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Case study 10.

Connecting, communicating and learning through social networking sites



Summary

Students are using Facebook to enhance their learning and to connect with other students in their courses and across cohorts.

- Social Networking Sites (SNS) provide the students with tools: SNS enable students to 'friend' other students (even if they only know them virtually); join groups; communicate with individuals or whole groups; and share resources. SNS enable students to catch up on learning when they have missed lectures/workshops.
- SNS enable students to pose questions: Questions are posted on the SNS group when they don't understand the course content. The answers come from many students as a response.
- SNS group management: Students have set up groups but they don't want their lecturers as members. However, if groups are set up by lecturers, they are willing to participate.
- SNS enable students to connect with peers beyond university: Students are able to connect with students for social and lecturer purposes during their studies.

Keywords

Social Networking Sites; student learning; connecting; communicating



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What worked?

This case study describes how students have used Facebook to **connect** with other students, and, once connected, they are able to **communicate**, and use this SNS as a tool to help in their **learning**. In the examples described in this case, students have set up their own Facebook groups for group work, courses, and across year level or degree cohorts. The students interviewed for this case explained how Facebook groups were created and have been managed; how groups have provided a platform that students can post questions to and check for answers; and how their formation of the groups have permitted attachments to be shared with group members.

What are Social Networking Sites (SNS)?

Most readers will be familiar with SNS, such as Facebook, however, the terminology around social media, social networking services, and social networks are clarified for use in this case study. SNS have been grouped under the umbrella term of “social media” but they should not be conflated with social media, because social media incorporates much more than what SNS can deliver. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) define social media as “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content” (p. 61). SNS encompasses these features of social media. Ellison and Boyd (2013) provide a more precise definition that highlight the features most important for social media,

A social network site is a networked communication platform in which participants 1) have uniquely identifiable profiles that consist of user-supplied content, content provided by other users, and/or system-level data; 2) can publically articulate connections that can be viewed and traversed by others; and 3) can consume, produce, and/or interact with streams of user-generated content provided by their connections on the site (p. 158).

Facebook is purportedly the world’s largest social network with over 1.23 billion monthly users (one sixth of the world’s population) (ABC News, 2014). Furthermore, it has been reported that in Australia there are nine million daily users of Facebook and of those, 7.3 million log on via a mobile device (ABC News, 2014). Research suggests that Facebook has become an increasingly important component of students’ university experience. Therefore, it is not surprising that a large proportion of students in this project reported using SNS, particularly Facebook.

Facebook is often used in higher education as a means for students to connect and communicate with each other and to reap the academic benefits of using Facebook for learning. The challenge for universities is that Facebook allows students to connect and communicate in a new, uncontrolled, third learning space, in addition to the university-led and lecturer-led learning spaces. Universities thus need to provide adequate bandwidth access for a large number of students who want to access SNS while on the university campus. This is changing the technology requirements for university students with the

move away from university supplied, controlled and managed technology to a situation where students bring their own devices and technology that they want to use as part of their learning experience. Many social media tools, including Facebook, offer new opportunities for the way students work while studying at university. This case describes how students at one university have used Facebook to help in their learning.

Student use of Facebook

Students were invited to participate in focus groups to further explore the Technology Enabled Learning (TEL) identified in this project. On multiple occasions, students referred to Facebook as an important technology that they were using for **connecting** with other students, **communicating** lecturer-related information with other students and helping with their **learning**.

A tool for connecting

It was reported that Facebook networks between students often begin by meeting other students in class or other events where Facebook is chosen as a tool for **connecting**. Students are encouraged to join the Facebook groups using their own personal profile where students initially 'friend' each other. However, with the introduction of group functionality, students are now able to join groups. In addition to individual connections, it is evident that most students in the focus groups are part of, or know about, Facebook 'groups' which may be just small groups or a whole cohort of students.

The other one [Facebook group], for the Nathan campus, it was sort of like the whole first years. (Law student)

The students explained that they can 'friend' each other to share personal information but the majority of the time they use Facebook groups to connect with other students. The groups are created and managed by peers with application to the group requiring approval before becoming a member. Generally, larger groups are created for year cohorts and smaller groups are created for subject or group work. Larger cohort groups have a longer life that may continue beyond graduation; while smaller groups may only exist for a semester or a particular assessment. Facebook group functionality allows groups to be created from Facebook friends or to be formed within a wider university group using the university email address as an identifier. There is a separation between wall posting and group posting where group postings are only made available to group members. Students do not need to know the person they are giving help to, or receiving help from, with many groups functioning where the members of the group have never met in person.

