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**ONLINE LEARNING FOR FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHERS: USING SOCIAL
NETWORKING FOR CREATING AUTONOMOUS PERSONAL LEARNING
NETWORKS**

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Abstract: *This article presents the results of a research carried out in July-October 2011 throughout Europe for obtaining an overview on the usage of social networks (SNs) in the autonomous professional development of language teachers. The survey aimed at obtaining results in the following areas: most frequently used SNs, the components of professional development in which they are used, advantages and disadvantages of SNs, gender-based preferences, extent to which teachers have created a personal learning network (PLN) through the usage of SNs, extent of participation in training sessions / webinars, following tutorials as a result of involvement in a SN, self-assessment of the influence of SNs on professional development. The survey was answered by 174 teachers of mainly English, French, German, Italian, and Spanish as a foreign language. The research has been performed within the aPLaNet project. The aPLaNet project, co funded by the European Union (grant agreement no. 511460-LLP-2010-TR-KA2MP / 2010 / 4139), focuses on enabling foreign language teachers to create their own PLN and to become more familiar with ICT tools that can be used both for professional development (establishing contacts with other colleagues and experts, using new tools) and also for classroom activities with learners. The project also makes available for foreign language teachers a mentoring programme for improving ICT and social networking skills. Based on the results of this research, a series of guides, videos and papers have been created that show language educators the meaning of PLNs at a personal level. The recommendations and guidelines on which these instruments have been created are presented in the final section of the article.*

Keywords: *personal learning network, social networking, ICT tools for foreign language teachers*

I. INTRODUCTION

As the OFCOM research (2008) indicates, the rapid growth of social networking that has been noticed over the last two to three years is indicative of its integration into the daily lives of many people. In parallel with this, there has also been considerable media coverage of the growth of social networking, its potential positive outcomes and concerns about the way that some people are engaging with it.

As trends surrounding social networking move rapidly, audience figures change as well but presently the most widely used social networking sites are *Facebook*, www.facebook.com, *Twitter*, www.twitter.com, and the community platform *Ning*, www.ning.com.

This article presents the results of a survey answered by foreign language teachers throughout Europe. And the purpose of the survey was to report on how foreign language teachers use social

networks (SNs) and to identify potential for professional development through the use of SNs. The SN usage was examined for purposes of usage, the networks preferred, main advantages and disadvantages considered when choosing what network to use or if to use any at all, social networking communities preferred by language teachers.

The rationale behind this endeavour is that SNs have become a powerful tool in communicating with colleagues world-wide and a resource for professional development and learning not only in teaching but in a variety of fields and, at the moment, these opportunities are not visible enough or formally accessible to teachers. The reasons for the limited usage of SNs vary from country to country but most frequent one of the following: lack of digital literacy, reticence against sharing (personal) information online, lack of a clear benefit, misleading information received via various media.

The survey was carried out within the aPLaNet project as part of a research and piloting programme to enable foreign language teachers to use SNs for professional development and to raise awareness on the benefits of using them for career development, maintaining motivation and solving problems encountered in the classroom.

The main aim of the aPLaNet (Autonomous Personal Learning Networks for Language Teachers – grant number: *511460-LLP-I-2010-I-TR-KA2-KA2MP*) is to enable the usage of social networks and web-based educational resources as a path leading to wider possibilities of self-learning and professional growth while creating a personal learning network by using these possibilities. Within the aPLaNet project, a teacher guide has been created that is meant to enable language teachers to create a personal learning network (PLN) by familiarizing themselves with a set of social networking sites and ICT tools: communication and web-conferencing tools, voice-discussion tools, blogging resources, collaboration tools (including wikis), digital storytelling tools, presentations, writing skills training, audio resources, word clouds, social bookmarking tools.

