**Skoole:** *A Community Proposition by Ryan Gomba*

Professor Bruckman: CS 4472 – Online Communities

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**ELEVATOR PITCH**

Social media is everywhere. We use Facebook to extend our friendships online, LinkedIn to network and maintain professional contacts, and Twitter to gather news and multimedia content from people who hold similar interests. We use sites like Last.fm and TheSixtyOne to explore music, Vimeo and Flickr to author and share our own digital content, and Foursquare and Yelp to interact within our local communities. We use social media to connect, to share, to work and to play. But rarely do we employ the power of social media to formally learn.

Skoole is an academic social network for colleges and universities. It connects every student and every professor at an institute of higher education and creates new conduits for information to flow. It enables more consistent and efficient learning outside the classroom.

Imagine a real-time network where assignments, grades, resources, events, and announcements are pushed to students over a variety of mediums – e-mail, SMS, a central website, and any service or device implementing public APIs. Imagine the ability of any classmate to contact any other classmate, without even knowing his or her name. Imagine a place where students and professors can, at any time, share links, videos, or tips related to class projects and concepts. Imagine the ability to push and pull this knowledge to and from *every* classmate, not just friends.

Imagine academic profiles – rolling resumes – that contain class lists, major declarations, work experience, and schedules that can be searched and sifted. Imagine - A student wishing to intern at a particular company or participate in a specific study abroad program can find every student who has done so before him, and contact them directly. Students can form study or project groups, creating group pages to share progress and information. They can schedule group meeting times using schedule merging to find the most convenient times.

Imagine an online destination where an entire student/teacher body lives. Imagine the possibilities such a network opens up: easier group collaboration, more viable student-professor interaction, simple task and schedule management for students, possible textbook exchange, tutoring arrangements, and more.

Skoole is a service that promotes learning, facilitates group collaboration, and enables a larger number of ties to form between students. It encourages students and professors to interact and extend learning outside the classroom. As such a valuable service in the promotion of higher education, colleges and universities will wish to implement Skoole, at nominal cost. And herein lies the beauty of Skoole’s business model: going directly to colleges and universities guarantees 100% participation among students. And priced at just $10 per student per year, 10% market penetration would give Skoole the potential to gross $150 million over ten years.

**USER SCENARIOS**

**The Student:** Ryan is a track athlete and sophomore majoring in Computer Science at Georgia Tech. Georgia Tech has decided to implement Skoole for the spring semester as a test-run. Ryan arrives on campus with books from last semester. He immediately logs in at Skoole.com, enters his course information, schedule information, and a few other academic-related profile items. He then creates a list of previously used, and currently needed, textbooks in a designated section of his profile. He browses around Skoole, finds classmates he has never met selling the textbooks he needs, and live-chats with them to arrange prices and pickup locations. Whereas the usual process would involve ~ $50 per book being “lost” through the bookstore, Ryan breaks even. Thanks to Skoole, he might save hundreds on textbooks over the next 3 years.

Right away, Ryan’s professors begin posting syllabi, announcements, and assignments on Skoole. Skoole has replaced T-Square for such uses, and does everything much better. Ryan has linked his phone to Skoole, so he receives immediate texts when assignments are graded, tests are rescheduled, and TA office hours are moved. Thanks to Skoole’s public APIs, Ryan can manage assignments, group meetings, and access course content in a variety of ways. He can visit skoole.com, or use any number of desktop or mobile applications created by third party developers. One of these integrates Skoole’s calendar events with Google calendar; another allows current classmates’ contact information to sync with Outlook.

Ryan travels to a meet one weekend and can’t regularly check his e-mail or Skoole.com. But thanks to Skoole’s push notifications, he’s notified via SMS that his Monday morning test has been postponed till Wednesday. He can put away the books and rest for his race. Ryan doesn’t want his phone number available to the entire Georgia Tech community, but would like to be notified if anyone desperately needs to get in touch. One day, a classmate finds Ryan’s Buzzcard and keys left behind in a classroom. He looks Ryan up on Skoole, and sends Ryan a message marked as “urgent.” Ryan gets all urgent messages sent to his phone. He quickly doubles back, avoiding a stressful hour of search and saving his lunch break.

For Ryan’s first group project, he must coordinate a meeting with five other team members and a TA. While finding a convenient time for everyone would normally be a daunting task – tackled with a half-hour long dialogue of text messages, phone calls, and e-mails between team members – Ryan can now create a Skoole group of all six team members and TA, and use Skoole’s schedule-merging feature to find a good time for everyone. Ryan creates a new Skoole event for Tuesday at 3PM. A notification of the meeting time will be pushed to every participant, and the event added to everyone’s Skoole calendar.

