



## Using Facebook as a Teaching Tool in Higher Education Settings: Examining Potentials and Possibilities

**Marion Sturges**

University of Western Sydney (Australia)

[m.sturges@uws.edu.au](mailto:m.sturges@uws.edu.au)

### 1. Introduction

In line with other higher institutions, much teaching at University of Western Sydney (UWS) is conducted using a blended delivery model. Blended learning is the integration of classroom teaching with online or e-learning. The implementation of blended learning has been given greater attention during the last decade largely due to the combination of web-based technologies and traditional face to face teaching into the learning and teaching process of higher teaching institutions (Clark, 2001). The key advantage of a blended delivery model of teaching is its accessibility to students and therefore, the flexible nature should appeal to those students needing to juggle competing schedules (Arthur, Beecher, Elliott & Newman., 2006; Volery & Lord, 2000). However, academics within the School of Education at the University of Western Sydney find that it is a challenge to get students to participate and respond to the on-line component, unless it is a compulsory and assessable part of the unit. This study was used to trial another pedagogical tool in an attempt to get UWS students to participate in on-line activity.

### 2. Rationale of the study

The researcher decided to introduce the social media network Facebook as a teaching tool at the beginning of semester 1, 2011 as a way of testing whether students would engage with this on-line medium. The rationale for using Facebook was simple in that many students were already very familiar with both its usage and application. Facebook was something that many students already engaged with. In August 2011 Facebook had more than 800 million active users (Facebook statistics, n.d) with 18-35 year olds making up over 50% of the users in Australia (Social Bakers, n.d). This aligns with the age demographic of students enrolled in this unit. Further many students already incorporated Facebook into daily routines with more than 50% of Facebook users logging in and using it each day (<http://www.facebook.com/press/info.php?statistics>). Therefore, Facebook was a tool many students already knew and were using.

The Contemporary Perspectives of Childhood Facebook page was designed to run alongside the traditional Blackboard learning management system (LMS). It did not attempt to replace current on-line learning systems but rather supplement it. The main advantage of Facebook over other LMS is its ability to keep students from past years as part of the group. At the end of each semester of teaching all students are deleted from the unit with other LMS. This means that students who have already completed the unit have no opportunity to work with current students. This enables a unique opportunity for a community of learners of previous and present users to be developed all of whom can share experiences and provide feedback.

### 3. Research questions

The research addressed the following questions.

1. Will students engage with Facebook when it is used as a teaching/learning tool rather than a social tool?
2. Will a community of learners group which offers a space for past and present students to connect, assist each other and take part in some 'online' teaching develop?
3. Will the use amount of student engagement worth the educator's time and effort involved in setting up and maintaining a Facebook page?

### 4. Context

The Facebook site was trialed during semester one and two, 2011 and first semester 2012 with a cohort of students enrolled in one unit offered by the School of Education at the University of Western Sydney. This unit 'Contemporary Perspectives of Childhood' is taught across two campuses and is a mandatory unit for students enrolled in the Bachelor of Social Science (Pathways to Early Childhood Teaching) and Bachelor of Teaching (Birth -5) as well as an elective unit for other courses. Subsequently, the cohort is predominantly students with a career trajectory of becoming early childhood or primary school teachers, but also includes a small number of students with career choices in secondary education, psychology and law. Student numbers vary but during 2011 there were approximately 60 students enrolled in the unit during first semester, 120 students during the Spring semester and in 1st half 2012 enrolment figures were approximately 70. Joining and participating in Facebook was entirely optional. Presently approximately 50% of enrolled students are choosing to join with about a third of enrolled students using it at least three or more times a semester.

### 5. Methodology

Data for this study was collected in two ways. Firstly, the number of Facebook group participants was tracked and a content analysis was undertaken of the comments and links posted to find and interpret patterns. A Qualtrics



survey link was also sent via internal email to all students who completed the unit in Spring, 2011. A link was also posted to the vUWS and actual Facebook site. This survey asked students if they joined the Facebook group, if and how they found it useful.

**6. Results**

Table 1: Number of students enrolled and who joined Facebook

Time	Number of Students enrolled each semester	Cumulative total of students enrolled in unit	Number of students joined Facebook	Percentage of students who joined Facebook
End of Semester One, 2011	60	60	5	12%
End of Semester Two, 2011	120	180	80	44%
Week 3 Semester One, 2012*	70	250	110	44%

\*At time of writing it was Week 3 of the semester.

The initial number of student who joined the Facebook site was small with just 5 out of the 60 students enrolled choosing to join Facebook after Semester one, 2011. My initial idea was that students were reluctant to combine study with social media. However, this was disputed as the numbers increased during the next coming semesters with larger percentage of students joining. At time of writing this paper it is only the third week of the 2012 semester and 35/70 students have already joined the group. It is anticipated that this number will increase further as the semester proceeds.

**7. Analysis**

A survey was sent to the 120 students who participated in the unit during semester two, 2011. The same survey will be sent to students at the completion of semester 1, 2012 to compare results. Seventy five students completed the Qualtrics survey. Students were asked how often during the semester they used Facebook with more than half stating that they used it at least once or twice over the semester.

