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Why Facebook is (and isn't) a pre-service teacher's friend

Pauline Taylor, School of Education, James Cook University

Abstract

There is increasing interest in the use of social media networking sites such as *Facebook* in engaging higher education students in learning and the broader university experience. Research indicates that *Facebook* has over 100 million active users worldwide, over half of whom log on to the site twice per day. The potential reach and opportunities for wide engagement in using social media is clear. However, institutions have approached its use with understandable caution given the very public and interconnected nature of these “risky” virtual spaces. Many universities have specific and explicit reference in their communications and code of conduct policies regarding the use of *Facebook* for students and staff.

The use of *Facebook* in teacher education programs could be considered particularly perilous. Hazards inherent in *Facebook* use in pre-service teacher education programs include issues of professionalism, ethics, identity, privacy and potential litigation. This paper describes and critiques the use of a *Facebook* group page in a professional experience-embedded pedagogy subject in a Bachelor of Education program. The critique draws upon literature relating to student experience, design thinking and social media use. It argues that, used prudently, *Facebook* can be an inclusive dialogic learning space and a valuable tool in developing the professional identity and engagement of pre-service teachers.

Key words: teacher education; social media; professional identity; design thinking.

Introduction

There is increasing interest in the use of social media networking sites such as *Facebook* to engage higher education students in learning and the broader university experience. It is estimated that *Facebook* has over 1.11 billion monthly active users, half of whom log in every day and average fifty page views per day (Facebook, 2013). It is the largest and most used social networking site globally. Research into the reach, popularity and impact of higher education students' *Facebook* use (for example, Jones & Fox, 2009), suggests that up to 99 percent of higher education students are active users of *Facebook* and interact with their pages five times per day for periods between thirty minutes and four hours (Pempek, Yermolayeva, & Calvert, 2009). Depending on the type of activity, studies suggest that *Facebook* use can enhance student engagement, learning and experience (Pascarella & Terrenzini, 1991) and make tertiary institutions seem more welcoming.

Although higher educations are typically slow in adopting new technologies (Kleiner, Thomas, Lewis, & Greene, 2007), universities are increasingly turning to these public and interconnected virtual spaces for marketing purposes and to enhance communication. However, research into to how academic staff are using such spaces for learning is still a relatively new field of inquiry. Whilst the potential of such tools seems infinite, institutions do regard them as inherently risky. Universities' communications policies generally make specific reference to appropriate use of social media by staff and students. The University of Queensland, for example, refers staff to the three-page state Government policy and 64-page guidelines on social media use (Queensland Government, 2010a, b) which requires agencies to "...conduct a risk assessment prior to implementing social media for official use." (2010a, p.2). The guidelines (2010b) state

3.2 Before you begin – consider the risks

The official use of social media has the potential to compromise compliance with legislation, particularly in regard to accessibility, privacy and recordkeeping. Content contributed by anyone may infringe upon the rights of others in areas such as defamation, intellectual property and fraud. (p.7)

Such policies and guidelines may act as significant deterrants to academic staff in engaging with social media to enhance learning.

The use of *Facebook* within professional courses such as medicine and teacher education is particularly problematic, as ill-considered use of the site can, and has, resulted in serious legal and professional consequences (Chretien, Greysen, Chretien et al., 2009, Heussner, 2010, Knight, 2011). In my role as a teacher educator and as Director of Professional Experience, I continually emphasized the need for students to be prudent in their use of *Facebook* to the extent of scheduling explicit briefing sessions from lawyers and union representatives prior to practicum experiences. These sessions focused on the relative ease with which defamation could be proven through the use of *Facebook*; how potential employers often looked at such sites; how information meant solely for 'friends' could be accessed and shared across multiple networks; how commenting or venting on such sites about professional experiences, mentors, schools, parents and children could, and has, resulted in litigation and ; the ease with students or beginning teachers could be in breach of professional codes of ethics. As a teacher educator, I certainly did not regard *Facebook* as any educator or aspiring educator's friend.

