The use of Facebook in tertiary education

Case study of a unit-related Facebook page in a university justice class

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to evaluate the usefulness of a university unit Facebook page, which was established to support a first-year university justice unit. The study pays particular regard to the Facebook page’s impact on students learning outcomes and communications amongst students and between students and teaching staff.

Design/methodology/approach – All students enrolled in the unit were asked to complete an online survey, which sought to determine whether they used the unit Facebook page and if so, the nature and extent of their use.

Findings – The study found that the unit Facebook page was useful in achieving most learning objectives for the unit. This included enhancing students’ knowledge and understanding of unit content, as well as their ability to critically analyse unit materials. Students also indicated that they found the Facebook page better than the university’s central learning management system across a range of areas. It was particularly useful for facilitating unit-related discussions.

Research limitations/implications – The survey results reported in this paper are based on a relatively small sample of students (n = 67) from a first-year university justice unit. Future studies should seek to garner evidence from broader and larger samples that transcend specific unit populations. However, the findings of this study do indicate further support for the use of Facebook as a supplementary tool in university education.

Originality/value – This study focuses on two aspects of social networking technologies that have not been previously researched and thus contributes to the growing literature on the uses and benefits of Facebook in tertiary education.

Keywords Higher education, E-learning, Universities, Cognition

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Web 2.0 technologies can offer a range of benefits to teachers and students in higher education. However, the integration of these technologies into universities has been limited and thus, empirical evidence of their value is still emerging. This paper describes the use of a unit Facebook page in a first-year subject in the School of Justice at the Queensland University of Technology in Brisbane, Australia. The page was primarily intended as a means of easing communications between the lecturer and students. However, the lecturer also attempted to create opportunities for further collaborative learning by encouraging robust online discussions and distributing extracurricular materials (including relevant news articles or web sites for further reading).

The authors would like to thank the students who took part in this research.
Students’ opinions regarding the value of the unit Facebook page were garnered using an online survey. In particular, students were queried about the following:

**RQ1.** Whether the unit Facebook pages contributed to the achievement of university learning outcomes.

**RQ2.** Whether the unit Facebook page was better or worse (particularly in terms of easing communication) than the learning management system used at the Queensland University of Technology; Blackboard.

These two areas have not yet been explored in the existing literature (Irwin et al., 2012). The feedback from students in this study was positive, but there were also some unexpected results.

This paper begins with a discussion of the current literature on web 2.0 technologies in higher education, paying particular attention to Facebook. The paper then sets out the methods used to answer the two-abovementioned research questions. Finally, the results of the study are discussed and the key findings, limitations and potential areas for future research are outlined.

**Facebook in higher education**

Since university students (and students more generally) are already very high users of Facebook (Rhoades et al., 2008; Bicen and Cavus, 2011, p. 943; Madge et al., 2009, p. 142; Junco, 2012), it is a natural extension to incorporate this medium into teaching strategies. While empirical studies into specific uses of Facebook in higher education are slowly emerging, given the relevantly recent explosion of social networking sites, there is still a need for further research in this area. The research that has been done suggests that there are benefits to be gained from incorporating Facebook into educational settings (Bicen and Cavus, 2011, p. 946; Hung and Yuen, 2010, p. 703; McCarthy, 2010, p. 730; Junco, 2012).

Most studies have reported high Facebook usage amongst university students. Selwyn (2009) found that 76 per cent of his sample of 909 American undergraduate students maintained Facebook profiles. Similarly, Smith and Caruso (2010, p. 7) found that 94.1 per cent of their sample of university students in US’ institutions were frequent users of social networking sites, and Facebook surpassed all other sites as the “favourite”. Other studies have also demonstrated heavy Facebook usage amongst university students (Yu et al., 2010, p. 1498; Bicen and Cavus, 2011, p. 945; Junco, 2012). While students’ immersion with Facebook is evident, the use of Facebook sites for educational purposes, including Facebook pages that have been created specifically to support university units (“unit Facebook pages”) varies between studies (Irwin et al., 2012, p. 1226; Hew, 2011). In one study, over 80 per cent of a student sample (n = 144) engaged with a unit Facebook page (Irwin et al., 2012, p. 1226). However, in another study students used Facebook in an informal manner and thus, tended to overlook some if not all messages, videos, pictures and links posted either by other students or the lecturer (Baran, 2010, p. 148). Empirical evidence of the extent to which students use unit Facebook pages is still lacking, though some studies point to benefits from the use of this social medium in a learning environment.

