

Social Networking Course- A Self-regulating and sustainable context for creating Open Educational Resources at the University of Mauritius.

Sandhya Gunness, University of Mauritius

nowbuths@uom.ac.mu

Main theme: **Formal Education**

sub theme: **Revamping Teacher Education**

Social Networking module- Why, what, where and how

The ILT 6023 Social Networking is one of the core modules in the MSc Educational Technologies (MSc EdTech) program at the University of Mauritius dispensed through the Virtual Centre for Innovative Learning Technologies (VCILT). The 45hr -3 credit online module is assessed purely on a continuous assessment basis and active participation and community-building is what is required from the students. Since all the courses on the MSc EdTech are fully online, students are encouraged and directed to use as many online collaborative tools as possible, giving them the opportunity to “sample, test and adopt” ICT-related tools for their own teaching and learning purposes. The responses we have had from past cohorts have been very encouraging, especially primary-level educators who find that their own pupils are more interested, more lively and participate much better in class compared to traditional chalk and talk methods. In fact, the MSc Ed Tech students are given many assignments and activities that are situated in their working environments, where they work with their own pupils to integrate technology into their teaching: testing simulations, evaluating different pedagogical strategies, using concept mapping tools and designing animations for testing and reuse in their classes. Amongst the objectives of the module, students are expected to be able to define terms related to the Web 2.0; identify characteristics of social networking sites; analyse the impact of social networking within the Mauritian context; participate constructively in different social networks and write collaboratively using wiki technology. The wiki on our Moodle e-learning platform is used as an introduction to wiki-writing techniques and we then move to WikiEducator where our students register and follow the WikiEducator Learning4Content (L4C). This gives them an opportunity to participate in an international activity with a community of educators or learners from around the globe and also immerse into actual OER-related activities.

Teaching that is modelled on Research

The Virtual centre for Innovative Learning technologies (VCILT), centre created by the University of Mauritius is responsible for providing and developing on-line web-based education and telelearning at the university and throughout the country. We have adopted Moodle as our e-learning platform since 2004 clearly in preference of the socio-constructivist philosophy behind the design of the learning management system and the fact that it is freely available to download and modify and being open-source, its

development is helped by hundreds of other developers around the world. A fair share of our resources and tools are also Open educational resources (OERs), freeware and creative commons-licensed as the University faces dwindling funds and cost-cutting demands from government administrations. Lecturers at the VCILT have also had the privilege of actively participating in and contributing towards OER- related forums and capacity-building workshops such as the first VUSSC (Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth) workshop, SIDECAPI (Staff Innovation in Distributed Education in the Caribbean, African and Pacific countries) an Edulink project as well as ADEA (Association for the Development of Education in Africa) workshops on OERs. Manifestly, OERs and ICT integration for education form a very important aspect in our programmes, and we realise the importance and impact that technology has on education – for learners but more importantly for educators. However, our own experience and research (Iyoshi & Kumar, 2008) show that ICT integration has been very slow to pick up in the education arena. Rightly, according to these authors, “The education system is a complex system of powerful drivers- assessment, curriculum, inspection/quality requirements, funding flows, promotion criteria- none of which have changed significantly in recognition of what technology offers. These drivers determine the ways in which teachers and learners orient their energies and are judged by others. Unless the drivers of the education system change, the behaviour of its members will not change.” The authors were referring to developed countries in this statement, and one can imagine the even bigger hurdles developing-country educators have to face as the leaders themselves are not comfortable with technology implications. As a solution, Laurillard (2010) proposes a learning system in which teaching takes research as its model, where educators would teach following the same way they would conduct research and eventually freely and openly share best practice teaching. She thus redefines Dalziel’s “Open source teaching”, (Dalziel, 2005) and proposes four essential communitarian characteristics of “Open teaching” shared by the research community that lecturers and teachers can expect:

- 1) Support for some personal development in how to teach;
- 2) The means to build on the work of others to design their approach;
- 3) The means to experiment and reflect on what the results imply for their design and their understanding;
- 4) The means to articulate and disseminate their contribution.

At the VCILT, perhaps owing to the innovative nature of our programmes and also since the technology is so fast-evolving, our teaching has resembled and reflected very much Laurillard’s proposition as we have always strived to combine and refine our teaching through action research and designing socio-constructivist approaches and situated learning activities for our modules and learners.

Parallels between Laurillard’s characteristics and some of the learning activities for the Social Networking module are found in the Learning4Content activity.