A review of the literature

However, a research interest in widening participation (Gale, 2009) student engagement (Astin, 1984; Kift, Nelson & Clarke, 2010; Kuh, 2009; Tinto, 2012) and design thinking approaches to curriculum design (Brown, 2008) drew me to studies which indicated positive links between *Facebook* use, student engagement and academic achievement (Junco, 2012; Roblyer, McDaniel, Webb et al., 2010). Despite some considerable reservations, I decided to use a *Facebook* page for a second year practicum embedded pedagogy subject in 2013. My motives were broad. First, I

coordinate a subject in multiple modes (including wholly online) in diverse locations. I reasoned that, as the majority of students already used *Facebook* regularly, this would be one way I could inject a more personal and ‘high touch’ approach into my communications with students than the university Learning Management System allowed. Pascarella and Terrenzini (1991) advise that when academic staff form appropriate informal connections with students, their instructional effectiveness is enhanced. Taylor and Worsley (2008) found in their small study with first year teacher education students at my institution that many pre-service teachers had chosen the profession because of the portability of the qualification and the ability to effect a wider social good. Their study concluded that emphasising these elements of the profession in the course was one way to encourage student engagement and persistence. I volunteer as a teacher educator in Cambodia every year so the *Facebook* page provided an opportunity to introduce myself and other academic staff and to share this experience, across the wider group in a familiar and informal way. Second, our Learning Management System (LMS), in common with most systems of this type, is prone to outages and is not as user-friendly as *Facebook*. It was a continual challenge to encourage students to engage with the LMS regularly and I needed a quick and effective communication tool to avoid a deluge of email queries from students when the system was not operational. Like many of my students, I have *Facebook* on my mobile device and access is included in my mobile provider plan. So, instant access to the page had benefits in terms of rapid, cheap communication and ease of use. Third, I like to encourage students to contribute to live blogs and public debate about teaching and education issues in my subjects as a way of developing their professional identity. Given the ubiquitous nature of *Facebook*, I thought students might use this medium to engage in professionally-focussed conversations more broadly.

Using the *Facebook* page

In orientation week, I sent students an email and posted an announcement in the LMS site alerting them to the *Facebook* page I had set up for the subject, the university policy regarding the use of social media and warnings about the public nature of the site. These cautions and reminders about appropriate legislation, university policies and professional codes of ethics were explicitly reiterated in online and face to face lecture materials. The page was established as a community page with open public access. Students did not have to be my, or each other’s *Facebook* friend in order to see or comment on the page.

As previously stated, I used the page for three main functions: to develop open, friendly, personal interactions with students; to share information promptly and; to engage students in wider and deeper debate about the profession and contemporary educational issues. I and other staff, shared some personal information with students (relating to our profession) and each week I posted cartoons and humorous messages related to weekly tasks. I copied the same announcements and important messages from the LMS onto the *Facebook* page and I created ‘events’ which reflected key dates in the subject. I also page the site to convey important reminders, clarify student queries, provide links to useful resources and as an alternative to the LMS in times of outage. In relation to engagement with professional issues and debate, I used the site to draw students’ attention to opportunities for debate, advocacy and political action, for example ‘liking’ pages such as ‘I give a Gonski’ and participating in live chat during televised debates focused on teaching and education ABC, Q&A program for example.

Facebook statistics showed that active users of the page mirrored the age and gender demographic of the student enrolment. In our courses, we have higher than the norm proportions of mature age students and they were equally as active as younger students. Out of 252 students enrolled in the subject, 155 “liked” the subject page, 129 when the page was established with more students liking the page as the subject progressed. Liking the page allowed students to comment on the page. Page statistics show that the page reach was considerably broader than the number of likers indicates (see

Figure 1).



Figure 1 Site statistics February 14 2013- 21 May 2013

An analysis of posts on the page shows that the majority of student posts (and academic staff comments) were related to clarification of information and sharing of resources. There was no significant difference between online and face to face students' use of the *Facebook* page. Unsurprisingly, higher page activity occurred at times when major assessment was due, regardless of the students' mode of study. Comparisons with the subject LMS site usage were startling. *Facebook* use was over twenty times the level of engagement with the LMS. Typically, a comment I posted to the *Facebook* page would have more than 50 views within 17 minutes. Data also suggested that students used the *Facebook* page in lieu of university email. Further inquiry into these phenomena provided insights which are presented in the discussion session of this paper. Students used the page exchanged practical and academic information and requested assistance on the site. They also engaged in productive and professionally-focussed debate on topics I posted or, in one case, live during a televised debate between the Australian Federal Minister and Shadow Minister for Education. Notable features of these responses were that they were considered, well-articulated and respectful to alternative views. Students also posted their own links to articles and resources on education-related issues and posed probing questions to each other on different topics. Student posts on the site also included sharing useful websites to support each other's practicum experiences, often giving a short synopsis of how they had used resources. There were no instances of breaches of confidentiality or inappropriate use of the page.