The potential benefits of using Facebook to support university classes are varied. They range from improved and increased communication between lecturers and students (and thus, collaborative learning opportunities), greater engagement with class
materials and topics and exposure to additional (extracurricular) learning materials (Irwin et al., 2012, p. 1225; Baran, 2010, p. 148; Cheung et al., 2011, p. 1340; Wang et al., 2012). Students may also benefit from the social connections that they make through Facebook by feeling more included in university communities of practice (Madge et al., 2009, p. 144; Hung and Yuen, 2010, p. 712; Wang et al., 2012). Importantly, Facebook sites can be a particularly good alternative for students who would otherwise have trouble participating in face-to-face class discussions since it is simply less intimidating for these more introverted students (Moore and McElroy, 2012, p. 271). These benefits are promising, though some students have also noted several disadvantages to using Facebook at university.

Some students feel that Facebook is unnecessary given the large number of communication methods already available in most universities (Irwin et al., 2012, p. 1227). The workload created by having to engage with alternative online learning technologies can, according to some students, outweigh the potential benefits, particularly when instructors do not support and orient online discussions (Capdeferro and Romero, 2012). Lecturers should ensure that the information students receive in the online environment is credible and trustworthy and thus, there is a certain amount of vetting that may be required (Carroll et al., 2012). While most students in a study by Wang et al. (2012, p. 433) reported that Facebook was successful as a learning management system, some students felt that Facebook should be restricted to social networking, rather than being used for academic purposes. Teachers must also be mindful that they do not exclude some students by relying too heavily on social networking media. Although it seems that the large majority of students do use social media such as Facebook (Smith and Caruso, 2010), its use is not universal. Some students will choose not to maintain Facebook profiles and thus, may be excluded from learning opportunities if Facebook is too heavily relied upon. Indeed, not all students will be digitally “wise” (Prensky, 2009) or be “digital residents” (that is, individuals with an ongoing online presence) (White et al., 2012). The intention is that Facebook can foster learning communities of practice, rather than exclude some students from them.

While some initial studies point to a number of benefits to be gained from the use of unit Facebook pages at universities, there is still much to learn about the ways in which students engage with such technologies and the specific advantages these technologies can have in terms of meeting learning objectives. Irwin et al. (2012) suggested that there is a need to determine whether Facebook can help to contribute to specific university learning outcomes. The authors stated, “Future research should employ methods that assess the ability of Facebook to assist in the development of competencies and learning outcomes when integrated into course resources” (Irwin et al., 2012, p. 1230). The authors also suggested that future research should seek to compare traditional learning management systems and “[...] equivalent Facebook functions [...] in order to determine the most efficient and convenient platform for student engagement and learning” (Irwin et al., 2012, p. 1230). This study seeks to fill both of these gaps. In particular, it contemplates whether one unit Facebook page, set up for a first-year university subject:

- contributed to the achievement of specific course learning outcomes; and
- was better or worse than the unit Blackboard site across a range of capabilities.

The methods used to address these questions are outlined below.
Method

The Facebook page was used to support a first-year undergraduate university unit, which focuses on policy-making practices and wider issues of governance through a criminology and social justice lens. The unit was taught in Semester 2 2012 as part of the undergraduate degree in Justice at the Faculty of Law, Queensland University of Technology in Brisbane, Australia. Apart from e-mail and Blackboard, which is used to store and manage access to university documents, grading and online classes, Facebook was the only other technology used to support teaching in the unit.

