

ENGAGING AND RETAINING STUDENTS — SUPPORTING STUDENT TRANSITION THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA

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Abstract

Views about Facebook in education are varied. Facebook poses a threat to academic success (Thompson, 2009) and yet “certain kinds of Facebook use” can support study. Facebooking students may perform better than their unwired peers (Ellison et al., 2007) but little is known about the impact of social networking sites on the student experience (Madge et al., 2009). The temptation for universities to engage with students in Facebook is strong. Victoria University (VU) in Melbourne uses Facebook to engage and support students and is keen to explore how Web 2.0 technologies might provide alternative and additional approaches to enhancing retention. This paper examines VU’s Faculty of Business and Law Facebook site and offers a general analysis of Facebook usage.

Introduction

Views about the role of Facebook and other social networking sites in education are extremely varied. Popular media periodically run stories suggesting that Facebook poses a threat to academic success (Kirschner & Karpinski, 2010; Thompson, 2009) and yet, contradictorily, “certain kinds of Facebook use” has been demonstrated to support study. So while some commentators bemoan Facebook as distracting, time wasting and inane, some studies suggest that Facebooking students may perform better than their unwired peers (Ellison et al., 2007) and that the societal aspects and communication capacity of Facebook may even improve academic performance at university. Other studies again stress how little is known about the impact of social networking sites on the student experience (Madge et al., 2009). And yet Minocha’s contribution (2009) to the question of how social software might enhance student learning is comprehensive and includes material specifically on Facebook.

The ironically-formed Facebook group from Sydney University — I Want To Sue Facebook If I Fail University — highlights the attraction for educators of Facebook. Its members incessantly complain about their predilection for and even obsession with being “on Facebook.” If students are on Facebook, the temptation for universities to engage with them in that space is strong. Certainly, a survey of 38 publicly-funded Australian universities undertaken as part of this paper

indicates that each university has a Facebook presence. Most universities have active Facebook groups with between hundreds and several thousand friends. Most also have faculty, school or department Facebook groups. The number of subject, course or social groups also in Facebook was not noted. Unsurprisingly, academics are divided about the appropriateness of using Facebook for teaching or supporting learning. Roblyer et al. (2010) surveyed an American university about faculty and student acceptance of Facebook. The results could reflect a more general sentiment: “students are willing; faculty members are not” (Roblyer et al., 2010, p. 134). The reasons for this unwillingness are no doubt more complex than that summary suggests.

Paradoxically, then, while some academics are vehemently opposed to using Facebook for teaching and just as some studies lay the blame for increasing numbers of students failing university on the social networking phenomenon, universities are simultaneously exploring ways to engage students in not only that medium but that specific product. Facebook is emphatically a social network site and yet trends using it for teaching are increasing exponentially, despite pedagogical and ethical qualms. Victoria University (VU) in Melbourne, like many universities around the world, uses Facebook to engage and support students and is trying to do so without invading students’ privacy or making involvement in Facebook mandatory. VU sees social networking sites and Web 2.0 technologies more broadly as providing alternative approaches to enhancing retention but it must be conceded that this is not without problems.

Methodology

This paper examines VU’s Faculty of Business and Law Facebook site with a view to reflecting on its role in engaging students and preventing attrition. The discussion considers the role of the university’s Transition Officer in administering Facebook and looks at some of the available data provided by Facebook about the age and gender of users as well as basic information about their location to assess if international students are using the site when they go home for holidays or if they are studying offshore. The paper offers a very generalised analysis of Facebook usage by: identifying key themes and tones of Wall discussion; a brief comparison of Wall and Discussion content; the percentage of content that is basically information generated by the FoBL’s Transition officer in a transmissive way; the percentage of content that is basically information generated by the students in a transmissive way; and more bi- and multidirectional communication whereby students and/or staff are both posting questions and responding to the posts of others. The discussion is also framed by a literature review considering the use of social media in universities as well as a desktop survey of Facebook to identify the extent to which Australian universities are using Facebook. This paper also compares the Faculty of Business and Law’s Facebook site with the whole-of-university Facebook site to compare themes and

activity levels. Some anonymised student comments from the Faculty's Facebook Wall are used with permission.