Discussion and critique

Astin (1984, p.1) defines student engagement as "...the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience." This interpretation is also reflected in more contemporary conceptualizations of engagement (Kuh 2009; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Data suggest that this subject's *Facebook* page facilitated high levels of students' time investment in the academic experience in comparison with the LMS. The *Facebook* page was more inviting, less alien and much more user-friendly than the LMS subject site. Further inquiry into student experiences of using the LMS subject site revealed that data download time and costs were a significant deterrent to using this platform. Students, both online and face to face, related that they logged on infrequently to the LMS and when they did, they simply downloaded what they needed or uploaded assessment. This feedback is confirmed by LMS site statistics which show that some

students logged onto the site (where all of their learning materials could be accessed) for less than two hours over an entire semester. Students stated that they prioritized what was essential to minimize data costs on their internet plans and worked offline whenever possible, many preferring printed materials to reading on-screen. They also expressed frustration with the ‘clunkiness’ of the platform and reliability issues. Students in this subject did not seem to be using the *Facebook* page as a preferred alternative to the LMS as, investigation into other concurrently-offered subjects which did not have an associated *Facebook* page revealed similarly low levels of engagement with the LMS.

Facebook by its very nature is an informal milieu and this experience showed that students engaged regularly in personal, professional and academic work through the page in productive ways. Staff’s limited personal and professional disclosure on the site seemed to humanize them and encouraged friendly and open interaction with students. This, in turn, had a positive effect on student engagement and staff workload. Sturgeon and Walker’s (2010) study found that *Facebook* provided an open and more egalitarian line of communication between students and academic staff and this resonates with positive impacts of design thinking approaches to curriculum design (Barnett, 2007). Mazer, Murphy, and Simonds’ (2007) study suggests that such strategies increase student motivation and engagement and this experience confirms their findings.

Quick responses to student queries were much easier to effect through the *Facebook* page than via the LMS site or email. I have access to all these facilities on my mobile phone but *Facebook* was open and free and, like my students, I found this the easiest to use. The majority of students in the subject had significant work and family responsibilities in addition to study commitments and, regardless of mode of study, often engaged in academic work in the evening at weekends. These were consequently the times when they had the most questions about learning tasks and *Facebook* allowed me to respond to these questions very easily and quickly. The timeliness of teachers’ feedback on students’ assignments as predictors of positive educational outcomes are a recurrent theme in student retention literature. I had a notably decreased amount of email correspondence with students in comparison with subjects where I had not used a *Facebook* page.

Students’ active participation in, and the quality of, professionally oriented debate on the subject page was at a far superior level to my previous experiences with face to face tutorials, asynchronous discussion boards or LMS blogs which was unanticipated considering the informal nature of *Facebook* generally. Staff had modeled professional discourse and the presentation of cogent, rational arguments in posts on the page and students’ responses reflected their engagement and understanding of the wider professional milieu to which they belonged. There were no instances of inappropriate communication in any respect on the site. It seemed that the familiar environment of *Facebook* and students’ regular interaction with the professionally-oriented topics on the page provided an ongoing, low risk (for them), supportive environment in which to develop and practise their nascent professional selves. Real world, high stakes and high risk practicum experiences are often the main or only context in teacher education courses where students can try out their emergent professional identities. *Facebook* may be a useful additional tool for teacher educators to support professional identity development and make tacit professional knowledge and practice more explicit.

Conclusions

Loving and Ochoa’s (2011) study on social media technologies in higher education noted that “Instructors realised that asking college students to visit online university course sites differs greatly from bringing the course site to them” (p.123) and this was certainly my experience and will change the way I approach my undergraduate teaching in future. Insights into how students were, or rather were not, using the university LMS interface have foregrounded ways in which academic staff might be more effective in their teaching. I plan to provide course materials on USB sticks, and in

hardcopy workbooks, as well as on the LMS site to address the data download and on-screen reading issues highlighted by students. I also intend to be more deliberate in my use of *Facebook* in subjects in the future by focussing specifically upon Roblyer and Wiencke's (2003) five identified components which contribute to positive learning outcomes: socially designed interaction; instructionally-designed interaction; interactivity affordances of technology; student engagement and; instructor engagement. Although Roblyer and Wiencke's research relates to online students, this experience has shown that online and face to face students used the subject *Facebook* page comparably.

Finally, student retention literature (for example Kift et al., 2010; Tinto 2012) suggests that time spend academically and socially engaged "on campus" are protective factors for student success and persistence. In a climate of widening participation where students are increasingly juggling competing work, life and study priorities, *Facebook* may provide easily accessible de facto "on campus" time and is an area for further investigation.

In conclusion, my experience with *Facebook* in this subject, has led me to regard the intrinsic risks in using such sites for academic purposes to complement, and maybe even eventually replace, conventional Learning Management Systems, are well "...worth the necessary workarounds" (Loving & Ochoa, 2011, p. 129). Prudent use of *Facebook* in teacher education courses can provide a rich and dynamic environment for social and academic interaction and professional identity building and can certainly be a teacher-educator's friend.

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