

Online Social Networking to Extend Classroom Learning

David Symonds

University of British Columbia

ETEC 500

Online Social Networking to Extend Classroom Learning

In the 1990s, as computer technology rapidly advanced, it became simultaneously more user-friendly and less expensive, opening the door for more digital tools to make their way into the hands of normal, everyday people. As the 20th century drew to a close and the 21st century began, the Internet facilitated a rapid explosion of available resources for communication and information sharing among ordinary citizens, and paved the way for a transformation of communication and information access in North America and across the globe.

In the mid-2000s, online social networking sites such as *Friendster*, *Myspace* and *Facebook* took center stage. As their popularity grew, online social networks were adopted as a legitimate way for people of all ages to communicate, connect, and share information. But despite this increasingly broad acceptance among the public, social networking sites have been largely excluded from the educational system.

As an educator of young adults, I can easily see how relevant social media and digital communication tools are to my students in their private their lives. They are constantly sending and receiving text messages, posting photos, pictures and videos, and updating their status on social networking sites. The social networking website *Facebook* has become a worldwide phenomenon with over 500 million users, and is now available in 69 different languages (Facebook, 2011). This trend toward a new way of communicating and sharing information, interests, and ideas shows no signs of slowing down.

Although it is clear that this is one of the fastest ways to extend communication to students outside the walls of the classroom in a context they understand and enjoy, serious questions remain about whether that extension of communication access also holds educational

value and if using tools such as *Facebook* can effectively improve students' ability to achieve prescribed learning objectives.

The Problem

A variety of different attitudes toward social media sites such as *Facebook* among teachers and school administrators can be found at any level. Some fear that they are risky, a distraction from schoolwork, or are simply a waste of time. Others are excited about the potential, and are convinced that the benefits of using social Web-based tools far outweigh the potential risks and shortcomings. One of the key problems, as Selwyn and Grant (2009) remind us, "much of the current enthusiasm and/or moral panic that currently surrounds social software is based on little solid evidence" (p. 82). This call for the collection of additional data to describe what happens when social software meets education in real life is a primary basis for this research project.

With the goal of providing relevant data about the feasibility of including social network-based work into classroom-based courses, my research will explore the attitudes of first-year university students towards the use of *Facebook* as a learning tool, and measure any changes in attitude or perceptions of value in using *Facebook* over the course of a semester. The qualitative study conducted in relation to these points will focus on the following questions:

- How can teachers put to use the affordances of social networking sites such as *Facebook* to enhance the learning experience for students in a first-year university course?
- How willing are students to use *Facebook* as part of a first-year university course?
- In terms of classroom dynamics and overall student success in the course, what is the impact, if any, of students and professors being *Facebook* "friends"?

- Does the creation of a *Facebook* “group” for students in a course have an impact on class dynamics and overall success in the course?

Existing Literature

Ever since Marc Prensky wrote his seminal essay, “*Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants*” in 2001, there has been enthusiastic discussion about the need for education reform – a re-imagining of the way we deliver information to students in the Digital Age. Despite high hopes and passionate rhetoric among teachers and educational theorists, Selwyn and Grant (2009) point out, “the field of educational technology is often concerned with questions of what *should* happen and what *could* happen once new technologies and digital media are placed into educational settings...as opposed to ...questions concerning what is *actually* taking place when social software technologies meet education” (p.82). Recent studies focusing on a variety of issues indicate that the use of social networking websites in university classrooms worldwide is becoming much more common (Baran, 2010; Madge, Meek, Wellens, & Hooley, 2009; Mazer, Murphy, & Simonds, 2009; Selwyn, 2009), though the results of these studies indicate that the educational benefits of social networking sites have only realized limited success, and that students are not as enthusiastic as teachers and researchers about the idea of overlapping the use of their personal Web pages with academic pursuits.

A successful application of *Facebook* to an educational environment must take into account existing knowledge about what works in education and what does not. Terry Anderson’s (2008) model states that online education must be learner-, knowledge-, assessment-, and community-centered, and must make use of existing learning theories, but transform them to fit online contexts. It is the transformation of content from traditional delivery modes to online social media that has stymied educators and researchers, who find that the social media sphere is

difficult to integrate with educational objectives, as evidenced by Madge et al (2009), whose report subtitle stating that Facebook “is more for socialising and talking to friends about work than for actually doing work” speaks for itself.

