

Chapter 5

The Advantages of a Ning Social Network Within a Higher Education Program

Laura Summers

Ning is a Web 2.0 platform used to host over 600,000 online social networking communities for groups of like-minded people (2008). In this article, I will explain how I came to use Ning to create a social network for students in the *School Library and Instructional Leadership* (SLIL) program.

Background

I am the coordinator for a *School Library and Instructional Leadership* (SLIL) program at the University of Colorado Denver. In May 2007 I began to search for ways to create a free, easy-to-navigate, online community for students in the SLIL Program. I was specifically looking to create some type of social network because I believed that social networking is a great way for people to have discussions, apply knowledge, and collaboratively work together to solve problems. However, I was not sure what this social network should or could look like.

I was looking for a space that would provide a few key things. First, I wanted a visual environment where students could communicate and collaborate with their classmates outside of class. Second, I wanted this online community to provide me a way to stay in contact with our full-time working students. Third, I was hoping that an online community could help foster professional growth for students by providing a space where they can learn from each other's experiences in their jobs as K-12 educators. Fourth, students in the SLIL program are expected to be well versed in using various forms of technology. Often though our students feel overpowered by their tech-savvy millennial students. I hoped that an online community could provide students in the SLIL program an authentic way to practice technology skills like uploading video clips, creating a podcast, and writing a blog. Finally, students in the SLIL program take either classes online or one Saturday a month. Despite the obvious benefits of completing a program this way for working adults, students often begin to feel isolated and cut off from the university. Therefore, I wanted to create a space that would help students feel more connected with the program and the university.

I began experimenting with online groups such as Yahoo groups and Google groups. However, I was not happy with these online groups; they couldn't meet each of my previously mentioned goals. Through networking with other teacher-librarians, I learned about the nation-wide *Teacher-Librarian* network (see: <http://teacherlibrarian.ning.com>) which is the grand-father of all Ning social networks in the school library profession. After learning more about it, I decided to pilot a smaller, closer-to-home program network in Ning—which I called the 21st Century Teacher-Librarian Ning. The Ning can be accessed at <http://21centurylibrarian.ning.com>. Initially during the pilot, 27 students joined the Ning as a part of an initial class. The pilot was a success and now two years later, 205 members have joined including students, alumni, faculty, and librarian-friends. In the following pages, I briefly elaborate on how you can create a social network of your own

in minutes using Ning and some things to consider to help ensure your social network is a success.

Building a Social Network

Setting up a basic social network site in Ning is quick and easy and only takes about 30 minutes. I briefly describe the four steps it takes to get your Ning up and running.

Step 1: Create Account

All one has to do is to go to www.ning.com to create an account. Through this process, the person creating the account becomes the network creator, and chooses a network name and domain address. For instance, the network name of the Ning I created is 21st Century Teacher-Librarians and the domain address is <http://21centurylibrarian.ning.com>.

Step 2: Customize Appearance

The first thing a network creator should see when he or she logs into Ning is a big green menu bar with three big buttons called “Invite Members,” “Customize Appearance,” and “Add Content.” By clicking on “Customize Appearance,” the network creator can change the look and feel of the Ning by selecting a theme and then changing it as needed. The appearance can later be changed by clicking on the “Manage” tab.

Step 3: Add Content

After the appearance has been set, the network creator can add content by clicking on the “Add Content” button or by clicking edit on any of the default pods (which are called “Features” in Ning). By default, your Ning will most likely have a “Latest Activity,” “Members,” “Photos,” “Videos,” and “Events” feature but others can be added under the Manage tab.

Step 4: Invite Members

But perhaps the most important step to setting up a social network is to invite members. This can be done by clicking the “Invite Members” button, which as mentioned earlier, is temporary displayed on the front page when you set up a new Ning. But you can later invite members to join your Ning by clicking on the “Invite” tab in the top navigation.

Just like that with four quick and easy steps you should have your social network up and running in Ning. However, keep in mind that a social network’s success depends on the people that make up the network and how it is managed.

