

FACEBOOK'S POTENTIAL IN THE CLASSROOM

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Few websites have become as instantly and universally popular as Facebook. After being in operation for only six years, the social networking site is heavily utilized in business, politics, music, and more. It is especially popular among teenagers and college students, who find no end of joy in posting pictures, updating family and friends about their daily lives, and harvesting their virtual crops on FarmVille.

But in an education setting, Facebook is seen by many instructors and educators as a frivolous, time-wasting distraction from schoolwork, and it is not uncommon to have Facebook banned at junior high or high school computer labs (Barack, 2009). But why not, some educators are asking, integrate Facebook into the learning experience? Many have found success doing so, saying Facebook can increase a sense of belonging, build bonds between classmates, and increase the bond between students and instructors as well as create a structure for students to support one another, it can foster student-teacher interaction, and enhance motivation (Educators Using Facebook, 2009; Muñoz & Towner, 2009).

The positive effects Facebook can have in education have to do with the concept of social capital, which has been described as "the working product of interpersonal networks, contact, knowledge, and related human resources" (Alfred, 2009).

High access to social capital in a classroom setting has a positive impact on what learners (especially adults) get out of their learning experiences. Alfred notes that "building a classroom community that emphasizes shared norms, mutual respect, and collaboration . . . can benefit learner participants both psychosocially and instrumentally" (Alfred, 2009). This community building can be done with the dynamic attributes of the Facebook community, and is already being done in many classrooms. Facebook, with its

ability to connect members to one another to share a sense of community, has the potential to be a great source of social capital. In fact, the results of a two-year longitudinal study suggested that "Facebook affordances help reduce barriers that lower self-esteem students might experience in forming . . . social capital" (Steinfeld, Ellison, & Lampe, 2008).

Burgess points out that the use of social network sites like Facebook in online coursework can particularly benefit women learners. "Most online instructional designs . . . reflect a male, patriarchal communication paradigm that focuses on data and rationality rather than relationships," she reports. "Women (and some men) who are socialized to value relationships and connections are marginalized in these traditional approaches to formal online learning and communities" (Burgess, 2009). Including social networking in the course curriculum can help create the relationships and sense of community important to the success of these students. Doing so brings "opportunities for women to expand their connections in terms of instrumental networks . . . affective networks . . . and access networks," as well as better develop weaker ties, "which are instrumental for mobility and influence" (Burgess, 2009). An important part of the learning experience is meeting others with the same interests as you, making friends, and learning from others' unique viewpoints. Facebook can help online learners make the social connections that are less available in the online community.

A particularly interesting Facebook success story comes from Mesa Community College (related by Diane J. Skiba in *Nursing Education Perspectives*). Two instructors in the nursing program actually created a Facebook profile for "Stella," one of the program's mannequin patients, on a whim. What started out as a joke became an integral

part of their program, as many students started "friending" Stella and visiting her page frequently. Soon Stella took on a life of her own. Her number of "friends" grew to the hundreds. She used her Facebook account to send welcome messages to students, post notices about exams, congratulate graduates, and provide encouragement on test days. Students even used her page to sell and trade textbooks. The faculty and students were astounded at how Stella's account positively encouraged students and helped them feel connected in a non-threatening way (Skiba, 2010).

This example illustrates how Facebook's already well-established and popular framework can provide students with the social capital needed to feel a sense of belonging in a learning environment, which can positively impact confidence, satisfaction, and achievement. In fact, this humanization of Stella through Facebook also further facilitated learning by helping students be more cognizant of the lives they were responsible for, as well as teaching them how to practice ethical and moral behaviors toward patients (Skiba, 2010). This surprise success story would not have been possible without a pair of forward-thinking faculty members and the dynamic social connections Facebook can create.

Of course, most classes and departments do not have a mannequin to whom they can assign a Facebook account. How do these instructors integrate Facebook into the classroom experience?

Burgess encourages educators to first define the purpose of the online community early in the course. "Including social networking as an instructional tool blurs the lines between what is 'inside and what is 'outside,'" she writes. "Facilitators should carefully design what goes inside the course by incorporating and acknowledging the contextual

realities of what is happening outside the course" (Burgess, 2009).

The most basic way to use Facebook as a learning tool is by simply creating a profile for students to access. This allows instructors to communicate with students via Facebook email, instant messaging, or posting on virtual "walls" (Muñoz & Towner, 2009). Instructors can also use status updates to relate casual thought and experiences. (Educators Using Facebook, 2009) The benefits of this centralized communication has been reason enough for many instructors to incorporate Facebook into their curriculum. "I now require all of my students, both graduate and undergraduate, who have Facebook to add me as a friend," one professor reports. "Most of my students don't e-mail or call me anymore, because they 'Facebook' me instead. I find that I'm using our [course management software] less and less and Facebook more and more" (Educators Using Facebook, 2009).

Instructors can also create a group page for a class, which allows instructors to send announcements and reminders to the entire class. This way students can also "friend" their classmates, which will allow them to connect with and learn more about one another (Muñoz and Towner, 2009). Through the group page, students can post pictures relevant to the class. "Photos are the primary way to increase a sense of belonging," the organization *Educators Using Facebook* (2009) reports in an online presentation. "Have students take pictures with their mobile phones and upload them onto your group photos." This space can also be used to share scanned examples of exemplary work by students, which would provide students with examples to model their work after, as well as the motivation to perform well in order to be featured on the group page themselves.