The resources presented in the teacher guide and the guidelines for enabling foreign language teachers to use social networking for creating a PLN are piloted within the project with a group of voluntary teachers (around 400 at the present moment) that are to report on the efficiency of the tools presented and of the processes for enabling educators to create their own PLN by means of filling in a pre-piloting and a post-piloting questionnaire. These teachers are involved either in a self-access piloting that allows them to learn – by using the aPLaNet webquest – on their own or in a mentoring programme. The mentoring programme allows teachers wanting to develop their social networking skills to find a mentor and to work together on their needs for social networking or for usage of ICT tools.

According to Graham Stanley (2010), "a Personal Learning Environment (PLE) is a flexible system that helps people take control of and manage their own learning. It consists of a number of different tools (a blog, wiki, social networks, etc.) that a teacher or learner chooses, around which he or she builds a group of people that can be turned to for knowledge, help, advice and support. This is the teacher's or learner's Personal Learning Network (PLN)".

II. SURVEY METHODOLOGY

An online survey was created, using google.docs, a free online tool which allows for the collection and processing of data gathered to investigate the uses of the three most widely used SNs, namely, Facebook, Twitter and Ning. In addition, this survey intended to find out participants' attitudes towards each of these three SNs, their individual preferences, their perceived benefits and shortcomings as well as to find out specific online communities within these three networks which the participants found of value.

The collected data was subject to a qualitative and to a quantitative analysis (with the help of the statistics generated by google.docs once the results of the survey have been collected).

174 participants completed the identifying social networks for autonomous professional development questionnaire. The majority of the teachers (162 participants, 93%) were teachers of English, 18 participants (10.3%) taught German, 19 participants (11%) taught French, 7 participants

(11%) taught Italian and 23 participants (13.2%) taught Spanish. 1 participant taught Turkish, 1 taught Portuguese and 1 taught Croatian.

The results below, showing a high degree of involvement in social networking on the part of the teachers, are influenced by the dissemination channels on which this survey was published in the sense that teachers with already an opening to using ICT and social networking were able to answer. This however does not affect the goal of our survey since the aPLaNet project is aiming at finding out which are best practices illustrated by teachers using SNs and what are the online communities they consider for professional development.

In terms of professional experience, the respondent teachers were teaching for an average of 13.95 years with a range from 2 to 35. These teachers were members of an average of 3.16 social networks with a range from 0 to 9.

III. RESULTS OF THE SURVEY

3.1. Most frequently used social networking websites

Participants were asked what particular social networking tools they had memberships with. 169 participants (97%) stated that they were a member of Facebook, 127 participants (73%) stated that they were members of Twitter, 106 participants (61%) stated that they were members of Google+ (since at the time of the survey this SN was rather new, this high number indicates one more time that the teachers answering the survey are up-to-date with state of the art social networking tools), 94 participants (54%) stated that they were members of LinkedIn and 50 participants (29%) were members of Ning.

Participants were allowed to provide multiple answers to what memberships they had with different social networking tools. Figure 1 shows the percentages of the different combinations of memberships of social networking tools of participants.

