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**EXPERIENCE OF USING OF SOCIAL NETWORKS IN
EDUCATION**

Botagoz Khamzina (a)*, Lyazzat Baimanova (b), Idiya Fakhrudanova (c), Aina Khamitova (d),
Akbot Bekseitova (e)
*Corresponding author

(a) 97 fl., 23-15st., Astana, Kazakhstan, be_khamzina@mail.ru, 87025884663
(b) 76 fl., Abai st., Kokshetau, Kazakhstan, ljasat@mail.ru
(c) 76 fl., Abai st., Kokshetau, Kazakhstan, agrokgu@mail.ru
(d) 76 fl., Abai st., Kokshetau, Kazakhstan, aina_hamitova@mail.ru
(e) 76 fl., Abai st., Kokshetau, Kazakhstan, bekseit_at@mail.ru

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is the analysis of the educational potential of Internet social networks. To achieve the research purpose the following methods of research were used: the theoretical analysis of scientific and methodical literature on the research problem, researching various technologies of the generation Web2.0; supervision, questioning, interviewing, and testing; the qualitative and quantitative analysis and the comparison of the obtained data. This work deals with the theoretical aspects of organising an educational activity in social networks of the Internet, and the analysis of foreign and Kazakhstani experience of applying social networks in the educational process of schools and higher education institutions. The article highlights the basic principles of work and key characteristics of communication in social networks, a model of remote and interactive training based on the social networks use as a pedagogical tool. Based on the analysis done a number of potential opportunities of social networks in an educational space are identified. The work also analyses the main tendencies of the development of social networks and the related prospects of using them as a pedagogical tool.

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Keywords: Internet, social network, educational activity, student, learning activity



1. Introduction

Nowadays, it is difficult to imagine our life without the Internet and without information. It captured the whole world and all spheres of our activity. The Internet became a platform for the barrier-free transfer and exchange of information, knowledge and communication of people from different cities and countries. Today we see that social networks become the most universal instrument of communication and the most popular service for the most part of Internet audience. Prompt progress and continuous updating in the field of information technologies give the chance to use the opportunities of the Internet technologies as an effective means of training. When using the global Internet network the information and educational environment is formed, which fully allows realising modern technologies of training. In these conditions the subject of using social networks as a pedagogical tool becomes extremely topical.

It is particularly topical among foreign researchers, as in their works a social network promotes cooperation and exchange of knowledge (Mason, Rennie, Johnson, and Johnson, 2007, 2008, 2004), shifts the role of the teacher from an instructor to a partner (Beldarrain, 2006), and brings real practical use in education (Conole, & Culver, 2010), etc. In the Russian dissertation researches and scientific articles, the pedagogical potential of social networks is viewed from different positions: as a means of informatising education and developing distance training, and also as an upbringing tool (Smyshlyayeva, 2009). Researchers consider qualitative and quantitative characteristics of a social network as a subjective image of interpersonal interactions and its temporary dynamics, developing the methodical bases of organising training of information security on the basis of telecommunication resources of the Internet (Matrekhina, & Altufyeva, 2006, 2008). Kazakh researchers have not yet considered a social network as a pedagogical tool, although researches in the field of information and communication technologies in the Kazakhstani education system are sufficient.

2. Problem Statement

With a rather wide range of studied aspects of using an educational potential of social networks, and with the increasing interest of teachers and scientists to information technologies of training, it is possible to note also that due attention is not yet paid in practice to applying social networks for out-of-class (after lesson) educational activity of school and university students in the aspect interesting for us. Therefore, there is a problem that is defined by discrepancy between a high significance value of the Internet technology means in the educational process and an insufficient level of using their opportunities in the system of training school and university students; between the need of introducing new forms and training methods in the educational process in practice and an insufficient elaboration of a students' network training model. The existence of these contradictions also defined the relevance of the research subject chosen by us.

3. Research Questions

Research questions are the theoretical aspects of organizing an educational activity in social networks of the Internet; the analysis of foreign and Kazakhstani experience of applying social networks

in the educational process of schools and higher education institutions; potential opportunities of social networks in an educational space; analysis of the main tendencies of developing networks and the prospects of using them as a pedagogical tool.

