**Online Presence for Learning and Employability: students' use of profiles in social networking environments**

**Karen Kear:**

The project started with some Associate Lecturer colleagues of mine that I’ve been working with on previous courses, and they were interested in the role of online forms within our Moodle environment and how the students used them, or didn’t use them and whether they thought they were valuable, and I realised when I was talking to them that I had done some work on that in my PhD a couple of years before which I’ve also done with the OU.

So, we had a chat and decided that this would be an interesting project to work on together. And we also realised that eSTEeM were particularly interested in an employability theme and that learning to use online spaces was quite important for our students so that they could develop their employability skills and be able to convey what they were like to possible employers and others online.

We did the investigation within the context of these tutor groups. So, my colleague Helen was the tutor for one of them and Frances was the tutor for the other. So, we asked their students in the two groups whether they’d be prepared to participate and give us some data on their experiences and what they had done. And we went through the ethics procedure here by eSTEeM so that was all done properly.

So, we started off with an online survey which Frances put together using SurveyMonkey which is an online tool that’s very easy to use. So, we did a survey which went out to both the tutor groups, the students in the two tutor groups, and got that data back and that included some quantitative information, some numerical information that we could analyse about whether the students were using profiles, whether they wrote something into their profile, whether they included a photograph, and also whether they looked at the profiles of other students.

So, we had that information. We also had some qualitative data from the survey so there were some open text questions where the students could put anything they wanted to in response to particular questions. So that gave us a bit richer data than just the numerical data.

The other thing that we did to supplement that really was we actually looked at the profiles of the students who’d agreed that we were allowed to do so through the ethics process, and we had a look at their profiles at the beginning of the course and then we had a look at their profiles towards the end, partly to see what was in the profiles and partly to see whether anything had changed later in the course. And the reason for looking later was, well they may have decided to change it anyway, but also, they were studying some material in the course itself about online social networking. So, they were learning something. And they were also learning about issues to do with privacy and presenting yourself online, so that could have made a difference. So that was another set of data that we used.

And the third approach we used was to interview some of the students and we did that online again using the OU’s Elluminate, online conferencing system as it was at that time.

We found out that the students were concerned about community. That didn’t necessarily mean that the profiles had helped them to experience community. For some of the students it had and that was part of the reason why they used the profiles, why they thought it was important for them to fill in some information and to put a photo in their profile and why they looked at other peoples. But for some students that wasn’t the case and so they didn’t really feel the need to use the profiles for either of those purposes.

So that was one of the main things and linked to that, there was a concept that some of the students used this phrase of “putting a face to a name”. So, they may have come across something that a fellow student contributed to the forum or had said to them. Or they may have met someone at a tutorial, and they just wanted to get a sense of who that person was just by seeing a photograph of them really. So, it seems as though the photographs were quite important even if there wasn’t any other information in the profile.

The other concern that several of the students had was around privacy. So, this is going back a couple of years so people may feel more comfortable about that now, but they were a bit worried about what information about themselves might get out in the world. They were less concerned about that because it’s within an OU environment so they realised that it would go in the OU Moodle and nowhere else so that was a bit more comforting for them. But nevertheless, they were concerned about privacy in general.

The students did realise, and they didn’t really need to be told about this but having an online presence is important and these were IT students so a couple of them commented that it is particularly important that a potential employer should be able to find you on Google and maybe on LinkedIn which was very popular at that time and may be less so now.

I think what we’ve learnt from this project is for me the main aspect is around the sense of community and this is something I’ve been interested in for many, many years in relation to online environments anyway. But it did underline that students do need that, not all of them, but many of them do need that and that they don’t always get it with the OU, and I think we were hopeful that the profiles would form a way of helping with that. But there’s been quite a lot of debate in the literature about whether that is true, and I think we’ve demonstrated that it’s not true for all students, just for some.

So that leaves us in a situation where we need to be finding other ways to help the students to experience community in their modules and that can be done online but it can also be done in other ways by building up a sense of community within a tutor group or other places where students can meet each other face-to-face, or they can meet online through synchronous communication through web conferencing, for example. So, that sort of broadened the project out really to community rather than the narrow sense of a profile.

We’re writing the replacement module at the moment and in fact I’m just coming to that part of the module where I’ll be writing about the social networking and so we’ll be able to use what we’ve learnt from the project and also the experience of teaching the previous module to help students to understand about online social networking and how it relates to employment and also to their educational experience.

So, we’ll be able to help them to do things to feel more of a sense of community for themselves if they wish to and also to do things to help other students and the tutors as well to feel more a part of a learning community. So that will be the end to help, to learn about it and to give them some experiences which will support them in feeling more comfortable in their online learning.