

Through the knowledge and analysis of the generic and specific on-line social networks most commonly used in transnational cooperation environments, the essential guidelines on the easy and effective use of these networks are drawn, not only as a didactic resource but also as an innovative communication vehicle between teacher and student. As illustrative example of a useful and real application, I am presenting an innovative project on the usage of on-line social networks within the field of teaching and learning foreign languages.

1. What is an on-line social network?

According to Six Degrees Separation Theory set out by Frigyes Karinthy everyone is on average approximately six steps away from any other person on Earth, what means all of us would be interconnected by a very smaller number than we first thought.

Graph Theory defines a social network as a social structure made up of individuals called "nodes", which are tied by one or more specific types of interdependency, such as friendship, common interest or knowledge. There is not a hierarchical organization, all their "nodes" have the same importance, all of them can be issuer and recipient, expert and pupil at the same time... It is a real democratization of society ending with an only one point of view about knowledge. Everybody is attainable to stay in touch. It is an amazing revolution of communication never known before.

On-line social networks are web services which let people stay in touch through all resources that Internet allows. They are not specialized in any resource being their only one aim to put people in touch with themselves, however the way is.

On-line social networks allow:

- To build a public or semi-public profile inside a closed system.
- To make a people list which is maintained some connection with.
- To see their contact lists.

About which on-line social network is the most used and popular, there are several researches and rankings but all of them do not have enough scientific rigor although among the first positions are always Facebook <http://www.facebook.com> with over 500 millions of users all over the world , and Twitter <http://twitter.com> with over 100 millions of users worldwide. We will pay special attention to both of them because of their spread, easy accessibility, being free and possibilities.

1.1. Classification of on-line social networks.

Due to the huge diversity about on-line services as social networks, it will be only considered those which have the characteristics previously described, in a simple way.

There are two classifications:

By software.

- Vertical on-line social networks. Installing Internet downloaded software in your own hosting service you can create your private social network. It can be personalized and keep entirely under control.
- Horizontal on-line social networks. Public and free social networks that already exist on Internet. They are open to everybody and you do not have to do its maintenance.

By features.

- Microblogging - Broadcast medium in the form of blogging. A microblog differs from a traditional blog in that its content is typically smaller in both actual and aggregate file size. Microblogs allow users to exchange small elements of content such as short sentences or links.
- Complete social networks - You can use all features of Web 2.0 without limits.

Examples:

- Twitter <http://twitter.com> is a microblogging and an horizontal on-line social network.
- Edmodo <http://www.edmodo.com> is a vertical microblogging.
- Facebook <http://facebook.com> is a complete and horizontal on-line social network.
- Ning <http://www.ning.com> is a complete and vertical on-line social network.

2. Why are on-line social networks turning into that significant and useful educational resource?

The new generation of students does not know the world without Internet so educational methodologies must be in accordance with new technologies.

Its most remarkable characteristics are:

- Very social, constant need of communication.
- Multitasking. Superficial vision of information.
- High ability in tacit knowledge. Informal learning.

Informal learning is more and more important for education system and on-line social networks are an excellence communication vehicle for knowledge construction based on social relations, conversation, collaboration and shared work. Informal learning on-line is built on the idea that a shared problem is easier and adds good items to learning process.

On-line social networks determine the way students are related to themselves and the way they gain access to information. Information is endless, universal and immediate because of Internet. Teachers do not be the principal source of information any more. The role of the teacher has turned into a mentor. Teacher is identified as a reliable source of high quality contents in order to student is not lost inside endless and inexhaustible information.

According to Horizon Report 2011, game-based learning is turning into one of the most outstanding technologies for teaching and learning. It says "the greatest potential of games for learning lies in their ability to foster collaboration, problem-solving, and procedural thinking". So we can consider on-line social networks a suitable way of communication for these learning tools.

3. How can teachers use on-line social networks?

There are innumerable on-line social networks that teachers can use according their students and their learning objectives. Vertical and complete on-line social networks are better for underage students, taking care about their safety and privacy. Both microblogging and complete on-line social networks are suitable for adult students (university and professional people) and the horizontal type is most commonly used in transnational cooperation environments because their long-range and universality.

On-line social network can be used as an extension of the classroom staying in touch with students but a very interesting usage is staying in touch with other teachers and educational institutions to update their knowledge and learning methodologies and to develop collaborative working as well.

3.1. Web 2.0

On-line social networks are a useful new way of communication but teachers must know not only how to use them but also how to use all the tools Web 2.0 offers to learning process and which one is the most suitable for each educational objective. Web 2.0 is the term used to describe tools and applications on the Internet that allows us to collaborate and share online. This is in contrast to previous less interactive websites. It is a concept not a product.

I would like to make a brief description of the most remarkable Web 2.0 tools for teachers:

To create contents.

- Post - The most common text on blogs. Short texts, in a semi-formal style related to edublog's general topic and can contain links.
- Mind map – Diagram used to represent ideas, tasks, or concepts linked to and arranged around a central key word or idea. Example: <http://freemind.sourceforge.net>
- Educational podcast – Creating and using audio and video files to learning process. Example: <http://scholar.google.es>

To create and upload contents.