Transition

The Faculty of Business and Law at VU has numerous strategies that aim to support the transition of all students. Many authors note that students may be more likely to drop out if they are without a social network at university (Wilson & Lizzio, 2008) and the need for students "to develop a sense of belonging to a group and form relationships with peers to be effective and successful learners" (Adams et al., 2010, p. 7) is well recognised. Recent figures on attrition at universities in Australia are alarming: "The total cost of attrition is \$1.4 billion and across the 38 public universities this is an average of \$36 million per university" (Adams et al., 2010, p. 17). While attrition is a national concern, it must be addressed at institutional, faculty and program levels.

For a range of reasons, attrition rates at VU are high compared to other Australian universities. Over a 10-year period, attrition rates hovered around 25% (Gabb et al., 2006). VU's students typically have lower levels of engagement than peers at other Australian universities; they spend less time on campus, less time in private study and have fewer contact hours per week (Gabb et al., 2006). The first year is crucial as far as attrition is concerned (Gabb et al., 2006; Kift, 2008) and a key way to reduce attrition is to attend to the transition of students. Like most universities in Australia, VU has undertaken various initiatives to address attrition at first year. In particular, the university has been keen to address students having little sense of belonging to the university (Krause, 2005). Several areas in the university have initiated programs that employ students (Students as Staff Program; Have A Chat mentors; Professional Development student advisors), engage students in programs beyond the curriculum (BizHelp Ambassadors; Leadership Program), and support students with peers (Student Rovers in the library; PASS in targeted units). Curriculum initiatives have emphasised the need to engage students — in assessment, via team work, online and face to face — in designing learning activities and assessment tasks. In addition to these program initiatives, the use of low-cost, highly popular networking sites like Facebook easily add another medium and method of communication and support for students. The creative use of social networking technologies could well help students to develop, maintain and extend a social network both online and on campus that could support their transition to university. Both the university and the Faculty of Business and Law have Facebook sites that provide supplementary and interactive spaces for students to interact with each other and a number of university staff.

Facebook

That Facebooking has so quickly become a verb and that so many other words associated with social networking (tagging, unfriend, retweet and twitlectomy) have entered not only common usage but also dictionaries in the last few years shows how extensive and pervasive the social networking phenomenon is. Facebook users currently number 624,682,980 around the world and Australia has 9,741,380 users according to www.checkfacebook.com (16/2/11). The growth since Facebook's creation in 2004, then, has been exponential. It may be an exaggeration to say that "students live on Facebook" (Parry & Young, 2010). Clearly, many students do not have Facebook accounts and some students are philosophically and politically opposed to having one. Research highlights that "not all students use facebook and there are differences in the usage of social networking sites due to culture/ethnicity, language or age" (Miller, 2009 cited in Lefever & Currant, 2010). In addition, many people who have had accounts have tried to close them down — sometimes with great difficulty: "It was a long, arduous road — the hardest part was slaying the Gorgon on level 16" (Mansour, 2007). In addition to personal stories of grappling with eradicating Facebook accounts, 2010 saw a broader campaign begin to raise privacy and security issues around Facebook. One journalist warns that "the very idea of Facebook privacy is a contradiction" (Stilgheman, 2011) and a number of social commentators added fuel to the drive to encourage people to close their accounts with one YouTube production reminding most users: "You don't have 852 friends" (Gardiner, 2010). Our students might be Homo Zappiens (Kirschner & Karpinski, 2010) but there are specific issues concerning Facebook that mean we can neither assume that students will or should be in that space nor that we should immediately join them there.

Even so, beyond the social sphere, Facebook is having an impact in the education sector — and into many facets of the sector. Social media commentator Marc Parry notes with some excitement: "We have been watching social media seep into every aspect of the academy: teaching, outreach, research, professional development, publishing, campus tours, student life" (Johnson, 2011). Perhaps, but the social and educational implications of this upsurge are far from clear. Little is known about the impact of social networking sites on the student experience (Madge et al., 2009) either socially or academically. Some students have noted that their ability to concentrate has been affected by the distractions of online communication which has been reflected in a consequent drop in academic standards. The recently defunct Facebook group from Sydney University, I Want To Sue Facebook If I Fail University (IWTSFIIFU), was only one such group, ironically operating in Facebook, that expressed concern about what has been described as addictive behaviour: obsessive Facebooking. If students are there, even lamenting the fact, the temptations for universities to engage with them in that space is strong. If universities need "to take advantage of the students' native environment" (Bowen interviewed in Parry & Young, 2010), then many

institutions believe that Facebook is the environment to inhabit. Students are, for better or worse, in Facebook in large numbers to varying degrees most days.