The Learning4content project.

Tell me and I'll forget, show me and I may not remember, involve me, and I'll understand.

Much of situated learning concepts lie within this native North American proverb which is the motto for the Learning for content (L4C) project. The L4C program provides training via a set of tutorials often delivered in online forums in learning4content workshops. The online forum, which started (L4C) on the 27th of April 2008 and lasted one week regrouped students, educators, professionals as well as amateurs from all around the globe wanting to learn more about the world of wikis. To date there have been 46 online workshops and participants are encouraged to expand the networks and building capacity among peers and teachers/educators to develop **free content** for learning, and prioritize wiki skills training in developing countries. We get our students to enroll on the L4C online workshops so that they can benefit from the international exposure, participate with people having similar interests, learn about and integrate wikis into their own teaching and eventually become “wikibassadors” themselves. The facilitators on the workshop, previous L4C participants themselves, provide excellent support and coaching for the students as observed in the reflections of the students’ journal. These activities form part of their continuous assessments and students are marked based on the quality of interactions and quality of resources that they propose through the learning contract that they have to sign when enrolling on the workshop. Along with wiki-writing skills, students experience online publishing and scrutiny from the world as student Isma reflects below in the Figure 1: Extract from <http://WikiEducator.org/Wikiflexion/Reflexions>

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Isma

I stepped into the wikieducator world as a tentative visitor and I now feel like I am an active part of a big family! I initially thought that wiki skills would be quite hard to acquire. Afterall, would a chemistry teacher with only a very basic knowledge of wikis be able to cope with an extensive workshop? Would I be able to work collaboratively with people from all over the globe? Just a fluttering of apprehension mixed with a good dose of excitement!

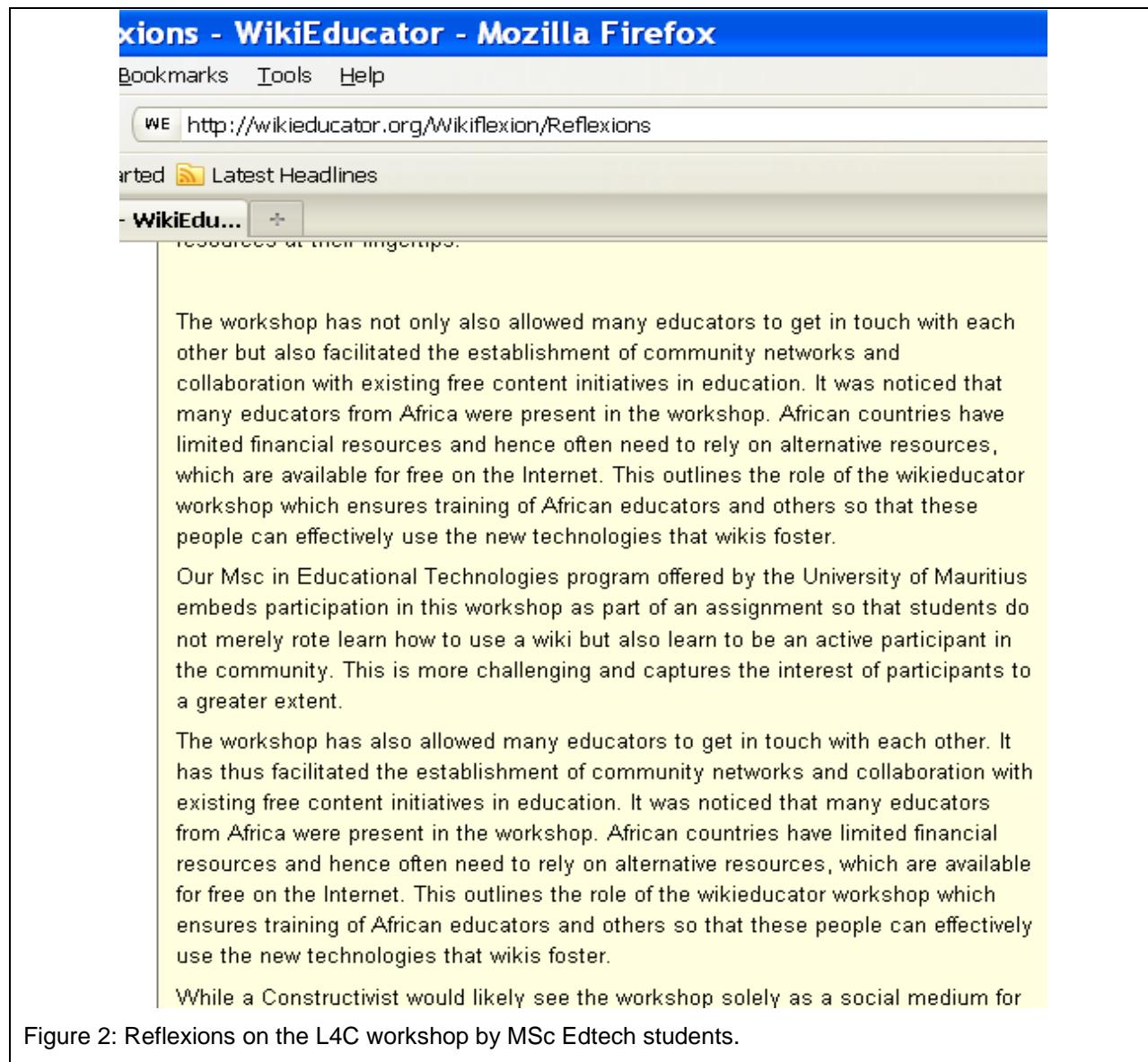
The apprehension was however, quite short-lived. Wayne ensured that everyone had a very warm and hearty welcome. I believe that the role of a coordinator/facilitator or teamleader in a workshop like this one is crucial to its success. If these "key persons" are able to earn the respect of the members and have proper power of coercion, then members would respond accordingly. Through continuous feedback, words of encouragement and good availability, Wayne has made sure that the learning environment was kept cordial and appropriate! Daily instructions and tutorials were quite easy to follow. If I

