Advantages and disadvantages of social media as learning environment in adult education

The social media has a great potential in adult education. Many adults perceive social media as the source of up-to-date information on friends and world while for some it is a tool for communication, self-promotion and boasting about one’s achievements. The rise of social networking sites, and a general interest in student-centered pedagogies have attracted attention to the use of popular Internet tools to enhance distance education. Such potential can be effectively used in adult education. It allows adult educators to prolong learning process beyond a classroom and for adult learners to learn things for which there was not enough time during a training. The article is specifically sought to describe the most popular social media tools and to provide an overview on the main benefits and risks of applying these tools and services in the process of adult learning.

1. The definition of social media websites

Social media refers to a set of web-based tools and services used for a wide range of applications (Lee, McLoughlin, 2010). Social media is characterized as Web 2.0 resources that emphasize active participation, connectivity, collaboration, as well as sharing of knowledge and ideas among users. Web 0.2 provides new ways for sharing information online in an open social environment. Different types of social media tools and services are used for different purposes.

Liu (2010) mentions some of the social media websites: Facebook, Wiki, YouTube, Bulleting Board, LinkedIn, Blogs, Twitter, Podcasts, Virtual Worlds, RSS, StumbleUpon, Netlog, Delicious, Digg, Plurk, and Jaiku. Social networking sites are used mainly for socializing and making friends, The social networking comprises websites like Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter which permit the sharing of professional and educational knowledge between peers. Wiki is used for creating content collaboratively. Blogs are used for personal journal and reflections, and social bookmarking used to share, organize, store, manage and search bookmarks of web pages. The main advantages of these Web 2.0 tools is their ability to enable users to create and share content rather than just access and browse the content. Social networking also supports the sharing of educational knowledge between multiple people. Additionally, these systems could be used for educational purposes to distribute questions and solutions between community members that are searching for specific information.

The overall degree of popularity and growth of social networking websites is very apparent. One of the most significant social media websites is Facebook due to its communicative and interactive features, and to the original emphasis and focus on the academic market. The possibilities of this site are available after simple registration. On Facebook one can post comments, links, photos, films and other files. Obviously, one can also comment on posted content and materials. It is also
worth to make use of this site as some kind of a motivator by establishing dates of upcoming events. Moreover, this tool can be used to recognise target group or diagnosis of needs through posting surveys or creating discussion. It would be difficult to run educational process on the so called timeline since the huge amount of new content appears so fast that it makes impossible to follow a subject. Possibility to create and manage a group should be used for the purpose of e-learning process. When using this tool for work or private purposes one should know that all author’s rights to posted materials are transferred to the site at the moment of registration.

YouTube can easily access information and courses related to their study. Utilizing this service is free and connects students to larger communities of people with similar interests. It is in such environments that the individual user or groups of users can decide what they want to discuss and who they want to work with to achieve their educational goals.

Wikis are another kind of service which allows information sharing through building of a corpus of knowledge within a set of interlinked web pages. A Wiki is software for creating and editing interlinked web pages. Wikispaces is one of the more popular wiki applications, with its reputation for ease of use and varied pricing models, from free to Private Label. Wikis promote collaborative learning and information sharing because anyone with rights can add content to the system. There are a number of educational institutions that have utilized the wikis system to assist their students to work together in order to interpret texts, to author articles and essays, to improve their research and communication skills and to share ideas collectively (Liu, 2010).

To sum up, current social media prolong the processes taking place in real life and can support training process. However, it should be used thoughtfully. Before inviting members of our training to participate in some activities the issues regarding the work of social media should be explained.

2. The use of social media in the educational process of adults

The use of online social networks in educational process been supported by numerous educational technology researchers, who have highlighted the benefits of participatory technologies in adult education settings (Lee, McLoughlin, 2010; Veletsianos, 2011; Tallent-Runnels et al., 2006). For instance, Lee, McLoughlin (2010) suggest that online social networks enable learners and instructors to present themselves socially in an online environment and connect with one another and this enables learners to participate in a group learning process. However, Veletsianos (2011) emphasizes that technological innovations need to be accompanied by didactical enhancements for technology-rich interventions to be successful. Researchers also recommend examining which course delivery format fits particular didactical approaches (Tallent-Runnels et al., 2006).
The use of social media in education is being defined as a model of distance learning or e-learning. Social networking technologies have been viewed as tools that enable the use of participatory pedagogies able to address the problems that have traditionally plagued distance education. The model of distance learning assumes that the learners neither meet „in real life” nor do they meet a person leading the training. Course materials, content and tasks are delivered by the use of new technologies. Therefore, social media websites provide a possibility to create a sense of presence, community-building, and learner participation in interactive discussions (Lee, McLoughlin, 2010). The literature suggests that using online social networks as educational platforms may support learners in forming social connections with others while they collaborate to share ideas, create products, construct identities, and receive timely feedback. Additionally, research on informal learning via social media suggests that participation in social media websites fulfills important social learning functions (Greenhow, Robelia, 2009).

Lee, McLoughlin (2010) also propose that the inherent design of social media supports the development of learner self-directedness, a capability that is essential in preparing lifelong learners for the complexities of today’s workforce. Social media also brings with it the freedom for learners to connect and collaborate outside of institutional boundaries, as well as to gain practical experience for the workforce. By using social media, adult learners also have an opportunity to manage their own learning environments and thus become more independent, lifelong learners (Rahimi, van den Berg and Veen 2013).

On the other hand, researchers (Greenhow, Robelia, 2009) offer a long list of potential risks that may arise when using social software in adult education. These include workload concerns for educators and students, lack of trust in peer feedback, ownership issues with regards to public and collaborative spaces, difficulty in adapting publicly available tools, and difficulty in protecting the anonymity of students. Furthermore, Madge, Meek, Wellens (2009) have suggested that social media websites might be more useful for informal rather than formal learning as 91% of the learners in their study never used such tools to communicate with teaching staff, and 43% believed that social media websites have no potential for academic work.

Practitioners adult educators (Zascerinska, 2010) indicate on the crucial actions that a trainer has to undertake applying social media as a learning environment in order to achieve educational success. The most frequent methods mentioned are: staying in touch with the participants, discussion moderation, inclusion of group tasks, creating an active learning environment, providing constant and accurate feedback, as well as respecting the diversity of participants’ work styles.

An example and inspiration for those interested in using Facebook for educational purposes and the creation of interest groups is a Polish group „Trainer for Trainer as Trainer”
The group was founded as closed group in 2013 and has over 10,000 of participants. Topics posted posts are very different, but related to adult education. Examples:

- links to resources, articles,
- questions about advice-what tools to use, how to use exercise,
- questions about opinions about products offered for adult trainers.

„Virtual meetings” were so interesting for people that involved participants and organized a network of coaches and trainers adults who meet in the real world, in order to share knowledge and learn from each other, among others—effective methods of working with adults in training.

Social media tools make the learning environment more dynamic by supporting new features and characteristics. These features and tools facilitate the learning environment for both adult learners and educators and encourage them to take an effective role in creating and sharing the information rather than just access the content. However due to some education-related risks social media should be used thoughtfully.

**For further reading:**

4. Veletsianos, G., Navarrete, C. (2012). Online social networks as forming learning environments: learner experiences and activities. The International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning, 13(1), 144-166