The unit Facebook page was established before teaching began, and students were alerted to its existence in the first lecture in week 1 of the teaching semester. The intention of the page was to:

- ease communications between the lecturer and students;
- ease communications amongst students; and
- provide another forum, beyond the classroom, where students could further engage with the topics taught in the unit.

The unit coordinator encouraged students to use the site for these purposes and regularly posted online news articles and other extracurricular content that were related to the unit topics. The unit coordinator maintained a regular presence on the site with the main purposes of answering student questions as they arose, correcting some students’ understandings of the unit and materials and encouraging critical debate around the unit topics.

First, this study seeks to determine whether the unit Facebook page contributed to the development of unit-specific learning outcomes. At the time of the study, learning outcomes at the Queensland University of Technology were chosen by the unit coordinators to best suit individual units. However, they had to be based on the university’s broader graduate capabilities, which require that graduates are able to demonstrate the following:

- “knowledge and skills pertinent to a particular discipline or professional area”;
- “critical, creative and analytical thinking, and effective problem-solving”;
- “effective communication in a variety of contexts and modes” (including written and oral communication);
- “the capacity for life-long learning including searching and critically evaluating information from a variety of sources using effective strategies and appropriate technologies”;
- “the ability to work independently and collaboratively”;
- “social and ethical responsibility and an understanding of indigenous and international perspectives”; and
- “characteristics of self-reliance and leadership” (Section 4.3.3, QUT Manual of Policies and Procedures).

These capabilities were tailored to the policy and governance unit that is the topic of this paper. For instance, capabilities one, five and to some extent, seven, are encapsulated in the following learning outcome for the unit: “demonstrate a strong understanding of the policy cycle and the ability to prepare quality policy documents
with a social justice orientation” (Lauchs, 2012). This study will determine whether and to what extent the unit Facebook page contributed to the achievement of these unit-specific learning outcomes.

Second, this study compares the functions of Facebook with the functions of the university’s learning management system, Blackboard. In particular, the aim was to determine whether students felt that the unit Facebook page was better or worse than Blackboard for creating learning opportunities, encouraging interaction between the teacher and students (as well as amongst students) and helping with assessment. While the study seeks to address these two specific goals, it also aims to contribute more broadly to the field by producing further empirical evidence of the nature and frequency with which students use unit-related Facebook pages.

This study adopted a survey methodology approach to understanding the students’ use of the unit Facebook page. An online questionnaire was used as the survey instrument. Students were asked a range of questions about the different ways in which they used the page and whether or not the page was helpful. The survey consisted of 23 questions overall; six open questions and 17 closed questions. For the open-ended questions students were able to enter as much text as they wished. For the close-ended questions, an other category was always used to ensure all possible options were included. The survey was developed by the authors and had previously been used in a slightly altered format with two separate cohorts of students ($n = 38$ and $n = 66$) undertaking different subjects in the School of Justice. The students did not raise any problems with the survey in these previous studies. A copy of the survey can be obtained upon request to the authors.

A link to the online survey was e-mailed to the entire student cohort (that is, users and non-users of the page), placed on the Facebook wall and placed on the Blackboard announcements page. Students were advised that, upon completion of the survey, they could choose to enter their names and go into the running to win one of three $30 gift vouchers for an online music store. However, students were assured that their participation was entirely anonymous and confidential. The gift vouchers were merely offered as a way to increase response rates and not as an incentive for students to identify themselves. The survey was open from October 19 (week 12 of the teaching semester) until November 25 (one week after the end of the final examination period).

Because the survey was distributed online, the data for the close-ended questions were automatically coded. However, the open-ended responses were coded and content analysed using a thematic coding approach, whereby themes were identified as they arose. In this respect, the data was allowed to “speak for itself”. Simple descriptive analyses of the quantitative data were used to address the research questions.