With so many Australians in the common university age range using Facebook, then, it is unsurprising that universities are keen to invade this social space for teaching, student support more broadly and for marketing. The buzz around social media has universities contemplating how they might use social software, and specifically Facebook, more effectively. Even so, social media observer Patrick Powers notes that he is “underwhelmed by [the] content” of many universities’ Facebook pages which he says seems to be nothing more than a quiet nod to the Facebook generation (Powers, 2010). Certainly, the content of most Australian universities’ Facebook sites appears predictable and fairly humdrum: notices about Orientation activities; calls for students to be involved in groups and activities; information about learning; and other support services at the university.

Do Students Use Facebook for Study?

Are students even interested in social learning online using their preferred social space, Facebook? Is it possible to generalise from the limited studies that have been conducted? Interestingly, some studies suggest that students prefer to use Facebook for social purposes, not educative ones (Parry & Young, 2010) although many are happy to use it for the social aspects of university life: selling books, attending functions, finding out about sporting events and clubs and other extra-curricular activities. Nevertheless, whether it is for study or socialising, many students are online and are on Facebook: “I always study while on facebook. It’s a good opportunity to talk to other students at the same time.” Many students regard their relationship with Facebook as problematic: “i sit on facebook in tutes, damn wireless internet!” (IWTSFIIFU, 2010). Apart from time wasting, Kirschner and Karpinski highlight the phenomenon witnessed by parents the world over — the apparently stupendous multitasking skills of students as they study, watch television, text friends, msn, tweet and Facebook simultaneously: “The assumption is that these children now have acquired specific new multitasking skills that they are able to apply in a learning setting” (2010, p. 1237). The research, however, suggests that students have no such multitasking skills or “parallel processing” functions (Prensky, 2001) and that the processing of information is negatively affected by their multifarious and simultaneous activities. If Facebooking negatively impacts some students’ learning, should universities engage in that space?

Should Universities Use Facebook?

What are the goals behind the university using Facebook and are there benefits to students? Given issues around privacy, copyright, ownership of materials and

security, should universities invade students' social space if they do use Facebook and should they exploit students' anxieties that they might be missing out on something if they do not use Facebook? Considerable research suggests that social software tools support numerous ways of learning through the sharing of resources, collaborative learning, reflective learning and peer-to-peer learning. These tools might enhance a student's sense of community and improve communication and negotiation skills, team skills, and the management of digital identities (Minocha, 2009). Still, the problem remains that some students and academics have privacy, security and pedagogical concerns about using a commercial product, specifically Facebook, for teaching and learning. Numerous students, too, seem to be addicted to Facebook in a way that is detrimental to their study and work habits. Finally, many students regard Facebook as a social, not an academic, space (Minocha, 2009). Is it unfair or even unethical to 'make' students sign up to Facebook if that is the only site in which content, discussion and assessment advice is located? It would certainly seem so.

VU already has a number of institutionally-supported e-tools that effectively create a "walled garden" VLE of the institution" (Minocha, 2009, p. 50). It is mandatory that all units of study have a Blackboard presence. In addition, the university supports PebblePad which has social networking capability. VU also has an institutionally-supported social networking system that enables communities of people to collaborate and connect socially. It is woefully underutilised. The uptake of and institutional support for many of these tools is limited and the time required to appropriately embed educational technologies into the curriculum can be prohibitive to both developing such curriculum and evaluating its effectiveness.

With multiple online spaces in which to communicate and collaborate, why is Facebook so attractive? Two obvious reasons present themselves: firstly, many students are already in that space; secondly, staff members who engage with Facebook for supporting teaching also have personal accounts and are familiar with the technology. Facebook is easy to use, intuitive and there is plenty of technical help available if you need it. Anecdotal evidence suggests that teachers who use Facebook for teaching use it to duplicate what is already posted in Blackboard or via e-mail. Teachers seem to be aware that using Facebook exclusively could exclude some students. Teams of students using Facebook to complete team-based assessment present another area that is difficult to control or to moderate and an area that has created some concern relating to inappropriate behaviour and even stalking: shocked lecturers in some units at VU were put on alert in 2010 and guides have now been put in place in some units around swapping mobile numbers and personal details and using Facebook for team assessment.

