SNS development for educational support in e-alumni project

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1. Introduction

In Japan, there has been some argument that academic programs today are often inadequate for various practical needs from the real world. The Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry, for example, has been outlining guidelines named "basic career skills" [1] for university students. The guidelines set assessment standards including items like "problem finding skill" and "self initiative skill". It is said that they plan to make a progress sheet of the skills and publish it using the standards. Despite the increasing demand for revision on university education from the outside, however, the realization of sufficient reform is not easy task for the following reasons.

(1) In general, universities focus on academic research, and hold few instructors who can offer practical knowledge for students' future careers.
(2) The needs for contemporary education are so diverse that it is almost impossible to provide adequate programs to cover them all.

As is the case with many other universities, TUFS faces difficulties providing services for the diverse educational demands from its students. It is here that we got a concept of using SNS (Social Networking Service) for educational use. SNS is a kind of website that provides community oriented services. If SNS is modified to our needs, we can inexpensively exploit the professional knowledge of TUFS's alumni who have already been contributing to the real world. The expertise of our alumni will be a valuable resource to bridge a gap between TUFS's current situation and its students' needs. In order to put this idea into action, we have begun a project which aims to support our students' studies overseas. The project, titled "Student overseas support through the use of e-alumni SNS", has been granted as a MEXT (the Ministry of Education, Culture,

Sports, Science and Technology) program of 2008, or Gakusei shien GP, under the category of "Aratana shakai needs ni taioushita gakusei shien program (in Japanese)" [2].

This paper introduces TUFS's address on the e-alumni SNS network development. Its effort will also be a useful case study on how SNS can be applied for academic institutes.

2. A framework of SNS usage at TUFS

This chapter introduces a framework of SNS usage to exploit collective knowledge of the alumni, based on the needs of assisting the students of TUFS.

2.1. TUFS's Background and its needs

Since TUFS's degree programs feature studies of 26 languages and other diverse cultures, many of its students study abroad for at least a short term. Since there are a wide variety of destinations for the overseas studies, the students need more detailed information on daily lives in the countries they choose. However, it has been hard to meet their needs with the limited budget and human resources TUFS has. In this dilemma, TUFS has started the project, "Student overseas support through the use of e-alumni SNS". The project aims at organizing alumni's collective knowledge through Information and Communication Technology, or more specifically SNS (Social Networking Service).

The system will facilitate active communication among TUFS, its alumni and students, and enable the exchange of the needed information.

To connect TUFS, its alumni and students with SNS, we found that the following two needs had to be met.

(1) Form communities based on users' majors and interests in the virtual world.
(2) Efficiently collect and exploit the expertise of the alumni from the communities.

Therefore, SNS is modified as following two points. We expect that this modification can be served as a useful reference for other universities that intend to use SNS for their students.

(1) We modified the way communities are formed: Usual SNS is open to all users and anybody can start his own community. Its members freely communicate and are able to enter in and resign from the community whenever they want. However, TUFS had to avoid irrelevant communities to be formed for the purpose of offering needed

information for its students. Therefore, we provided some basic communities as well as limiting activities in the e-alumni SNS. (See chapter 2.2 for more details)

(2) We modified the way users are administrated: To efficiently pass expertise of the alumni to the students, appropriate administration on the SNS is necessary. Users of usual SNS don't belong to any of communities when they log in, but our users belong to "home community" on their log in so that they can easily find information needed. (See chapter 2.3 for more details)

2.2. How to form communities

To form communities on the e-alumni SNS under the intention of TUFS, Study Abroad Support Office (See chapter 3.3) has been set and has assigned an administrator (doubles as an study abroad coordinator) for the SNS, who created 26 language communities and home communities (See chapter2.3). 26 language communities represent the major languages in TUFS's course.

Beside the communities formed by the administrator, the alumni users are allowed to start new communities to facilitate communication among the alumni although they have to apply and ask the administrator for creating their communities. Once their communities are ready, the administrator makes the applicants to be the members of their communities and the applicants will take over their communities' management.

