

Chapter 2

An Informal Use of Facebook to Encourage Student Collaboration and Motivation for Off Campus Activities

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ABSTRACT

Facebook has become the students' communication tool of choice. Instant messaging and online presence and the fact the "everyone you know" is on Facebook makes email look slow and clunky. Tutors may well be Facebook users themselves for those very same reasons, and as a way of keeping in touch with friends and family. Indeed, not to have a Facebook and Twitter account may be seen to be out of touch. At the same time, the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) is embedded deeply into the higher education landscape. The VLE is an integral part of the student learning experience. The role of the VLE is well established and recognized as the place the students go to access learning materials associated with their unit of study. The VLE used at Southampton Solent University, UK, is MyCourse. A look at the patterns of usage of a selection of media students at SSU suggests that students access the VLE periodically, between classes, to review or preview learning materials and to review assignment briefs. However, by contrast, the students are connected to Facebook for long periods of the day. The VLE offers communication and collaboration tools, but does the "always connected, always checking in" nature of Facebook provide a more effective way of facilitating communication and collaboration? Similarly, the VLE offers the facility to share work via forums and message boards. However, do the instant update, commenting, and like features, combined with the fact that Facebook is a place the students choose to go, have an impact on student motivation if work is shared on a Facebook group?

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter will first consider the value students place on an effective use of the VLE and the VLE's role in student learning. Against this context the chapter will introduce case studies where the social media website Facebook was used to complement and enhance what the VLE could offer the student learning experience.

The two case studies involve one cohort of thirteen students at two different time periods. At the time of writing the students featured in the case studies are completing a three-year undergraduate degree in Media Culture and Production. Across all units of study, the student learning experience comprises three elements:

- On campus lectures, workshops and seminars,
- The VLE,
- Independent study outside of the classroom sessions.

In the first case study we meet the students in their second year where a unit of study, that they have chosen to specialize in, requires them to work together and work with other students from other courses, to write and make a short film. The short film was to be made on location. Location filming takes a good deal of organization and a great deal of enthusiasm from both the tutor and the students. The weather in the UK means it can be cold and wet and the filming day is long and tiring. In this first case study we look at how Facebook was used informally to enable communication and collaboration.

In the second case study we meet the same group of students who at this point are in their final year and working towards their final major project. The final project requires the students to demonstrate high levels of skill in photography, a topic the students had last studied in their first year. The on-campus lectures and workshops, VLE

materials and suggested readings were geared towards refreshing the students' knowledge. However, the students needed to get out and practice those skills in order to become skilled photographers. In this second case study we look at how a Facebook group and Facebook photo sharing complete with 'likes' and comments was used as a motivational tool to encourage the students to get out on their evenings and weekends to take photos of their surroundings and then to upload and share with the group.

The chapter concludes with a reflection that considers and answers:

- How did the students feel about a learning activity being facilitated through Facebook?
- Did the students feel that Facebook was a good way to communicate and collaborate on group projects?
- Did the students feel motivated by their peers sharing their work?
- Did Facebook have an impact on their learning?

BACKGROUND

In 2012 Facebook reached 1 billion active users.

This morning, there are more than one billion people using Facebook actively each month. If you're reading this: thank you for giving me and my little team the honor of serving you. Helping a billion people connect is amazing, humbling and by far the thing I am most proud of in my life. (Zuckerberg, 2012)

With Facebook users accounting for 51% of the UK population (United Kingdom Facebook Statistics, n.d.), it is not surprising, as an educator in UK higher education, to find that the majority of your students are on Facebook. As a tutor of

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