4. Purpose of the Study

The research purpose is the analysis of the educational potential of Internet social networks.

5. Research Methods

The following methods of research were used to achieve the research objective: the theoretical analysis of scientific and methodical literature on the research problem, researching various technologies of the generation Web2.0, supervision, questioning, interviewing and testing; and the qualitative and quantitative analysis and the comparison of the obtained data.

6. Findings

The term ‘social network’ was introduced in 1954, before the emergence of the Internet and modern Internet networks, by James Barnes, a sociologist from ‘The Manchester School’, in the work ‘Class and committees in a Norwegian island parish’, which was published in the collection ‘Human Relations’. There, Barnes defined a social network as ‘a system of dots, some of which are connected among themselves. The dots of this system are people, and the lines connecting these dots specify that people interact with each other’ (Barnes, 1954). On the Internet, the social network is a program service, a platform for the interaction of people in a group or in groups. In relation to the Internet, it is a virtual network which is an instrument for ensuring services, connected with the establishment of contacts between its users and also different users and the information resources corresponding to their interests established on sites of the global network (Danilina, 2010).

The first social network on the Internet appeared in 1995 with Classmates.com. The American software programmer Randy Konrads created a website through which the registered users found and kept in contact with friends and acquaintances, with whom they dealt during their whole life. Today, Classmates.com has more than 40 million users (mainly from the USA and Canada) (Samoylenko, 2010). Prior to 2000, virtual social networks developed very slowly. Only in 2002 the first of the most popular social networks today — Friendster — started a beta-version in the form of a private network. Actually, the rapid development of social networks began since 2003 when there appeared networks that are giants today, such as LinkedIn, MySpace, Hi5 and Tribe. In 2004, Orkut and Facebook appeared, and Friendster was launched for mass use. In 2005, Bebo and Yahoo! 360 appeared.

In Russia, the first social network, Moi krug (My Circle), appeared in 2005. It was successful in large numbers and bought by Yandex in March 2007 (Bulavkina, 2010). In 2006, on the Russian segment of the Internet appeared two more very successful social networks, Classmates and In Contact. These two networks rushed onto the RuNet and literally made a real revolution. The first social network in

Kazakhstan was ON.kz, which appeared in 2010. Now there are more than 20 social networks in Kazakhstan.

The results of numerous researches show that social networks have captured more than half of all Internet users. Those authors concluded that social networks possess a huge potential, and they give tremendous opportunities of interaction for the new generation (Purim, Feshenko, and Mozhayeva, 2008, 2011). About 10 years ago experts and researchers understood the extraordinary influence of the Internet on education, as well as the potential that follows from the features of social networks and communication characteristics in them.

Theoretically, as a similarity of a social network, it is possible to consider any online community whose members participate, for example, in forum discussions. A social network is also formed between members of a thematic community created on any service of blogs. Today, social networks have a number of additional opportunities, in comparison with the instruments of users' communication that existed earlier (Bulavkina, 2010). Social networks differ from each other in their general orientation, various opportunities for users, different requirements and interface. Understanding these peculiar features is important for revealing the opportunities of using social networks as an educational tool.

The basis of a social network is made by the user profiles. Each user of any social network registers his or her profile in which he or she enters certain information about himself or herself using set fields. Such fields can include first name and surname, photo, sex, relationship status, birthdate, hometown, religious and political views, and contact information, as well as personal information, such as activities, interests, favourite movies, music, books, games, favourite places, etc. (Purim, 2008). Unlike a personal page on the Internet, which a person can arrange as he or she likes, place on it whatever he or she wishes, and include any information, profiles of users in social networks are, as a rule, unified now. The majority of social networks at present do not allow considerable variability of arrangement and placing information of this or that kind. Moreover, administrators of the majority of social networks also watch the authenticity and reliability of provided information, as well as its strict compliance to the appropriate fields of a profile.

Thus, a distinctive feature of the majority of social networks is the maximum reality of communication for the Internet, that is, in social networks people using their real names, showing their real photos and communicating with the same real people. A modern social network usually has the following standard services: the storage of a personal card with contact information, an online address book, an online organiser available from any computer, the storage of a user's multimedia data, an opportunity to limit communication with undesirable persons, etc. These services vary from resource to resource however any user receives his or her own 'residence' on the Internet.

