



Is Facebook a Distraction or a Valuable Academic Tool? A Personal Reflection in Using Facebook in an Advanced English Academic Classroom

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Abstract

During the last seven years, Web 2.0 tools have become an integral part of my English language classroom at the Cyprus University of Technology. The constant developments of new Web 2.0 tools have enriched the foreign language learning experience and made it more creative and interesting for instructors and students. However, with the rising popularity of social media and the availability of those various social media outlets on various mobile and non-mobile devices, the learning process has been inhibited by the permeation and proliferation of social media in the classroom, according to fellow instructors at the university. As a result, we, the language instructors, have tried to intervene and limit the usage of social media during class. Unfortunately, such interventions have led to unnecessary confrontations and did not solve the social media usage issue. In addition, certain Web 2.0 tools such as Wikis and Blogs became much less popular than social media. Furthermore, students were also not so keen in using the university's Moodle due to various problems that students encountered by using or attempting to use Moodle, which added additional problems to my classroom's progress. Faced by these developments, I decided to embrace the social media outlet Facebook for my Advanced English Academic class in order to provide students with a web 2.0 tool that has not been used for academic purposes, but it was seen as a major learning distraction in my institution. This paper is a personal reflection of my experience in using and implementing Facebook in a tertiary English language academic environment at the Cyprus University of Technology.

1. Introduction

Since the establishment of the Cyprus University of Technology's Language Center in 2007, the integration of Web 2.0 tools was and still is an integral part of the LC's classes in order to enhance students' learning experience and extend the classroom beyond the traditional brick and mortar classroom. Web tools are also used to increase students in class participation. The courses were well received and I personally became very enthusiastic in using and introducing various Web 2.0 tools such as Wikis, YouTube videos, blogs and SurveyMonkey in combination with the university's Moodle platform. Students seemed to be enjoying the new approach in our language classes, even though they had to get used in using Web 2.0 tools for learning. [7]November (2010) calls the educators who are embracing the new technologies and trying to learn them "digital immigrants" as we are moving to new unfamiliar grounds and trying to adapt to the new digital culture we are encountering and trying to learn and comprehend it in order to apply it into our classrooms effectively. Through this "digital immigration process" we have to collaborate with the younger generation who has grown up with Web 2.0 technology and is referred to as "digital natives" [10](Prensky, 2001). This collaboration process looked like a match made in heaven, but the first dark clouds were slowly approaching because digital natives do not necessarily see certain Web 2.0 tools as learning tools. In addition, the introductions of social networks such as Myspace and especially Facebook, which are also Web2.0 tools, were just starting to become popular. However, from 2007-2010 these emerging social networks were not seen as big threats or a nuisance as long as they stayed outside the classroom. We could also hope that the phenomena might slowly subside or disappear as [6]Heffernan (2009) notes that a slow detachment from Facebook by a small but fast increasing number of Facebook users. However, that all was about to change and I was confronted with serious dilemmas. This paper reflects a two year journey, 2012-2014, in dealing with a social network called Facebook and deciding if it is a distraction or a valuable academic learning tool that can be successfully used in a tertiary academic environment.

1.2 The rise of Facebook and the implications

Even though Myspace was launched in 2003 and became one of the most popular social networking sites in the US in 2006 [3](Davies,2010), it never became very popular in Cyprus. Nevertheless, it was surpassed by Facebook, which was launched in 2004, in 2009 [1](Associated Press, 2014) and by 2013 it reached 1.230 million monthly users [12](Sedghi, 2014). Europe alone had 206 million active

users a day [13](Smith, 2014). A research that was conducted by Pingdom in 2011 showed that 69% of the population, 553.900 people, were Facebook users in Cyprus. Facebook was not only conquering the world but also our classrooms and problematizing the new developing class dynamics, which initiated my experimental learning experience with Facebook.

The Facebook learning experience

In the beginning, I observed my students entering the computer labs, sitting in front of their computers and logging into Facebook and starring at the screen completely ignoring me. This new phenomena caused me to engage in arguments with students on a daily basis and Facebook became a major distraction during class, as I was trying to monitor students' computer usage in order to prevent Facebook usage and keep them focused on the class flow. Fellow colleagues and I became frustrated and requested that the IT department block Facebook from all the computer labs that were used for language classes. Students started to bring their own laptops and were still able to access Facebook bypassing our preventive measures. I also noticed that students developed an intrinsic need to post, comment or like something on Facebook disregarding any disruption they might cause as a result, I started to limit the usage of Web2.0 tools in class in order to stop consuming my energy in arguing over the in-class Facebook usage and actually focusing on my teaching. I became frustrated with Web 2.0 tools and Facebook contributed to my frustration as it constantly interfered with class procedures, distracted students and inhibited the class process in a negative manner.