Fig 1: Extract from <http://WikiEducator.org/Wikiflexion/Reflexions>

Some reasons behind integrating the L4C project into the Social Networking module pertinently coincide with Laurillard’s suggestions for a bottom-up approach for accelerating the growth of Open Education and a new kind of teaching community:

1) Support for some personal development in how to teach;

This is achieved through the actual wiki-training sessions where the students realise the potential of Wikis and the international movement of the facilitators who contribute, collaborate and create meaningful content and learning experiences for new-comers. The pedagogical approach of cognitive apprenticeship and situated learning provide the support for these newcomers to develop both personally and professionally outside the confines of the “classroom walls” As portrayed in their reflections in the figure 2 below:



The screenshot shows a Mozilla Firefox browser window. The title bar reads "Reflexions - WikiEducator - Mozilla Firefox". The address bar shows the URL "http://wikieducator.org/Wikiflexion/Reflexions". Below the address bar, there are several tabs: "Bookmarks", "Tools", "Help", "WE", "Latest Headlines", and "- WikiEdu...". The main content area displays text from a page titled "Wikiflexion/Reflexions". The text discusses the workshop's role in allowing educators to connect, establish community networks, and collaborate with existing free content initiatives in education, particularly noting the involvement of African educators despite limited financial resources.

The workshop has not only also allowed many educators to get in touch with each other but also facilitated the establishment of community networks and collaboration with existing free content initiatives in education. It was noticed that many educators from Africa were present in the workshop. African countries have limited financial resources and hence often need to rely on alternative resources, which are available for free on the Internet. This outlines the role of the wikieducator workshop which ensures training of African educators and others so that these people can effectively use the new technologies that wikis foster.

Our Msc in Educational Technologies program offered by the University of Mauritius embeds participation in this workshop as part of an assignment so that students do not merely rote learn how to use a wiki but also learn to be an active participant in the community. This is more challenging and captures the interest of participants to a greater extent.

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While a Constructivist would likely see the workshop solely as a social medium for

Figure 2: Reflexions on the L4C workshop by MSc Edtech students.

2) The means to build on the work of others to design their approach;

The wiki by nature of its architecture and philosophy provides a rich environment where visually appealing page edits and formats by advanced users can be viewed by newcomers who would like to emulate the special effects onto their own wiki-pages. Potentials for learning design and page layouts are but a basic part of wiki-editing, while the creation, refinement and co-authoring of pedagogical contents within an

international community proved to be a greater learning experience for many of the students. Being themselves teachers they appreciated the collaborative and altruistic atmosphere that reigned on WikiEducator and could easily compare to the “don’t care less” attitudes of their superiors and colleagues in certain educational establishments.

