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СОЦИАЛЬНАЯ ОТКРЫТАЯ ОБРАЗОВАТЕЛЬНАЯ СРЕДА «ОБЩЕСТВО»: НОВАЯ ПЛАТФОРМА ДЛЯ СОЦИАЛЬНОЙ ОБРАЗОВАТЕЛЬНОЙ СЕТИ, ОТВЕЧАЮЩЕЙ СОВРЕМЕННЫМ ТРЕБОВАНИЯМ

КЛЮЧЕВЫЕ СЛОВА: социальные образовательные сети; открытые образовательные ресурсы; сотрудничество в образовании; онлайновая система обучения.

АННОТАЦИЯ. В статье рассматривается структура социальной образовательной сети, способной отвечать требованиям современного студента и преподавателя. В соответствии с полученным грантом Erasmus+ в предложенной статье изучается создание социальной открытой образовательной среды в качестве такой социальной образовательной сети для современного мира. Такие инструменты являются прогрессивными средами в сфере образования и практически не используются сегодня для удовлетворения потребностей студентов и преподавателей в образовании из-за проблем в методическом обеспечении и недостатков интерфейса программ. Главные аспекты интерфейса социальных образовательных сетей должны обеспечить социальную коммуникацию, равенство и возможность обмена информацией со сверстниками. Социальная открытая образовательная среда создавалась с учетом этих условий. В статье представлены инновационные элементы и технология использования этой платформы для совершенствования работы в социальных образовательных сетях.

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SOLE-SOCIAL: INNOVATION IN A SOCIAL EDUCATIONAL NETWORK FOR CONTEMPORARY DEMANDS[1]

KEYWORDS: Social Education Networks; Open Educational Resources; Collaborative Learning; Online Education.

ABSTRACT. The paper considers the necessary structure for a Social Education Network needed to suit the demands of contemporary students and educators. Following an Erasmus+Grant, the paper explores the development of the Social Open Learning Environment platform as such a new Social Education Network (SEN) for the modern world. Such tools are progressive mediums for education and are relatively unused in education at present due to methodological issues and the interface of the SEN to manage student and educator demands. Key aspects of the SEN interface need to promote social communication, equality and peer-to-peer sharing of information. The SOLE platform is designed with these concepts in mind and the paper presents the elements of innovation and application of technology to enhance the social educational network experience.

The 21st century is characterised by increasing economic, political and cultural integration. Globalised society fosters internationalization policies and cooperation practices in education. As UNESCO Education Strategy 2014–2021 states, internationalization of higher education is currently considered a major trend worldwide [17]. Higher educational establishments are being more extensively integrated in interconnected cultural and educational space so that their graduates are competitive enough in the world labour market.

The development of transnational university networks is largely achieved through learning mobility which "has always been considered as a key, if not defining element of Internationalization" [1]. Learning mobility means "moving physically to a country other than the country of residence, in order to undertake study, training or non-formal or informal learning; it may take the form of traineeships, apprenticeships, youth exchanges, volunteering, teaching or participation in a professional development activity, and may include preparatory activities, such as training in the host language, as well as sending, receiving and follow-up activities" [3, p. 309]. However, despite the measures taken with respect to promotion

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of learning mobility worldwide, the state of modern economy resulting in people's level of well-being and paying capacity limits opportunities for conventional geographical mobility.

Alternatively, the virtual access offered by information and communications technology (ICT) has made it possible to consider advantages of the so-called virtual mobility. In the training material "Spot+ project team" virtual mobility is defined as a situation within a higher educational establishment which provides a "possibility to attend classes, seminars and other events held in a place located anywhere in the world; the possibility to access reference materials and contents at a distance, by using ICT-based solutions; the possibility to communicate with other people located anywhere" [18, p. 10]. It might include such forms of collaboration as transnational lectures and/or learning materials, cross-border recruitment of students, intensity of communication flows, international accreditation of achievements, etc. [18, p. 10].

Currently virtual mobility for students is considered as one of the top priorities in European education policy makers' and institutional leaders' view. The emphasis is laid upon expanding cost-effective learning opportunities and the quality of education through ICT. Open Educational Resources (OER) are being extensively integrated in international education to transform access to and processing of learning materials. The importance of opportunities for virtual learning mobility development has been amply demonstrated by the European Union's support for the Erasmus+ Programme [3].

Virtual mobility is primarily provided by means of Learning Management Systems (LMS). A LMS is defined as "a centralized web based information system where the learning content is managed and learning activities are organized" [15]. LMS were introduced in higher education in 1960s and have been widely available in higher education for the last decade. Nevertheless, according to D. Stone and G. Zheng, "... the changes in the educational and training environment have exposed more and more weaknesses of the traditional LMS" [15]. As C. Dalsgaard and G. Siemens state, "... they tend to be institution- and content-centric, lacking in support for the affordances that lead to the establishment of flattened communication networks and collaborative information flows [7]. Among the desired features for a new generation of LMS such characteristics as openness, increased use of learning analytics, being personal, social, flexible and mobile are named.

