

Using Facebook to Promote Learning: A Case Study

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A growing body of research is examining the use of social media on college campuses. This study explores the use of one social media outlet, specifically Facebook's closed group feature, in two graduate courses. Findings show that using Facebook can promote student learning. Students used the groups for sharing ideas and support, asking questions, and participating in discussions. This article provides a framework for using Facebook closed groups to advance student learning.

Introduction

The way that college campuses communicate with students constantly evolves. With the advent of social media, administrators and faculty seem unsure how to make the best use of it. There is a growing body of research that is examining the use of various social media applications within the context of higher education. For example, Page Abe and Nickolas Jordan (2013) illustrated that social media has tremendous potential for engaging learning in the curricular context, and Sarah Kathleen Henry (2012) explored the intersection of social media, well-being, and community across higher education. While this research is promising, educators lack a clear framework for ways in which specific social media applications can be used to promote student learning. Part of this is due to the wide variety of social media applications available. Facebook is the social media application with the most on-campus users. As a means of providing an approach for educators who wish to use social media as a way of promoting student learning, this study begins exploring a new framework through the use of Facebook.

Facebook

The initial idea for Facebook was hatched in late 2003 in a residence hall on Harvard University's campus. Now, Facebook is the largest social media website in use and worth nearly \$83.5 USD billion (Protalinski, 2012), touting over one billion active users (Vance, 2012). One study conducted by Smith and Caruso (2010) found that over 90%

of traditional-aged college students self-reported that they used Facebook in some way every day. Faculty have joined the social media site, too—research posted by Kirk Wakefield (2012) on the *Faculty Focus*' website claims that nearly 85% of all faculty members have a Facebook account.

With so many members of the higher education community using Facebook one might think that the medium would be used to intentionally advance learning as never before. However, that does not appear to be the case. In an article about social media use on college campuses, Amy Ratliff (2011) notes that administrators, "struggle to identify how much presence is needed [on Facebook], what type of information to disseminate, and how often they need to update their Facebook 'status'" when using Facebook to promote campus programs or services (p. 5). She continues to discuss how professors tend to use social media strictly for personal purposes, rather than academic ones.

In our own experience, Facebook appears to be used primarily as a tool for marketing and promotion as evidenced by the amount of campus event invitations these authors have received. Institutions, student groups, and marketing teams seem to use Facebook primarily to disseminate information either about the institution itself, as part of a larger recruitment campaign, or to promote campus events. Thus, exploring ways Facebook could be used to enhance student learning is worthwhile; this study does so through a case study of two separate graduate-level courses.

The Environment: Two Hybrid (Web-based and In-person) Courses

The courses studied were implemented at a medium-sized, comprehensive institution in the Midwest by one professor for students enrolled in a particular graduate program. Twenty-three first-year students were enrolled in the Group A course while 10 second-year students were enrolled in the Group B course.

Facebook's closed group feature was incorporated into both courses. Facebook allows for the creation of online

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social groups. These groups can either be “open,” “closed,” or “secret.” A closed group is a group in which only members can see the posts contained within, yet others are able to see that the group exists. To become a member of a closed group, individuals have to request access and are admitted by the group’s administrator. Once the students were registered on Facebook they were required to join the class group, which had been set up by the professor prior to the first day of class.

Establishing a closed Facebook group allowed the instructor and students to interact in the group with no outside Facebook interaction required, meaning the professor and students did not have to “friend” each other on Facebook outside of the group. Further, to protect the privacy of those in the group the professor stipulated in the course syllabus, and requested on the first day of class, that students not leave their Facebook accounts open for others to see or share what other individuals had posted. The students agreed to uphold that expectation on the first day of class.

Group A

The first course is required for all first-year students in the graduate program and is taught each spring semester. The data for this case study comes from the course taught in the spring of 2012. Entry into this course required the appropriate major and permission of the instructor. This course counted as 4 credits and students were assigned a letter grade.

Course Logistics - This course met once per week for three and a half hours of in-class contact. Additionally, two optional work sessions were provided for students to meet in-person to discuss their assignments with the instructor outside of office hours and class time, with each work session lasting two hours. Assignments in this course included reading material, group and individual projects requiring qualitative research and extensive writing, an in-class presentation, and active participation.