A tool for communicating

Students described how they were using Facebook for **communicating** with other students while completing their studies on and off campus.

*"I needed to communicate ...so I needed something to keep in contact with everyone"
(Engineering student)*

Facebook allows students to be instantly updated and students were able to share information with other students by posting a message on the group,

"You get an alert on your phone straight away when someone sends you a message or posts in the group. It's really convenient just to have." (Law student)

"It's just a way to have a universal communication with everyone at the click of a button and it goes all out to people's phones and we can receive it." (Law student)

Student communication includes notification when assessment is available, changes to lecture times, and general information about the course. Students are using Facebook to organise social events or to check on the status of their peers when they are absent.

A tool for learning

Students shared many examples of how Facebook is helping in **learning**, from sharing details of assessment to helping understand important concepts. The students use Facebook to help each other complete assessment by sharing information,

She told me that if there are any assignments, or there are any things, like we all help out with each other and we actually send links to each and every student, so we can share resources, we discuss everything on Facebook. (Engineering student)

Students also use Facebook groups to ask questions of the group to explain and further explore important concepts,

I really don't understand...can someone explain it to me, and then one person pops up and somebody else throws something and somebody else gives you an analogy. (Law student)

Facebook enables students to collaborate during group work,

Because we have to do a media presentation, which is group work, ...Any articles we find, we'll add it on our Facebook chat and draft copies will go on Facebook through the messaging app. (Law student)

Although one lecturer provides functionality in the learning management system to enable group collaboration, the students use Facebook as their preferred place for collaborating,

She set up links through the [LMS] website so we could send information to and from each other. Obviously we can't ever discuss it in there [the LMS]. We use Facebook all the time and just helped communications when we're not all together.” (Law student)

Students also note that Facebook is used to share what is presented in the lecture when the students cannot attend. They are able to notify other students that they are unable to attend and can then request other students to capture important information presented or discussed in the lecture. Students commented that in some cases the lecturer has the ability to stop the recording (for material or a discussion they don't want on the recording) or they were not experienced in using the recording equipment and therefore inadvertently part of the lecture was not recorded, for example not speaking clearly into the microphone.

Facebook enabled students to connect with other students, communicate easily and enhance their learning by sharing information or asking questions thereby increasing their affective and cognitive engagement in their studies.

Why it worked

Enablers

There are a variety of factors that have enabled Facebook to support high levels of student learning in the higher education environment. This section attempts to highlight important factors that have emerged from the data, or been observed by the researchers, in compiling this case. The following factors are intended to provide guidance for other higher education institutions to assist in enabling TEL.

Student initiated and managed: In this case, students created and managed their own Facebook groups. They were able to share with each other the Facebook groups that were available and remove themselves from groups when they wanted to. Students are also using their own devices to access Facebook.

Availability and ease of access to SNS: Facebook is free to join and easily accessible using a variety of devices. The university wireless infrastructure was robust enough to be able to handle an increasing number of students using multiple devices to access Facebook. Access to Facebook was enabled through the university IT infrastructure.

New third learning space: Facebook enables students to learn on the move, away from university or at home. As a third learning space, Facebook groups are not managed, controlled or accessible by the university or academic staff.

Challenges

There are several challenges in relation to Facebook use at university.

This section highlights specific challenges that were reported by participants or observed by the researchers to have a direct implication for the enactment of the TEL and which may be relevant for other institutions to consider in deciding whether to support the use of Facebook for teaching and learning.

Facebook not integrative with the LMS: Facebook does not integrate with the learning management system. It is likely that students are using Facebook because the university supplied learning management system or other Web 2.0 tools do not offer the same functionality.

Facebook is uncontrolled third space learning: Facebook is beyond the regulation and control of the university as it is learning that takes place outside the normal learning environment.

Facebook can be distracting: Students also highlighted that Facebook was interesting but could be distracting. Students suggested that Facebook was not used in lectures as students considered Facebook a distraction to them and others around them.

Student Facebook use is inconsistent: Not all students have a Facebook account or want to use it for learning.

Staff Facebook use is inconsistent: In terms of lecturers' use of Facebook, the students explained how some lecturers were using Facebook as a core part of their course. In engineering, some of the students explained that they have received negative messages from lecturers about the use of Facebook and were advised not to use it for learning. Some students expressed concern about 'friending' lecturers on Facebook.

