

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Academic use of Custom Social Networks in Translation training

María-Dolores Olvera-Lobo¹, Juncal Gutiérrez-Artacho²

¹CSIC, Unidad Asociada Grupo SCImago, Madrid, Spain & Universidad de Granada. Department of Library and Information Science, Granada, Spain

²Universidad de Granada. Department of Translation and Interpreting, Granada. & Universidad Pablo de Olavide, Department of Filology and Translation, Seville

Correspondance details:

Juncal Gutiérrez-Artacho. Universidad de Granada, Department of Translation and Interpreting, C/ Buensuceso, s/n 18002, Granada (Spain). juncalgutierrez@ugr.es

Abstract

The widespread application of e-learning in traditional learning contexts can be justified only if it offers results that are better than those previously achieved. Research into the academic use of social networks has focused on a range of fields including learner motivation and sense of community. This area of study seeks to disprove the negative ideas inherent in such networks and create communication spaces similar to those provided by existing social-networking sites, but with the fundamental objectives of education and teaching. The pedagogical value of this tool is being analyzed and evaluated for the purpose of improving the new didactic methods used in the classroom through incorporating communication means that are more familiar to students.

We created a social network on the online platform *Ning*, which enabled us to create a personalized social network for the course Translation 6: Legal, Economic, and Commercial (English into Spanish).

Our analysis of the users' interactions with the platform revealed high participation and numerous visits to the SN. On average, the students accessed the site once or twice daily to communicate with their teacher or classmates about the coursework or to reference available materials, among other activities.

Keywords

Teaching Translation, Professional Translation, News Translation, Functionalism, Applied Translation

Introduction

Social networks (SNs) have been defined as web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system (Boyd & Ellison, 2008). Such networks are based on the “six degrees of separation” theory, according to which all the earth’s inhabitants are connected by no more than six intermediaries (Watts, 2003).

The computer tools developed to maximize the effectiveness of these networks seek to achieve three primary objectives. First, they foster stable and efficient communication between users through the creation of individual profiles, groups, and other applications that facilitate this interaction. In addition, these tools enable the location and integration of communities in which participants feel comfortable and can share opinions, interests, and materials. Finally, the tools promote cooperation by helping individuals to carry out joint activities or projects regardless of the physical or geographic location.

While this new social and communication phenomenon is the most well-known aspect of Web 2.0, it is not free of controversy. There are diverse opinions concerning its uses and the relationships formed between members. For some, these sites create a frivolous environment where individual privacy is pushed into the background (Gignoux, 2009); however, recent studies show that privacy in SNs depends on use and the user’s knowledge, which is steadily increasing (Fogel & Nehmad 2009). Others maintain that SNs offer academic and commercial benefits that are not easily obtained through other media (Haro, 2009; Hendrix et al., 2009; Oradini, 2008).

Indeed, SNs have a multitude of uses and aims, some of which are more beneficial than others for users. These online spaces provide an excellent platform for building a network of professional and personal contacts to unify ideas and engage in learning projects. Many companies use SNs to facilitate communication between their employees, contact new employees or clients, and promote their business. In the educational context, major institutions such as European and North American universities have identified the benefits of using these sites for communication and student recruitment, thus expanding their presence on networks including Facebook and Tuenti (the ones most used in Spain).

Some innovative initiatives have already incorporated SNs into primary and secondary education settings, achieving promising results in terms of academics and popularity as can be seen in Haro (2009). Many scholars suggest that students learn in new ways using social

media and that educators should embrace these new platforms (Jenkins, 2006). Furthermore, the higher-education sphere is also beginning to use the SNs (Gray et al., 2010; Montgomery & McDowell, 2009; Yang & Cheng, 2010). In classrooms, this resource is sometimes used to create specific academic groups, forums, spaces for debate or virtual communities of practice, all of which are coordinated by a teacher or tutor with specialized knowledge of the topic at hand. The interactive, friendly nature of SNs creates a relaxed, comfortable working environment that modifies the teacher-student relationship and offers a multiple channel of communication that all class members can use, e.g. bulletin boards, forums, chats or micro-meetings.

The widespread application of SNs in traditional learning contexts can be justified only if it gives results that are better than those previously achieved. Evidence suggests that the use of the written online communication motivates participants and improves the quality of learning products (Mazer *et al.*, 2007; Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008). Research into the academic use of SNs has focused on a range of areas including learner motivation and sense of community (Borau *et al.*, 2009; Hewitt & Forte, 2006; Jin *et al.*, 2009; Mazer *et al.*, 2007). Educational networks are based on the use of social-networking technologies for educational purposes (Hargadon, 2009). This area of study seeks to disprove the negative ideas inherent to such networks and creates communication spaces similar to those provided by existing social networking sites, but with the fundamental objectives of education and teaching. The pedagogical value of this tool is being analyzed and evaluated to improve the new didactic methods used in the classroom by incorporating communication means that are more familiar to students.