Table 2: Usage of Facebook

Total number of responses	More than 10 times	Between 5 and 10 times	Between 3 and 5 times	Once or twice	Never
75	22	14	3	5	31

Of the seventy five students who completed the survey at the completion of semester 2, 2011 46 students stated that they joined the Contemporary Perspectives Facebook group and 29 did not. The 46 who joined were asked if they found Facebook useful and to give a reason why or why not. 44 of the 46 students that joined Facebook stated that they found it useful and gave the following reasons:

- able to ask for help from people and see a reply usually straight away and doesn't just have to be the help of the tutor.
- access to it whilst on Facebook as I am on Facebook a lot
- Current and previous students were able to share ideas and help each other
- doing the work at home
- flexibility in terms of managing time, freedom of expression, many varied views which leads to growth, very positive feedback from fellow students and Marion (increases confidence).
- allowed for students to get together in a semi formal setting and ask questions and discuss answers.
- encouraged students to communicate to each other through other means of Facebook and develop friendships.
- allowed me to ask questions, see other questions that students were asking
- allowed me to communicate my thoughts and get feedback.
- allowed me to express my opinions and complete work in my own time and at leisure
- I tend to find myself with Facebook open most of the time so I always saw what people were saying, it helped mostly during the times of assignments as everyone helped each other to answer questions, it was a brilliant idea!
- gave a good opportunity for working together and having help on hand whenever it was needed.
- other students offered their opinion which gives you a wider understanding of topics from another point of view
- people were commenting on things I didn't know
- sometimes another student would ask a question, it may be something that I wanted to know.



- to be able to see how other students are progressing and daily updates I was able to see that if I was struggling with something that I was not the only one and everyone was able to help one another out  
The 2 students who believed that Facebook was not useful tool believed it was so because the information was already available on the other LMS.

## **8. Results of content analysis:**

Facebook was useful in the following ways.

### **8.1 Answer questions**

Students used the site to ask all sorts of questions. Having a team of past and present students answering questions proved to be of great significance as it cut down on the workload of the educators. The sorts of questions posed included process or assignment questions. Process questions included ones such as: "I have an image which is on a double page. Does anyone know how to scan it?" and "Where are the assignment boxes?" For a number of reasons students who didn't feel comfortable asking these sorts of questions on the LMS asked them on Facebook. Assignment questions related to set assessment tasks and included questions such as, "I wanted to choose a motorbike to analyse. Is that a problem?" or "Where did past students choose to analyse?"

### **8.2. Sharing relevant links**

Both students and educators were able to share relevant links not only to the unit content but to interesting teaching, political and social developments which lent an enthusiasm and interest to the unit. As well as increasing general contemporary issues within the unit topics it enabled students to express their opinions on other general matters thus developing a greater political and social awareness and interest. Examples included links to newspaper articles, on-line articles, YouTube clips etc.

### **8.3. Offering advice**

Past and present students were able to offer advice relating to academic, professional and personal issues.

### **8.4. Teaching advice from the field**

Some of the past students were beginning teachers and present students asked them questions about the state of the field. These past students were able to provide a differing voice to university staff and provide real life examples to share with students. Examples conversations included casual teaching and registration.

### **8.5. Housekeeping**

The single biggest advantage of Facebook from the educators point view was the general housekeeping issues that it was able to address. This included reminders about class dates, face to face preparation, work requiring completion or room changes. Although the normal LMS enabled announcements to be made addressing these sorts of housekeeping issues when used in conjunction with Facebook it reached more students in a quicker time period.

### **8.6. Feedback**

Educators were able to receive timely feedback about their lessons from their students as students commented on what they did or did not enjoy or understand.

## **9. Issues**

The single biggest issue is the time and effort that Facebook requires to set up and upkeep. This is especially relevant as the educator was already answering many similar questions on the regular LMS. However, to counterbalance this the use of Facebook meant that students sent significantly less emails to the educator.

## **10. Conclusion**

In conclusion, I believe that after an initial set up time that Facebook is a most useful teaching tool which students will happily engage with. Initial findings indicate that students will and are comfortable using it to support their studies and that a community of learners made up of past and present students did develop. For educators the large amount of time and effort involved in setting Facebook up and maintaining it may be offset by less individual emails to the lecturer. I believe therefore that Facebook has the potential to be a significant teaching tool in tertiary settings.

## **References**

- [1] Arthur, L., Beecher, B., Elliott, R., and Newman, L (2006) E-learning: Do our students want it and do we care? [Proceedings of the 23rd annual ascilite conference: Who's learning? Whose technology?](#)
- [2] Clark, T. (2001) 'Virtual Schools : Trends and Issues, A study of Virtual Schools in the United States' In: *Distance Learning Resource Network: A WestEd Project*. Naperville, pp. 1-44
- [3] Facebook Statistics (n.d) Available from <http://www.facebook.com/press/info.php?statistics> Downloaded on 14<sup>th</sup> February, 2012
- [4] Social Bakers, (n.d) Available from <http://www.socialbakers.com/facebook-statistics/australia> Downloaded on 14<sup>th</sup> February, 2012
- [5] Volery, T. & Lord, D. (2000) Critical success factors in online education. *The International Journal of Educational*