The main feature of new generation services are instruments for searching needed contacts and the establishment of communications between people. Having a profile already allows using them. Unlike blogs, social networks do not give such ample opportunities for the publication of any texts on a personal page. A person keeping his own blog places in it on its own behalf any texts of any format and volume, thus having an opportunity to draw attention directly to himself or herself, to earn a certain reputation and to increase popularity of his or her name through his or her texts. In social networks, on the contrary, there is practically no possibility of writing and placing an author's texts for everyone'. These social

networks have a visible system of contacts outside a user's direct friends. Thus, the user receives necessary information on people whom he or she does not personally know but whom he or she can easily contact.

A group of researchers interested in studying some object can achieve their purpose by inviting users to the group, as well as by placing certain information and moderating the group discussion. During the research we made a theoretical analysis of methodical, psychological and pedagogical, scientific and technical and didactic literature on the using opportunities of the Internet technologies. This research phase revealed a distinctive feature of training by means of social networks, which can be called remote and interactive training expressed in the possibility of acquiring knowledge due to interactivity, i.e. interaction with other participants of the educational process 'at some length', i.e. at a distance.

The main idea of a technique of remote and interactive training is reduced to the creation of a special interactive virtual environment in which the trainee would gain knowledge in the form most comfortable for him or her and when it is convenient. Nowadays, there are various models in the modern theory of distance learning, such as an integration of full-time and distance forms of education; network training (autonomous network courses; information and subject environment); network training and case technologies; and distance learning on the basis of interactive television or computer videoconferences.

With regard to our research, the model based on the integration of classroom (lectures, seminars, workshops, etc.) and distance and interactive forms of education (webinars, videos, videoconferences, forums, discussions, teleconferences, etc.) is most acceptable. This model assumes an individualisation and at the same time a broad interactivity in training, which is considered to be the most perspective in modern high school education as it increases the possibilities of independent and group deepening in the studied material, creates conditions for using research approaches in training, independent and group information search for solving a problem, and the ability to work with information individually, in a team or in communication. The model of this kind intensifies the educational process.

Studying the researches in the field of using information technologies reveals a problem of an organisational character: on what basis can distance and interactive training be organised? The Internet social network becomes one of the most acceptable and applied platforms for this model of training.

In recent years the issues of applying social networks in education have been extensively discussed in the world pedagogical community. Many methodologists are sceptical about the possibility of using networks as a pedagogical tutorial, as traditionally social networks are considered an environment for spending free time and entertainment. Definitely, social networks cannot be the only means of network training, but their educational opportunities are obviously underestimated by educational institutions. Interest in social networks is connected with the need for educational institutions to establish direct effective communication with educational process participants and consumers of educational services. The network community will serve as an additional 'informal bridge' between a teacher, a student, a future student (a school student) and an employer. In our opinion, the initial negative opinions of critics will be removed, and efforts will be rewarded with a serious and competent approach to the organisation of educational activity by means of social networks (Skripnikov, 2006).

Today, the most popular social networks are Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Google+, LinkedIn, In Contact, Classmates and My World. Definitely, in recent years, we observe the change of ways and forms

of people's communications on the Internet. Social networks managed to realise technically what modern people need, namely, public social tools and ways of interaction for the creation of one's own educational or work zone. Their potential is not small, their opportunities are multidimensional and their efficiency is no longer in doubt, in any case, in foreign practice.

The choice of social networks as a platform for organising distance and interactive training has a number of arguments. The principles of creating many social networks, such as identification, communication, presence on a site, relationships, groups, reputation, exchange, search and integration with other offers, are very well suitable for the creation of an educational group, a class in an online space and in a social network. The placement of an educational resource on the basis of social networks automatically establishes direct effective communication between a teacher and a student, as well as between a student and a student. It ensures the continuity of an educational process and deeper planning of students' educational and research work, which is not limited by the framework of classroom lessons. It can be also noted that social networks make teachers more socially available for students with respect to communication. The following main characteristic of social networks is that the network participants themselves fill their contents and that there really are connections established between the participants. Due to the need for studying the opportunities of using social networks in education, the West poses a topical theory of social training that assumes people study most effectively when they interact with other trainees within some theme or some subject. Richard Light researched and proved the need of social interaction in the process of training. He concluded that one of strong factors of students' success in education is their ability to create and participate in small research groups (Light, 2001). Social training shifts teachers' attention from the subject content in educational activity to trainees' interaction surrounded by this content. For this reason foreign experts in electronic training urge software developers to create the control systems of training integrated with popular social services. So far the effective and proved integration of learning management systems with social services does not exist today. The pedagogical community has to go to Facebook, Twitter, In Contact, and other social networks to experiment in organising social (distance and interactive) training of school students and university students.

