Chapter 3
Student–Faculty Communication on Facebook:
Prospective Learning Enhancement and Boundaries

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ABSTRACT

This chapter addresses the topic of Facebook use in education, with focus on the learning issues concerning the student-faculty relations and communication on this social network. Its main purpose is to reveal academics' general and particular attitudes towards the use of Facebook with instructional aim. Therefore, it presents a generous theoretical perspective on the emerging phenomenon of Social Networks integration on education, in the United States mainly. Further on, it puts side by side these views with the findings of a particular, empirical study conducted by the authors. A survey applied to a sample of Facebook users from "Alexadru Ioan Cuza" University of Iaşi, Romania (N=160) revealed that the academics partially agreed that the use of Facebook is suitable for educational exchanges. Whilst the literature suggested that students have more positive attitudes than faculty towards the use of Facebook in education, this present study does not support this view.

INTRODUCTION

Facebook, a Legitimate Learning Environment?

Facebook, the biggest Social Network in the world (Facebook, 2011), used mainly as a virtual space for social relations enhancement and as a valuable marketing tool, recently began to take shape as an educational platform. This phenomenon can be witnessed above all in the United State of America, where the adoption rate of the new technologies in colleges is higher, but also in European countries, where the young adults are deeply emerged into the online environment. Nevertheless, the practice of teaching college students on Facebook is quite new and recusant in the academic environment. While Facebook is not being used for traditional and direct teaching, it is becoming more of an informal education network. Consequently, several debates surrounding its legitimacy as being or not an appropriate medium for learning and for a healthy development of the teacher-student relationship are undergoing. Enthusiasts have praised Facebook for its potential of being a space equipped with communication tools that suit the collaborative and constructivist approach towards the educational act. The skeptics expressed their unease referring to the lack of borders between private and public, personal and institutional communication in this unregulated environment. Selwyn (2009) argued that "whilst growing numbers of educators celebrate the potential of social networking to (re)engage learners with their studies, others fear that such applications compromise and disrupt young people's engagement with 'traditional' education provision" (p. 157). It is recognized that some of the qualities of social networking may clash with current pedagogical paradigms, as Selwyn (2009) highlighted. Educationalists hope that social networking promotes exchanges between learners that are related to formal educational objectives, but social networks

as Facebook are also distinguished for providing channels for informal and unstructured learning.

Moreover, the communication practices on Facebook between students and faculty vary from one course to another, one university to another, one country to another. While some instructors only use dedicated closed groups or official pages to stay in touch with their students, others accept friend request from their students, allowing them to see their profile and to share different type of contents with them.

The scholars in the fields of Education, Sociology, Media Communications and Information Technology are just beginning to direct their research interests on this matter. Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe (2007) state that "Facebook constitutes a rich site for researchers interested in the affordance of social networks due to its heavy usage patterns and technological capabilities that bridge online and offline connection. We believe that Facebook represents an understudied offline to online trend..." (p. 2).

Yet, research on the use of Facebook for educational purposes has been limited. Most of this literature has focused on the unprofessional content of students' Facebook profiles and the need to provide students with social media guidelines (Karl & Peluchette, 2011). The authors of the present study found various content analyses of wall posts of students, quantitative and qualitative analyses of surveys applied to students, in depth interviews or exploratory studies regarding teachers' and students' attitudes towards Facebook. Nonetheless, these studies, especially undertaken in the United States of America, haven't been able to provide reliable findings in order to settle on a positive or a negative impact of Facebook usage as a learning tool in universities or to address the issue of teacher-students Facebook mediated communication. Nor they suggested directions towards an operational learning model that could complement the traditional teaching methods and other e-Learning practices. Therefore, further exploration of the boundaries and prospective

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