

**Students' perceptions, experiences and beliefs about Facebook
in subjects at an Australian University**

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Abstract

This paper reports on students' perceptions, experiences and beliefs about the voluntary use of Facebook in Advertising, Law, Nursing and Creative Industries' subjects at an Australian University. The researchers conducted in-depth interviews with students and the transcriptions were analysed using the constant comparison method. This resulted in a number of emergent themes, of which six are explored in this paper. The findings suggest that students are quite divergent in their responses to academics using Facebook in their subjects. They do not always see its relevance to the subject and are somewhat ambivalent about how it facilitates peer-to-peer relationships or a better relationship with the lecturer. The study also identifies themes relating to cynicism and intrusion into social spaces.

Students' perceptions, experiences and beliefs about the use of Facebook in subjects at an Australian University

Background to the Study

In many universities, academics are strategically encouraged to incorporate new media technologies into their subjects with a view to engaging students and enhancing their learning experiences. This is a response to changes in student expectations about learning environments and questions about whether existing teaching practices and models meet their needs (Berge, 2008). Thus, we can expect that a majority of our undergraduate students (or at least those born after 1982) are part of the Millennial Generation (Wood, Solomon and Allan, 2008). This cohort has been raised with interactive communication technologies (ICTs) such as the Web, and email, and now with the advent of Web2.0, a whole range of new media technologies for social networking (e.g. Facebook, Myspace, YouTube and blogs) (Wood *et al.*, 2008). So what does the Millennial Generation expect in terms of their university educators' engagement with these technologies and the delivery of meaningful educational experiences?

In pursuit of an answer, we note that there is limited research available in higher education that examines the integration of new media technologies into teaching and learning beyond the use of virtual worlds such as Second Life. Thus, there is limited guidance on how educators can integrate social networking sites (SNSs), such as Facebook, into subjects delivered face-to-face to enhance student engagement in meaningful ways. To address this limitation, this study explores emerging themes derived purely from the students' perceptions, experiences and beliefs about how and why Facebook was used in their subject in Advertising, Law, Nursing and Creative Industries' subjects at a metropolitan university in Queensland, Australia. It should be noted that in every subject identified, students' participation in Facebook was purely voluntary and non-assessable. The paper commences with a description of the methodology used. Then the six themes are discussed together with the available literature. The paper closes with the study's limitations and future research directions.

Research Method

The research involved in-depth interviews using a semi-structured interview format (Kvale, 1996). Students were recruited through postings on the university's online news boards and the monthly campus newspaper. Theoretical sampling (Strauss and Corbin, 1990) was used to obtain a diverse range of interviewees. Ten students, ranging in age from 18 to 47 years, were interviewed: four males and six females. There were seven domestic students and three International students from Advertising, Law, Nursing and Creative Industries. The student year levels ranged from first to third year. Interviews were audio-taped and transcribed to provide the data, which were analysed using the continuous comparison method to develop emerging themes (Strauss and Corbin, 1990).

Emergent Themes

Making Assumptions

Hargittai (2008) states that one should not assume that because people use the Internet, they use all new media technologies similarly. As educators, however, we do tend to assume that our students (especially the younger ones) are participating in new media technologies, particularly SNSs. In fact, not every interviewee had a personal Facebook account at the time they were enrolled in a subject that uses one:

I wasn't actually a member of the Facebook at the time so I didn't interact there. [001, F, 20 years, Domestic]

Facebook in China is not that popular as in Australia. [017, F, 25 years, International]

You know, it was just sort of assumed that everyone knew what Facebook was and ... they could easily set themselves up an account if they didn't already have one. [018, F, 27 years, Domestic]

I didn't feel I had time to develop my personal Facebook so I didn't join... [019, M, 47 years, International]

Why Have Facebook?

In terms of incorporating new technologies into teaching and learning, it is important that the students understand its purpose in the subject. Students' understanding of the purpose of Facebook in their subject may have influenced their decisions about participation:

To get us more involved, if we didn't understand anything ... another way for us to stay in contact. ... There was stuff about work experience. [007, F, 19 years, Domestic]

... was used by the lecturer to communicate additional materials to help us with our learning experience. He provided materials on Facebook for those wanted additional supporting material with regards to case studies. [08, M, 19 years, Domestic].

