Ning

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Using the Social Network Service Website Ning to Supplement and Extend the English Education Environment

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CALL   Learning Community   Student Autonomy   SNS   Ning

The launch of social network service (SNS) websites such as MySpace in 2003 and Facebook in 2006 has added another dimension to how we use the Internet to communicate.   Facebook, the most popular SNS website, has over 120 million users making it the most-trafficked social media site in the world and the world's fourth most-trafficked website in the world ("FaceBook," 2008). The number of SNS website users is steadily growing, all over the world, especially among young people.   The most popular website of this type in Japan is Mixi, with over 10 million users as of December 2007 ("Wiki," 2008).   With such amazing popularity, can SNS websites be a useful platform for enhancing the English learning class-room?

This paper introduces the SNS website, Ning, and describes an online collaborative project with students from Sungkyunkwan University in Seoul, South Korea and students from the University of Shimane-Matsue campus. We used Ning to recreate in-class English learning opportunities on the Internet, encourage communication outside of class and to facilitate interaction with students in Korea. Ning social networks allow students to communicate with each other through blogs, comments, discussion forums, chat and even voice recordings. This ability for students to communicate easily, combined with the wealth of other English content that can be added to Ning, makes it a wonderful tool for English learning and teaching.   It is always available for students to use, so they have access to a teacher, interesting English content and a community of English learners.   What's more, this learning environment can be extended to include students from other countries, as we did in the collaboration project with students from Korea. Therefore, Ning may offer instructors a solution to the problem of limited class time, access to learning materials, and opportunities for authentic communication within

the English classroom and beyond.

1. What are social network service websites and how are they used?

SNS websites are 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. The nature and nomenclature of these connections may vary from site to site."(Boyd & Ellison, 2007). These sites allow a user to register with an email address and password, and are normally free of charge. Users can create an online identity for themselves by uploading personal content and media to the user's 'homepage' on the SNS site. Individual user's pictures, blogs, and other media are usually kept on the homepage, making it a virtual location to call home, for the user.

Members of social networking sites have various means of interacting. They can chose to share the contents of their homepage, such as blogs and photos, with other members as well as send short comments and messages. Members have the ability to screen who can access their homepage or block unwanted members from accessing. This gives a degree of privacy and safety, but usually members cannot totally avoid being seen or contacted. Some sites offer search options that can be used to search for others by various criteria such as name, nickname, or schools attended. For example, on FaceBook if you search for the name of a high school, it will show you all of the members' names who are associated with that school. You are not given access to any member's homepage without first getting permission, but you are free to send a message to any other member. Being able to search and contact any member on SNS websites, raises concerns of privacy and may make it unsuitable for educational use.

2. What is Ning?

Ning on the other hand, is a SNS site that can be controlled completely by one person; in this case the teacher. The teacher can create a private network that only selected individuals may access. This allows us to create a class network of students who are able to use the collaborative tools of SNS sites without the lack of privacy characteristic of most SNS sites, like FaceBook. The teacher decides who to allow or deny access to the site and has the freedom to control and modify the Ning network website in order to meet the needs of the class. The teacher can create groups, add various features, determine the layout of the site, change the site's appearance, select content to include, and add various applications and widgets. The teacher has complete control over creating and managing the network.

In addition to the control teachers have in creating and managing a Ning website, widgets and applications can further customize your Ning site to meet the needs of the class. Widgets, which are small applications that can easily be embedded into other sites, have literally thousands of functions. There are widgets for chatting, maps, games, surveys, dictionaries, news, video and a host of other things. Applications are similar to widgets but they are included with Ning and can also be added easily by the teacher to perform a variety of functions. For example, a widget used for polling can be used to let your whole class vote on the next essay topic they will write about. Widgets and applications allow the teacher more creative ability designing Ning to fit the needs of the class.