It is important to distinguish between using Facebook as an additional site for supporting students and using Facebook for teaching. In particular, the use of Facebook to support the transition of students who are new to university or at

least new to VU is just one way that students can access information and communicate with staff — it is by no means the only method of communication and outreach. Minocha (2009) has listed what she calls the non-educational benefits of using social software and includes collecting user input on university initiatives, engaging students and educators, overcoming shyness or social inadequacy for students needing to ask questions, overcoming geographic isolation, enhancing collaboration and ‘being green’ as online content could reduce the need to print information. All of these benefits are achieved through Facebook and all of these benefits can assist with student transition. Again, Minocha’s study (2009) offers several instances of the benefits to students’ retention in UK universities using social tools “where early signs of a student struggling were picked up in formal and informal contributions...and early interventions meant that students were provided with support and help before it was too late” (p. 46). Madge et al. (2010) also indicate that Facebook is “an important tool used by the majority of the respondents to aid transition to university” (p. 144).

Using Facebook to Support Transition: Facebook Activity

In Australia, transition is a major economic, pedagogical and ethical concern for universities. Facebook is one of the many ways that students might be engaged in a timely way and linked to appropriate support staff, peer mentors or course coordinators. This commonly available and highly accessible social networking tool could well be a vital, and cost effective, way to combat attrition by engaging with students as individuals in bidirectional communication in a platform they are already occupying.

Like most universities in Australia, VU has undertaken numerous initiatives to address the attrition rate at first year. Whole-of-university and Faculty Facebook sites are just one facet of a more complex set of activities and support strategies. Facebook could help the university to address the concern that students have little sense of belonging to the university (Krause, 2005) and there is some evidence that, for some students, this is already an outcome. Given the increased usage of students on the FoBL Facebook and the activity levels during semester 2, 2010, it is clear that some students seem to be developing that sense of belonging through Facebook while others are extending their already established network and becoming mentors to others. Activity levels appear to be increasing and there is value in a range of activity indicators.

In 2008, the FoBL set up a Facebook account. In addition to the FoBL Facebook, VU also has a university-wide group and various student groups also have accounts. The FoBL Facebook account is administered by the faculty’s Transition Officer and part of her role is to both engage students through Facebook and increase the number of students using the space. Research has noted that “an important factor in implementing an effective online program is the assignment of

a mentor” (Troy et al., 2009, p. 6) and the Transition Officer plays this important role. The Facebook site needs to be monitored frequently. Inappropriate behaviour needs to be moderated, questions need to be responded to in a prompt and friendly manner and the overall tone needs to combine a sense of fun with professionalism. It is also important to note that, in addition to an online presence, the Transition officer has a physical presence at events like Orientation, mentor programs and student events. Online and real life activities often complement each other.

Numbers of people who like the faculty Facebook group have increased from 1,500 in April 2010 to the current number of 2, 534 (21/02/2011). Overall, most of the faculty’s Facebook friends were female (so, for example, between the age-range of 18–24 at the end of 2010, there were 803 females and 521 males using the site). While the greatest number of users were located in Melbourne, significant numbers of students were located in sites where VU teaches offshore (Kuala Lumpur and Singapore) and where many of our international and indeed local students come from (New Delhi, Bangkok, Colombo, Giza, and Jakarta). These students could be assessing the site before they arrive in Australia and they could be continuing to communicate through the site when they are on holidays. Either way, these numbers of global users suggest an important use for the faculty’s Facebook site in the support of international students that could be significant and which requires further research.

Given that the amount of interaction among participants in online forums is regarded as a reasonable indicator of successful learning experiences (Roblyer & Wiencke, 2003), the faculty Facebook site was surveyed to gauge activity levels. A considerable percentage (around 50%) of content is basically information generated by the FoBL’s Transition Officer. This is essentially “instructor engagement” (Roblyer & Wiencke, 2003) to which students respond with comments or “like.” Instructor engagement includes postings about community and university events, projects, opportunities for student mentoring, orientation sessions, welcoming particular cohorts, and broadcasting employment opportunities. Other university officers, including the Executive Dean of the Faculty, also make announcements or, more importantly, comments on announcements using the site. In this respect, the site is more of a purpose network even though it uses the medium of a social network (Troy et al., 2009). Many students, however, ask follow-up questions requesting further details to instructor engagement — and some of these questions are answered by other students and other staff members. Whether students are lurkers (Pempek et al., 2009), likers or the more loquacious commentators, they are in the space. Lurkers may well be engaged in “legitimate peripheral participation” (Lave & Wenger, 1991) that will lead to a more active participation later. “Likers” are engaged by using the thumbs up icon on postings or photos. They either do not feel the need or have the confidence to comment. Commentators fall into two broad categories: those who respond to others’ postings and those who generate their own. There