I was not sure of its purpose. [010, M, 18 years, Domestic]

As the quotes show, not every student saw the relevance or even the purpose of Facebook in their subject. This supports Daniels Lee's (2009) finding that, in a different context of new technologies, her students were not sure whether the technology was actually relevant for the particular subject being taught. Moreover, simply believing that we are serving our students 'where they are', or using the technology as 'a panacea for reaching students' (Chu and Meulemans, 2008, p.74), does not mean that students understand its purpose.

What's the Buzz?

Since Facebook is so widely adopted by the Millennial Generation, shouldn't there be some sense of buzz about the value of being part of the subject's Facebook site, perhaps when students and academic staff meet face-to-face in tutorials or lectures?

There wasn't any mention of Facebook in my tutorial. I think if there was it would probably have made me go, 'Oh, maybe I should check it out' ... You know, like people are using it and they seem way more knowledgeable than me and they know what's going on and are on top of everything? [001, F, 20 years, Domestic]

He (the lecturer) sort of briefly mentioned it and asked who has a Facebook. And then he sort of got into this thing about Facebook in the subject and that it was an optional thing. [010, M, 19 years, Domestic]

The lecturer would plug the use of it. Like when we went for the first lecture ... she said she'd made a Facebook page ... then on the posts on Blackboard ... she'd be like 'thanks to everyone who's posted stuff on Facebook' ... [018, F, 27 years, Domestic].

Can We Be Friends?

SNSs create a sense of connectedness and identification with particular interest groups or a community of interest (Barker, 2009; Boyd and Ellison, 2008). In our University, Facebook is used in academic subjects to try to create a sense of involvement for students and to increase opportunities to develop friendships, but these Facebook friends may not necessarily develop into or support face-to-face interactions, as the following quotes suggest:

To get students more involved ... another way for students to stay in contact. [007, F, 19 years, Domestic]

I made some friends on the Facebook but we did not meet up in real-life..... It was easier to express my thoughts to them in text than trying to talk. [017, F, 25 years, International]

I think that Facebook might waste time with too much extra chat and you don't know who they are. [019, M, 47 years, International]

Findings in our study also suggest that Facebook can create a sense that teaching staff are more approachable in this environment, but not for everyone:

Well, his communication on the Facebook group was a little bit more casual than what he would normally describe in his Blackboard or lecture communications. ... he was on a more casual level so it reduces that professional barrier to a certain degree. [008, M, 19 years, Domestic]

I feel the lecturer is more approachable through Facebook.... I feel more close to the lecturer but I didn't feel this in the lecture. Through the Facebook we become friends. [017, F, 25 years, International]

I think the lecturer needs to be at the formal level they're at. I don't think the lecturer should be your buddy. [010, M, 18 years, Domestic]

The range of views expressed in these statements both support and negate Chu and Meulemans' (2008) findings that students are not particularly interested in using an SNS to communicate with their lecturers or having their lecturers as friends. Additionally, the quote from 017 suggests that International students, who do tend to be quieter in the face-to-face activities of a subject, could find Facebook a suitable avenue for more engaged contact with their teaching staff. Orr *et al.* (2009) found that shy or introverted individuals have more favourable attitudes towards SNSs, which may be the case for this international student.

I Am What I Post

Facebook provides means for people to post information about themselves, such as textual information and photographs, which is then assessed by others who access their sites (Krämer and Winter, 2008; Tong, Van Der Heide and Longwell, 2008). When considering the integration of SNSs into academic subjects, we must understand that we are creating environments that involve impression management or self presentation, raising concerns about appropriate student behaviour on the site. This issue has not been addressed in an academic environment. However, a theme relating to issues of self presentation in subjects' Facebook sites is apparent in the data:

This is going to sound really bad, but I'd read people's profiles and [at] some point I'd meet and judge them sort of based on what they already had on their profile. [010, M, 18 years, Domestic]

Sometimes I am not happy – some peoples pictures really [laughs embarrassed] ... from my point sort of like naked. May because of my culture or background – in some pictures the people had really very small clothes [scantily dressed]. So I feel embarrassed sometimes with these pictures. [017, F, 25 years, International]