Instructors can also publish notes on the class group page, which can be anecdotes about good things that happened in class or thoughts about class content (Educators Using Facebook, 2009). Instructors can also "ask students to be 'bloggers of the week' . . . or encourage students to blog weekly about their reaction to course content" (Burgess, 2009). Such online interaction students between can be very valuable in helping them think about course content in different ways outside of the walls the classroom.

It can be argued that there are courseware programs in existence (like Blackboard, Moodle, and Web CT) that accomplish these things in the classroom. But Muñoz and Towner (2009) point out that Facebook has some advantages. "The ability and ease with which an individual . . . can upload photo and videos, the frequent and seamless updates and maintenance, the generous 1024 MB limit on videos, and the compatibility with a wide variety of web browsers are superior to some courseware options," they write. They also point out that Facebook already has an "incredible usage rate among students" (Muñoz & Towner, 2009).

Facebook has also started to feature downloadable third party applications specifically designed to help educators integrate Facebook into the classroom experience. Applications like Courses and Courses 2.0 provide virtual classroom features that can replace or duplicate web course functions. One positive attribute of Courses is that it can be used without instructors "friending" their students (Educators Using Facebook, 2009). But it does require that students download the application (Muñoz and Towner, 2009).

The use of Facebook in the classroom is still in its infancy, and is not without its unique issues and concerns. Schwartz (2009) brings up a number of issues particular to Higher Education that deserve further thought and discussion: Is it wise to have students

be considered friends? Should posts be considered public, or should they be considered private? Should instructors interact differently with students in a “cyberhallway” rather than a physical hallway?

Proponents have offered guidelines on how to deal with what many may consider some of the biggest issues regarding Facebook use in the classroom--those of privacy, safety, and proper personal boundaries between students and instructors.

First, it is advisable to have instructors create a separate "teacher" account for professional use, with just a few personal bits of information (Educators Using Facebook 2009; Muñoz & Towner, 2009). This helps keep the relationship between student and instructor professional and helps instructors keep their personal world separate from their "teacher world." Instructors don't want to have to filter personal photos and comments based on what their students would think of them. And there is the possibility that certain students would dismiss the credibility of an instructor if the instructor's personal or political views posted on Facebook did not line up with their own. Instructors should never invite students to be their "friends" on their personal profile, as this could also be construed as an invasion of privacy (Muñoz and Towner, 2009).

Second, instructors should request students to designate them on their "limited profile" list for the sake of privacy and safety (Muñoz and Towner, 2009). This allows students to control settings that would not allow instructors to see personal photos or videos (Educators Using Facebook, 2009). And in order to avoid problems at the high school level, it is wise for instructors to have parents sign a permission slip to allow their children participate in Facebook at school (Educators Using Facebook, 2009).

Despite the fact that educators are using Facebook in the classroom in deliberately

safe ways, there are still many that have concerns about the practice. The School District of Elmbrook in Wisconsin has banned all contact between staff and students via social networking sites and instant messaging, seeing it as an avenue for instructors to develop inappropriate personal relationships with their students. The school board deemed it an "irresponsible practice," although e-mail communication and mobile phone communication was still allowed (Barack, 2009).

The board representing Chicago Public Schools issued an even more stringent communication policy, even banning cell phone contact between instructors and students. "All employees communicating with students via electronic means must do so using Chicago Public School network systems," the new policy reads. The decision was met with a great deal of exasperation from instructors. "The biggest frustration is that on the technology front, the [required network] is totally inadequate," one teacher commented. "The message to me is strong and clear--innovative, tech-savvy teachers should look elsewhere for employment." Another instructor was dismayed by the new policy, having planned to use Twitter for a significant portion of class lessons, "since it is an easy and free way . . . to send bulk text messages. Needless to say that won't be happening," she writes (Russo, 2009).

It is too bad that school boards like these do not have the foresight to see that embracing new technologies--especially those that are well-established, free, and already being used by students--is a powerful way to improve learning and achievement. Of course precautions should be made to make sure relationships are safe and proper, but there are ways to do that without severely inhibiting the possibilities of more technologically-advanced learning environment. Better to spell out what inappropriate

relationships are, and set up rules and guidelines as to how to avoid them, rather than limit the ways instructors can help their students learn.

I feel that the inclusion of Facebook in the classroom setting is a positive idea because it helps dissolve the stigma of learning being institutionalized, stale, and boring. When learning experiences are infused into a website students utilize everyday for fun, students realize that learning can and should be a part of everyday life. It does not have to be separate and unattached.

The knowledge I have gained about the positive effects of using Facebook in the classroom will help me greatly as I pursue a career in instructional design. I plan to help professors design effective curriculum both in the live instruction and online instruction environments, and will be able to illustrate to them how versatile and effective Facebook can be in helping students obtain the social capital necessary to succeed in the classroom. I will be able to show instructors how Facebook can be used to foster better communication between them and their students, and how students will be able to enjoy a sense of belonging and community through sharing photographs and experiences via the Facebook interface. When I become a professor myself, I will be able to use Facebook in my own classroom, and advocate future instructional designers to do the same.

It is my hope that Web 2.0 applications like Facebook will become even more versatile in the future, and that more and more educators will see that social networking is not a pesky distraction, but a valuable resource that can bring even more success to students in all educational environments.

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