

Chapter 11

Facebook, Tele-Collaboration, and International Access to Technology in the Classroom

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the results of a study using the well-known social networking site, Facebook, to investigate graduate education students' perceptions on the use of technologies in classrooms around the world. This study was part of a larger project exploring tele-collaboration and the use of online discussions involving graduate students in an online program based in Australia, and students in a graduate Education program at a regional university in Greece. Findings reveal many similarities between the situations and perceptions of the participants from the different countries. They also demonstrated that even when technologies were available in schools, participants identified a critical need for professional development to increase teachers' use of ICT. These findings are relevant to researchers, educators and policy development in terms of implementation of ICT and/or social networking in the language classroom.

INTRODUCTION

To date, there appears to have been little research on how teachers use Facebook, either privately or in educational contexts, and whether the characteristics and trends in Facebook use identified for students generalize to teachers. There has also not been much research on how Facebook itself can be used to collect data, based on naturalistic discussions of topics of interest to users, such as the use of technology by teachers. This chapter attempts to address these research gaps by exploring how Facebook discussions can facilitate discussions by teachers, who are also graduate students in Australia and Greece, about similarities and differences in access and use of technologies in their classrooms.

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Background

Facebook is a widely used social networking site with over 1.11 billion users (Wikipedia, 2013). Facebook is the most popular social networking site in Canada, the UK, and the US, with Facebook penetration highest in North America, followed by the Middle East/Africa, Latin America, Europe and Asia-Pacific (Wikipedia, 2013). With a few exceptions (e.g. Peoples Republic of China, Iran), Facebook can be accessed globally for free by anyone who has internet access and a Facebook account.

The site works with a user registering, then creating a personal profile, to which they can add other users as ‘friends’, with whom they can then exchange messages, chat, etc. Additionally, users may join common-interest user groups, organized by workplace, school or college, or other characteristics, and categorize their friends into lists such as “People From Work” or “Close Friends” (Wikipedia, 2012). In general, privacy can be maintained as the Facebook page owner has control over who is a ‘friend’, and what kind of access they have to content on the page.

In this study, we propose that these features, together with the widespread familiarity of many students with the specific site and its functions, as well as the fact that it is free to access, could position Facebook as an appropriate option for a ‘virtual learning environment’, by facilitating interactions and tele-collaboration between teachers in diverse teaching and learning environments.

Despite the relative newness of Facebook, which was only launched in 2004, there has been an explosion of research about various facets of Facebook since approx. 2009, when widespread uptake began to be seen. Research about Facebook spans a number of different fields, from psychology to education to business and medicine. Recent research includes analysis of the types of people who use Facebook (Carpenter et al., 2011; Gangadharbatia, 2010; Gosling et al., 2011; Orr et al., 2009; Ross et al., 2009), how different groups use Facebook (Attia et al., 2011; Ellison et al., 2007; Hum et al., 2011; Nosko et al., 2010; Park et al., 2009; Pempek et al., 2009; Waters et al., 2009), how Facebook can or is used in education (Eyesenbach, 2008; Goodband et al., 2011; Harrison & Thomas, 2009; Hew, 2011; Kabilan et al., 2010; Madge et al., 2009; Maranto & Barton, 2010; Pempek et al., 2009; Roblyer et al., 2010; Yan et al., 2010), privacy issues with Facebook (Qi & Edgar-Nevill, 2011; Smith & Kidder, 2010; Weir et al., 2011), and even content analyses of Facebook pages (Glyn et al., 2012; Hum et al., 2011).

Research indicates that Facebook use varies by both the type of user, as well as by purpose or use (Carpenter et al., 2011; Gangadharbatia, 2010; Gosling et al., 2011; Orr et al., 2009; Ross et al., 2009). Although the use of Facebook for educational purpose is relatively new, interest in this phenomenon is increasing (Eyesenbach, 2008; Goodband et al., 2011; Harrison & Thomas, 2009; Hew, 2011; Kabilan et al., 2010; Madge et al., 2009; Maranto & Barton, 2010; Pempek et al., 2009; Roblyer et al., 2010; Yan et al., 2010). Research on the use of Facebook in educational contexts has explored a number of groups in terms of their use of Facebook, although the majority of research has focused on student users.

To date, considerably less research appears to have been done on how teachers use or perceive Facebook themselves (personally and/or pedagogically), although some research has suggested students reported higher levels of teacher trustworthiness and caring attributes when the teacher provided more information about themselves (e.g., self-disclosure) on shared Facebook pages (Hew, 2011). Research on Facebook in educational contexts also suggests considerable individual variation in the type and amount of use by individuals, but has not yet examined these issues in detail. To date, there appears to have been little research on how teachers use Facebook themselves, either privately or in educational contexts, and whether the characteristics and trends in Facebook use identified for students generalize to teachers.

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