Permission settings on the SNS are as follows:

Table 1

permission	University	alumni users	Students
Forming communities	○ (permitted under the guidelines for forming communities)	△ (partially permitted for the purpose of alumni communications)	× (only permitted to make a profile for himself)
Sending invitations to ask for participation in communities	○ (permitted for the purpose of committing educational plans for the students)	△ (partially permitted for the purpose of alumni communications)	△ (partially permitted for the purpose of user communications)

（○＝permitted.△＝partially permitted×＝not permitted）

By making closed communities administrated by TUFS as described, we can avoid irrelevant communities to be formed so that the users are ensured to participate efficiently in the communities they need.

2.3. How to administrate users

To pass information under the intention of TUFS's support for its students, the users profile information is divided into two categories, "Users basic information" and "Registered information by users".

"Users basic information" is provided by TUFS, using the lists of the alumni and the students, and includes their personal information such as their major and their years of school entrance. A home community a user belongs to is decided by this information. Home communities are initially set by the administrator (→described in chapter 2.2). While users of normal SNS don't belong to any communities on their log in, our users join a home community when log in.

"Registered information", on the other hand, is posted by the users themselves. The users can refer "registered information" to access other communities or members where they would like to get direct information.

3. Operations of the SNS

This chapter introduces how we realized the operations of the e-alumni SNS in line with the framework of SNS usage we have presented in chapter 2.

To realize the operations, we allocated the GP budget to purchase commercial SNS software (DB-SNS) in late 2008 and customized it. The service server of the SNS started its operations in September 2009. The server environment consists of LAMP (Linux, Apache, MySQL, PHP). The server is placed in Information Collaboration Center at TUFS.

3.1. Image of e-alumni SNS usage

Figure 1 shows the image of the e-alumni SNS usage. As described in chapter 2.3, when log in, the users including the alumni and the students belong to their home community in which they have the members of the same major and year of school entrance. To exchange information on overseas studies, the users move from their home community to a community with their major language TUFS previously prepared.

The alumni users are allowed to create their own communities and exchange various information they are interested. The student users are not allowed to make their communities as mentioned in chapter 2.2.
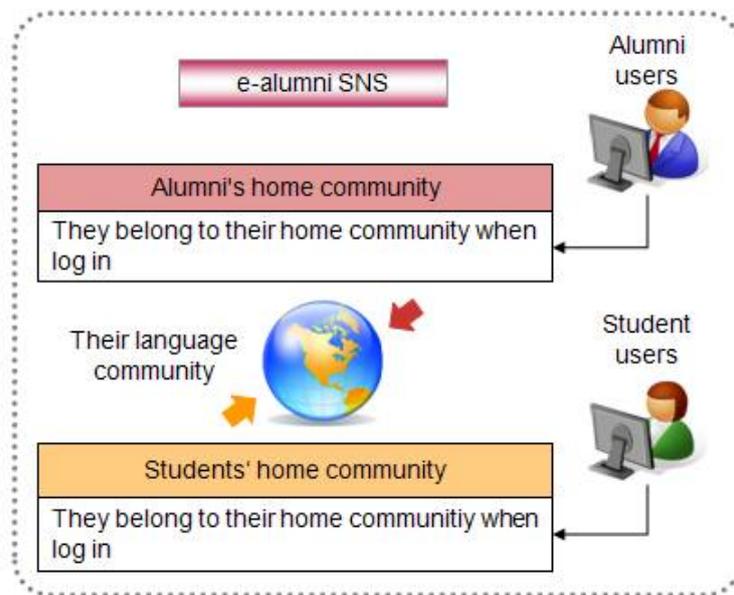
Figure 1

3.2. Operation rules

Prior to commence the operations, Study Abroad Support Office drew up a set of rules on privacy policy and terms of use in 2009.