Since international virtual collaboration implies interaction within the intercultural context, which is social in its nature, among the enumerated features the social component is viewed by the authors as the most significant one. The efficacy of such collaboration is achieved by the general purpose/principle of social which is "is to be able to see, network, learn, collaborate, and share with people with similar interests and learning experiences, and provide a learning community like environment to facilitate communication and collaboration, and ultimately learning and doing" [15].

The deficit in the social component of LMS can be partially compensated for by the incorporation of social media channels into LMS or by the supplementary use of specific branded social media as such. The advantages of specific branded social media highly demanded by the youth like Facebook and Twitter over "traditional" forms of education are extensively highlighted in the research. According to the literature, the most considerable advantage of social media use for educational reasons is their opportunities for providing student-centred and collaborative learning environment [2; 9; 11; 20]. Social media offer such benefits as interactive organization and participation of students in study groups, creating online communities of practice, posting and sharing course-related content, soliciting supportive and constructive feedback from peers, etc. Compared to other social media social networking sites are distinguished separately. They are being ever more extensively used in education due a number of reasons [5].

1. The environment to which students are accustomed to. Users are well-familiar to the interface, communication channels and ways of content publication due to the high-quality usability of the site and participants' considerable personal experience.

2. Variety of communication channels. Wiki-pages, forums, surveys, votes, comments, messaging, etc. provide ample opportunities for collaboration.

3. Unambiguous identification of users. Participants often use their real first and last name; pseudonyms are chosen more rarely.

4. Participants' activity can be monitored by means of news. With this tool user effectively control all the information channels and monitor the update of various content. Students are informed of all the changes relating to learning process on timely basis. They are able to trace their mates' and professors' learning activities

However, despite all of the advantages offered by specific branded social media in education, they cannot substitute for LMS due to a number of reasons. S. Neier and L. Tuncay Zayer surveyed the USA students taking an introductory marketing course about their experience with the use of social media and their perceptions on the use of social media tools in the education. The results of the survey show

that although students do recognize value in using existing social networking sites like Facebook for class announcements and for the formation of teams for group projects, nevertheless, they state that educational potential of such sites cannot be fully realized in part because of students' desire to keep their professional and personal lives separate [11, p. 138]. This is consistent with the survey by a team of Russian researchers A. V. Feshchenko, N. N. Zilberman, I. A Kulikov, G. V. Mozhaeva [5]. The research finds that students prefer to use social networking sites as a tool for learning considering the main advantage of the communicative potential of the platform as well as its convenience and regularity. However, they voice concerns relating to a great number of factors distracting from the learning process itself. Besides, students are discouraged by the fact that their pages and activities they are involved in are available to all the members of the site.

At this point it becomes obvious that neither LMS nor social media solely can successfully provide ongoing formal and informal interactions centered on shared learning objectives, which is crucial for effective international virtual collaboration. Some functions (technical, supervisory, organizational) have been successfully implemented by LMS, whereas others (communication, motivation, individualized instruction) by social media [5]. One of the possible solutions is to hybridize both technologies into one which, on the one hand, would provide a conventional virtual community space where participants meet, build friendships, post photos and videos, "like" one another's pages, etc. and, on the other hand, could involve students in various course-related activities.

In the EU the issue is successfully addressed by the application of Social Education Networks (SEN) which are becoming increasingly commonplace in educational institutions: "The field of adult education is gradually undergoing a shift away from modern, instrumental approaches towards more transformative approaches to teaching and learning" [10]. The 'transformative approaches' include collaborative team-based learning activities that require synchronous and asynchronous communication between students working on a given project that bring students together in a communicative framework. Such tasks and platforms work towards creating an expanded classroom environment that is no longer constrained by size or geographic location.

Schlager et al. state: "Research suggests that it is not necessarily important for each individual to be connected to every other person in an organization; most important is to have people connect to the right experts for the in-

formation they need. Because teachers have a limited amount of time, fostering the correct ties (often between novices and experts) is important" [13].

As such, an SEN can provide a sense of community and association developing higher educational results and greater motivation [4; 12; 19]. Furthermore, SEN tools can foster a productive approach and encourage cross-cultural communication as well as communication across time zones and outside the student's circle of contacts. Tu and Corry suggest that online tools, such as SEN, should create an educational framework by developing a community that builds upon instruction, social interaction, and technology [16]. Consequently, SEN tools are being seen as new methodology for developing more successful interactions where students are seen as self-educators with peer-to-peer learning as well as access to technical experts taking centre stage.

Focus is now towards learners using SEN to share materials, research and knowledge with other learners, although the traditional support and input of specialists is still valued and seen as needed. "[SEN] contributes to enhancing our theoretical knowledge about the mechanisms by which the conditions stimulate active participation in online discussions" [8: 64]. Similarly, parallel networks of teachers and educators are being created using the same SEN platforms to pool resources and new teaching practices: "Work has shown that teacher networks, in different forms, are effective alternative and supplemental interventions to traditional workshops and institutes for learning content and pedagogy" [13, p. 87].

