Using Facebook to Engage the 'Hard-to-Reach' Students in Higher Education

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Social networks and generations

Reynol and Mastrodicasa (2007) explain that individuals born between 1991 and 2001 can be considered as 'Generation Z' or 'Millennials' (Oblinger, 2003, p38). This generation band of individuals exhibits a nature of being highly-connected, digital natives with a lifelong use of communication and media technology. As a teacher of this generation of students, I felt this opened up a range of pedagogical possibilities with reference to their traits around the use of technology. A potential technology for use in this context is that of a Social Networking Site (SNS), namely the market leader in this technology, Facebook.

So why would anyone consider using Facebook within the Higher Education (HE) teaching and learning environment? One of the clear potential benefits is that, if students are already using and interacting with Facebook, that platform may offer a helpful way of reaching them and engaging them with learning, especially those who may not be fully engaged with it. Having myself often heard stories of students' being disengaged within the classroom because they were 'sitting on Facebook', I began to consider using Facebook along with them, to see if any synergy and crossover might exist.

Learning in SNS

Students using Facebook will already have an understanding of its functionality, will be regularly making use of the platform and will consequently be finding it easy to engage with, in contrast to traditional platforms like Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs). Of course, for the teacher, an important consideration at the outset is that not *every* student will be using Facebook, whether by choice or otherwise. Exceptions are few and far between in my experience: I rarely find students who are not active on the Facebook platform.

Facebook offers a range of functions that indicate potential synergies with pedagogical practices and student engagement within HE. The fact that Facebook has 'groups' and 'chat' functionality – real-time text-based communicaton between users - offers considerable potential for educational applications: it permits creation of individual profiles on the platform and inter-user engagement via written communication and the sharing of rich media content such as files, photographic images and video content. One of the core functions of a platform is that it enables users to create their own individual private 'groups'; on Facebook, group members certainly can interact privately in the ways mentioned, their content hidden from the wider user base of the platform, so Facebook does offer the same functionality as that of a module page within a traditional VLE. Another important element of the Facebook platform as a whole is its integration with mobile devices, offering real-time notifications to be delivered to smart phones and tablets. In my experience, Generation Z craves speed of response above most other elements.

Researching student SNS usage

Following my previous Facebook-based research, in late 2016 I conducted an ethnographic research study with a group of first-year undergraduate students, to explore the potential application of Facebook and with the overall aim of ascertaining if the platform could improve student engagement both inside and outside the classroom. The study made use of a Facebook

'group' which a cohort of students could join in order to discuss class topics, post questions, interact with virtual tasks and download lecture content. I was also present within the Facebook group to engage with the students. I was aware of the possibility that my presence might produce something of the 'Hawthorne effect', but there was little evidence of this having any impact.

My research was conducted over a period of twelve weeks and highlighted some important considerations to be taken into account when looking to embed SNS technology into the HE learning environment. Several positive elements were highlighted within the study and included the accessibility of information circulated between the lecturer and students using the platform and also the superior speed of communication by 'chat' to that by email.

Students within the study placed much positive emphasis upon the collaborative learning advantages when using Facebook. This highlighted synergy with the concepts of Communities of Practice. Wenger (2011) explains that a Community of Practice can be considered as groups of individuals who share a common goal in learning via the means of interacting on a regular basis with other people with the same overall goals. Furthermore, Wenger argues that the process of this community interaction leads to greater engagement and overall learning.

An important conclusion of the research was that utilising the Facebook platform enabled a method of communication with students who could be considered 'hard to reach', either by their own choice or otherwise. My research indicated that Facebook provided a common ground, a safe environment and familiar online territory to students who often found the transition to HE difficult or who chose not to engage in, for example, face-to-face learning contexts. This was particularly true for students who felt, for various reasons, unable to engage in conversation during class contact time; they found Facebook a much easier, more familiar and less intimidating method of communication. Similarly, students with poor attendance and engagement with the class increased their levels of interaction via Facebook and started to participate there in discussions and collaborative learning with their peers. In my opinion, this was in part driven by a peer involvement and the ease of using this particular platform. All these points seem to correlate with the Generation Z traits highlighted earlier. I feel that many of these elements explain why Facebook acted as an enabler for a whole range of students to engage and come together online, something which can be inherently difficult within the classroom itself.