Closed Facebook Group Mechanics - Twenty percent of class credit was determined by active participation in this course. Active participation was defined as the following:

Active participation means you bring your insights and contribute them to the class discussion. This necessitates preparing in advance and attending class. It also means engaging actively with the thoughts of your colleagues—listening carefully, responding openly, and making connections amongst others’ contributions. This course is designed for active participation, which means that full participation of every individual is necessary in discussions, readings, activities, and assignments. Each individual in the

course is responsible for helping others learn, as well as for their own learning.

Thus, students were explicitly told that their participation in the course would influence their grades. The syllabus also stated, “You are expected to come to class prepared to contribute to class discussions and to listen respectfully to others.”

Regarding the closed Facebook group, the syllabus read, “Your participation in the course Facebook group will be factored into your active participation grade for class.” Specifics for the closed Facebook group were outlined on the syllabus as follows:

This group offers you an opportunity to post questions, insights, ideas, and comments regarding class discussions and assignments. I will use the group to share announcements so they do not take up class time, ask questions to further your thinking, and occasionally request use of the site in preparation for the next week’s class discussion (for example, I might ask each member of the class to post one question they would like to discuss about the reading in class 24 hours prior to our class meeting). The site also allows us discussion opportunities beyond class. I urge you to check the group regularly for new information.

Group B

The second course was an optional, independent study course designed specifically for second-year graduate students in their final semester of the program and was taught in the spring of 2012. Entry into this course required the appropriate major and permission of the instructor. This course counted as 2 elective credits and students were given either Satisfactory or Unsatisfactory for their efforts.

Course Logistics - This course met once per week for 1 hour and 40 minutes of in-class contact. Assignments in this course included reading material, reflective journaling throughout the semester, a final paper, and participation both in-class and in the Facebook closed group.

Closed Facebook Group Mechanics - Thirty percent of class credit was determined by active participation in this course. Similar to the syllabus for Group A, the syllabus for Group B stated, “Your participation in the course Facebook group will be factored into your active participation grade for class,” and this sentiment was repeated in class. The professor defined active participation for this group exactly the same as it was defined for Group A.

However, Group B was unique in that in order for students to meet the standards for active participation, the syllabus outlined specific requirements for participation in the closed Facebook group:

Each week that reading is assigned you are required to make at least one post. It can be a response to a question someone else posted, it can be an insight you made related to the reading, it can be a discussion question or two that you hope we will get to in class, etc. You are required to submit your weekly post by 9 a.m. on Thursday morning on weeks when we have class.

Methodology

Data for this study was collected through the two Facebook closed groups. Due to the archival nature of Facebook, complete access was available to both groups, including the complete history of the group’s use of Facebook. The observation notes of the faculty member, and the course syllabi were also collected for analysis.

A two case study approach was selected because it allows “the researcher to analyze within each setting and across settings” (Baxter & Jack, 2008, p. 550). The two courses using closed Facebook groups were chosen for the differences in the way Facebook was implemented, thereby adding depth to the particular phenomenon of using Facebook to further student learning. Additionally, the two courses shared similarities, which also add depth to the research purpose of this study. The similarities and differences were previously described in the environments section.

The data was organized manually into categories and subcategories. Specifically, the analytic procedures outlined by Marshall and Rossman (1999) for qualitative research, was used to ensure the dependability, confirmability, and credibility of this study. The first step was to organize the data, which included reviewing all of the Facebook posts made during the spring 2012 semester for both groups, retrieving the syllabus for each course, and making field notes, thereby contributing to an audit trail. The second step was conducted in conjunction with step 3, which was to note patterns and categories emerging from the data, as well as to code the data. Finally, “testing the emergent understandings,” as well as “searching for alternative explanations” was conducted not just by the researcher going back to the original data, but also through the process of member checking (p. 152). This analysis process allows for the achievement of the criteria trustworthiness.