3. Why should we use Ning for English language education?

An important advantage to using Ning is that it can extend your positive class environment

outside the physical classroom. There is only a limited amount of time that our students can be in the English learning environment of the physical classroom. Outside of the classroom there are distractions, such as other class assignments and jobs, and time for improving English skills is limited. However, with Ning networks, we can create a virtual classroom and learning community online that can be conveniently accessed anytime. In the Ning network site students can have discussions, collaborate on writing projects, do peer-editing, give and reply to feedback and do almost everything that you would normally do in a physical classroom. With this network of students we can create a community of learners to increase the time our students have for English learning, practice and acquisition. We are not limited to the couple of hours a week of classroom lessons.

Ning websites not only extend the time available for participation in the English classroom, but also allow instructors to do things that normally are not possible in the physical English language classroom. For example, the teacher can invite ESL students from other countries to share and collaborate online in the Ning classroom website allowing students in other countries to participate in our student's course and English learning. Students can share media, such as video, audio, pictures and games with any other student in the network. Students can express themselves through writing or speech and can share that expression simultaneously with all of the other Ning network members included in our site.

Ning gives the students the ability to access and comment on each other's work. In the traditional classroom, student writing for example, had a very limited audience of the teacher and perhaps another student who reads it for peer editing. With Ning networks, all student work and submissions can be viewed by all of the member of the network. Student writing provides a wealth of English reading input that is easy to read, interesting (because friends and classmates wrote it), and interactive due to the fact that students can add their comments. It is also instructive for the student to receive feedback on their work from not only the teacher but also her classmates.

Having access to everyone's work can be a source of motivation and feedback for students. Simply knowing that everyone else in the course will be able to read one's work may be a source of motivation to write well. A student's perceived inability to write at a similar level to her classmates, for example, may encourage her to work harder. The teacher can feature particularly good writing as well, and make it a source of pride for the student who wrote it. Examples of good student work can be very encouraging as well as informative for students who are not sure about the teacher's desired results for an assignment. Student writing that has been featured as an example of what the teacher wants helps clarify the desired outcome for a writing assignment and give students a clearer image of what to achieve. Incidentally, the exemplary student work may likely be a good source of comprehensible input for the classmates who read it.

In regards to course management, Ning gives the classroom a location to store student work and resources. Normally teachers have to file all the student papers that have been collected throughout the course. Student work that is submitted to the Ning network is listed clearly on the students' homepage. There is no question of whether it was turned in or when it was turned in. The date and time is automatically added to any submission. Ning stores all submissions so students and teachers can easily access previous work, confirm submissions and teachers do not need to bother with storage and

filing.

Experts on language education agree that comprehensible input is paramount for second language acquisition to occur. Ning in the ESL classroom is an ideal platform for delivering large amounts of interesting, comprehensible input to your students. This input is available in the form of English interactions with other members, content and media. Ning facilitates easy communication with other members through comments, chat and messages. Student created content, such as videos, writing and audio files, are also sources of useful input that will likely be relatively comprehensible because the student levels in the class are similar. The media added to the site by the teacher, such as links to web articles, should also be high interest and comprehensible.

4. How can Ning actually be used in English language courses?

In general, Ning can be used to do the same things you would normally do in a particular course. For example, if debate is a major activity in your course, you could have online debates between students or groups of students using a chat widget, such at Meebo. The comments of every student who contributed to the chat can be saved and are viewable by the instructor. This allows the teacher to assign a debate and be able to see individual students contributions and participation. The same would apply to a speaking class where students are required to orally describe a picture or give a short speech on a particular topic. This can be done in the virtual Ning network classroom with the web application Voicethread. Students can record their voices talking about a picture or theme and we can also have other students add responses orally or in writing. Ning can be used to recreate many of the learning opportunities that students have in class in addition to the collaboration that is possible with other students around the globe.

5. Collaboration Project

In the collaboration project that our students did with the class of Korean university students, we focused mainly writing projects that members would read and respond to. My students wrote self introductions, interviewed a Korean partner, uploaded self-introduction audio files for the Korean students to hear, created animated cartoons, posted blogs on a variety of topics, and worked with their Korean group members to write a final persuasive essay and creative story. In addition to the writing my class did for assignments, they also spent considerable time writing in response to the written work the Korean students submitted.