As for Kazakhstan and the Commonwealth of Independent States, here this tool is only coming into use. It did not gain everybody's recognition; this is rather a distant prospect. Successful examples are not many so far. Little attention is especially given to the aspect of using social networks for training. The major question is, of course, how useful this technology of using social networks can be when applied to our Kazakhstani education system. However, it will not be bad if we know about new technologies and their opportunities. As Hippocrates said, 'Everything is medicine, and everything is poison – it is all about the dose', i.e. everything depends on reasonable application.

An important step for further modernisation of the Kazakhstani education system is the implementation of the electronic training system project, which is an important direction of the education development State program. **Electronic training, or eLearning**, is a new paradigm of training when the relations of the educational process participants are built in the conditions of their mobile distance interaction, and the most important thing is that all trainees are given equal opportunities.

There is an experience of applying social networks in the educational process of Kazakhstani educational institutions, but, in our opinion, it is rather small so far. For example, there are about 30 Twitter accounts for Kazakhstani higher education institutions (from 139 working higher education institutions) or their separate faculties. Some schools of Astana and Ust-Kamenogorsk are already testing lessons with using social networks. Nazarbayev schools take the leading position on electronic training. The sites of these schools have appendices 'Virtual School' and 'Vacation School' where applicants can be registered for training at regional Intellectual school, receive tasks and recommendations about their making, and get the teacher's individual advice. Pupils can also see the records of online lessons and seminars, as well as post their questions.

L.N. Gumilev Eurasian National University started Kazakhstan's first student social network, Enulife.kz, in 2011, focusing on involving students in scientific and innovative activity. The network has groups headed by scientists of the university. By involving students in the network, scientists stimulate them to scientific work and, at the same time, create for them an opportunity to be members of a certain prestigious community.

During our research we studied, compared and analysed the successful foreign experience of applying a social network as an educational tool at some schools and higher education institutions in the USA, Great Britain and Russia. For example, one of the popular social networks used for educational purposes by many foreign school students and teachers is Glistar, which allows users to create easily free interactive posters (glogs) and 'to interact' with the dynamic contents. This is a means for obtaining the first design skills in drafting presentation materials, working with multimedia, subsequent publication of the project and its promotion on the network.

Another example of the effective use of cloud technology (Web 2.0) at school and higher education institutions is the social network 4portfolio.ru. The network is for creating and keeping a web portfolio of the trainee and the teacher. The web portfolio is a combination of portfolio and social network technology opportunities. Giving an educational institution its own social mini-network ensures the full control of the safety of a trainee's personal information. This option will allow for expanding the possibilities of a higher education institution site, providing an internal information space for communication between students, parents and teachers - a space with access closed off from strangers.

Whereas the experience of using the social network 'Facebook' for training is rather rich in the USA and European countries, the same cannot be said about Kazakhstan. So, for example, according to the research of the University of Massachusetts, 98% of higher educational institutions in the USA have official pages on Facebook, 84% on Twitter and 86% on YouTube (Barnes, & Lescault, 2012). Moreover, 90% of the questioned educational institutions in the USA think their experience of using social networks in the educational space is successful, and that social networks promote the development of eLearning and education, offering new technical and methodical solutions of educational tasks.

So, for example, in 2010 the London School of Business and Finance (LSBF) initiated transforming traditional training in classes with the possibility of online education by means of Facebook (Barnes, Lescault, 2012). The school's new training courses permit attendance at a high-quality lecture with one mouse click. The school specialists developed a special application for Facebook - LSBF Global MBA™ <http://apps.facebook.com/lsbfglobalmba/> - for the technical realisation of this idea. So, an

available, useful and easy-to-understand system is created on the basis of the well-known Facebook software product.