Specifically, trustworthiness was achieved through the member checking process, as well as the triangulation that occurred through multiple sources of data, which contributed to credibility and confirmability (Shenton, 2004). A peer de-briefer was used during steps 2 and 3 in order to have someone outside the process offer critical feedback, bringing credibility to the study (Shenton, 2004). Finally, field notes and an audit trail were made and kept through the entire data analysis process, providing dependability

and confirmability (Shenton, 2004). It is important to acknowledge that a limitation of this study is the inability to generalize the results beyond the Facebook application.

Results

Nine themes emerged for how Facebook was used by the students and are illustrated in Table 1. These themes serve as the foundation for a framework of how Facebook can be used to promote learning.

Table 1. How Facebook was used		
Action:	Group A:	Group B:
Announcements made related to the course	28	10
Announcements made related to the course	4	0
Asked for help from peers with an assignment or the reading in terms of understanding	23	4
Posted a video when doing the reading	4	3
Thanked class for the time together	3	3
Post not related to the course, but wanted to share it with the class	10	2
Encouraging each other (includes humor)	12	10
Photo of a class activity	10	0
Saw something in the news/on the internet that reminded them of class	7	14

Announcements

As stated above, both syllabi articulated the same instructions for using the Facebook group for this purpose. However, the use of the Facebook groups for announcements went beyond the syllabi instructions and included students sharing information about events happening on campus that had a perceived connection to the course or may have been of interest to those in the group. For example, when the class was exploring the importance of hearing others’ stories, the following was posted by a student, “Hey All, I was thinking the Frank Meeink speaker maybe a great opportunity to hear his story. It is at 7PM in the Lamoine Room.” Announcements also included updates

and reminders about course material and assignments, as well as when, and where, study groups were going to be held. Three times the amount of announcements were made in Group A as were made in Group B.

Posting After Class

A few of the students in Group A used the Facebook group to make a post related to the course material after that week's course meeting; thereby, demonstrating that they were continuing to consider what they were learning. Group A is the group in which there was no requirement for any posts to be made. For example, a post that was made by an individual in Group A consisted of referencing a comment made in a previous class by an individual and its connection to the next week's reading, "Am I crazy or did [name of student] bring up Romanticism as a possible synonym for constructivism? Check out pg. 144 of the Bochner article." The students in Group B made no similar posts.

Asking Peers for Help

Overwhelmingly, Group A used the Facebook group almost six times more to ask their peers for help with an assignment than in Group B. Although some of their interest in doing so could be due to the difference in the course assignments, Group A seemed more willing to share various approaches to the course assignments than Group B. Examples of such sharing include, "'Life begins at the end of your comfort zone' I found this quote pretty helpful for our My Story assignment ... hopefully it will challenge some of you as much as it is challenging me" and:

Hey, some of the questions that I pondered (am pondering) as I prepare to write "My Story" include: What experiences made/make me who I am? What moments/events in my life make me feel the way I do about the world or myself? What events/moments/experiences in my life change(d) how I saw/see the world or myself for that matter? Perhaps this will help or perhaps it won't... Take it as you may.

Students made these posts in an effort to share with their peers what they found helpful as they completed their assignments.

Posting a Video

Almost the same number of students posted videos related to the course content on each of the two Facebook closed groups. It is easy to connect to a video elsewhere on the Internet through Facebook in that the web address simply needs to be typed into the post box and/or a tab can be selected that allows a video to be uploaded. The content of the videos posted included songs, educational YouTube videos, and clips from movies and television shows. None of

the students uploaded their own videos, but rather videos created by others were posted to the group from elsewhere on the Internet.

Thanking the Class

A few students in both classes used the Facebook group to thank their classmates for the time spent together in class. An example of a Group A post from someone who appreciated a risk someone else took is, "Thanks for class today everyone and for being patient." An example from Group B is "I wanted to say that I appreciate you all." The thank you messages were posted throughout the semester and were often made in connection to vulnerability shown in class. Those posting the thank you messages were either from those who had taken the risk themselves or those who gained new insight from a classmate becoming vulnerable during class.

Posts Not Related to Class

Students in both Group A and Group B made posts about events, songs, and news articles not related to the course content, but that they wanted to share with their classmates. This was done eight times more often in Group A than in Group B. For example, one student posted a news article and said, "Not related to this class I suppose, but I thought it was interesting and wanted to hear people's thoughts. I think it could definitely affect some of the way we do things."

