Exploring the Affordances of Facebook Groups: The Case Study of a Closed Group Created By College Students

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ABSTRACT

This case study explores the affordances of a specific Facebook group created by college students, as perceived by the group members. The main focus is to investigate if Facebook groups have an educational value. Furthermore, three secondary research topics emerged: comparison of the group’s perceived affordances of faculty as opposed to the ones of students; comparison of the group’s perceived affordances with the ones of Blackboard LMS; and comparison of the group’s perceived affordances with the ones of a standard mailing list.

Keywords: Affordance, Case Study, College Students, Facebook, Facebook Groups, Social Network, Social Networking Service (SNS)

INTRODUCTION

Since 2004 that Facebook was launched, it has been used in several different contexts, including the field of education and learning. The potential educational value of Facebook as an academic and teaching tool has been the object of several studies, and not all of these agree on their findings. This paper describes a case study that attempts to explore the affordances of a particular feature provided by Facebook, i.e. Facebook groups, as these are perceived by a specific college community group that consists of undergraduate students, alumni, and faculty of an American college. The main research focus is to explore the educational value of a specific closed Facebook group that was created by college students of an American college, by investigating the perceived affordances of the group. Three secondary research questions emerged and are discussed in the analysis section.

History and Definitions

There are numerous definitions of social network sites (SNSs) throughout literature, and there are no significant discrepancies between them. To illustrate, Boyd and Ellison (2007: p. 211) define SNSs as

web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system.

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Madhusudhan (2012: p. 100) gives a similar but more compact definition: “SNSs are profile-based websites that allow users to maintain social relationships by viewing, visiting, and sharing their lists of social connections with other members”, whereas Liccardi, Sobj, Pau, Massey, and Lewthwaite (2007: p. 225) describe them as “…social structure of nodes that represent individuals (or organizations) and the relationships between them within a certain domain”. In their very recent paper, Park, Lee, and Kim (2012: p. 1704) state that “SNSs are a new communication technology that provides users with a unique venue for creating and maintaining online relationships”.

One of the most popular social network sites which has attracted a lot of attention and discussion over the last years is Facebook. Facebook was released on February 4, 2004 by the Harvard student Mark Zuckerberg, and, unlike other SNSs, it was designed to be used exclusively by people associated with colleges and universities - a user had to provide a valid .edu email account in order to get registered. Gradually, its use became wider; in September 2005 a high-school version was released, and in 2006 Facebook allowed the creation of communities for commercial organizations. It was not until September 2006 that the general public could access and use Facebook (Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Facebook, 2004; Hew, 2011; Phillips, 2011; Stephens, 2007)

Gray, Annabell, and Kennedy (2010: p. 971) refer to Facebook as “the best known social networking site”, and numerous scholars report that the majority of college students rank Facebook as the leading SNS (Educause, 2006; Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Gold, Wilkinson, & Huberman, 2007; Hew, 2011; Park et al., 2012).

The official mission of Facebook as this is currently described at the company’s site is “to give people the power to share and make the world more open and connected” (Facebook, 2004).

Use of Facebook

The popularity of Facebook among college and university students has attracted a lot of research. Consequently, there is a plethora of studies that investigate its use. Some explore the use of Facebook by comparing it with MySpace and/or other social network sites (Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Gold, 2007; Liccardi et al., 2007; Madhusudhan, 2012; Roblyer, McDaniel, Webb, Herman, & Witty, 2010; Stephens, 2007), whereas others focus on the way Facebook may be used in order to support specific groups of people or communities, such as research scholars (Madhusudhan, 2012), libraries (Miller & Jensen, 2007; Phillips, 2011; Stephens, 2007; Stewart, 2009), and college communities of students (Educause, 2006; Ellison et al., 2007; Gold et al., 2007; Gray et al., 2010; Liccardi et al., 2007; Park et al., 2012; Pempek, Yermolayeva, & Calvert, 2009; Smock, Ellison, Lampe, & Wohl, 2011). Other studies extend their focus to the ways college students may interact not only with each other, but also with their tutors (Hew, 2011; Roblyer et al., 2010; Roblyer & Wiencke, 2004; Schwartz, 2009), seeking to investigate the collaborative learning that may take place through the use of Facebook. Furthermore, studies like the ones conducted by Wang, Woo, Quek, Yang, & Liu (2011), Loving and Ochoa (2011) and Gray et al. (2010) dare to explore the possibility of employing Facebook as a replacement of standard learning management systems (LMS), while some other studies aim to investigate the functionality and the affordances of the specific tools and features that Facebook provides, seen either separately or as “toolkit of features” (Gold, 2007; Park et al., 2012; Smock et al., 2011: p. 2326).

As far as the educational value of Facebook is concerned, it seems that the existing studies provide conflicting data. Although most of the aforementioned studies report that Facebook appears to be used successfully for educational purposes, Wang et al. (2011) note that their findings in regard of the teaching and learning use of Facebook are both positive and negative; Liccardi et al. (2007) and Gray et al. (2010) express their uncertainty about
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