For the final persuasive essay project, groups were created randomly with two Japanese students and 4 Korean students. The group function on Ning allowed us to create a separate page for each group where the students could have group forums and discussions. All members could see the group pages but they would have needed to join the group in order to have added content on a group page other than their own. The six person groups collected their ideas on the group page, mostly through forum discussions, and shared in writing sections for the persuasive essay. The essay topics were on student-selected topics such as, plastic surgery, the Peking Olympics, westernization, and the gap between the rich and poor.

The students enjoyed a lot of authentic communication with the students in Korea. The knowledge that English was the only medium for communication helped emphasize the importance of English for global communication. Starting with limited interactions, such as informal questions about interests,

the students could begin to develop an interest in each other that motivated our students to learn more and share more with each other. The intrinsic motivation to develop friendships with the Korean students led some students to regularly access the site outside of class and even after the course was finished. The students at Sungkyukwan University were more proficient in English and that led to some difficulty for our students to understand what they had written, but our students were still able express their ideas through carefully written responses and ask questions to clarify meaning. I think the results could have been better had the levels of the students been similar but the chance to interact in so many interesting and beneficial ways through Ning was, I think, a very rewarding experience for the students.

6. How does Ning compare to Moodle?

According to Joshua Davies, an expert on using Ning,

"Moodle is a teacher managed course platform to which you can add social network functionality On the other hand, Ning is a social network system to which you can add classroom functionality. If your course is mostly teacher-centered with a lot of quizzes and drilling then Moodle may be better for you. If your course is community-based and you want to make the most of student interaction, then perhaps Ning is a better option." (J. Davies, personal communication, November 2, 2008).

Your classroom goals and teaching style will most likely favor one system of learning management over another. However, in my experience Ning is much easier to use and share with others than Moodle. Students and teachers can learn to use Ning quickly and easily. It is easily shared because it is simply a website that is hosted on the Internet - there is nothing to download and no need to use a server. Like other SNS sites, Ning provides each member with a homepage where students can collect and manage their content and media. Moodle simply has a profile with the ability for students to create blog entries, but other students cannot respond to the blog. Moodle doesn't allow students to upload media such as pictures, video or music as Ning does. Moodle is missing some of the interactivity and features that are built into Ning because it was created primarily for an academic setting controlled by the instructor. For example, a student on Moodle cannot just start a forum. The teacher needs to start the forum and then students can contribute. The whole framework of Moodle is more teacher-centered and Ning is more student-centered.

Moodle is much better for any type of evaluation, however. Ning doesn't offer any grading functions, tests or quizzes for evaluation. New widgets and applications are being developed to meet this need but currently Moodle is better for testing students. Moodle has many other functions and setting for managing homework submissions, such as a deadline function, that Ning doesn't have yet. Moodle is a system made for the classroom but as a result it may limit student involvement because of its teacher-centered characteristics. Ning however, has some trouble meeting the needs of a normal classroom because it was created for the purpose of interaction between members in social networks. Ultimately the needs of your classroom will determine the best alternative for managing your course materials and promoting English learning for your students.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have introduced the SNS website, Ning, as a potential tool for extending and

supplementing the English language classroom and briefly talked about how Joshua Davies of Sungkyukwan University and I used Ning to encourage student collaboration in our courses.　The structure of Ning websites encourages student-centered, autonomous English interaction through various means, such as chat, short comments for feedback, blogs, discussions, voice recording and video. This interaction can take place mainly outside of the classroom thereby increasing the time students have for English learning and practice.　Ning stores all the students' submissions and allows access to all of the content for members of the network.　This provides a wealth of student-generated input for students to interact with and respond to.　Ning is private and managed by the instructor, so only students and collaborators invited by the instructor have access to the class network.　Ning is a platform with many options that may be adapted and used creatively by instructors to support and improve student interaction and learning between students in the classroom and with students across the world.

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