Another study by Baran (2010) identifies potential issues and shortcomings involved in using Facebook for formal instruction, concluding that “Not all students are ready to embrace the use of social networking tools such as *Facebook* in formal teaching, learning and assessment” (p. 148). Other statements offer a sense of optimism for the potential benefits of *Facebook*: “The technology undoubtedly helped to emphasise my availability and that of the other students and helped us feel that we were part of a group and were sharing the same learning environment” (p. 148). This statement supports the notion that the real power of social media is in its ability to connect people to one another, and build learning in a collaborative way.

The failures and missteps encountered thus far in the application of *Facebook* to learning environments should not be a deterrent to future studies. Responding to social media with scepticism and resistance puts students at a disadvantage; Rosenfield (2009) argued that resistance to using social media for education “prevents the effective use of technology in teaching, the acquisition of vital 21st-century literacy skills by students, and the professional development of teaching staff” (p. 6). There have also been successes in using *Facebook* in formal education environments. McCarthy (2010) reported that in a 2009 study using *Facebook* as part of a blended learning approach, the vast majority (73-88%) of students felt that the online activities helped them develop academic and social relationships with their classmates, while nearly all (90%) agreed that the *Facebook* group benefited their studies (McCarthy, 2010, Table 4). These mixed results support the notion that further study is needed to inform both students and educators seeking to include the use of social networking tools in their educational practice.

Methodology

Based on my understanding of some of the successes and failures of previous research studies, I will conduct a of qualitative research study designed to measure the reception and effect of introducing *Facebook* as a course component to a first-year English Business Administration program at a university in Seoul, South Korea. The sample will be composed of approximately 60 first-year English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students. The researcher in this study will also be the instructor, making the use clear instrumentation for data collection imperative in order to minimize the impact of possible bias on results.

Procedures

Students will take a survey (Appendix A) prior to the start of the course to assess several factors including:

- Current online social networking habits, based on number of hours per week spent on websites such as *Cyworld*, *Facebook*, etc.
- Access to Internet-capable computers on campus and at home/in dormitories
- Access to social-networking websites via mobile devices
- Personal level of interest in online social networking
- Primary purposes of online social networking activities, if any
- Previous experience using social networking websites for educational purposes, if any
- A brief statement in response to the question: "Do you believe that social networking websites could be effectively used to supplement classroom learning? Why or why not?"

During the second week of the course, students will be asked to create a *Facebook* profile (if they do not already have one), and to join a group with other members of their classroom-based course. Students will be encouraged to use the group space for course-related activities

such as discussions on topics arising from in-class activities and assigned readings, raising questions for later in-class discussion, and posting of links, notes, or videos related to course content.

Students will receive a participation score for the online portion of the course based on:

- A minimum of one original post and three response posts per week regarding discussion topics assigned in class
- Quality and length of posts to group page

Information for a final research report will be based on collection of data over the duration of one 16-week semester, and will consider:

- Number of average weekly posts to the group page, individual and overall
- Changes in the quality and length of postings over the duration of the 16-week course, individual and overall
- Increases and decreases in activity among students over 16 weeks overall
- Any noteworthy, unusual, or exceptional activities which occur in the online learning space

At the end of the semester, students will complete a survey (Appendix B) to determine whether there had been changes in attitudes, values, and beliefs about social networking and its relationship to education, as well as the nature of these changes.

Because the data collection will occur both in class and online, the results will be comprised of observations, surveys, and recorded interactions occurring in the *Facebook* group space. Qualitative data will be gathered from the results of the pre- and post- course surveys, while observational data will be used to provide additional perspective on changes in students' responses to the survey questions, as well as to describe any noteworthy successful or

unsuccessful applications of the *Facebook* social networking software to the furtherance of the learning objectives of the course.

Issues and Challenges

One of the inherent hazards of acting as both researcher and instructor is that there is a significant potential for bias to effect the overall results and interpretation. The use of student surveys to collect data will help to mediate the effects of potential bias and provide concrete, measurable results as a supplement to observational data.

Significance

The primary purpose of this study will be to improve my own teaching methods in respect to providing more useful, accessible information to students in a blended learning environment. Currently, the research on the use and benefits of incorporating online social networking sites into the educational process is limited to a few small studies which focus on specific elements such as teacher perception (Mazer et al, 2009), social benefits (Madge et al, 2009), or identity politics (Selwyn, 2009). There is a need to examine the overall viability, advantages, and drawbacks of using mainstream social networking sites such as Facebook to supplement in-class instruction. While the mere fact that this study is being undertaken belies a personal belief that there are advantages to using social networking software in the instruction of university students, the data which are collected during the course of this study will determine whether its use was beneficial and increased student learning, if it failed to produce measurable results, or if it appeared to impact achievement of learning objectives negatively. The results of this initial study will be used to refine my research questions, and eventually to construct a study of social networking in education on a larger scale, in order to yield more generalizable results.