Considerations for good practice

Of course, many may say "our VLE system offers the same functionality so let's just encourage student to use that", to which I would reply, "Good luck!" Any VLE is alien to most students starting in HE and simply isn't 'cool' or what peers are using. This appeared, within the research I conducted, to play an important role in the students' adoption of Facebook as an interactive educational platform.

The points considered above confirm Facebook as advantageous to learning when used within HE. However, some important limitations of the technology should be considered before anyone jumps in to make use of Facebook within her/his own HE teaching practice.

Facebook interaction between a lecturer and students in itself raises ethical and privacy questions. Consideration must be given to the line between a professional relationship and a personal 'social' relationship: should such a line be crossed or blurred to some degree in the context of teaching within HE by means of SNSs such as Facebook? I personally found that this aspect was, though important, not restrictive when it came to *my* use of Facebook, which I

believe is owing to the fact that I do almost sit in the Generation Z band. However, fellow academics with whom I have discussed the idea of interacting with students via Facebook have expressed concern that they belong to a different generation from me and from that of the students we teach – developing appropriate rapport with students within this medium can present understandable challenge.

The research indicated that the willingness of students to engage with Facebook within a HE learning context is highly dependent on the individual lecturer using the platform, on her/his understanding of the technology and on the level of trust established between her/him and the students: these may well constitute some initial barriers to the successful educational application of Facebook.

Pianta and Hamre (2001) and Klem and Connell (2009), alongside a wealth of others, explain how important to the learning and achievement of students in HE a good lecturer/student relationship is. Such a relationship may be enhanced by the kind of SNS interaction I have described in this paper, but it is quite clear that a host of issues could cause difficulty for the unwary teacher. I do feel that it comes down to understanding the students, their attitudes to the HE environment and their wider social interactions; or, to put it another way, to a sensible and balanced approach, *already* thought through from a professional standpoint, as to what is and what isn't appropriate to discuss or post on Facebook.

Another, fundamental, issue when considering the use of any type of SNS as a tool to be deployed in the HE environment, will come down to points of data control and ownership. Considering Facebook, one of the clear issues in this context is the ownership of the data and of information stored on the system. This will no doubt, from my experience so far, raise questions at an institutional level. This also relates to a point of concern - that any user of the platform can remove content s/he has posted as and when s/he wishes, without any logged record of what content has been posted. This links back to concerns of ethical practice and potential misconduct. For instance, a member of staff could engage with a student in discussion (or vice versa), make an inappropriate comment, cause distress or offence and then simply erase any record of the instance.

There is also the notion that the educational use of Facebook with student cohorts may exhibit increases in student engagement at the outset, owing to its novelty. This level of engagement with the platform may drop as the novelty wears off. However, the platform is dynamic in nature and its changing levels of functionality may curb this element. I did note a sense of excitement during the initial stages, when I invited students to join Facebook groups in order to interact with me and the wider lecture content, but the students sustained their interest and an active involvement over time.

Conclusions

Considering the points highlighted from my research and the similar work of Greenhow, Robelia and Hughes (2009) and Tess (2013), it seems fitting to mention that ultimately, perhaps, the wider consideration is that the potential use of social networking in HE points towards a growing dependency on the use of technology and a shift in the way students learn, interact and engage generally.

Examination of the core advantages and limitations of Facebook provides some insight into the potential and interesting use of this technology in the HE learning environment. Using Facebook

appears to help remove barriers to student engagement, the more so with students who often struggle to engage fully with the learning experience and can be considered 'hard to reach'. This said, it does not present an easy integration into practice, but, if adopted within the bounds of what is shown to be effective, it may help take students beyond simple interaction and foster an environment of rich student engagement across all types of learners. Of course, in the first instance, the engagement will in part be bound by the topic and cognitive interest of the student, but I feel the use of the familiar technology of social networking can help foster it.

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