

## Chapter 13

# Virtual Communities as Tools to Support Teaching Practicum: Putting Bourdieu on Facebook

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### ABSTRACT

*The impact of Web 2.0 and social networking tools such as virtual communities, on education has been much commented on. The challenge for teachers is to embrace these new social networking tools and apply them to new educational contexts. The increasingly digitally-abled student cohorts and the need for educational applications of Web 2.0 are challenges that overwhelm many educators. This chapter will make three important contributions. Firstly it will explore the characteristics and behaviours of digitally-abled students enrolled in higher education. An innovation of this chapter will be the application of Bourdieu's notions of capital, particularly social, cultural and digital capital to understand these characteristics. Secondly, it will present a possible use of a commonly used virtual community, Facebook©. Finally it will offer some advice for educators who are interested in using popular social networking communities, similar to Facebook©, in their teaching and learning.*

### INTRODUCTION

Understanding the technology behaviour of undergraduate education students in relation to Learning Management Systems (LMS) such as Blackboard© while on practicum has been the site of much interest. The interest is especially pronounced when trying to understand students' participation and interaction with the LMS and

how to increase engagement (Barnett, Keating, Harwood and Saam, 2002; Rye and Katayama, 2003). It seems that only when the participation is attached to formal assessment in units, are students found to participate, however, when there is no assessment, students generally do not participate or participate intermittently. This may be because they are expected to participate in multiple LMS groups in multiple subjects. While there may be an initial flurry of activity as students ask for advice, help, contact details, resources and general

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assistance, this initial activity often diminishes over time, which has left lecturers pondering why these discussion forums cannot be sustained during the whole term of the teaching practicum.

This lack of participation seems to be inconsistent with the students' involvement in other forums, including social networks. This study examines how students' interaction with social networks differs from their participation in discussion groups in LMSs.

During the 2008 semester one practicum period, it was decided that the Facebook© behaviour and activities of an undergraduate cohort would be used in lieu of a traditional LMS discussion. The cohort was fourth year business education students, who had 'friended' their lecturer on Facebook©. A short survey revealed that the majority of students had Facebook© accounts so the technology had a high uptake rate among this group of students. Hence a Facebook© group was created for these students during their four-week teaching practicum. A broad analysis revealed that 63% actively participated in the group, posting a total of 100 messages hence it would appear that this manifestation of online discussion groups may be more active over a sustained timeframe.

This study sets out to theorise the digital behaviour of this group of students. While there is little doubt that Web 2.0 technologies are making an impact in the communicative behaviours of individuals, including the group who participated in this study, the "tremendous growth in the popularity of websites focusing on social activities and collaboration" (Abitt, 2007, p. 1) implied that sites such as Facebook© can supply more than an entertainment function for students. Facebook© described itself as a "social utility that connects people with friends and others who work, study and live around them" (Facebook©, 2008, p.1). The research questions guiding this study are:

1. How can Facebook© be used to communicate with students while on practicum?

2. How is Facebook© used by students as part of their everyday communicative interactions?

Facebook© boasts "more than 80 million active users" (Facebook©, 2008, p. 2). Somewhere among that number were the fourth year business education students ( $N=30$ ) who were enthusiastic users of Facebook©. The students in the study were using the technology to communicate with friends, fellow students and staff, to share photographs, to undertake quizzes and to share their ideological convictions through joining various groups. This behaviour helped to naturalise the use of the social networking tool to communicate with the students while on practicum. This chapter will describe the process of adopting a Facebook© group with students while on practicum and discuss the affordances the technology brings to the educational environment. It will describe the pedagogical strategy adopted. The chapter will theorise the use of the technology using Bourdieu's concept of capital among the group who will be described as Generation C. Finally, the findings from the study will be analysed followed by a short discussion of the perceived advantages and disadvantages of using this technology with students.

## **BACKGROUND**

### **Conceptualising the Differences in Digitalisation**

What digital behaviours and expectations characterise our students today? They use technology (IM, Facebook©, Flickr, Skype) to be constantly connected – to friends, family, information and entertainment, to connect with more people, in more ways, more often. The current generation seamlessly transition between their 'real' and digital lives (BECTA, 2008, p.12). The characteristics and behaviours of these students are distinctly different from those of an aging faculty who closely resemble Prensky's (2001) digital

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