From an academic perspective, the inclusion of SNs in translation teaching would provide a positive example of applying this tool in the educational setting and would guide students in optimizing the use of such sites for their professional and social futures. Moreover, this approach would promote the adoption of new didactic methods that better respond to the current context of the Information Society and to the demands of the translation labor market.

We conducted a study in which our didactic proposal, PATT, was applied to translator training through the use of social networks (Olvera-Lobo et al., 2007). PATT moves the students closer to the reality of professional translators in the 21st century. Translators are faced with linguistic difficulties and problems relating to typesetting and layout, work-induced stress and the ubiquitous inter-disciplinarity (Olvera-Lobo et al. 2008a, 2008b, 2009; Senso et al. 2006). Our established social constructivist approach to translator training seeks

to adapt the e-learning environment to the professional realities of the translation marketplace (Olvera-Lobo et al., 2005). However, teachers are aware that SNs may offer both advantages and disadvantages—for example, the service these networks provide lies outside the university and we are therefore not dependent on our own level of IT expertise, but rather the same SN services have an underlying commercial purpose that might lead to unexpected changes at inopportune moments (Al-khalifa, 2008; Robinson & Olvera-Lobo, 2011).

Methodology

This study was performed in the context of the course Translation 6: Legal, Economic and Commercial (English into Spanish). The aim was to analyze the validity of the custom SN in the academic performance of the Translation students. The course Translation 6: Legal, Economic and Commercial is a compulsory course of 6 ECTS credits (25 hours of student work per credit) for students in the University of Granada's Translation and Interpretation degree program (specializing in English). These students were in the third year of the degree, having completed several courses on Non-specialized Translation, Terminology, Documentation, and Applied Linguistics.

Students are expected to acquire numerous skills in Translation 6, which is their first contact with this broad speciality area, where it is essential to incorporate a certain part of theory into the learning-teaching process. In this way, the students can develop a solid base in terms of the fundamental concepts and elements involved. It is equally important to optimize the practical classes, which introduce the students to terminology, text typology, characteristics of different texts, and, of course, translation itself.

While the course was classroom based, the group of 37 students also performed various virtual tasks and translation assignments. Our SN was created through the online platform *Ning*¹, which enables users to create personalized social networks for a particular topic or purpose, geared towards specific audiences. *Ning* provides the services needed to address the teaching demands of this subject and facilitates the sharing of communication and documentation between professors and students, as well as between students in the same work group or in general. Some features of our SN in Ning are: the **Personal member profile** where users can add a small bio, personal information, a picture and social-media

¹ Available at: www.ning.com

connections; the **Forum discussion**, a built-in personal forum offering all standard forum features such as threads, reply, forum search, and more; the **Shared calendar** to track shared group activities and events; internal use of email; download and upload **documentation** in Box.net²; the creation of different **groups** within the network; and sharing of multimedia material, etc..

Because the teamwork was encouraged through the use of the PATT model (Olvera-Lobo et al., 2007), the students were organized in teams, virtually simulating the work of a translation agency by recreating the production chain in the professional workplace. The teacher sent the groups three assignments, each to be completed in a week . In the translation assignment, the students were to assume different roles as documentalists, terminologists, translators, reviewers, typesetters, and project manager, this latter being a profile that is seldom included in the training context but that is becoming increasingly important in the labor market. The use of the SN introduced a new means of communication and learning that helped the students to improve and develop the tasks involved in each role.

Specific forums were created to allow team members to interact privately in relation to the translation assignments, the work organization, and the distribution of tasks, among other matters. Likewise, a general forum was used periodically to debate topics to be discussed in the classroom or those previously covered. An alarm system was created to signal the most important dates, such as deadlines for turning in translations, while a notes section enabled the teacher to share relevant information with the students. Finally, the network included an area that all the students could use for downloading and uploading the documents corresponding to each training unit. As project manager, the teacher had additional privileges for administrating the SN.

We used *Google Analytics*,³ a free website traffic-control tool offered by Google, to monitor the project. The different functions and simple incorporation afforded by the web analyzer make it a useful and effective traffic-control resource for website managers. Among numerous other functions, this tool allows users to analyze advanced data through dynamic tables, multiple dimensions, and filter features. Furthermore, SN managers can use *Google Analytics* to supervise reports and automatically alert users concerning important changes in data patterns.

² Box.net, <http://www.box.net/>

³ Available at: <http://www.google.com/intl/es/analytics/>

Results and discussion

Our analysis of the users' interactions with the platform revealed high participation and numerous visits to the SN. On average, the students accessed the site once or twice daily to communicate with their teacher or classmates about the coursework or to reference available materials, among other activities (figure 1). Access to the SN increased substantially on the days of and during classroom instruction.



