

Chapter 14

Facebook and the Societal Aspects of Formal Learning: Optional, Peripheral, or Essential

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ABSTRACT

An online subject used social media to provide “collaborative spaces” that were “additional and complementary” to discussion in the university’s Learning Management System (LMS). Facebook and Twitter provided optional “informal spaces” in which students “talk about general issues to do with media and connect with other students in the unit.” This chapter’s analysis of Facebook posts shows a cooperative group of peers providing advice on assessment and recommending useful resources. Analysis, however, reveals that, as well as supportive posts, a proportion of posts could be considered inappropriate, distracting, or even, infrequently, inflammatory. Guidelines about acceptable behaviour must be imposed by teaching staff. More importantly, optional participation in social media sites requires critical consideration. If Facebook is used as a student support space for an online subject, it should be integrated into the curriculum and have an explicit purpose; making social media sites optional alongside mandatory university-supported platforms can prove problematic.

BACKGROUND

This chapter explores how students used a Facebook group set up by their university as an optional student support space for an online subject that was delivered through the university’s

LMS, which in this case was Blackboard. The analysis of Facebook Comments is framed by an overview of Facebook use at universities. Some mention of the Australian government’s Digital Education Revolution provides a broader context for a more focused discussion about the use of technologies to support student learning. Our

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primary focus is a case study of Facebook usage in a totally online unit of study delivered by Open University through an Australian university. One of the authors undertook the unit as a mature-age student returning to study. Along with a general analysis of Facebook Posts, Comments and Likes and a thematically derived typology of Facebook Posts, we present our student/author's reflections and perspectives on the use of Facebook in that subject as a separate, optional social space set up by the university but occupied only by students. The Facebook site was not an integrated part of the unit but an additional online social space and quite separate to the LMS. In this subject, students had options to join not only a Facebook group but also to join Twitter. Students could also participate in the optional synchronous and asynchronous support sessions offered in the university-supported platforms of Blackboard Collaborate and online discussion.

The course administrator posted the following information on the LMS about the "collaborative spaces" available to students on Facebook and Twitter:

These are offered as additional and complementary spaces to the Discussion Boards, which remain your primary learning space and contact with your tutor. A lot of us use social media... so integrating its use into our learning allows us another point of connection with the unit. However, you will not be disadvantaged if you choose not to participate on Facebook or Twitter. Most importantly: these spaces should not be used as a place to try and contact your tutor, or ask questions about assignments etc. They are more informal spaces where we can share information, talk about the general issues to do with media, and connect with other students in the unit (LMS announcement, 2013).

This announcement by the course administrator will be used to frame the consideration of having multiple, sometimes optional learning spaces

online that are populated by different groups of teaching staff and students within the same cohort.

INTRODUCTION

Facebook has very quickly permeated most aspects of university life. That Facebook has proven so popular with marketing, peer support programs, clubs and societies, extra-curricular leadership programs, transition support and discipline-specific learning support initiatives is hardly surprising. What is surprising, however, is that, apart from university marketing areas issuing social media guidelines about how to speak to digital native students in the emerging digital environment and university policy areas producing social media policies that say this is an emerging area and it is very exciting and remember to be polite, and not breach such laws as those pertaining to Copyright, Privacy and defamation (Woodley & Beattie, 2012), it would seem that some universities have not made official decisions about whether to use Facebook or not for teaching. Social media uptake in various areas of university life from marketing to school managers are often initiated by individuals, sometimes with little in the way of social media policy or guidelines and sometimes with little sense of the purpose of the social media site. Consequently, the growth of social media generally and Facebook, in particular, in university settings has sometimes been haphazard, idiosyncratic and uncritical. Risks in the use of social media continue to surface during a time when the social norms of communicating and publishing online are in a state of flux (Solove, 2007). It is a common notion that some online behaviors have left regulators, legislators, the judiciary and universities playing 'catch up' with both technologies and generational shift (Solove, 2007; Stewart, 2013; Woodley & Silvestri, 2013).

In the last few years, universities have been grappling with the issue of how to use social media effectively to support learning. In Australia

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