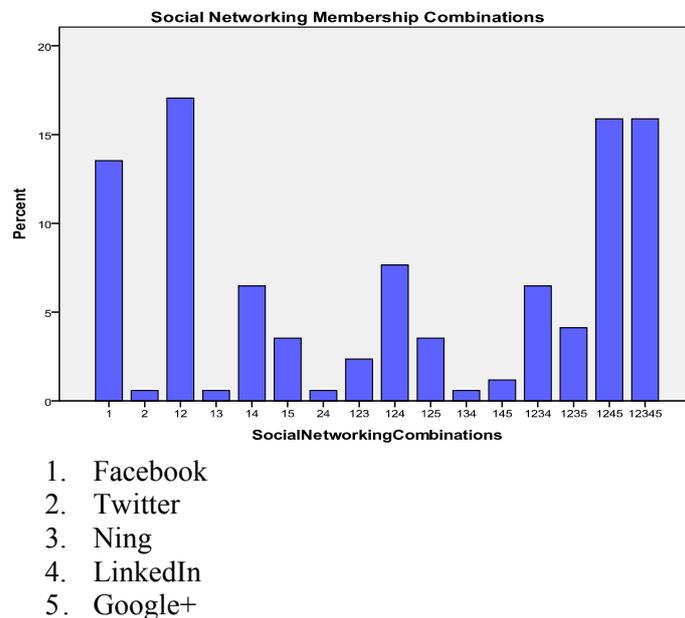


Figure 1. Different combinations of memberships of social networking tools

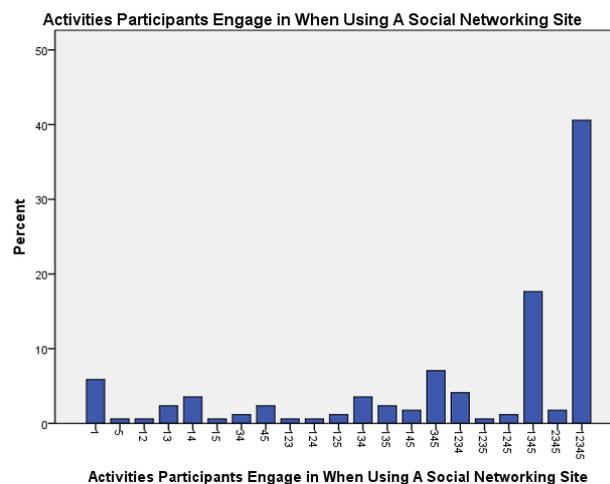
3.2. Main activities carried out on SNs

Participants were asked what were the activities for which they used SNs and multiple answers were allowed. 148 participants (85%) specified that they use them to contact friends and family, 145 (83%) stated that they use them to keep up-to-date on what is happening in areas of interest/work, 139 participants (80%) stated that they use them to talk to colleagues and share

resources, 132 participants (76%) stated that they use them to learn about work-related seminars, courses, and webinars and 87 (50%) stated that they use them to socialise and meet new people.

The distribution of activities in Figure 2 suggests that the majority of the participants use social networking sites for all of the activities listed. Participants declared they spent an average of 14.05 hours a week on social networking sites with a range of 0 to 45.5. Participants were also asked if they used different social media sites for different things, 93 participants (54.1%) stated that they did and 79 participants (45.9%) stated that they did not. 37 participants (21%) stated that they had received training and attended tutorials on how to use social networking sites effectively, 83 participants (48%) stated that they had not and 53 participants (30%) stated that they had not received any training but they would like to. The majority of participants (107 participants, i.e. 66% had created a network of professional contacts using a social networking site.)

Figure 2 shows the distribution of the different combinations of activities that participants engaged in when using a social networking site.



1. Contact friends and family
2. Socialise / meet new people
3. Talk to colleagues and share resources
4. Keep up to date on what's happening in areas of interest / work
5. Learn about work-related seminars, courses, webinars etc.

Figure 2. Different combinations of activities when using a social networking site

3.3. Advantages and disadvantages of using social networking

Participants were asked to provide what they considered to be the advantages and disadvantages of Facebook and were permitted to select multiple answers. 148 participants (85%) stated that Facebook made it easy to connect with people, 144 participants (83%) stated that Facebook made it easy to share content such as photos, videos, links and documents. 108 participants (62%) stated that Facebook had a user-friendly interface, 95 participants (55%) answered that it was a quick method of disseminating information and 76 participants (44%) stated that it was fun to use.

When looking at the distribution of the multiple answers produced by respondents, the majority of participants stated that Facebook has all five advantages. In terms of the disadvantages of Facebook, 106 participants (61%) stated that privacy regarding personal details was an issue, 102 participants (59%) said that it was not always a safe environment, 95 participants (55%) indicated that Facebook did not have adequate filtering of irrelevant information such as advertisements, 56 participants (32%) indicated that it was time consuming to maintain contacts and 15 participants (8%) stated that they required a certain amount of technical expertise indicating that the majority of participants found Facebook relatively easy to use. The majority of participants consider the main disadvantages of Facebook to be that it is not always a safe environment with inadequate filtering of irrelevant information and has privacy issues regarding personal details and photographs.

