

3-1-2013

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Recommended Citation

Toland, R. (2013). Facebook as a Learning Tool. *Perspectives In Learning*, 14 (1). Retrieved from <http://csuepress.columbusstate.edu/pil/vol14/iss1/6>

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Facebook as a Learning Tool

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Abstract

Facebook is a social network that has been used by hundreds of people around the world. The network started as a technologically infused meeting place for college students to communicate socially. Since the inception, the network has blossomed into a global sensation. Such growth has spurred many uses for the site including the opportunity to add to the learning experiences for college students. Facebook is a tool in a learning revolution that incorporates the ease of technology and communication efforts between students and between teachers and students. This essay focuses on how Facebook can be used as a learning tool for teachers that support the ideologies of constructivist learning and student-centered methodologies. However, there are best practices that need to be taken into consideration when implementing the use of Facebook as a learning tool.

Online learning has increased dramatically in higher education in the past five years. The adoption of course management platforms such as Angel, Blackboard, D2L, eCollege, and WebCT, among others, have helped ease the transition into online teaching. “Many institutions are still unclear about how this new technology fits with their mission and have found that achieving widespread adoption by faculty is difficult” (Abel, 2005, pg.75). Online teaching is similar to visiting a foreign country--we know how to drive in the United States but, when we venture abroad, all the experiences and prior knowledge go out the window. Anxiety with new technologies in teaching often stems from a lack of experience and understanding of innovative classroom enhancement technology and social media.

Facebook

Facebook, ever heard of it? Even though the site has become famous for its “social” connectivity, Facebook has become an outlet for many organizations to connect individuals with educational, professional, and creative aspirations. As a matter of fact, you can go to “find friends” in Facebook, type in a name, business, club, organization, or institution, and presto, the person or entity you are searching for will be available if they have a Facebook page. For example, if one was to type in Columbus State University, a brief history of the school is provided, coupled with a list of everyone who is “friends”, (i.e. all who are interested in the institution and have become a “friend”).

In addition, Facebook can be used to enhance the learning process. According to Munoz and Towner (2009), Facebook is the most widely used social media among college students and colleges. The technology capabilities are easier and more advanced than their pedagogy endorsed technology counterparts, WebCT or Blackboard. Students can upload videos, pictures, post to bulletin boards, and participate in communication via e-mail and instant messaging. Munoz and Towner (2009) further suggest,

Facebook is a network that connects students with other students, indirectly creating a learning community – a vital component of student education. Facebook provides instructors opportunities and structures by which students can help and support one another by building their courses atop the community already established by the students themselves (pg.5).

“Constructivists believe that learners construct their own reality or at least interpret it based upon their perceptions of experiences, so an individual's knowledge is a function of one's prior experiences, mental structures, and beliefs that are used to interpret objects and events” (Mergel, 1998, para. 9). Today's learners use Facebook as a way of communicating, and it has become a part of their experience and reality. Educators that facilitate online, blended, or face-to-face instruction can initiate improved interest and engagement by students through using a platform that includes Facebook.

Facebook can be used as a learning tool to help students reach their academic goals by improving cognitive skills. The social network can facilitate an increase in a student's concentration, perception, long term memory, and logical thinking by providing an inlet for new information. In a

recent study conducted by the University of Queensland and Griffith University (2012), researchers found that college students believe adding Facebook to their courses will enhance their learning experiences. An example of students' perceptions of Facebook as a learning tool from this study includes:

- “The page enhanced communication and interaction between students and the course instructors.”
- “I found it a good learning resource because most of the questions that people asked on the page were relevant to my study” (Undergraduate student, 3rd year course).

Interactions with the Facebook page was easy as students were commonly using Facebook for social networking. Students stated:

- “Because I was already on *Facebook*, the page was a quick and easy way to get information and keep up to date” (Undergraduate student, 3rd year course).

Students were able to receive updates and information that may have been missed via other communication means.

- “I liked it because I was able to gain information that was perhaps missed if I didn't attend class that week” (Undergraduate student, 3rd year course).

Response to questions and facilitation of discussions were faster than relying on email and discussion boards.

- “It was a faster way of communicating rather than emailing the lecturer all the time”

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(Postgraduate student, 1st year course) (pg. 1227).

