

Supporting Student Transition through Social Media

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Abstract

The use of social media and, specifically, Facebook has grown exponentially in all facets of the education sector. Facebook is yet another medium through which universities can offer students support, information and a place to interact with each other, university support staff and resources. Students in transition have been identified as a particular cohort that can benefit from the creative use of social media.

Despite considerable concerns about Facebook, this medium provides an efficient and cost effective *additional* interactive point of engagement to support student transition to university. Facebook provides some students who may be without a social network, a group which is more likely to abandon university or feel isolated at university, with “a sense of belonging to a group and [as well as] relationships with peers” (Adams et al. 2010: 7).

The Faculty of Business and Law at Victoria University (VU) in Melbourne has had a Facebook site since 2008. This site has doubled in Friends in the last year and international students, both in Melbourne and offshore, are overrepresented as Faculty Facebook Friends. This paper examines the Faculty's site and offers a general analysis of Facebook usage with a focus on international students' use of the site. Student perspectives on the faculty site are also provided which highlight the frequency and constancy with which some students access Facebook. The discussion explores ethical and educational qualms about using Facebook in a university context as well as some more technical and cultural concerns about using Facebook to support students offshore.

Key Words:

Social media, Face Book, international students, transition

Introduction:

The use of social media and, specifically, Facebook has grown exponentially in all facets of the education sector: “We have been watching social media seep into every aspect of the academy: teaching, outreach, research, professional development, publishing, campus tours, student life” (Parry in Johnson 2011). The potential of Facebook to provide support for students is great and the phenomenal uptake of Facebook by universities around the world is testimony to a sense – if not actual evidence – that Facebook might engage students in ways that perhaps other platforms do not; in part because so many students are already in that particular online space. If students use Facebook in such staggering numbers, the temptation for universities to invade that space is strong.

Facebook is yet another medium through which universities can offer students support, information and a place to interact with each other, university support staff and resources. Student participation in an online community – Facebook or other – enables students to contribute to and connect with resources, including people, who can provide emotional, social and academic support. In effect, through participating in online communities such as Facebook, it is possible that some students will develop social capital (Ellison et al. 2007) which can enhance participation in academic life. Students who feel isolated or shy may be the very students who most benefit from Facebook: “users experiencing low self-esteem and low life satisfaction” (Ellison et al. 2007) receive greater

benefits. Students in transition have been identified as a particular cohort that can benefit from the creative use of social media and international students have been further identified as a significant cohort which makes notable use of Facebook – both on- and offshore. Using social media in a university setting is still a relatively new activity and using Facebook, in particular, is not without problems. Facebook might be an emerging technology in the education sector but the use of a commercial product, with numerous problems regarding both security and a “cavalier history on privacy” (Dick 2011), for teaching, remains a concern (Roblyer et al. 2010).

Facebook

The growth of Facebook since 2004 has been exponential but it is an exaggeration to say that “students live on Facebook” (Parry and Young 2010). Not all students have Facebook accounts, some students are philosophically opposed to a Facebook account and others again might be recovering Facebook addicts – or, even more broadly, recovering internet addicts. While researchers concede that “the Internet itself is not addictive but rather that its applications have the potential to become addictive, particularly highly interactive applications like online chatting” (Lu and Wang, 2008), these are the very dynamic features that make Facebook so tempting for many. Certainly, given the links with Facebook addiction and a connected increased failure rates of some students, many commentators are asking if universities should be using this platform at all (Minocha 2009). Facebook is impacting on the education sector both positively and negatively. Some students complain that they are distracted by online communication which is reflected in a consequent drop in academic standards. Ironically, students are often in Facebook and complaining of their addiction to Facebooking. Other students claim that Facebook keeps them connected with university (Woodley and Meredith, 2011).

While some students may resent using a social platform, Facebook, as part of their formal study (Parry and Young 2010), many seem to be happy to use it for the social aspects of university life: selling books, attending functions, finding out about extra-curricular activities. Facebook and other social networking tools have the capacity to enhance a student’s sense of community and improve communication and negotiation skills, team skills and the management of digital identities (Minocha 2009). The problem remains, however, that some students and many academics have privacy, security and pedagogical concerns about using a commercial product, Facebook, for teaching and learning.

Facebook users currently number 773,783,960 globally and Australia, a country of under 23 million people, has 10,659,580 users according to the useful site www.checkfacebook.com (4/11/11). With so many Australians using Facebook, it is predictable that universities have invaded this space for teaching, student support more broadly and as another venue for marketing. A desktop survey of 38 publically-funded Australian universities indicates that each university at least has a Facebook presence. Most university Facebook groups have between hundreds and several thousand friends as well as Faculty, School or Department Facebook groups – but they certainly differ hugely in terms of busyness.