**Results and discussion**

**Sample**

There were 227 students enrolled in the unit overall; 251 internally (meaning they attended classes on campus) and 20 externally (meaning they completed the course via distance education). A total of 183 students “liked” the unit Facebook page (that is, they agreed to receive newsfeeds from it) by the end of the teaching semester. This represented 66 per cent of the unit population. A total of 67 students responded to the survey; a response rate of 24 per cent. Only the demographic characteristics of the survey sample were available (Table I), as demographic information on
Uptake of Facebook page

63 (94 per cent) survey respondents said they accessed the unit Facebook page at some point during the semester while four (6 per cent) said they chose not to. The four students who did not access the page gave the following reasons: I do not have a Facebook account (n = 2); I do not like Facebook (n = 3); I only use Facebook to keep in touch with friends and family (n = 1); I do not see the purpose of using Facebook for university (n = 2); I would prefer to use Blackboard for my studies (n = 2); I would prefer to use e-mail for my studies (n = 2). Still, one of those students said that Facebook was a useful addition to support tertiary units. That student stated that Facebook “Can give an easy means of communication between students, teachers and tutors”. The three students who said it was not a useful addition to tertiary studies gave the following reasons:

[...] it's (sic) easier to get information and resources from a central web-based program such as Blackboard rather than use Facebook, which I am not a user of.

The information that is shared on these sites is often times incorrect and it gives the students the wrong information. If the information was closely monitored by a member of the faculty, then it might be useful.

Because all of the information is easier to access through Blackboard. Why make it more complicated by adding ANOTHER site we have to check?

The second comment was interesting because, in line with suggestions from the literature, the lecturer did monitor the Facebook page throughout the semester and quickly corrected any misinformation (Carroll et al., 2012). The student that made this comment admitted that they had not used the site, which may explain this misunderstanding. However, the comment also re-confirms the point about the importance of ensuring that information...
appearing on these sites is properly vetted and corrected if necessary (Capdeferro and Romero, 2012; Carroll et al., 2012). It also indicates that students may not have been properly informed of the lecturer’s intention in this regard, which is also an important lesson. The remaining two comments related to the ease of using Blackboard. Some students clearly prefer to use Blackboard and thus, lecturers should ensure that these students are not at risk of missing any critical unit-related information if they choose not to use Facebook (Smith and Caruso, 2010; White et al., 2012).

Of the 63 survey respondents who accessed the unit Facebook page, most of them accessed it at least once a week (Figure 1). These results indicated that the students were frequent users of the unit Facebook site, which is consistent with previous findings of students’ considerable immersion with social networking media (Rhoades et al., 2008; Bicen and Cavus, 2011; Madge et al., 2009; Junco, 2012; Hung and Yuen, 2010; McCarthy, 2010; Selwyn, 2009). The few students who chose not to use the site reported similar feelings to those in previous studies; that Facebook is not necessary for university, particularly as there are already alternative methods of communication such as Blackboard (and other learning management systems) (Irwin et al., 2012; Wang et al., 2012).

RQ1: impact on learning outcomes
As described earlier, the lecturer drafted the specific learning outcomes for individual units, though they had to reflect the university-wide learning outcomes that are outlined in the university’s manual of policy and procedures. The learning outcomes for this unit specifically related to the field of governance and policy-making – the topic of the unit. However, they reflected overarching learning objectives that tapped the following capabilities: knowledge and understanding of the unit content, the ability to critically analyse the unit content, the ability to communicate and work collaboratively and the ability to perform in assessment. Students were asked to indicate whether Facebook was useful for achieving these learning outcomes. They were provided with a four-item Likert response scale to measure the extent to which Facebook was useful, ranging from not useful to extremely useful (Table II).
Students indicated that the Facebook site was useful across five of the six key learning outcomes for the unit. Most students reported that the Facebook page was somewhat useful for improving their knowledge of the unit content. A separate question asked students, Was the unit Facebook page helpful in completing assessment for the unit? The overwhelming majority (56 students, which equalled 95 per cent) answered yes. The three students who answered no to this question mentioned that the Facebook site re-stated what was already available on Blackboard, while another said, “There was nothing of use towards the assessment [...]” However, given the ongoing discussions on the Facebook wall about assessment criteria and different ways to approach the assessment items, this latter comment seems unfounded. In addition to addressing the specific learning outcomes, students were also asked to indicate the nature of their use of the Facebook page (Figure 2).