Ryan is struggling with a CS homework mid-day on Friday. He doesn’t want to bother anyone currently in class, but will be busy later and needs to finish up. He quickly heads over to the CS assignment’s page on Skoole. He views a list of those who have already submitted the assignment, and notes the status symbol indicating which of these people are currently available (not in class or not currently marked as “busy.”) He doesn’t know anyone particularly well, but it’s easy to chat one classmate up. In ten minutes, he’s finished.

Later in the evening, Ryan is working on a Proofs homework due the next morning. As is the nature of college students, so are a few other people. Ryan soon has trouble with problem number 12. He heads over to the CS 1050 news feed, posts a question about it, and moves on to the next problem. A few minutes later, Ryan sees that another classmate, John, has posted on his question with some advice. Since the professor can easily view the feed at any time, this isn’t a conduit for cheating – instead, just the opposite – real, collaborative learning. Ryan figures out the problem without banging his head on the desk for hours. Another student with similar trouble can very easily see Ryan’s post and John’s helpful hint.

Ryan is trying to decide how to spend his summer. He figures he either wants to study abroad in Spain or take a co-op he’s been offered at Microsoft. He runs a quick Skoole search and finds everybody at Georgia Tech who has listed either program under his or her profile. He sends a message to a few fellow students, and a few days and many conversations later, he’s decided on traveling to Spain. He runs another Skoole search for students attending the Barcelona 2010 program, and makes a few acquaintances. One might even turn into a roommate arrangement.

One day, Ryan finds a particularly awesome video explanation of recursion. He figures it might help his classmates out, so he posts it to the CS 1331 news feed. It quickly gets bumped up and garners the attention of the professor. The professor decides he’ll show it in class to make sure everybody sees it, and takes note that Ryan is actively searching for explanations outside of class. This might make the difference between an A and a B at the end of the semester.

On the topic of grades, Ryan uses Skoole’s gradebook to keep track of his grade in each class. Certain professors’ policies, such as dropping the two lowest quiz grades, are automatically implemented. Ryan can enter in expected grades for the remaining assignments in the semester to figure out exactly what he needs to score on his final Database Systems test. One of his professors has actually used Skoole’s curving system to dynamically curve the grade distribution of the class, giving students a real-time understanding of their curved grade status.

As end of the spring semester is fast approaching, Ryan needs to register for classes for the fall semester. He can run a Skoole search to see if he knows anyone who has taken his upcoming classes in the past. He does. He sends a few of them messages to find out what they thought of their respective professors. Ryan also decides he really enjoyed CS 1331. He doesn’t have time to become a TA, but marks his profile as an available tutor. He posts his final CS 1331 grade to assure any students looking for tutoring he knows his Java. He also posts his tutoring rate of $10/hour. Next semester, anyone can run a Skoole search for available tutors. If Ryan’s price is within reason, he might have found a good way to make a little extra cash, while keeping his Java skills sharp. Next year, he can share schedules with anyone he tutors, and easily arrange times to meet, just like he’s done with group projects all year.

**The Professor:**

Dr. Marks is a professor at Georgia Tech. He teaches architecture. He was skeptical about Skoole at first – but after using it, he enjoys being able to constantly connect with his students outside of class. He can post relevant articles, videos, and photo galleries to a news stream that students enjoy reading. He can delegate tasks such as grade entry to his TAs, setting specific permissions for any member of Skoole. Any time modifications are made to documents, a notification will be sent to students. Dr. Marks uses Skoole as a repository for content, and enjoys being able to search the content of any uploaded document or post. He also enjoys being able to reference a previous semester’s activity so that he makes sure to stay on track this semester.

Dr. Marks has been running a blog for the past few years and was worried he might need to migrate everything to Skoole. Not to worry – using Skoole’s WordPress plugin, Dr. Marks can push every blog post directly to his classes’ news feeds. No longer does he have to urge his students to subscribe to his blog’s RSS feed – every post will be pushed to every student’s notifications panel. In fact, Dr. Marks can link any RSS feed to Skoole and set notification settings, enabling a constant stream of information to flow to students from trusted news sources, colleagues, and experts in the field.

Over the course of the semester, Dr. Marks has figured out that he can peruse the news feeds to get an understanding of what concepts students are having difficulties with. He’s decided to occasionally post on highly commented topics in an effort to clear up any confusion and extend learning beyond the lecture. He also enjoys being able to see who the most active students are on Skoole – his lectures are large, and activity on Skoole helps him determine which students are genuinely interested and invested in his class.