Managing a Social Network

The network creator of a Ning, or anyone who has been given administrative privileges, will have access to the Manage tab in the top navigation menu bar. Among other things, under the Manage tab, one can accept new members, ban members, and control features as needed. The network creator can also set up the structure of the network site under the manage tab. For instance, at the top of the main page in the direct center of the 21st Century Teacher-Librarian site, visitors can read a welcome note encouraging students to ask questions of each other within a forum or post a blog entry. There is also a link to the program website and a list of members with thumbnail

photos. In another network I created for the Colorado State Library's Power Library Program (see: <http://www.cde.state.co.us/cdelib/powerlib/index.htm>), visitors are greeted with the goals of the program in the top center, a prime real estate area. Ning is very versatile and customizable; it allows the network creator to move content around based on the users' needs.

Popular Features

Ning gives users the ability to add a number of different features. Educators need to think about the purpose of their Ning when deciding which features to add and where to add them. I will briefly address some popular features I have used in the Nings I have created.

A popular feature to add to the main page of a Ning is a list of upcoming conferences under the events feature. Students can even be invited to an event through an email link. Using the event feature in this way, I have been able to inform students about professional development opportunities in the area. I have also used the notes feature to create a space on the Ning to list program requirements standards and links to state standards and endorsement requirements. Two other popular features in Ning are the blog feature and the forum feature. Both of these features enable faculty and students discuss various topics within Ning. Currently, sock puppet poetry slam; adopt-a-Dewey; movies vs. the books; wikis; and media literacy are just a few of the topics currently featured on the main page of the 21st Century Teacher-Librarian network. Students know immediately where the most recent conversations are taking place along and what topics network administrators, who are also program faculty, want to highlight. Another useful feature is the activity feature. The activity feature offers shows the most recent activity in the Ning—in other words, it shows which forums have been updated the most recently. Finally, public (i.e., open to anyone in the Ning) or private (i.e., only open to specific members) groups can also be created to provide specific spaces for groups with similar interests or needs within your social network. Within private groups, the owner has to invite participants to join that section and members-at-large cannot view any posted information from that sub-group.

While not necessarily a "feature" but another nice and notable capability of Ning is the ability to prompt new users when joining the network to answer required or optional questions. For alumni and internship purposes, I have used this option to collect information about members of the social network so that I can follow students beyond graduation and possibly find good internship locations for current students within the program.

Limitations

Perhaps the biggest limitation of running a Ning for students is the time requirement. While it is easy to setup, in my experience, you have to continually contribute to the social network if you want it to last. I attempt to post a blog entry once a month about a professional experience I have had. Program instructors are encouraged to keep forum discussions updated and to use the network as a place to showcase performance-based assessments. Some courses require students to blog or to post professional links within the network.

Initially, the SLIL network was setup to be a private network which meant that only approved members could access the network. However, we learned that setting it up as a private function kept the Really Simple Syndication (RSS) feed option from working. RSS allows members to know when a response to a question has been answered or a new blog is posted. We felt that it was extremely important to have RSS

enabled so we eventually opened the network to non-members. Among other things, opening a network up can put a network at the risk of spammers.

Finally, one last possible limitation of using a Ning is that the free version of the application includes a column of advertisements always viewable on the left side of the screen. Ning has tried to market to the network's audience and for the most part the advertisements have not created a distraction from the network's purpose. However, the only way to eliminate the advertisements is to add premium services. Currently to go ad-free, it costs \$24.95 per month.

Conclusion

“As with any new technology the answers do not lie within the software or the virtual space, but rather within the human capital: the collective wisdom that emerges from collaborative work with our peers” (Summers, 2009). Ning also means peace in Chinese (Bianchini, 2007) and one might even hope that with the ability to communicate globally through a virtual network, there might be greater understanding among different cultures through social networking.

References

- Bianchini, G. (2007, April 11). The story behind the Ning name. *Ning Blog*. Retrieved from http://blog.ning.com/2007/04/the_story_behind_the_ning_name.html
- Summers, L. (2009). The value of social software in school library instruction, communication, and collaboration. *Knowledge Quest*, 37, (4), 48-50.

Bio

Laura L. Summers, Ph.D. is an assistant professor in the Information, Technology, & Learning Program in the School of Education at UC Denver where she directs the online and hybrid ILT-School Library graduate degree programs. Laura's online instructional design, teaching, and research practices are based upon her 20 year career spanning business, K-12 education, and higher education. Her dream is to be a part of social, engaging, collaborative, reflective, and transformational online and hybrid learning opportunities.