At Victoria University (VU) in Melbourne, Australia, the university has a number of Facebook sites including one for the whole university, one for clubs and societies, one for sport, one for SIFE (Students in Free Enterprise), one for Alumni and one for the Faculty of Business and Law. Schools within the Faculty of Business and Law also have Facebook sites – so the Victoria Law School, for example, has a busy site that, as well as general events and Q&A, is especially linked to a range of legal entities: law firms, legal aid centres, law journals and other publications and employment sites for graduate lawyers.

A recent examination of the Faculty of Business and Law’s Facebook site (Woodley and Meredith, 2011) explored how the Faculty’s interactive social space might contribute to a broader and more complex range of activities and approaches that aim to support students in transition. It appears from an analysis of the Facebook site as well as student comments in Facebook, that the frequency and constancy with which students access Facebook and the fact that many students are invariably always ‘on’ it, means that, for many Friends of the Faculty, Facebook offers a convenient, cost effective and sometimes fun way to keep up to date, get questions answered and feel connected (Woodley & Meredith, 2011).

Faculty of Business and Law’s Facebook and Addressing Attrition

Like most Australia universities, VU has undertaken numerous initiatives to address the attrition rate at first year. While the attrition rate of international students studying onshore at Australian universities is consistently lower than the attrition rate of domestic students (Banks & Olsen, 2008; XXX), this does not indicate satisfaction, happiness or success in this cohort: “Fewer international students dropped out than domestic students with 10.58% of international students dropping out compared to 18.97% of domestic students” et al -

hobosons...p. 10). However, as noted in the Council of Governments' International Students Strategy for Australia 2010 – 2014, "International students face particular challenges and may require some specialised services to support their wellbeing. They may be living independently and for the first time in a foreign country with an unfamiliar culture. They may be far from their families and with few friends or people who can support them. Their English skills may be limited in some cases, and their everyday financial situation uncertain" (9). International students may be under particular stress and may be without the social and familial networks to support them. Most universities offer International students receive particular support with tailored Orientation sessions, Learning Support and other programs that target International Students. For example, Have a Chat is run in the Faculty of Business and Law with a view to creating a safe and fun place for international students to practice speaking English while learning about culture with domestic and international students who have been trained to mentor peers (Woodley & Meredith, 2011).

As well as having to adjust to a new social, academic and cultural environment, international students often find that previously successful methods of communication and– Facebook, however, can be a constant on- and offshore. Facebook sites at whole-of-university and Faculty levels are just facets of a more complex set of activities and support strategies. Facebook could help to address the concern that students have little sense of belonging to the university (Krause 2005) and there is some evidence that this is already an outcome. Given the increased usage of students on the Faculty of Business and Law's (FoBL) Facebook and the further increasing 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 an established network and supporting others. Activity levels are increasing.

Challenges of Facebook to Support International Students Offshore

Of course, some of the ethical and pedagogical concerns of using Facebook are about choosing whether or not to use Facebook over other social networking platforms. But there are other challenges involved with using Facebook. As well as teaching in Australia, VU also runs programs in collaboration with a number of institutes around the world including countries as diverse as Germany, Mexico, India, Malaysia, Hong Kong and the People's Republic of China. Clearly, while 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 in Lefever and Currant 2010). In addition to teaching offshore, VU has a significant cohort of international students onshore, especially in the Faculty of Business and Law. In 2010, Victoria University had over 10,000 international students offshore (in both TAFE and Higher Education) and nearly 7,000 international students onshore (VU, Annual report, 2011). While those onshore numbers have dropped due to a range of factors, they remain significant. Most of VU's international student cohort, both on-and offshore, are from the People's republic of China. For our biggest offshore cohort, then, the use of Facebook presents a problem. While Facebook is accessible in Hong Kong, it remains officially banned although some areas in China do seem to be able to access it (Oreskovic, 2011). For the most part, however, VU's students in China – and our staff teaching there – cannot use Facebook. VU's International branch is exploring what alternative technologies might better serve students and staff in China.

Methodology

This paper analyses the usage of VU's Faculty of Business and Law (FoBL) Facebook site to examine the extent to which it particularly engages international students. The discussion looks at some of the available data provided by Facebook about the age, gender and location of users and offers a generalised analysis of Facebook usage by identifying key themes of Wall discussion and calculating the percentage of content that is generated by Faculty that is transmissive and the percentage of content that is basically information generated by students in a transmissive way as well as quantifying more bi- and multidirectional communication whereby students and/or staff are both posting questions and responding to the posts of others. The discussion is framed by a literature review considering the use of social media in universities. Anonymised student comments from the Faculty's Facebook site are used with permission.

Transition and International Students

The Faculty of Business and Law at VU employs several strategies to support the transition of all students to university, the Faculty is mindful that international students – although less likely to contribute to attrition figures – nevertheless require specific support in transitioning to a new country, new university and new educational traditions. Some of these challenges faced by international students can significantly impact on students' capacity to optimise their academic and social adjustment (Sawir, 2007).