Figure 1. Use of social network by students

The data collected show that the students used the social network primarily to access course materials. After the profile page (table 1), Box.net was the second most visited page by month, with 684 visits bounced from other pages on the custom social network (profile, forum) and 396 non-bounce visits. Moreover, we found that the students spent a greater amount of time (3:22 minutes, on average) in this section of the platform, which organizes and stores the training materials. If we compare this interaction with other SN, the time used may seem very short, but it is necessary to understand the real use of this SN. For today's students, who spend countless hours on Facebook and MySpace, faculty participation in those networks is often seen as an intrusion into a private domain. In our project the teacher is the administrator, who can review all the comments and activity of the SN. In this way, it is difficult for the students to behave as in other commercial SNs such as Facebook or Twitter, the use of which is mainly entertainment and leisure. The third and fourth most visited pages per month concern the information about the groups created by and about the members, with 236 and 186 visits, respectively. It bears noting that the fourth most visited option, with 325 visits, was the section providing information about the members of the different groups; despite this being in an academic context, it is striking that the students spent time visiting their classmates' personal pages, as in other SNs.

The other most visited options in our SN refer to the reading of the personal profiles, messages, and the participation in forums, incorporation of academic notes for the members

of our SN, the interactions developed by one of the most participatory groups, as well as the page corresponding to the personal inbox of each member.

Page Title	Pageviews	Unique Pageviews	Avg. Visits per person (Unique Pageviews)	Avg. Time on Page
First page	1,192	569	14,97%	2m 13s
Box.net Files	684	396	10.42%	3m 22s
Groups	345	236	6.21%	31s
Members	325	186	4.89%	31s
My profile	276	167	4.39%	1m 05s
Forum	197	122	3.21%	46s
Notes	160	113	2.97%	16s
Group 4	158	121	24.2%*	2m 18s
Inbox	146	78	2.05%	52s

Table 1. Average of pages most visited by the SN users each month

*The average of visits in Group 4 is based on the total numbers of people who can access to this page (students of the group and teachers)

Figure 2 shows the duration of the visits per page by students accessing our SN, revealing that 41.98% of the visits lasted longer than 3 minutes, 26.27% longer than 10 minutes, and 8.42% longer than 30 minutes. These data suggest that the users found the SN to be useful and adequate for studying the subject.

Duration of visit	Visits with this duration	Percentage of all visits
0-10 seconds	195.00	24.13%
11-30 seconds	88.00	10.89%
31-60 seconds	82.00	10.15%
61-180 seconds	104.00	12.87%
181-600 seconds	127.00	15.72%
601-1,800 seconds	144.00	17.82%
1,801+ seconds	68.00	8.42%

Figure 2. Duration of visits per page

The total number of non-bounce visits to our SN (808) show that the students accessed the site not only when in the classroom but also when at home. Our SN was private and could be accessed only by prior invitation. Google Analytics recorded the IP address of each visitor to the social network. The fact that the students accessed our SN from different places explains the greater number of visitors than participants in the experiment (278 in all).

The web analyzer *Google Analytics* counts the visits of each page on the network separately rather than the site as a whole. Therefore, *Google Analytics* shows that each time the students visited the site, they stayed for an average of 10 minutes and 28 seconds, a duration very similar to the total average registered by the most visited pages in the SN (table 1). Our SN's bounce rate of 18.19 percent reflects that students who frequently visited a specific page came from other sections of our SN, indicating that students used different features of this electronic environment. A total of 6,428 pages were visited by our users during the four months the SN site was active. Each time the students visited the site, they stayed for an average of 10 minutes and 28 seconds. Our SN's bounce rate of 18.19 percent was useful for evaluating the quality of the site.

278 people visited this site
808 visits
278 Absolute Unique Visitors
6,428 Pageviews
00:10:28 Time on Site
18.19% Bounce Rates

Table 2. Summary of SNs' data

Conclusions

Learners valued aspects of improved communication positively and appeared to associate these with changes in academic performance. Management of change is successful only when decision-making is informed by the target participants (Vickers, 1998). The academic use of SNs embodies the philosophy in which the leading role of learning-teaching processes is customized to the students' habits.

This pilot study signifies an initial contact of the application of customized SNs for the translation-training environment. Translator training is advancing towards transversal training, which focuses on the students and which integrates knowledge and skills applicable to translation processes. The use of social networks in the classroom makes it easier to apply our didactic approach, PATT, which seeks to promote teamwork, collaboration, tele-work, and the translation knowledge and skills among the by providing students some specific courses and materials during their translation training.

The results found here focus mainly on the students' time spent on the different features available in our SN and thus show the tasks developed for and the students' interests in the different sections of our SN. The figures referring to the most visited pages – the use of documentation to undertake the academic tasks and acquire information about the profile

members – and the time of staying in them confirm that the SN is a good platform to communicate with the students, giving us confidence in the benefits of using these Information Technologies in the classroom environment. In future studies, we will continue to compile data and analyze the academic use of the Web 2.0 tools, which would provide information for our decision concerning their use in course modules.

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