By 2012, I knew that I had to re-think my Facebook usage attitude in the classroom because three new variables were introduced to the Facebook playground. First, smartphones became much cheaper and allowed student to purchase them and as a result use the new mobile device to access Facebook. Secondly, tablets also became cheaper and many students started to download their course books and simultaneously access Facebook. Finally, a vast majority of students had 3G access which meant that did not need the university's internet in order to access Facebook. Facebook was everywhere and was used by everyone in and outside the classroom. Facebook was ubiquitous available and my classroom became inundated with the tidal wave called Facebook. All these new developments and observations put Facebook in a whole new picture. I could not stop adult university students in using Facebook during class, I could not stop the advance of technology, many ICT tools became unpopular with students such as Wikis and blogs, and I was tired of arguing about Facebook usage in class. However, the vast majority of my students were on Facebook, many ICT tools could be embedded in Facebook such as the very popular YouTube and Facebook was easily accessible from various mobile devices which eliminated the need for computer access. Putting all these into perspective, I decided to start experimenting with various advanced English academic courses and repurposing Facebook for educational purposes in order to explore the capabilities of Facebook. [4](Davis,2011)

1.3 Embracing Facebook in phases

Phase 1

During the first phase, I uploaded and posted only the first week's material of an ESAP(English for Specific Academic Purposes) shipping course on Facebook. I wanted to test students' attitudes and participation during this week. I observed a positive attitude during the week, but I also noticed that students did not really know how to deal with this new tool as it was only used for pleasure such as games and posting pictures and not for pedagogical reasons. Nevertheless, during the week Facebook functioned as a valuable tool and not as an obstruction.

Phase 2

In phase 2, I felt more comfortable in using Facebook as pedagogical tool and used Facebook in my first Advanced Academic English class. All the materials, documents, videos and pictures were uploaded on Facebook and on the university's Moodle platform. Students were also encouraged to comment and communicate with the instructor through Facebook. The results were more than encouraging as students' participation increased during the course and students engaged in after class discussion with the instructor using Facebook. In addition, students embraced the comfort of the group's Facebook page in order to review material, open documents and discuss problems that they encountered with other students or the instructor promptly. However, these encouraging findings did not eliminate the unpopular and distractive Facebook usages defined by me, the instructor. Nevertheless, it stopped being a serious nuisance and distraction. It became a valuable tool.

Phase 3

Encouraged by the previous experiences, I introduced Facebook in my second Advanced Academic English class in spring 2014. This time I used Facebook not only to upload material for students to use, but I wanted students to become participants and become critical thinkers during this phase. The rationale for this Facebook implementation was to allow students to become more mature in using Facebook as a pedagogical tool and not only for entertainment. Students could also have a say in the material that was uploaded and validate material instead of accepting online materials as is without questioning the validity of that online materials. As the course commenced students were problematized by the fact that Facebook was an integral part of the course. Students were asked to create surveys, comment on material and upload their material which they did not feel very comfortable in doing so as they had to become active participants and critical thinkers simultaneously. As the class progressed, students were feeling more comfortable in posting as they discovered that it was safe to post and express their opinion. Facebook proved itself as a safe medium for internet communication, an important factor for instructor- student interaction when using a Web2.0 tool [2](Damron, 2009, p.42). There were also a limited in class Facebook use not related to the course. However, during the last two weeks of the semester students were exposed to local controversial subjects, which caused students to increase their participation in class through discussion and, after class, on Facebook. Students started to question material and uploaded videos to support their position. Facebook usage not related to the course was almost eliminated without any instructor's intervention. I was convinced that Facebook had become a valuable tool and it had stopped being a major distraction.

Conclusion

Even though I started using Facebook reluctantly, I discovered that Facebook, just like any other ICT tool, can be used and exploited as a valuable academic tool. However, in order to integrate Facebook effectively into the academic environment, the instructor and the students have to prepare appropriately and show maturity, respect and willingness to learn from each other and negotiate the usage of Facebook. Most academics are still reluctant to integrate any kind of ICT tool or fail to integrate them effectively [11](Roblyer, McDaniel, Webb, Herman & Witty 2010, p. 134). [5]Hamid, Chang and Kurnia (2009) also point out that it is often not clear how to appropriately repurpose Web2.0 tools in order to make it into technologically valuable academic tool. In failing to do so we lack the understanding of the possibilities that Facebook has to offer in the academic environment and demonize Facebook for being distractive and inappropriate for an academic learning environment. However, instructors that comprehend the capabilities of Facebook and use it effectively can reap some of the benefits and advantages that Facebook has to offer:

- *Relaxed friendly and inviting atmosphere which encourages students participation and engagement*
- *Students feel comfortable learning through Facebook because most of them use it everyday*
- *Facebook can promote collaboration and social interchange between participants*
- *Students get engaged about their learning outside the classroom*

[8](Panduragan, 2012)

Nevertheless, it is still necessary to conduct extensive research concerning social networks and their impact in order to draw better conclusions. Until then, each of us educators should explore and embrace the academic possibilities of Facebook before disregarding it as a distractive and ill fitted academic tool.

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