What the research literature says

Many studies have suggested that university students have become increasingly more frequent users of Facebook with the following statistics since 2007 reported in the research:

- 95% of students reported by Mori (2007)
- 76% of students at a UK university reported in Selwyn (2007; 2009)
- 92% of students at a UK university reported by Madge, Meek, Wellens and Hooley (2009)
- 93% of students at Griffith University reported by Irwin, Ball, Desbrow and Leveritt (2012)
- 90% of students at a UK university reported by Prescott, Wilson and Becket (2013)
- 77% of students at three Australian universities reported by Gosper, Malfroy and McKenzie (2013)

It is not surprising that large numbers of students are using Facebook for academic purposes. Madge, Meek, Wellens and Hooley (2009) suggest that Facebook was used by students for educational purposes to “informally discuss academic work...46% of respondents stated they used Facebook to informally discuss academic work with other students on a daily or weekly basis” (p.149). Selwyn (2007; 2009) in examining over 68 000 wall postings of UK university students over an 18-week research period, found only 4% (2 496) of the posts related to their studies or academic aspects of the university experience. In that small number of academic-related postings, he suggested that students were:

1. Recounting and reflecting on the university experience
2. Exchanging practical information
3. Exchanging academic information
4. Displaying supplication and/or disengagement
5. Participating in ‘banter’ (exchange of humour and nonsense)

Consistent with the findings reported by Madge et al. (2009) and Selwyn (2007: 2009), students in this case discussed how they have used Facebook for academic purposes. However, unlike Madge and Selwyn, this study did not look at students’ Facebook accounts to determine how they were using Facebook. Facebook groups only display content to other members of the group and, as these posts are separate to wall postings, group postings may offer more relevance in researching student Facebook use.

Vivian, Barnes, Geer, and Wood (2014), in a similar study of 70 Australian students’ Facebook postings over a two-week period, found that students were posting a range of academic-related posts on their Facebook walls. These authors suggest that students who were not posting publically may have been using private Facebook applications to communicate with their university friend network to discuss academic matters. These private communications were beyond the researchers’ access. Vivian et al. (2014) found that students were using Facebook in a range of ways:

1. Doing work/procrastinating/motivation + emotional support (46%)
2. Content + exams/assessment + resources + course and tutorials + grades + university schedule + time and meetings + university, system or staff (37%)
3. Checking peer progress + communication + seeking help (9%)
4. University social + holidays and breaks (7%)
5. Career (2%)

The students in this case reported that they were using Facebook in line with items 1, 2 and 3. As this case was self-reported data via a focus group it is likely that all five would be evident in Facebook group postings.

Goodband, Solomon, Samuels, Lawson, and Bhakta (2012) discussed the importance of student power and control over Facebook in a case study of mathematics students at a UK university. They suggest that Facebook use is “more complex and ambiguous than might be anticipated...[as] Facebook is only one means by which students communicate with each other” (p. 248). They also found that “Facebook appears primarily to strengthen and solidify pre-existing bonds between offline friendship groups” (p.248). The students who participated in our research supported this idea. It was clear when talking with various groups that their bonds were stronger because of using Facebook to connect, communicate and learn.

Ellison and Boyd (2013) suggest the rise in popularity of SNS stems from the “desire to communicate and share content” (p. 159) and view this as the key SNS driver, as members want to communicate “one-to-many and one-to-one, synchronous and asynchronous, textual and media-based” (p. 159) in a public or private capacity. They suggest that what makes social media popular is using it to “collaborate, share information, and socialise” (p.160). This was also emphasised by the students interviewed for this case, students shared how they used and valued Facebook because they could post or respond at anytime to individuals or the whole group during learning episodes or anytime afterwards. The students mentioned that they did not need instant answers to questions but could pose questions with a goal of checking back later to review any responses and continue the discussion.

Goodband, Solomon, Samuels, Lawson, and Bhakta (2012) suggested that groups provided students with “a public medium for a discourse of resistance to authority in general” (p. 248). This unregulated communication channel can have a large impact on the success or failure of the course. Parr (2014), citing Steele-Davies, indicates that “this can actually have a massive effect on the performance of the [student] cohort...if the wrong students set up [the most popular] group, and that’s the one everyone goes on, the amount of control they have...is massive” (p.2). This is a real risk for any subject or course as students have a very simple technology that can amplify their concerns/problems within a course or a whole cohort.