Students from all over the world can subscribe for free online lessons and do a course in a mode convenient for them at mit.edu, where students can not only see lectures, but also can keep in contact with the school lecturers and teachers, as well as participate in discussion panels, even with the leaders of various business and finance industries (Barnes, & Lescault, 2012). These examples show that we should stake popular social networks for the development of electronic training, its organisation and its methodical support now and in the future.

The results of our questioning among students of Brunel University London are further proof of the prospects of applying social networks in training. We found 29% of the students use the Internet for training and 59% think their training success depends on it. A further 46% prefer Facebook, 45% assume that sometimes the Internet is harmful and 41% note their teachers use mostly Google, YouTube and Facebook as educational tools.

The most popular and interesting social resource for Russian users from 14–24 years old, and also the leader on the project visits by users, is In Contact: 45% registered users on this resource visit it daily and 70% more than once per day. Every third participant of In Contact spends more than 30 minutes of his or her time on one visit. Because of its high degree of activity and involvement of modern Russian students, In Contact was chosen as a platform for organising **educational work** with applying information and communication technologies. We should distinguish the philosophical faculty of Tomsk State University among the Russian higher education institutions. It has an interesting experience of using In Contact and blog-hosting 'blogspot.com' in training students of humanitarian faculties (Feshenko, 2011).

Let us reveal in more detail the experience of the faculty of arts at the Shuisky State Pedagogical University, which actively uses social networks as platforms for training. The teachers of the faculty of arts chose two services as a technical base for distance training: the social network In Contact and the blog-hosting '**livejournal.com**'. Subgroups corresponding to studied disciplines were formed on the basis of the service 'community' available on the site In Contact. Each subgroup has its substantial filling, which is structured by type: participants of the group, photo, video and audio materials, documents, discussions, news, appendices and polls.

The additional opportunities of In Contact are the service '**statistics**' through which teachers can trace students' activity in the group, which sections are most popular, what materials are downloaded and what information students share with each other. The news line allows the project participants to know the slightest changes to the process of the educational activity. The teacher can watch students' work, coordinate their actions and direct their search activity to the necessary course. In Contact does not limit the volume of the posted information; therefore, teachers and students can create a global information layer in a studied subject. Teachers use the communities created on In Contact to supplement interaction between the teachers and students; they do not replace classroom lessons.

The tendency to the integration and all-inclusiveness increases the educational opportunities of social networks. As for the arrangement and the interface, the main tendency of social networks today is increasing opportunities for customising the appearance and the structural filling of a user's profile. It

also raises educational possibilities of using social networks, because the message transmitter can operate in the most effective form by means of the most effective remedies.

Since 2008 the software in the field of Internet technologies has given the ordinary user the chance to create and post on online social networks. It has led to the sharp growth of the number of small social networks organised for the communication of a certain narrow layer of people; for example, people with similar interests, professions, or residence in a particular area or city. The prospects of using such networks as a pedagogical tool are not totally clear, but such narrowly targeted social networks will attract a very uniform audience that will allow to send to this audience the personal messages complying with it that will be most effective.

These tendencies in the development of social networks create a situation where the all-inclusiveness of the audience and simultaneous use of the maximum quantity of opportunities given by modern Internet technologies elevate an educational activity onto a much higher level.

Thus, having analysed and having estimated the successful foreign and small Kazakhstani experience of using and tendencies of developing social networks for educational purposes, it is possible to distinguish the following potential possibilities of applying social networks in distance and interactive training:

1. The novelty of technology is one of the motivating factors in training. Almost each student is familiar for a long time with Facebook, Twitter and other networks; is positive; and wishes and is ready to do his or her educational activity using **a social network.**

2. They are a free resource. **Many schools and higher education institutions have to buy expensive special software products (autonomous control systems of education) and keep servers for storing digital data and organising communication in a network.**

3. Students are keen on social networks more than on other electronic resources. **Though autonomous control systems of education are known and used by teachers, students use them less often and only if necessary.**

4. The functionality of social networks allows quick sharing of important information with students, what they learned and reminders—and not only with their fellow students.