- Edublog – Online diary usually written by or for teachers about education subjects. A typical edublog combines text, images and links to other blogs, web pages and other media related to its topic. Examples: For creating and managing Edublogs <http://edublogs.org> Stephen Dones' edublog <http://www.downes.ca>
- Educational videoblog – Edublog whose most contents are in video format. Videos can be original, created by videoblog's author or can be a mix of others. Examples: Teacher Tube is You Tube site for Education <http://www1.teachertube.com> or editing tools such as Remixer or Streaming.
- Wiki - Website that allows the creation and editing of any number of interlinked web pages via a web browser using a text editor. Examples: The biggest wiki is "Wikipedia" <http://www.wikipedia.org>, a creating and editing site <http://wiki.com>.

To create on-line index-links.

- Social bookmark - Method to organize, store, manage and search for bookmarks of resources online. Example: <http://www.delicious.com>
- Webquest – Innovative presentation of learning itineraries through links to websites created by teachers using common word processing software such as NotePad or Microsoft Word. Examples: Create a webquest <https://www.teacherweb.com/tweb/twquest.aspx>
- News feed - Data format used for providing users with frequently updated content. Content distributors syndicate a web feed, thereby allowing users to subscribe to it. Examples: News aggregation website of Google <http://www.google.com/Top/News>

4. Example of application: Learning foreign languages using on-line social network as communication system.

On-line social networks have several advantages to learning a foreign language such as deeper immersion, higher development of language skills, higher motivation, more autonomy and flexibility.

The proposal is that on-line social networks are ideal to create a learning community and to base its work in Problem-based learning (PBL), in which students learn about a subject in the context of complex, multifaceted and realistic problems. Organizing foreign language students in working groups, students identify what they already know, what they need to know, and how and where to access new information that may lead to resolution of the problem. The role of the teacher is as facilitator of learning who provides appropriate resources of that process.

There are several on-line social networks specialized in learning foreign languages such as Livemocha <http://www.livemocha.com>, Busuu <http://www.busuu.com> or Babelyou <http://www.babelyou.com> for self-learning and teachers can guide their students through them, but it is more interesting the usage of Facebook and Twitter for the boost of teacher-student relation and for the reasons previously stated. There are countless possibilities:

- Creating a social bookmarking with a selected websites about learning the language.
- Class diary - Students explain what they are doing.
- Audio podcasts recorded by students in order to improve their pronunciation.
- Sharing resources for exam preparations, group works...
- Collaborative creation of stories (posts, video podcast, audio podcast...) about the usage of the language in specific contexts (business, holidays...).
- Arguing forums about grammar subjects.
- Creating wikis for working groups and explain to the other students with photos, audios, videos, mind maps...
- Notice board - Lets students know everything about exams, homework, works, timetables, deadlines.
- Students questions - Private questions on messages or public questions on walls and forums in order to all students learn.
- Helping among students themselves (chat, messenger).
- Rigorous evaluation process. Teacher knows the real effort of each student and the contribution to group works.
- Sharing resources. Links about cinema scenes in original version.
- Keep in touch with other educational institutions and make on-line language exchanges and share projects in common.
- Virtual performance. Every student assumes a role based on a novel or film.
- Quiz show. Students have to answer as soon as possible.
- Brainstorming.
- Creating a wiki about a Well-known Historic Event.
- You can use hashtags on your messages to follow better an issue (ej. #past tense).
- Creating polls.

- Following to someone interesting by twitter or news feeds: writer, politician, mass media. Student can understand their language better.
- Create a word cloud from Twitter hashtag as conclusion of an activity. The size of every word is proportional to the times it appears.

5. Summing-up

Teachers should not see the change of attitudes, abilities and competences of new generations of students as a problem but also a natural evolution in the development of collective knowledge which they must accept, adapt and take the most of.

On-line social networks make easier and faster the communication between teachers and students and the usage of all the tools from Web 2.0 helps boost education process with collaborative and informal learning.

Teachers and professors must know how to create contents with these new tools and how to use according to their educational objectives.

The main value of an on-line social network is not you can upload a photo, a video or link a blog but the high ease to stay in touch people among themselves and learning and teaching are based on communication.

On-line social networks would be in the superior level referring to communication. They are suitable communication systems from which teachers can organize and administer the rest of collaborative tools.

References

1. De Haro Ollé, Juan José (2010): "Redes sociales para la educación". Anaya Multimedia. Madrid.
2. Castaño, Carlos VV.AA. (2008): "Prácticas educativas en entornos Web 2.0. Editorial Síntesis. Madrid
3. Cruz Piñol, Mar (2002): "Enseñar español en la era de Internet". Octaedro. Barcelona.
4. Alemañy Martínez, Cristina (2009): "Redes sociales. Una nueva vía para el aprendizaje". http://www.eumed.net/rev/ced/01/cam4.htm
5. Wikipediahttp://www.wikipedia.org
6. López Ardao, Carlos (2010): "Blog universidad Social 2.0" http://www.ardao.es
7. Resources for teachers http://www.resources-teachers.info
8. Santamaría, Fernando (2010): "Blog Reflexiones sobre tecnología educativa, comunidades, redes y otras hierbas" <http://fernandosantamaria.com/blog>
9. Warschauer, Mark (2010): Language Learning & Technology Journal <http://llt.msu.edu>
10. The New Media Consortium (2011): The 2011 Horizon Report <http://www.nmc.org/pdf/2011-Horizon-Report.pdf>
11. The innovative educator <http://theinnovativeeducator.blogspot.com>