The student who answered other in Figure 2 said, “To see if anyone else had already asked the question I was going to – every time they had. It was like an incredibly effective FAQ!” Overall, the responses shown in Figure 2 shows that the majority

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learning outcomes</th>
<th>Mode</th>
<th>Not useful</th>
<th>Somewhat useful</th>
<th>Useful</th>
<th>Extremely useful</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge of the unit content</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5 (9%)</td>
<td>28 (48%)</td>
<td>23 (40%)</td>
<td>2 (3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to understand the unit content</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9 (16%)</td>
<td>16 (28%)</td>
<td>27 (47%)</td>
<td>6 (10%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to critically analyse the unit content</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>15 (26%)</td>
<td>17 (29%)</td>
<td>25 (43%)</td>
<td>1 (2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engagement/contact with the UC</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4 (7%)</td>
<td>8 (14%)</td>
<td>24 (41%)</td>
<td>22 (38%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engagement/contact with peers</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9 (16%)</td>
<td>10 (17%)</td>
<td>23 (40%)</td>
<td>16 (28%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance in assessment</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3 (5%)</td>
<td>11 (19%)</td>
<td>33 (57%)</td>
<td>11 (19%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Notes:** UC – unit coordinator; Likert response items were coded as follows: 1 – not useful, 2 – somewhat useful, 3 – useful, 4 – extremely useful; the highest scoring categories for each learning outcome are italicised.

Students indicated that the Facebook site was useful across five of the six key learning outcomes for the unit. Most students reported that the Facebook page was somewhat useful for improving their knowledge of the unit content. A separate question asked students, Was the unit Facebook page helpful in completing assessment for the unit? The overwhelming majority (56 students, which equalled 95 per cent) answered yes. The three students who answered no to this question mentioned that the Facebook site re-stated what was already available on Blackboard, while another said, “There was nothing of use towards the assessment [...]” However, given the ongoing discussions on the Facebook wall about assessment criteria and different ways to approach the assessment items, this latter comment seems unfounded. In addition to addressing the specific learning outcomes, students were also asked to indicate the nature of their use of the Facebook page (Figure 2).

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![Figure 2](image-url)

**Notes:** UC – unit coordinator; four students chose not to answer this question
of students used the site for checking assignment tips and viewing updates from the unit coordinator. Similarly to the findings of Wang et al. (2012), very few students used the site for pre-dominantly social reasons such as befriending fellow classmates or contacting peers for social reasons.

The above results indicated that students did find the unit Facebook site helpful for achieving key learning outcomes – particularly for enhancing their performance in assessment items. The unit Facebook page also reportedly increased most students’ knowledge and understanding of the unit content, as well as enhancing their ability to critically analyse the topics covered. In response to our RQ1, these findings indicate that learning outcomes can be assisted by the use of social media technologies (Irwin et al., 2012). This is a promising outcome for those teachers who seek to use Facebook in their classrooms.

RQ2: Facebook versus Blackboard

Students were asked to indicate whether Facebook was better or worse than the university’s learning management system, Blackboard, across a number of areas. The results are outlined in Table III.