Students without a social network are more likely to abandon university and the need for effective and successful learners “to develop a sense of belonging to a group and form relationships with peers” (Adams et al. 2010: 7) is well recognised. The use of low-cost, highly popular networking sites like Facebook adds another means of engaging students. Social networking technologies help students to develop, maintain and extend a social network both online and on campus that supports transition to university.

Facebook and engagement

Facebook is just one way that students who are new to university or new to VU can access information and communicate with staff to support their transition but it is not their only method of communication and outreach. Minocha (2009) lists “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 and enhancing collaboration. Some of these benefits can assist with student transition. Indeed, Minocha’s study (2009) offers instances whereby social tools enhance students’ retention: “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” (46). Madge et al. (2010) also note that Facebook is “an important tool used...to aid transition to university” (144).

Facebook Activity at VU

Facebook provides another means to engage students and link them to appropriate support staff, peer mentors or course coordinators in a timely way. This commonly available and highly accessible social networking tool provides another way to combat attrition by engaging with some students very much as individuals in bidirectional communication in a platform they are already occupying. In 2008, the FoBL set up a Facebook account. In addition to FoBL’s Facebook, VU has a university-wide group and various student groups also have accounts. The FoBL Facebook account is administered by the faculty’s Transition officer who engages students through relevant, current and frequent postings. Research notes that “an important factor in implementing an effective online program is the assignment of a mentor” (Troy et al. 2009: 6) and FoBL’s Transition officer plays this vital role. The Facebook site must be monitored frequently. Inappropriate behaviour must be moderated, questions must be responded to in a prompt and friendly manner and the overall tone needs to combine a sense of fun with professionalism.

Numbers of people liking the faculty Facebook group have increased from 1,500 in April 2010 to 2,963 (2/11/2011). Most ‘friends’ are female and most are in Melbourne. Significant numbers of students are located in sites where VU teaches offshore (Malaysia and Singapore) and where many of our international and indeed local students live or have links (New Delhi, Bangkok, Colombo, Giza and Jakarta). These students both access the site before arriving in Australia and continue to access the site when on holidays. Numbers of global users alone suggest that Facebook could be important in both attracting and supporting some international students.

As the amount of interaction among participants in online forums reasonably indicates successful learning experiences (Roblyer and Wiencke 2003), the faculty Facebook site’s activity levels indicate some success with engagement if not learning. Nearly 50% of content is essentially “instructor engagement” (Roblyer and Wiencke 2003) - information generated by the FoBL’s Transition officer to which students respond with comments or “like”. And includes postings about events, projects, opportunities for students, Orientation and welcomes for particular cohorts. Other university officers also use 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 ask follow-up questions and some of these questions are answered by other students or other staff members rendering it more bi-directional. A small percentage of Wall content (around 20%) constitutes “student engagement” (Roblyer & Wiencke 2003) - information generated by students – and includes resources, questions, responses to questions and responses to instructor engagement. Overall, the Faculty’s Facebook site is bidirectional: students both post questions and/or respond to the posts of others. Asked on the Facebook Wall if the Faculty’s site was useful and why they used it, 16 students were positive saying was “great”, “useful” (2) and “very informative”. Most posts stressed the constancy and frequency of their Facebook connection: “it is the only online source I check every ten minutes.”

Conclusion

There are numerous legal and ethical issues about using Facebook for teaching. Indeed, a discussion still needs to be had about the appropriateness, at all, of Facebook for teaching. But the issue of additional, extra-curricular activity on Facebook seems to be less problematic. Facebook could well engage and support some students who would otherwise be isolated or disengaged and evidence suggests that, for international students, this begins

before students arrive in Australia. 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.

Obviously not all students should have to have Facebook in order to feel connected and receive pertinent and current information about their studies and university life. University email, university and faculty websites (including intranet sites) as well as more traditional communications methods – lectures, posters, and university television – all seek to communicate with students and to respond to student queries. Facebook, however, seems to provide a more multidirectional (Woodley & Meredith, 2011) site for students. The interactivity, responsiveness and connectedness made possible by not only the functions of Facebook but by the students' high participation levels in that platform are essential to achieving anything like a sense of community and belonging especially for students who are new to Australia, new to university life, new to VU or all three.

The resources allocated to retention-specific initiatives continue to be lower than those allocated to recruitment" (Troy et al. 2009). This observation is especially true of international students. The administration of Facebook is cost effective and, despite various ethical qualms and technological glitches (in China), an analysis of the data and feedback from students suggest that the benefits of having a Faculty Facebook page for some students – and international students in particular - are considerable. The Faculty's Facebook site will continue to be an additional, optional site of engagement alongside many other strategies that engage and sustain students at university.

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