Furthermore, the researchers suggest the use of Facebook enhances productive pedagogy and instructive strategy. “Continued integration of Facebook into courses may see further benefits through enhanced ‘student to student’ and ‘student to instructor’ communication, which in turn, may translate to greater learning outcomes” (Irwin, Ball, Desbrow and Leveritt, 2012, pg. 1229).

Implementing Facebook

“Learning-by-doing is generally considered the most effective way to learn. The Internet and a variety of emerging communication, visualization, and simulation technologies now make it possible to offer students authentic learning experiences ranging from experimentation to real-world problem solving” (Lombardi, 2007, pg.1). With Facebook, you can promote authentic learning. Below is an example of how Facebook can be incorporated in a traditional, online, or blended course about Personal Health. These processes can be used in any course. In addition, the use of Facebook can be used for students enrolled in undergraduate to doctoral level programs since Facebook has become the social media of choice for many traditional and non-traditional students.

Example:

1. Students create a Facebook account.
2. Students become “friends” or a member of the Facebook page “Personal Health”.
3. Each week, the facilitator should post a question as it pertains to a specific topic such as obesity, benefits of exercise, heart disease, sexual health, and more.
4. Students then provide a main post in response to the facilitator’s question,

and they then respond to others’ postings.

5. As a requirement, students must incorporate another form of media to their post. One example is taking a picture of a meal they consumed and providing nutritional values.
6. Students construct a paper offering what they have learned for the week and submit it to the online class board for peer-based assessment.

This example incorporates constructivist and authentic learning strategies coupled with the use of the social media, Facebook. The platform initiates collaboration between teacher and students as well as peer interaction. However, when creating and encouraging the use of Facebook as a learning tool, instructors should adhere to “best practices” in order for students to achieve an optimal learning experience. According to Munoz and Towner (2009), an instructor should incorporate the following:

1. Create a professional Facebook account, different from one’s personal account, that includes contact information with varied personal and professional information, a few photos that have been carefully selected, favorite quotes, books, journals, etc. This professional Facebook account helps students get to know the instructor.
2. Inform students of the Facebook page and leave it open to the public. This allows students to access the instructor’s professional Facebook page without having to be approved as a “friend”. If the instructor wants to develop a course page, as opposed to a professional, instructor page, then the page should be made private only inviting the class members.

3. Inform students that the instructor will not be viewing students' personal profiles and will designate them on their contact list that allows limited access to personal information. Again, this maintains a professional demeanor with students and prevents them from feeling that their "personal spaces" are being invaded.
4. Provide the Facebook page address on the syllabus.
5. Create an icebreaker activity to welcome students.

In addition, it is suggested that instructors include podcasts, websites, and videos. Using Google Documents will link students to study guides, presentations, assignments, and tutorials. Also, a teacher should offer Facebook as an option and not as a requirement because some students may not wish to be a member of a social network. Following the suggested best practices will encourage student participation.

Potential Negatives

As stated, Facebook can be used to enhance face-to-face, blended, or online courses; however, there are some risks associated with this type of social media in the classroom. Security issues concerning facilitator and students' privacy have been raised. According to authors, Muñoz and Towner (2009), privacy issues can be detoured by developing a Facebook page that is only used for the course. The class page would need to be established as "Private", and only class members would be invited to join.

Another concern is the current efficiency and frequent changes in Facebook format. Blackboard, Moodle, Engage, and other course management systems used for online and blended classes have a format that may be updated but not to the extent where re-

training of faculty is necessary. In addition, most learning management systems are operated by companies that are readily available if there is an issue with the technology. Unfortunately, a Facebook "technological meltdown" could leave students and professors in a state of frustration and confusion.

Conclusion

Today's learners have very different learning styles and preferences. However, the majority of their information now comes from technology and, more precisely, through social media. Facebook offers students and educators a learning enhancement tool that can be incorporated with online learning to encourage authentic learning and constructivism practices. Yet, to gain the most from social media in learning, an instructor must follow best practices as outlined by research. Facebook and other social media outlets are becoming standards for learning and collaboration; instructors should embrace the new tool as an effective catalyst to learning.

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