5. Social networks have a wide range of opportunities and interaction forms, meaning, a variety of communication forms. They provide ample opportunities of collaborations between students and teachers, and impart skills for communicating with students and teachers—and not only with their higher education institution.

6. The experience of using social networks for solving educational and research tasks helps students understand their powerful potential opportunities in their future professional activity.

7. The information support of a training course by means of a social network allows students who are absent from classroom lessons or students with disabilities to watch an educational activity, as well as to take a direct and active part in it online.

8. The possibility of students and teachers continuously interacting in a network at a comfortable time for them provides continuity in the educational process. A teacher becomes more socially available to students with respect to communication.

9. The use of social networks by teachers for solving their professional tasks raises and improves their level of communicative competences and their knowledge of applying computer technologies without additional efforts.

10. Social networks enable a teacher to deliver a classroom lecture in an interactive mode.

11. The educational process can also involve parents.

12. A virtual class created in a social network can be available to students everywhere, irrespective of their location, by means of a mobile phone and the Internet.

13. A teacher does not need to print and distribute hands-on training material in paper. It is enough to attach the material as a file and upload it to the virtual group on the social network.

14. Timid students, usually not active in classroom lessons, feel more comfortable and become more active participants of an educational process and self-assured in networks.

15. Necessary files can be uploaded in advance on social networks. Many will be able to see them right at a lesson by means of the mobile Internet on their phones and graphic tablets, others – at home, and it is economy of paper and money.

16. Joint teacher and student planning and filling of an educational content of one's own electronic educational materials become possible. There is an opportunity in a social network to attract 'third' persons - experts, consultants and specialists in the studied area to participate in an educational process.

17. A social network pulls together a teacher and a student, the former remembers students better visually and learns their interests through the student-created profiles.

18. The formation of information and communication culture based on modern school students and university students happens in the space of a social network.

19. Some social networks have a wide choice of applications that can be used for educational purposes.

20. The clearness of the concept and the interface of social networks allow students to save considerable time for immersion into the environment of electronic training.

21. The trainees' activity can be traced through a news line. This tool prevents them from becoming puzzled in a huge information stream and to carry out effective monitoring of updating content.

22. Social networks are the powerful instruments of interacting higher education institutions and colleges with their target audience: future applicants (Khamzina, 2014).

These are only some potential opportunities of social networks from the boundless sea of opportunities that can be used by a school or university teacher unafraid of combining traditional teaching forms with new achievements in the sphere of applying Internet technologies.

On the other hand, together with the distinguished educational potential, there are problem points of using social networks, such as:

1. The lack of the convenient tools specially developed for educational purposes (for example, keeping an electronic record), as in the teaching management systems.

2. The lack of access to social networks from classrooms of schools and universities.

3. Active communication, extensive information stream and an abundance of entertaining content, together with an educational content that distracts from the educational process.

4. A high degree of time and labour needed for organising and supporting an educational process in the conditions of continuous training in a social network for the teacher.

5. The openness of an educational space to the whole Internet community, which is unacceptable or uncomfortable for an educational process.

6. The impossibility of estimating the teacher's work in **social** training for paying for his work (Khamzina, 2014)

7 Conclusion

The revealed and given problems can, we think, be solved by deeper study of educational opportunities of social networks; the development and approbation of effective techniques of their application in an educational space; by the development of special applications for social networks; the expansion of opportunities of organising and managing social training; and the definition of objective assessment criteria of the work results of teachers' and professors with using similar technologies and a fair assessment of their work. Certainly, to turn social networks into a full-fledged educational space, it is necessary to overcome a number of difficulties and problems of different character. The joint competent efforts of experts on **IT technologies**, school and university teachers are needed. It is necessary to find a balance between flexible strategy of training and the quality of teaching. On the whole, whether to try a new social network for teaching already now, or to postpone until tomorrow depends on the decision of school and university teachers. After all, teachers must first try themselves to be able to make some judgment.

Nevertheless, social networks are a powerful and effective tool, with a wide range of opportunities and unique positive features, which potential must be tested and safely be used in the modern educational world.

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