are also participants who ask questions. Most reply to responses with a “thnx heaps!”

A smaller percentage of content on the Wall (around 20%) is information generated by the students: “student engagement” (Roblyer & Wiencke, 2003). Some student engagement includes sharing websites and resources for study and assessment advice. Much is made up of questions, responses to questions and responses to instructor engagement. Overall, then, the Faculty’s Facebook site is bidirectional; students both post questions and/or respond to the posts of others. More student control of the site is expected with the growth of the Faculty’s BizHelp Ambassador Program. The Discussion function of Facebook has postings generated by students and staff but seems to be not as well utilised as the Wall. Asked on the Facebook Wall if the Faculty’s page was useful and what other type of information would they like, 6 responses said that it was “great,” “useful” (2) and already “very informative.” One student said simply: “Yes!! Modern and up to date communication method thats [sic] easy to use.”

Compared with the VU Facebook site, the Faculty of Business and Law’s Facebook site is more active despite having half the number of friends. The VU Facebook site has more “student engagement” in that more students generate general questions about Orientation, books for sale, contacts in fields of study and accommodation queries. International students are well represented on this site. However, what is notable here is that many of these questions are not answered: clearly, students do not have the answer to some of the technical questions (costs, administrative details) and perhaps appropriate VU personnel do not have “Facebook duty” as part of their role. Staff members who are private people on Facebook may be reluctant to blur private/public roles. What this highlights is the importance of having dedicated staff whose roles include responding to postings. They should be responsible for providing information and should also attempt to generate enthusiasm, connectedness and a sense of belonging.

Conclusion

There are numerous legal and ethical issues about using Facebook for teaching (Gibson, 2010) and while many staff and students use Facebook socially, many of them are not comfortable conflating academic and social spaces which teaching via Facebook entails. At VU, there are no guidelines about teaching using social media and it is done on an *ad hoc* basis dependent upon academics’ individual interests and capabilities. The discussion still needs to be had about the appropriateness, at all, of Facebook for teaching. But the issue of extra-curricular activity and social connections and information on Facebook seems to be less problematic and it could well engage and support some students who would otherwise be isolated or disengaged. Facebook needs to be just one of many strategies undertaken by the Faculty to inform, engage and connect students. People, resources and programs need to be available through other media

including the university website, unit of study Blackboard sites, posters and VU student e-mail. Students cannot be made to have a Facebook account and they need to be assured that they will not miss out on anything by not having an account.

It is clear that it is not enough to simply have a Facebook group and expect that students will find it. Students need to be advised of it in classes, in e-mails, at Orientation sessions and in posters around campus. Further, it is not sufficient for students to know about the site either. Plainly, there needs to be pertinent information about university, courses, exams, support services, transport and the like. Most importantly, there needs to be interactivity, responsiveness and connectedness to achieve anything like a sense of community and belonging, especially for students who may be new to Australia, new to university life, new to VU or all three. To have students participate in an online community means that students contribute to and connect with resources, including staff, which can provide emotional, social and academic support. In effect, through Facebook, it is possible that some students will develop social capital (Ellison et al., 2007) which can enhance their participation in academic life. Interestingly, students who are feeling isolated or shy may be the students who most benefit from Facebook: “users experiencing low self-esteem and low life satisfaction” (Ellison et al., 2007) receive greater benefits from Facebook use. Given that administering Facebook is cost effective, that “the resources allocated to retention-specific initiatives continue to be lower than those allocated to recruitment” (Troy et al., 2009) and that the benefits of having a Faculty Facebook page for some students are considerable, Facebook will continue to be used as an extra-curricular support space alongside many other strategies that engage and sustain students at university and contribute to a “goodness of fit” (Troy et al., 2009) between students and the university.

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