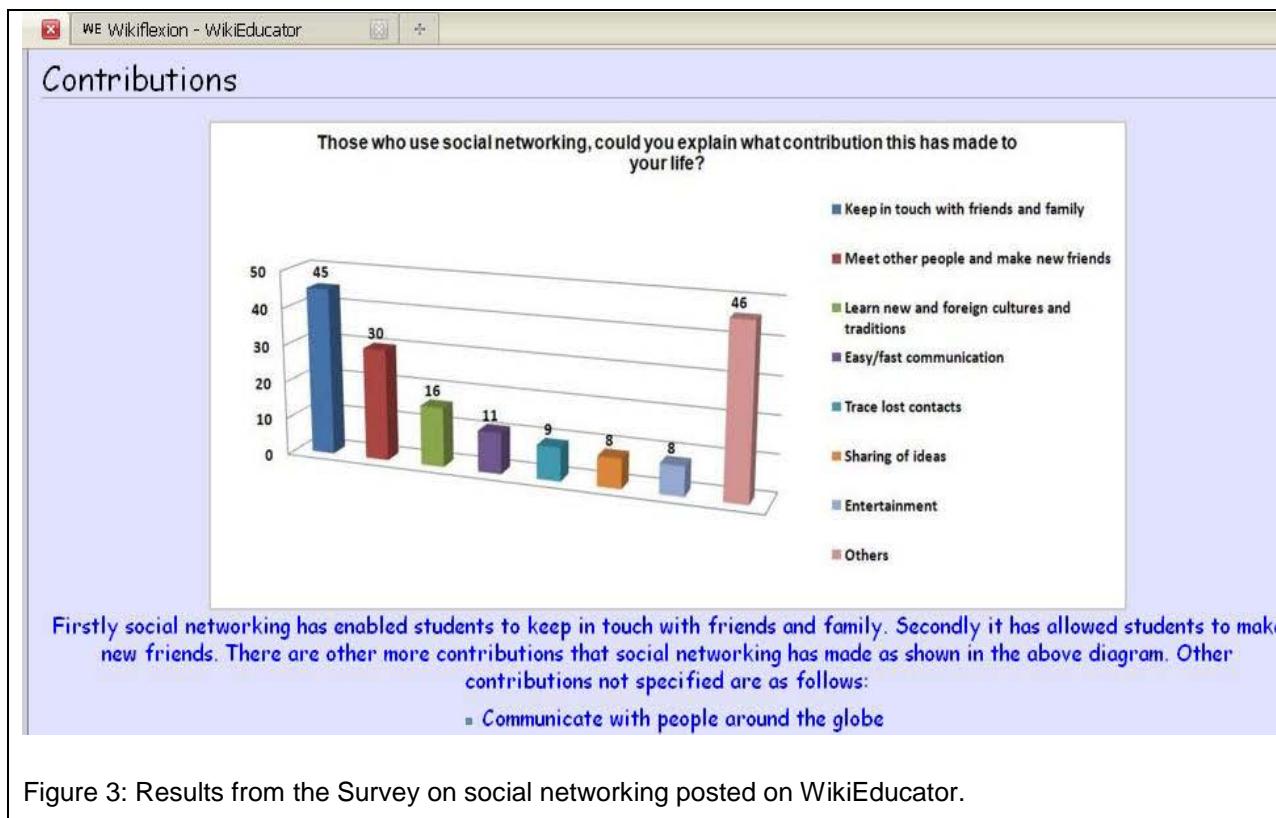
3) The means to experiment and reflect on what the results imply for their design and their understanding;

The wiki is always a work in constant progress. As mentioned in the Kiwi EU-funded Project: “Communal knowledge that is generated collaboratively by a group of people with shared tasks and similar interests is always going to be superior to any isolated expert’s advice when it comes to reflecting the topics, challenges, questions and answers that are relevant to this particular group. And unlike many corporate KM systems, a wiki is not bound by the restraints of a too complex or hierarchical workflow design: Anyone can ‘be the boss’ and have the last say – if only for a fleeting moment, until the horizon of shared knowledge expands and the wiki is edited again.” ([Kiwi –Knowledge In a WIki](#))

The enduring, insatiable quest for more knowledge, better organisation of content and possibility of recognition are both great motivators for the research community and with the social media contributing users, drawing the parallels even more into light. As students, we love to experiment with new technology, novel approaches and new pedagogical designs, and as teachers, it is our duty to update our knowledge based on state-of-the-art content, tools and techniques pertinent to our fields – so that we can impart this knowledge to our students. Through the MSc Edtech, we thus reach out not only to our students, but also to their students and institutions, thus bringing a cascading effect for the dissemination of ICT and technology-enhanced teaching and learning.