**The School:**

After seeing the benefits of Skoole, both students and teachers have provided an overwhelmingly positive response to the administration of Georgia Tech. The site has facilitated education outside of the classroom and provided valuable tools for student collaboration, student-teacher interaction, and knowledge dispersion. Georgia Tech decides that the nominal fee of $10 per student per year is an extremely reasonable price to pay for a tool that is used every single day by students and professors alike. Georgia Tech can rest assured that Skoole will continue to invest in developing its product. What’s more, Georgia Tech will be provided a Skoole representative to which is can voice its ideas for developing Skoole. Georgia Tech is provided a master account that is able to mass-message each and every student at Georgia Tech, or target students depending on their majors, class enrollment, or other criteria. This allows Georgia Tech an alternate method to reach students. Emergency messages can be sent via Skoole and marked as urgent, so that students like Ryan will be alerted via SMS when any major announcement is made. But Georgia Tech has decided to invest in Skoole mainly because it promotes the core foundation of any institute of higher education – learning.

**INITIAL FIELD WORK:**

The fieldwork required to determine the viability of Skoole would target three main user bases: students, professors, and universities. Students would need to be interviewed and polled to determine which features of Skoole are most appealing and most valuable. Students would also need to be questioned regarding privacy. Would they be comfortable sharing schedules with fellow classmates? Current course listings? Would students wish to link phones and download third party applications to extend school past the browser? These assumptions are core to the success of Skoole.

Professors would also need to be interviewed and polled. While younger students might be excited about the idea of extending the classroom to the cloud, older professors might be weary, wary, or just stubborn. What features, securities, and flexibility would Skoole need to provide for professors to be willing to migrate current processes and routines from places such as T-Square and personal web sites to Skoole? The activity level of professors and the amount of content available via Skoole is important to its value and success.

Finally, institutions would need to be formally approached and meetings arranged to discuss the way in which Skoole could be most easily and safely implemented. What security measures would need to be guaranteed? What uptime is acceptable? How would user accounts and the information associated with them (student ID, Name, Course listings) be safely set up and properly maintained? What customer support must be in place for both the institution and individual students? Will the institution have a direct contact with a representative of Skoole? What contractual provisions would need to be created in case of system failure, lost data, or security breaches? Most importantly, institutions would need to see the value of such a product in promoting learning and the student experience. A large institution like Georgia Tech would need to be convinced that Skoole adds $100,000 in value. Such an institution might also be extremely unwilling to allocate funds for something they have never “needed” before. A free yearlong trial, with the institution and Skoole working side-by-side to improve the product might be necessary. In the end, Skoole will need to be willing to bend to the needs, wants, and provisions of students, professors, and institutions alike.

**SKOOLE BY THE NUMBERS**

***\*All figures are extremely rough estimates, calculated for fun***

Data produced by an average 4,000-person student body + 100 person active faculty:

100MB/person/year \* 4000 people = **500GB/year**

Cost of servers to support a 4,000-person student body + faculty:

$5000/kick-ass server/year \* 2 kick-ass servers = **$10,000/year (*25%)***

Revenue generated from a 4,000-person student body:

$10/person/year \* 4,000 people = **$40,000/year**

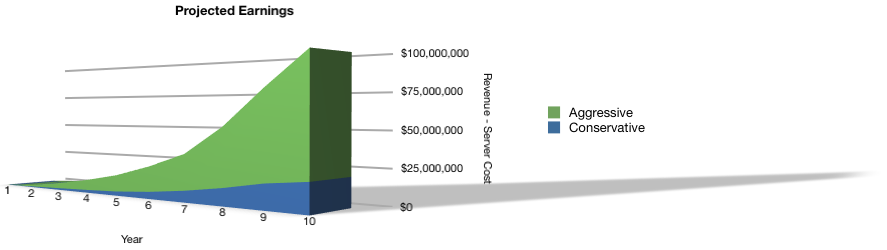
Number of institutes of higher education in the US: **4,080 schools**

Average student body: **4,000 students**

1% Penetration: (40 schools \* 4K students \* $10/student/year) \* 75% = **$1.2 MILLION/year**

10% Penetration: (400 schools \* 4K students \* $10/student/year) \* 75% = **$12 MILLION/year**

50% Penetration: (2000 schools \* 4K students \* $10/student/year) \* 75% = **$60 MILLION/year**

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