The privacy policy is based on the Japanese Personal Information Protection Law （Article 57 in 2003） and the university's personal information protection rules. The terms of service defines the followings:

(1) The limitation of TUFS's using the data of alumni

(2) The limitation of the users' behavior in the SNS

(3) The procedure of user registration:

・Study Abroad Support Office sends invitations to confirm alumni's will to participate in the SNS by mail. IDs and passwords are sent to the applicants after identification of the applicants is confirmed.

・Study Abroad Support Office holds explanatory meetings to call for the students to participate in the SNS. IDs and passwords are handed over to the applicants after identification of the applicants is confirmed.

3.3. Operation body

Study Abroad Support Office with a study abroad coordinator (doubled as an administrator as described in chapter 2.2) and two clerks was set in TUFS's Student Exchange Division in November 2008. The coordinator is in charge of consulting

students who wish to study overseas, and facilitates communication between the alumni and the students on the SNS. Two clerks take care of the SNS operations including drawing up rules, contacting and inviting the alumni and the students, and user registration on the SNS.

The operation body of the SNS includes vice president of TUFS, who is in charge of education and students, and Information Collaboration Center, which helps the SNS server operations facilitating the use of the SNS.

4. Accomplishment of the operations and problems

This chapter introduces TUFS's accomplishment and problems in the SNS project.

4.1. Creating users data

When we started the SNS project in 2008, we only had computerized alumni's data of about 7,000 people. Other older data of alumni, expecting users of the SNS, was in a form of registry lists piled up since Meiji Period (1900), which needed to be computerized. The work of the computerization cost us 1, 600, 000 yen and one of our clerks in Study Abroad Support Office spent half a year in additional fixing work of the data. (Not full-time)

4.2. Progress of the SNS

Our progress in the SNS project is shown here.

Table 1　Progress of the e-alumni SNS project

2008	The project was adopted as Gakusei shien GP.
November 2008	Study Abroad Support Office was formed, with an administrator doubled as a study abroad coordinator and two clerks. Purchase of Commercial SNS software was made.
March 2009	Terms of use on the e-alumni SNS were drawn up.
September 2009	The SNS service server started its operations.
October 2009	The e-alumni SNS started its services. TUFS called for the alumni and the students to participate in and resister the SNS. New accounts were created for the applicants.
June 2010	We had 1300 alumni registrants and had less than 1000 actual users in them. We had 230 student registrants and had less than 140 actual users in them. Number of communities made by the alumni was 17.

Most active communities are Chinese, Photo Album, Thai, Eco Center, English and TUFS reunion.

4.3. Problems

So far, we do not have enough student users to give information from the alumni on the SNS. Despite our efforts to call for active participation, access from the students has stagnated. It is partly because they think alumni messages are only to refer, or because they concern about age difference with elder alumni. Our restriction of students' rights to create a new community might be a reason, too.

We have been considering making a survey on the SNS as well as investigating access logs and revising the contents of explanatory meetings. It certainly needs more efforts to facilitate the students to use the SNS.

4.4. Promotion for the use of the SNS

In our efforts of promoting the SNS to students, some alumni take turns to write columns on the SNS. Nine alumni have uploaded their columns so far. We plan to create an evaluation system in the SNS on the students' responses to the columns.

5. Conclusion

This paper has introduced TUFS's address on the e-alumni SNS, which allows the alumni and the students to share their knowledge on the virtual world. We will continue our efforts to realize our goal and keep analyzing the effectiveness of the SNS. When evolved into a matured system, our project will definitely be applicable for many universities.

References

[1] The Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry, syakaijin kisoryoku ni kansuru kenkyukai interim report, 2008. (in Japanese)
http://www.meti.go.jp/press/20060208001/20060208001.html

[2] Application for 2008 Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) grant, "Aratana shakai needs ni taioushita gakusei shien program(in Japanese)" 'Student overseas support through an e-alumni Program' application form, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, 2008.