Extraverted participants tend to present themselves in less restrained ways by choosing less conservative pictures to put on their sites (Krämer and Winter, 2008). Since Australian universities are strongly multicultural, some students may express concerns over how other students present themselves on a subject's website, as the quote from 017 suggests. However, there is some ambivalence among students as to whether the academic has a duty of care or a responsibility for the way students use the subject's Facebook site for impression management or self-presentation when it can be viewed by other students:

I feel that the duty of care of the lecturer would probably be to ensure that discrimination is kept to a minimum I believe that their duty of care would be limited to that and that anything [else]... would probably be harmful to the personal liberties and personal expressions of the individual. [008, M, 19 years, Domestic]

I don't think there's really the necessity or the option for it ... having this whole set of rules on what you can and can't do is just another incentive not to sort of pursue it, especially if it's optional. [010, M, 18 years, Domestic]

I don't think it's up to QUT to hold everybody's hand and to make sure that their Facebook page has the security settings and that they're not uploading photos that someone else might see and then cause problems. [018, F, 27 years, Domestic]

Sensing Cynicism

In our data there is a degree of cynicism expressed about using Facebook in academia:

He said it was sort of to keep in touch with 'your generation' [said with indication of quote marks and degree of scorn]. [010, M, 18 years, Domestic]

I just don't think universities have to portray themselves as being cool and that's like what I think this [using Facebook in a subject] sort of boils down to. [018, F, 27 years, Domestic].

These findings support Chu and Meulemans' (2008, p. 77) finding that students were somewhat sceptical about academics' motives for using SNSs, such as 'looking like they are trying to fit in'. Additionally, our findings identified a secondary issue related to how students perceive that universities are trying to present themselves to attract the Millennial Generation into their degree programs. This notion of students' perceived cynicism towards universities' promoting themselves by using new media technologies to appeal to this generation does not seem to be considered in the literature.

Intruders in Social Spaces

Further, there were some quite strong opinions about distinguishing social space and university space, and how technologies are perceived in ways that delineate these spaces:

I think Facebook for me has a kind of social connotation to it ... so probably having something that's quite educational on Facebook - I don't know whether people would react to that coming into their social sphere. [001, F, 19 years, Domestic]

I think Facebook should not be used in the university subjects. I associate Facebook with my personal life and my fun life, like my social life. It's social networking. ... when you're on Blackboard everything is uni. [010, M, 18 years, Domestic]

These findings support Chu and Meulemans (2008), who identified student opinions about using one technology over another for certain tasks at university (for example, the use of email in preference to an SNS site to communicate with their lecturers).

Implications, Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Whether academics are keen or feel pressured to incorporate SNSs or other new media technologies into their teaching, there is very limited research to guide them. While not a guide as such, our study captures students' perceptions, opinions and attitudes towards such moves. The findings, while a fairly brief, provide some useful insights to consider when thinking about incorporating SNSs into a subject. However, a relatively small sample was used that potentially limits generalisability. The findings, however, represent student perceptions from a sufficiently diverse range of faculties and subject areas where Facebook has been used. Thus, these exploratory findings represent a broad view of the issues that arise. Also, the research was conducted at a single university, so conducting similar research across a number of universities would make the findings more generalisable.

The findings suggest a number of possible directions for future research on the use of SNSs in academic subjects. For example, work could be done to capture students' perceptions of the degree to which a Facebook site creates a sense of community in the subject that has ongoing meaning for those involved. Research could investigate the strength of ties developed between student 'friends' in the SNS that enhances enduring offline friendships with members of their cohort. Additionally, research could be carried out regarding self presentation issues in subjects' Facebook sites to determine how different students perceive themselves relevant to their student peers and how their peers perceive others on the site. Further, research could examine the degree to which students are addressed and treated in their face-to-face activities in a subject, based on how they are perceived through their self presentations on the subject's Facebook. Finally, further research could be conducted into how subject SNSs can contribute to the first year experience. In particular, research could focus on how this form of social networking can improve retention rates by creating a sense of community and engagement with 'virtual friends' for younger students in very large classes.

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