100 participants (57.4%) believed that the main advantage of Twitter was the speed of disseminating information, 99 participants (56.8%) believed that it was easy to connect with people, 67 participants (39%) believed that it had a user friendly interface, 64 participants (37%) believed that it was fun to use and 52 participants (30%) believed that it was easy to share content.

When looking at the distribution of the multiple answers produced by respondents, the majority of participants stated that Twitter has all five advantages. In terms of the disadvantages of Twitter, 55 participants (32%) believed that the main disadvantage was that it was time-consuming to maintain contacts, 40 participants (23%) believed that Twitter required a certain amount of technical expertise, 30 participants (17%) believed that it was not always a safe environment, 25 participants (14.4%) believed that Twitter did not have adequate filtering of irrelevant information and 24 participants (13.7%) believed that Twitter was dangerous because of spammers.

31 participants (18%) believed that the main advantages of Ning were that it was easy to connect with people and had a user-friendly interface. 27 participants (16%) believed that it was easy to share content, 12 participants (7%) stated that the speed of dissemination of information was an advantage and 10 participants (6%) believed that it was fun to use. In terms of the disadvantages of Ning, 5 participants (3%) indicated that it was not always a safe environment, 15 participants (9%) stated that it was time consuming to maintain contacts, 4 participants (2%) indicated that there was inadequate filtering of irrelevant information, 20 participants (11%) stated that it requires a certain amount of technical expertise and 12 participants (7%) stated that privacy and spammers was an issue.

3.4. Usage of SNs by gender

123 females (71%) and 50 males (29%) completed the questionnaire, 1 participant did not specify gender. A Mann-Whitney U test indicated that there was no significant differences in the activities that males and females participated in when using a social networking and there was also no significant difference in the time spent per week on social networking sites in relation to gender. There were also no significant differences in the number of activities engaged in between males and females. Mann-Whitney U tests indicated that females reported finding significantly more teaching resources through their contacts and learn significantly more about useful teaching techniques through their contacts. In terms of the number of advantages and disadvantages identified for each of the three social networking tools, the results were as follows: females identified a significantly greater number of disadvantages associated with Facebook and a significantly greater number of disadvantages associated with Twitter. Females also identified a significantly greater number of advantages associated with Ning.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

In terms of using SNs, we have observed that the networks that are most frequently used in personal social networking also predominate in the usage of foreign language teachers, be it for personal or for professional purposes. A significant result is the fact that the teachers answering the survey use social networking mainly for professional purposes (more than two thirds of the responders – for each question regarding purpose of usage) rather than for personal socializing and entertainment (approximately 50%). The main advantages of using Facebook appear to be a mixture of easiness to connect with people and to share information, those of Twitter are related to speed of disseminating information and easiness to share and find content. Ning is mainly preferred for ease of use and the user-friendly interface.

Most networks present to foreign language teachers the same disadvantages: unsafe environment, the process of maintaining contacts is time-consuming and there is irrelevant content received through spam. In terms of online safety, we have noticed that Facebook is considered to be the least safe while Ning is considered to be the safest – and this is explained by the fact that Ning websites are social networking communities handled separately by one group with a purpose so they can be easily converted to professional communities only for those interested, with the content being log-in protected. Some examples of Ning communities are “classroom 2.0” and “The Educators PLN”

The results of the survey indicate that the potential of finding development opportunities and teaching or learning resources through the use of social media is high for foreign language teachers. Moreover, educators active in the virtual surroundings stop being direct instructors and start being facilitators, offering resources and tracks that help to develop their own process of learning according to Montero and Roldán (2008).

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