

## Redesigning Learning through Social Media, Web 2.0 and F2F Teaching - An Action Research Study

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### **Abstract**

*The focus of this research was to explore how social and participatory media could be used to enhance the face-to-face teaching and learning process. Action research was used to design learning that valued the students' own experiences and to encourage students to create, connect and form a partnership in the learning process: hence supporting students' strengths and abilities.*

*To monitor and participate in the use of social media required an increase in the teacher's work time. As a partial counter-balance, it was found that the teacher/researcher successfully reduced her time spent on correction by implementing peer and self-assessment and by making more effective use of classroom observations. This led to a valuable triangulation of assessment data. Reviewing many of the screen clips collected in this study, one can see the diversity of roles and activities in which the students were engaged, and their development over time through the action research cycle. Combining Web 2.0, face-to-face teaching and social media, where students made online friends and used pseudonyms, provided students with more choices and flexibility when working, communicating and learning.*

*This research may help curriculum developers interweave new technologies, new literacies and multimodal learning methods into day-to-day learning programs. The developed methods of learning and designs should also be transferable to other educational learning environments.*

### **1. The Study**

As I watch and listen to my students, I can see that social and participatory media continues to play an increasingly important part in their lives. It appears that, the connections now being made, outside the classroom, with social media and learning, demonstrate that what it means to teach and learn is changing. I can see that such dynamic and interactive environments have the potential to offer new and exciting approaches for education. However, educators need to understand the challenges involved, and research is needed to provide examples and curriculum designs to support educators in these times of change. As part of my PhD study, I used action research to explore social and participatory media within my 13 classes over an eighteen month period. The areas of focus included:

1. the needs of the teacher when redesigning curriculum;
2. students as active participants; and
3. the development of appropriate scaffolding to support multimodal methods and the new literacies evolving in our world today.

This was a qualitative study investigating emergence, connections and designs for learning. It took place in an Australian public high school where I used Armstrong and Moore's [1] framework of the action research spiral and Nuthall's [2] lens on learning.

During each of the three semesters of the study, students shared a Ning (see, <http://www.ning.com/>) social media site with all of the classes that I taught during the particular semester. Students took on their own identities with profiles and avatars. They used pseudonyms and could change their identities as often as they desired. These encouraged students to think broadly and imagine themselves as someone else, perhaps, in another place and at another time. A student's profile could be changed at any time and was listed on a student's 'My Page'. Each member of the Ning had their own 'My Page' and this made visible their chosen avatar, their recent activity and any comments left for them. A student's 'My Page' provided quick links to such things as their groups, 'Likes', 'Friends', blogs, pictures etc. Within school rules, students brought their out-of-school literacies and language into our learning environment, the data contained many examples of creative content. Students often used a type of 'SMS' language to communicate and they were able to

access the site 24/7. A student's 'My Page' became a type of ePortfolio for assessment purposes, where all activity and interaction was automatically time stamped.

As technologies provide both benefits and 'risks' to their users, there are debates concerning digital cultures, both in and outside school environments. As the Internet offers instant access to information and creates new forms of communication and community, there are clearly powerful opportunities for self-expression, creativity and learning [3] and this can be seen though the data collected. In this study, little formal attention is given to issues of the digital divide, cybersafety or online bullying, except when instances were highlighted in the student behaviour data. However, as teacher, I built these into my curriculum and I was very aware of the complexities they held [3-5].

By allowing students to create informal groups within the social learning environment, they could further support friendships and interactions by making online 'Friends' giving 'Gifts' and posting comments. Where possible I combined project work with student interests and passions and I used the social media to create conditions where students could discover others who might have similar interests to them. This approach helped to value students as resources and to create opportunities for them to display their skills and understandings and, hence, life experiences. In doing this I looked to Haggie and Brown [6] who argue that to succeed is to start with simple questions: What interests us? What are we passionate about? These are questions that I continued to ask myself throughout the study as I used them to help inform my students.

## 2. Summary of the research findings

### The Students:

- students gained confidence in their interactions when given more flexibility and freedom to build their own interest and learning groups;
- students were able to work differently online, compared to the more traditional classroom, and some students behaved very differently when online (in some cases, it was the quiet student in the face-to-face classroom who was very confident online);
- students often changed their online identity, and the use of pseudonyms and changeable profiles allowed them to remain anonymous, to take on a different persona and, at times, it provided them with another chance to be accepted within alternative peer groups;
- scaffolding was needed to help improve the quality of peer feedback, but this type of feedback was appreciated by students;

### The Learning:

- using social media as a global classroom environment opened up interesting opportunities for students to change the dynamics in the classroom. Students could publish their content in multiple ways; this flexibility supported the wide range of learning styles of students;
- merely posting projects online, that were written for the classroom, did little to change the way students learnt (teacher projects needed to be redesigned to take advantage of the qualities of social and participatory media);
- by posting, online, their responses to teacher-directed tasks, students became models for their peers and provided a shared learning experience that involved concepts of knowledge building;
- a changing mindset of the teacher took place over the eighteen month action research process and a type of essential 'unlearning' occurred (for both teacher and students).

### The Teacher:

- the action research process was necessary to maintain momentum for changing practice over an extended period of time;
- the concept of critical friends needed to be widened due to the global nature of the study;
- parents appreciated the availability of the online help resources that the social site provided;
- an effective triangulation of student assessment data was possible through the development of peer-to-peer feedback/assessment, student self-assessment and teacher observations;
- less time than expected was needed to monitor the social site once the teacher-student relationships were built;

- teacher observation combined with student self and peer assessment provided an excellent triangulation of assessment data for parent and school reporting requirements.

### 3. Further information

This study took a sociocultural perspective on learning, with what Jenkins [7] describes as a new form of hidden curriculum. This involved students as active participants in learning where learning design included interdisciplinary literacies as discussed in Casey [8] and Casey [9]. Within this research, the concepts of emergence and complexity were evident and this is acknowledged and discussed in Casey and Evans [10]. Casey [11] provides an analysis of the online spaces that were developed when designing a learning framework that combined face-to-face teaching with online social and participatory media. This also provides further information on the data collection and analysis processes.

### References

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