Encouragement

Students in both groups used Facebook to give each other encouragement. Examples from Group A include a student posting an inspirational quote, "'Step back from the problem and acknowledge that there is more than one way to look at it. Open yourself to new possibilities.' –Deepak Chopra." A Group A student posted "Good job today everyone!" Examples from Group B include "I can't wait to be a part of the learning process with you!!" and the quote "You know my name, not my story. You've heard what I've done, not what I've been through." Such encouragement was often "liked," a button Facebook provides that allows an individual to indicate interest in or approval of a post by other members of the group.

Photos

One unique usage of Facebook for Group A was posting photos of class activities. Often in class the students participated in interactive learning activities that they felt they would want to reference later. One such example included making a long continuum on which all of the course concepts were displayed. Without prompting a student volunteered to take photos of it for their classmates and posted it on the Facebook group so that classmates could reference it outside of the classroom when working on assignments.

News/Internet Article

Students in both groups used their Facebook groups to share news articles and Internet activities that they found to be connected to the course topic. These were often “liked” by other members of the group, and occasionally contributed to the lesson plan of the instructor. They did so twice as often in Group B than in Group A.

Discussion

Much of the difference between how Group A used their Facebook group and how Group B used their Facebook group could be due to the difference between the courses in terms of the structure around Facebook use. Posting to the Facebook group was an assignment for Group B, which could have narrowed the scope of its use for the participants despite the instructor’s in-class messages about ways the group could be used and the syllabus articulating that the group was not only for required posts. Such a requirement might have contributed to students feeling the need to focus on into the next week’s assignment in order to make sure that they met the required post expectations.

The course assignments could also account for the differences in the use of Facebook. Weekly reflective journaling was an assignment for Group B. Students may have felt uncomfortable asking for help from each other, given the more personal nature of the weekly journaling. The assignments included for Group A might also have felt personal, but were more cumulative in nature and did include components of analysis that were not as personal in nature. The willingness of Group A to ask each other for help seemed to create a more collaborative atmosphere, which may have contributed to them desiring the building of relationships with each other related to issues outside of the classroom.

The results of this study suggest that Facebook can be used to promote student learning outside of the classroom. Furthermore, it appears that there are benefits and limitations to requirements being placed around its use. For example, while it appears that having a very limited structure for the use of Facebook leads to students feeling more comfortable asking questions of each other for help with assignments; it also appears that having structure allowed for connections to be made between news and other forms of media and what was being learned in class. Unfortunately, such differences could also be due to factors such as different course topics or different students. Thus, further research can be done to explore the difference between the kinds of posts each of the two groups made and how it relates to the structure placed by the instructor around the use of closed Facebook groups. Additionally,

research can be conducted that analyzes how the group interacted in-person compared to their online interactions. Further data would be needed for such a study.

Also, while this study was completed with two hybrid courses, further research could be done to expand the use of Facebook to a completely online course. College students are often on Facebook and having the class meet in-person as well could make it so that students are more comfortable posting, because they are also forming in-person relationships with each other. Facebook is designed to allow those in the outside world know more about you, so it would be worth exploring its use with those who only meet for class online.

Furthermore, both groups used were in a graduate-level course; exploring the use of Facebook for undergraduate students is worthwhile. Additionally, the students in Group A were in their first year of the program, while those in Group B were near the end of the program. Perhaps motivation to expand beyond the requirements was waning for those who were about to graduate.

Conclusion

This study is the beginning of exploring an approach for the use of one social media application, Facebook, as an additional way to promote learning. Specifically, the closed group feature of Facebook was used in 2 hybrid courses, resulting in students making connections between the course concepts and their life experiences. Additionally, the use of Facebook appears to encourage student collaboration and support for each other’s learning.

Continuing to explore the use of Facebook to more thoroughly flush out a framework for its use seems worthwhile. At the same time, research on social media’s ability to promote learning also needs to grow beyond exploring the use of Facebook, as social media use continues to expand with different applications varying in scope and accessibility. Still, this study’s focus on Facebook is a solid start to such exploration. As such, future research should consider other ways to incorporate usage of social media in student learning.

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