The Social Open Learning Environment (SOLE) is an Erasmus+ funded project with the explicit purpose of creating a SEN designed specifically to meet the needs of students and instructors in contemporary online social education. Following the concepts and ideas discussed above, the SOLE has three innovative technical modifications at its core to ensure: Firstly, a social environment to encourage collaborative peer-to-peer cooperation; Secondly, an educational community to share materials and information in an equality driven environment regardless of status or educational qualification; and Thirdly, a platform for learning with online courses, OER materials and other tools for the educational and student professions.

The SOLE platform was designed to work on three mutual levels as a broad educational tool. In one sense, the SOLE is a "flipped classroom" where the teacher's role is taken by co-operative learning and social interaction. No one person on the SOLE has the role of "expert", thus developing a more equal relationship between the participants and promoting

partnership learning rather than top-down education. As Shen et al. argue, a SEN should provide: "Educators [with the ability that] they can become part of the interface for online learning to provide a dynamic overview of class interaction such as are some students dominating and others lurking" [14, p. 32]. Moreover, the methodology of the SOLE allows for learners to develop at their own pace and explore issues of interest, rather than being forced to work at a certain speed and focus on closed issues. This aspect is aimed at creating a more active methodology and "that one person has produced something of value that is then accessed by another person, as enabled by the sociotechnical network" [13, p. 97].

With the aim of SOLE to create a social network that promotes interaction in a globalized environment, the designers acknowledged three key areas for development and innovation. The first area was Linguistic communication; the second area was Collaborative tools; and the final area was Social interaction.

Linguistic communication is always an issue for global courses and the concept of international collaboration. Given that English is the current language of choice for international educators, the use of SEN platforms can limit their appeal and success to only students who are comfortable and competent in using English. Often, a lack of or a perceived lack of communicative ability can cause the student to be taken out of their comfort zone and placed in an uncertain situation, thus hampering a successful outcome of their collaborative task.

In order to solve this issue, the SOLE platform has a built-in translator enabling not only the website but all communications to be translated to and from the user's mother tongue. This feature provides a more comfortable working environment as the user can write a message to their collaborative partner(s) in their native language and have the message translated instantly into the chosen language for the group to communicate. Similarly, this feature works for incoming messages and allows users who are uncertain of their linguistic skills to overcome their lack of competence and comfort.

A further success of SOLE are the features which relate to online collaborative document editing and work. The platform allows multiple users to join a Chatroom and edit in real-time a text document, share files, pictures and other information for the purpose of collaboration. This feature is a key aspect in promoting successful online collaboration through the platform. Other SEN's require the use of multiple tools and other sites to achieve such an effect. This can mean that the student has to be well versed in many e-based learning tools to achieve the required collaborative goal.

Social interaction in SOLE is promoted by the equal relationship of all users. Instructors, students and general users have the same rights to post comments, upload information, edit information, create user groups and introduce new ideas. This equality of status is essential in that in does not create a hierarchical situation where student users are subordinate to their teachers. It also creates a situation where each participant is a mentor to everyone else and the openness of the user's information can act as inspiration and be a source of knowledge for others users on the platform.

Consequently, any SOLE user can share the information they have on a given topic without concern of whether the material is acceptable to the course instructor. The ability to openly express opinions, share ideas and thoughts allows SOLE to be empowering for participants in a manner that traditional classrooms are not. Multiple viewpoints, disentangled from individual identity, allow for a "bottom-up" creation of ideas and an alternative methodological framework [6].

Table 1

A summary of the Challenges and Solutions facing SOLE development.

Challenges	Solution
Different level of students' language proficiency	Multilingual service for translation built in the platform interface
Low degree of students' involvement in collaboration resulting in incomplete achievement of learning objectives	Peer-to-peer initiation of ideas/topics and being actively involved in posting materials, commenting, "liking", etc.
Lack of rapport among students as members of virtual learning teams	Setup, interim and final videoconference meetings throughout the course
Asynchronous interaction due to time difference	Message boards, Groups and the use of comments allows students to post and keep up with new developments
Sporadic use of the site contrasted to "living" in social networks as it is not viewed as a priority	Email messages and integration with Twitter, Facebook etc. make the SOLE part of a student's daily routine
Tools for assessment of students' coursework	The 'Course' function allows instructors to post courses and students to enroll enabling access to a formal online eLearning environment

The social interaction and collaboration promoted by SOLE cannot be underestimated. Through the combination of a variety of tools and careful planning and thought, the structure of the SEN encourages user interaction in a methodology that is not yet accepted or seen as being mainstream. Despite extensive research pointing to the success of well-used

SEN, the educational profession still views such tools with circumspect. However, the aim of the SOLE is to elevate SEN from a misunderstood, misused and infrequent classroom tool into a focal point of education. The variety of technical tools at the users' hands, as well as the wide range of active learning opportunities, ensure that the SOLE is developing a community that builds upon instruction, social interaction, and technology. Moreover, and importantly, the SOLE is a peer-to-peer network and operates regardless of academic or social status and promotes the sharing of materials to aid and develop education. Time will tell how successful the platform will be, but initial trials indicate that there are encouraging signs for the future.

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