References

- Anderson, T. (2008). "Towards and Theory of Online Learning." In Anderson, T. & Elloumi, F. *Theory and Practice of Online Learning*.
- Baran, B. (2010). Facebook as a formal instructional environment. *British Journal of Educational Technology*, 41(6), E146-E149. doi:10.1111/j.1467-8535.2010.01115.x
- Livingstone, S., & Brake, D. (2010). On the Rapid Rise of Social Networking Sites: New Findings and Policy Implications. *Children & Society*, 24(1), 75-83. doi:10.1111/j.1099-0860.2009.00243.x
- Madge, C., Meek, J., Wellens, J., & Hooley, T. (2009). Facebook, social integration and informal learning at university: 'It is more for socialising and talking to friends about work than for actually doing work'. *Learning, Media & Technology*, 34(2), 141-155. doi:10.1080/17439880902923606
- Mazer, J. P., Murphy, R. E., & Simonds, C. J. (2009). The effects of teacher self-disclosure via Facebook on teacher credibility. *Learning, Media & Technology*, 34(2), 175-183. doi:10.1080/17439880902923655
- McCarthy, J. (2010). Blended learning environments: Using social networking sites to enhance the first year experience. *Australasian Journal of Educational Technology*, 26(6), 729-740. Retrieved from EBSCOhost.
- Prensky, M. 2001. Digital natives, digital immigrants. *On the Horizon* 9, no. 5: 1–6.
- Rosenfeld, E. (2008, February). Blocking Web 2.0 tools in schools: creating a new digital divide. *Teacher Librarian*. p. 6. Retrieved from EBSCOhost.
- Selwyn, N. (2009). Faceworking: exploring students' education-related use of Facebook.

Learning, Media & Technology, 34(2), 157-174. doi:10.1080/17439880902923622

Selwyn, N., & Grant, L. (2009). Researching the realities of social software use – an introduction. *Learning, Media & Technology*, 34(2), 79-86. doi:10.1080/17439880902921907

Facebook Press Website (2011) Retrieved from:

<http://www.facebook.com/press/info.php?timeline> on March 8, 2011

Appendix A

Pre-course Student Survey on Social Networking Website Use and Education

1) How much time do you spend using online social networking sites each week?

More than 10 hours-----6-10 hours-----3-6 hours-----1-3 hours-----less than 1 hour

2) Do you have reliable access to the Internet at home or in your dormitory? YES NO

3) Do you have access to the Internet on your mobile phone? YES NO

4) Are you a current *Facebook* user? YES NO

5) Have you ever used *Facebook* to complete educational coursework in the past?

YES NO If YES, describe: _____

6) How comfortable are you with asking a professor questions in class?

Very Comfortable ----Moderately Comfortable----Neutral----Moderately uncomfortable----Very uncomfortable

7) How comfortable are you with asking a professor questions online?

Very Comfortable ----Moderately Comfortable----Neutral----Moderately uncomfortable----Very uncomfortable

9) How do you feel about asking for help from peers?

Very Comfortable ----Moderately Comfortable----Neutral----Moderately uncomfortable----Very uncomfortable

10) How useful is *Facebook* as an educational tool?

Very useful -----Moderately useful-----Neutral-----Not very useful-----Not useful at all

Appendix B

Post-course Student Survey on Social Networking Website Use and Education

1) How much time do you spend using online social networking sites each week?

More than 10 hours-----6-10 hours-----3-6 hours-----1-3 hours-----less than 1 hour

2) How comfortable are you with asking a professor questions in class?

Very Comfortable -----Moderately Comfortable-----Neutral-----Moderately uncomfortable-----Very uncomfortable

3) How comfortable are you with asking a professor questions online?

Very Comfortable -----Moderately Comfortable-----Neutral-----Moderately uncomfortable-----Very uncomfortable

4) How do you feel about asking for help from peers?

Very Comfortable -----Moderately Comfortable-----Neutral-----Moderately uncomfortable-----Very uncomfortable

5) How useful is *Facebook* as an educational tool?

Very useful -----Moderately useful-----Neutral-----Not very useful-----Not useful at all

6) Did using *Facebook* during the course help you to achieve your learning goals?

Definitely-----Probably-----Not sure -----Probably not-----Definitely not

7) Did using *Facebook* during the course help you establish social relationships with peers?

Definitely-----Probably-----Not sure -----Probably not-----Definitely not

8) Would using *Facebook* as part of your regular coursework in the future benefit you?

Definitely-----Probably-----Not sure -----Probably not-----Definitely not