Souleles (2012), in a study of undergraduate graphic design students, suggested that students have mixed feeling about their lecturers using Facebook. One group “expressed resistance to any notion of teachers using Facebook” (p. 249) where another group were “enthusiastic about the prospect of teachers embedding Facebook use in teaching and learning” (p. 249). Karl and Peluchette (2011) caution lecturers against using Facebook because the students “would feel nervous, worried, suspicious and concerned if they received a friend request from a professor...it is not appropriate for faculty to initiate such requests” (p. 220). It appears that students have mixed feeling about using Facebook for teaching but as groups have been used in this case the need to friend (and sharing of wall

postings) may not be needed as lecturers can establish groups for teaching purposes, thereby keeping the private wall postings away from teaching and learning.

Madge et al. (2009) and Selwyn stressed that Facebook could be considered a distraction from learning. Madge et al (2009) found that “25% of respondents felt their academic work was often or very often affected by the amount of time they spent on Facebook” (p.149) saying that it was a distraction to their academic studies. Selwyn (2007; 2009) found that most of the educational discussion he noted in the posts were “post hoc critiquing of learning experiences and events...instance of supplication and moral support with regards to assessment or learning, or the promotion of oneself as academically incompetent and/or disengaged” (p.170). These findings suggest that keeping up to date with all postings would be a time consuming process and a distraction from academic studies.

Moving forwards

Participant advice

The students advocated several key ‘methods of success’, that could be considered when thinking of using SNS for teaching and learning.

Encourage students to establish Facebook groups for learning - groups for subject or cohorts can be created as a means of connection, communication and collaboration.

Encourage students to participate in using Facebook for learning - explain how Facebook groups can be used to connect with peers and seek help from other students.

Develop and communicate a SNS policy - to ensure students and staff are aware of the ethical and appropriate use of SNS for teaching and learning.

Explore using SNS with the teaching team - decide on the appropriate use of SNS for teaching and learning.

Institutions moving forward

- Students are going to continue to use SNS for connecting, communicating and learning as they offer functionality that is not available in the current offering of LMS. Universities need to cater for large numbers of students accessing SNS on campus, particularly as students will generally be using their own devices. An option may be for universities to lobby LMS organisations to provide a collaborative and communication functionality within the LMS.
- The university needs to develop and communicate an SNS policy that explains how SNS are to be used by the university (for example, student recruitment, marketing,

communication and teaching/learning) and for staff and student use. The university also needs to implement sharing practice sessions where lecturers have the opportunity to share their SNS teaching and learning experiences with other staff.

Resources for exploring

In addition to Facebook, there are many SNS available. *Wikipedia*, for example, provides a list of SNS: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_social_networking_websites - and this list provides a description and focus for each SNS, the date launched, approximate number of registered users, and the status of registration.

According to eBiz (see <http://www.ebizmba.com/articles/social-networking-websites>), the 15 most popular SNS as at January 2015 were:

1. Facebook
2. Twitter
3. LinkedIn
4. Pinterest
5. Google+
6. Tumblr
7. Instagram
8. VK
9. Flickr
10. Vine
11. Meetup
12. Tagged
13. Ask.fm
14. Meetme
15. classmates

Guides, Cases and Readings

The following resources from the *NMC Horizon Report 2014 Higher Education Edition* (Johnson, Adams-Becker, Estrada and Freeman, 2014) are recommended to further explore how social media can be used in higher education.

- *In higher education, Social media is your job* – James Nolan, *The Huffington Post*, 16 September 2013.
URL: go.nmc.org/hiedsoc

- *Is it time to start using social media to promote academic projects?* — Annett Seifert, *School of Advanced Study Blogs*, 14 August 2013.
URL: go.nmc.org/time
- *Social media for teaching and learning* — Jeff Seaman and Hester Tinti-Kane, *Babson Survey Research Group and Pearson Learning Solutions*, October 2013.
URL: go.nmc.org/socmed
- Visitors and residents: Students' attitudes to academic use of social media — Chad M.Gesser, *Footnotes*, January 2013.
URL: go.nmc.org/asa
- Davis III, C. F., Dell-Amen, R., & Rios-Aguilar, C. *Social Media in Higher Education: A Literature Review and Research Directions*
URL: http://www.academia.edu/1220569/Social_Media_in_Higher_Education_A_Literature_Review_and_Research_Directions.
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