4) The means to articulate and disseminate their contribution.

Needless to emphasise, the ability of the wiki to disseminate content as they are contributed by individuals and groups. In this activity, the students were required not only to complete the workshop successfully, but also to publish a [collaborative article](#) based on their personal reflections about the WikiEducator philosophy. Another batch of students actually carried out a survey and wrote about [Social Networking](#) sites amongst the student population in Mauritius as shown in figure 3 below. The possibility of easily accessing a mass of students and getting information regarding their social networking preferences and uses helped the researchers to pool in their results together for the purpose of this activity.



Self-regulated learning environments

The ILT 6023 Social Networking module offers its learners the opportunity to reflect on their own teaching modes and the effect of the internet on education- One of our favourite resources for the ILT 6032 Social Networking module refers to John Seely Brown's "Minds on Fire" where he aptly describes "The latest evolution of the Internet, the so-called Web 2.0, has blurred the line between producers and consumers of content and has shifted attention from access to information toward access to other people. New kinds of online resources such as social networking sites, blogs, wikis, and virtual communities have allowed people with common interests to meet, share ideas, and collaborate in innovative ways. Indeed, the Web 2.0 is creating a new kind of participatory medium that is ideal for supporting multiple modes of learning." (Brown, 2008).

The activity performed through the EL4C workshop allowed for learning that was situated and as Lave (2000) argues: "Knowledge needs to be presented in authentic contexts — settings and situations that would normally involve that knowledge. Social interaction and collaboration are essential components of situated learning — learners become involved in a "community of practice" which embodies certain beliefs and behaviors to be acquired. As the beginner or novice moves from the periphery of a community to its center, he or she becomes more active and engaged within the culture and eventually assumes the role of an expert."

Through the L4C workshop, the students were required to acquire, develop and use cognitive tools (Wiki technology, graphic designing, conducting surveys etc) in an authentic activity so as to be able to create

content and contribute OERs back to the WikiEducator community. Contrasting sharply with traditional learning, wikis are thus highly learner centred and self-regulated learning environments where learners take responsibility for what and how to learn due to the open and online setting. Successful students develop self-regulatory skills by applying meta-cognitive strategies to monitor and regulate the learning process. (Pintrich, 2004). Contributions by the students act as “paybacks” to the community and thus increasingly build up the contents on the wiki as Open Educational Resources. Decisions about what and how much to contribute back is left to the discretion of the student and also forms part of the learning process. By making learners more responsible of their own learning process, and putting them in situated, technology-enhanced learning contexts we get them to transform their traditional views of education and embrace a newer vision of learning to take into account **identity** (who are we becoming?) **community** (where do we belong?) **meaning** (what is our experience, our culture?) and **practice** (what are we doing?) Thus they raise questions about how developing countries institutions and educators make sense of their new educational environment (What does it mean to teach in the new global knowledge environment?). As Senteni (2006) states, "Implicitly, the effective use and contextualisation of OER (i.e. re-processing) depends on existing educational systems in which team building, collaboration and sharing are new processes that cannot be taken for granted. ODL approaches engage learners in a community building process, going from an individualistic vision of learning and knowledge to an instrument mediated, socially distributed one. This paper takes the notion of team-building, collaboration and sharing further towards an accelerated pathway for creation and dissemination of OERs through scaffolding and empowering students (who are also teachers) in meaningful and authentic tasks with a real community. This proves to be a powerful model since students earn marks while at the same time constructively build networks and propose quality content freely.

Conclusion

In retrospection, ten years after the creation of the VCILT, catering for a niche market of “technology-enhanced teaching and learning”, and facing increasing resistance from “hard-core” research communities snubbing e-learning in Mauritius, we still bask in our students’ joy and praise as well as in our utter convictions about our work. It gives us real pride when we find our students benefiting from the course to be able to propose sound Technology plans and actually secure funding to be able to carry out their plans, when we see their personal reflections on particular modules and how their teaching has been transformed owing to the activities set, when we thrust them into self-assessment and peer-reviewing techniques, and most importantly when we learn from them! Designing learning activities that involve contemporary thinking, futuristic approaches but still based on sound learning theories such as situated learning and socio-constructivism, provide our students with relevant tools and empowering them to be able to “be the change you want to see in the world” as quoted by MK Gandhi.

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