Students indicated that Facebook was better than Blackboard across most areas, except for accessing information about the topics covered in the unit. This was unsurprising since Facebook could not, at that time, act as a repository for separate documents such as study guides or readings in pdf or word processor formats. Students had to visit Blackboard to access these documents. However, Facebook was considered more useful for its communicative capabilities – whether it aided in communication between the students and the unit coordinator or amongst students. For instance, the unit coordinator frequently posted updates and comments about the unit materials and assessment, as well as answering direct questions from students who posted on the page. Students also frequently posted responses to their peers’ questions or concerns and apart from ensuring that any advice was correct, the unit coordinator encouraged this peer-to-peer engagement. This finding about the high communicative value of Facebook is similar to the findings of previous studies (Irwin et al., 2012; Baran, 2010; Cheung et al., 2011; Wang et al., 2012).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tasks</th>
<th>Mode</th>
<th>Facebook was worse</th>
<th>Facebook was better</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Communicating with the UC</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5 (9%)</td>
<td>53 (91%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communicating with peers</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3 (5%)</td>
<td>55 (95%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Receiving unit announcements and updates</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>23 (40%)</td>
<td>35 (60%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accessing information about assessment</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>21 (36%)</td>
<td>37 (64%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accessing information about topics covered in the unit</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>30 (52%)</td>
<td>28 (48%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Completing the written assessment item for the unit</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>15 (26%)</td>
<td>43 (74%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Notes:** The highest scoring category is italicised; response options were coded as follows: 1 – Facebook was worse, 2 – Facebook was better; UC – unit coordinator; five students chose not to answer this question.
Conclusion
Facebook and other social networking media have increasingly been used in university, and studies that show their benefits are slowly emerging. This study sought to add to this growing body of literature by determining whether a unit Facebook page for a first-year justice unit helped students in achieving the unit’s specific learning outcomes and whether the Facebook site was better or worse than the university’s learning management system, Blackboard (Irwin et al., 2012). Students indicated that the Facebook site was helpful for achieving key learning outcomes, particularly in terms of enhancing students’ knowledge and understanding of the unit, ability to critically analyse unit content and performance in assessment. Additionally, students indicated that Facebook was better than the unit Blackboard site across a range of areas – particularly in terms of improving communications amongst students and between students and teaching staff. These results were promising and indicated that Facebook should be taken seriously as a supplement to learning management systems such as Blackboard. However, Facebook should not replace other learning support systems because it cannot provide all required functionalities (for example, it cannot act as a repository for unit-related documents) and also because the use of Facebook by students is not universal. In a final survey question, students were asked whether, overall, they felt that Facebook was a useful additional to support university units. The overwhelming majority (n = 52, 88 per cent) said yes and only one student (2 per cent) said no. Six students (10 per cent) said they were not sure.

While this study indicated support for the use of unit Facebook pages, there are still some aspects of this topic that require further research. For instance, it is unclear whether the unit coordinator’s use of the site affects students’ enjoyment and engagement with it, and thus, whether there are best practice standards that should be adhered to in this regard. Also, there is, of course, a level of disparity between whether students feel that Facebook has helped them learn, and whether it actually has. This is a direct limitation of the survey method used in this research. While it was not possible to use other more objective measures for this study, future studies should perhaps consider comparing actual unit results with students’ survey responses to increase content validity. Future research should also determine whether there are measurable productivity gains for teachers who use unit Facebook pages, insofar as the time they save from not having to answer duplicate student questions via e-mail. As one student respondent noted, “It provides a great forum for discussion and I would dare say saves the unit coordinator time because instead of personally asking questions, I just looked at the page to see if someone else had asked the same question as I did.” Anecdotally, the Facebook page described in this study did save the unit coordinator time and effort, whilst enabling them to also appear more available and approachable to the students (Baran, 2010; Mazer et al., 2009). However, formal methods of researching this would
also add to the growing body of literature in this area. Finally, the survey results reported in this paper are based on a relatively small sample of students \( n = 67 \) from a first-year university justice unit. Future studies should seek to garner evidence from broader and larger samples that transcend specific unit populations. Qualitative or mixed-methods approaches would also provide a rich source of data to support the quantitative findings of this and other studies.

References


Further reading


About the authors

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