Chapter 11
Utilizing Social Networking Sites for Communication in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

This chapter first analyzes the need for communication and collaboration tools to connect units of higher education. It then examines a popular social networking site, Facebook, as a possible platform of communication. This chapter also discusses findings from a phenomenological study that explored rhetorical roles employed by participants on Facebook and then connects findings to current research concerning communication and collaboration in higher education. Data indicated that messages on Facebook were used for cooperation and coordination, but not necessarily collaboration. It also indicated that while participants were audience-minded, they were not necessarily audience-aware, and participants used audience shaping as a coping mechanism. Finally, composers' inclinations to exercise authority over their personal, representational space (Facebook wall) led the researchers to conclude that use of Facebook in higher education may best be achieved by creating a Facebook page or group for specific communicative purposes.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade institutions of higher education have encountered various internal and external challenges. From a decline in completion rates, to a decline in funding, to a decline in trust and support, the American university has confronted (and continues to confront) multiple crises. One indicator of an institution's resilience while managing challenges is the quality of its communication (Boyer, 2016). At the same time, colleges and universities have become complex webs of administrators, faculty members, support staff, and students. Such organizational structures hinder communication and ultimately the

flow of ideas. Now, more than ever, it is integral for professionals in higher education to find creative ways to foster a culture of communication and collaboration in order to withstand the challenges ahead.

In the last decade, professionals have studied social networking sites as possible platforms for communication and collaboration in higher education. However, these studies have often been narrow in scope, typically focusing on specific course disciplines, such as Cain and Policastri's (2011) study of Facebook use in a pharmacy management, leadership, and business course; LaRue's (2011) study using Facebook as course management software in a nursing informatics course; and Estus' (2010) study utilizing Facebook in a geriatrics pharmacotherapy class. Studies like these are useful for understanding the use of a particular social networking site within a specific discipline. However, they do not indicate how these platforms might be used on a broader scale. To understand the nature of communication on social networking sites and how they might be utilized in higher education, it is useful to study the rhetorical situation on these platforms (Olson, 2001).

To illustrate the differences in the rhetorical situation while using a social networking platform, first consider communication and collaboration as it occurs in a face-to-face setting. Typically, the number of participants is limited to a physical space—in a room and in a geographic region. They are limited by time since collaboration must take place synchronously. They are limited by the visual tools available (i.e. pictures, videos, and links). In face-to-face situations, the audience members often listen passively until his or her turn to speak. In contrast, communication through a social networking site imposes no restrictions through physical space, time, or time zones since collaboration can take place asynchronously. Also, numerous tools are available for illustration and reference for all collaborators. The audience is rarely passively reading; they are responding in multiple rhetorical forms.

This illustration demonstrates some of the ways in which roles of composers and audience members in collaboration naturally change in a social networking platform, like Facebook. The roles re-shape the context of the communication act (Olson, 2001). Gaining a better understanding of rhetorical roles of communicators and collaborators on social networking sites could offer insights into how these digital platforms might be used effectively across units of higher education.

For the last decade colleges and universities have been utilizing social media. For example, Barnes and Lescault's (2012) edition of their annual national study of college and university social media adoption included interviews with 456 institutional representatives at an array of different institutional types. Data analyses indicated that nearly 100% of colleges and universities surveyed used some form of social media in 2010-2011, and this increased from 61% in 2007-2008. Findings from longitudinal data analyses suggested that institutional usage continues to rise for the most popular tools, but adoption of others has leveled off or fallen. Ninety-eight percent of colleges and universities reported having a Facebook page in 2010-2011. This is more than a 10% increase from the previous year, and it is more than a 60% increase since 2008-2009. While digital platforms like Facebook are being utilized in higher education, they are typically only used to recruit and research prospective students (Barnes & Lescault, 2012).

For many years, Facebook has been one of the most commonly used social networking sites for American internet users. In a Pew Research Center survey by Smith and Anderson (2018) involving 2,002 American adults, Facebook and YouTube were the most commonly used social networking sites. Sixty-eight percent of respondents used Facebook, more than Twitter (45%), Instagram (35%), Pinterest (29%), and Snapchat (27%). However, the number of Facebook users is leveling off while other social networking sites continue to rise, and Facebook, which has dominated social media usage, has now been surpassed by YouTube (73%).

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