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FACEBOOK: A VERSATILE PLATFORM FOR BLENDED LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

Facebook is a popular networking tool among the young learners. This paper reports a practical usage of Facebook to engage learners in blended learning. The practical usage of Facebook in hosting online forums, sharing media files in vodcast, building collaborative content through Facebook Doc, and using Facebook as repository for articles and lecture notes has been described. Recent survey on 55 students revealed that a strong majority of the students agreed that Facebook has positive impact in their studies. Thus, the authors strongly recommend that Facebook can be used as an alternative tool to engage learners online.

Keywords: Blended learning, Facebook, Blended Learning Tool, Tertiary Education.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Facebook changed the landscape of online networking. Like other social network sites, Facebook allows users sharing of text, photos, videos, holding discussion, publishing news or notification, and many more without much knowledge in programming or specialized networking skills. The user friendly interface and the simple button-clicking operation have lured millions of people to use Facebook as a platform to interact and to communicate with others. Indisputably, Facebook has successfully integrated into the life of many youths, and becoming a part of their life. The popularity of Facebook among the tertiary learners has drawn attention of some educators. The role of the online networking platform in teaching and learning has always been a topic of discussion. As described by Maloney (2007), the new generation of networking has provided chances in turning the tide of teaching and learning, from static information delivery to dynamic information management, from content management to knowledge management, and from social interaction to isolated surfing. Undeniable, Facebook has encouraged its users to be more interactive. However, some educators think that social networking tools may distract learners'

attention from what their supposed to learn (Cassidy, 2006). The learners were using Facebook to engage in other matters very much more than using it in learning activities (Selwyn, 2009).

A recent research conducted by Roblyer et al. (2010) showed that the learners in university are more likely to communicate through Facebook, while their teachers have higher preference in email. University teachers were lagged behind in adopting this evolutionary online networking tool as they treated it as another type of email, thus the real impact is yet to be unleashed. Mazer et al. (2007) found that Facebook could be a good platform to foster good relationship between teachers and learners, which to the good relationship could later lead to better learning atmosphere in the classroom. On the other hand, a few research suggested that teachers should not to over-privilege Facebook, as learners might not take the social networking site as functional formal teaching and learning tool, and overuse of the social networking site might distract the teaching and learning process (Madge et al. 2009, Bugeja 2006).

Many teachers have stated that Facebook is more towards a social platform than a formal online learning site. Thus the usage of Facebook in formal teaching and learning activities is not much reported. However, there are several special functions offered by Facebook which actually can be harnessed in formal teaching and learning activities. In this paper, we report some of these functions that we have used in formal teaching and learning. The feedback from some of these students is reported as well.

2. FACEBOOK FEATURES THAT SUPPORT FORMAL TEACHING AND LEARNING ACTIVITIES

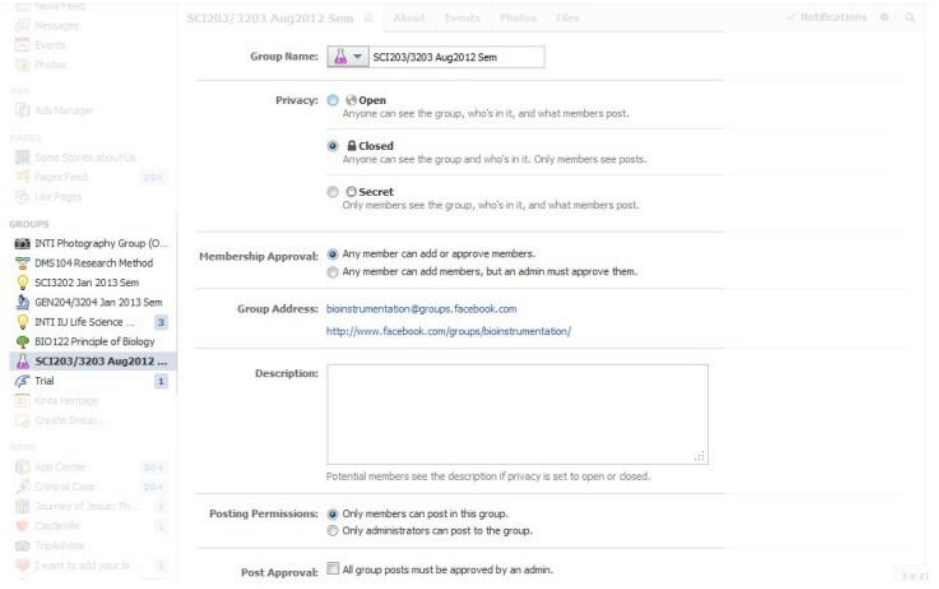
It is essential for both teachers and learners to have their own Facebook accounts. A Facebook Group can be created, which the membership can be limited to the students for one particular subject (Figure 1). It is important for the teacher to be the administrator for the group, in order to take full control of the activities in the group.

The teacher can choose whether to open the group to public (anyone can see the group, who is in the group, and the members' post), closed to public (anyone can see the group and who is in the group, but only members can see the posts), or can just keep the group as secret (only members can see the group, who is in the group, and the members' posts).

In membership approval, the setting allows any member to add members. Under the setting, the teacher is required to be connected (to be "Friend") to just one learner from a class. Then, that particular learner can assist to add other classmates into the group.

Facebook allows the setting of group address, which the members can use the address to send private messages to all other members of the group. This feature is akin to the group email. Besides, group administrator can choose to allow other members to post, or the administrator is the only one who can post on the group's wall. Of course, if you opt to allow your students to post on the group's wall, you can always take the right to approve the post first, before it appears on the wall.

Figure-1. Some of the settings for the Facebook Group.



2.1. Sharing on the Group's Wall

Online forum is a way to communicate and interact through the posting of messages synchronously or asynchronously. The forum reduces the limitation of time and space and has been reported to enhance teaching and learning in many aspects (Dowson 2006, Wong & Thong 2011, Dehler, &Parras-Hernandez 1998). Online forum can be easily conducted by posting a topic on the group's wall to be discussed. The topic can be one which is specially structured by the teacher that triggers extensive discussion for few days, or just a simple topic posted by one of the learners, which demand nothing but a confirmation. The teacher can choose whether all the members can post and discuss whatever topics which are related to the subject, or the teacher can set the posting option to "only administrator can post". However, in order to promote dynamic knowledge transfer between the learners, the learners should be given the right to post on group's wall. Of course, the teacher should play the role as a moderator to ensure that the content of the post is acceptable within the academic boundary.

Vodcast and podcast has been reported to enhance learners' performance (Silva Cruz &AmorimCarvalho 2007, Berger 2007, Wong et al. 2011). Sharing of media files is simple on Facebook Group. Just like posting text on the group's wall, the media files can be uploaded directly onto the group's wall. The media files can be easily accessed as many video or audio files can be played with embedded media player with "click and play" feature, without been directed to another webpage or opening a media player programme.

"Ask question" is another interesting feature on Facebook Group's wall, which allows the members to conduct short question-and-answer session, with multiple choice of answers are given. This feature can be utilized for constructive learning by requiring the learners to explain their answers at the comment area embedded below the post. By doing this, the learners not only need to

justify their choice of answer, but also need to defend their answers. They can learn from their peers' who had chosen other answers together with their explanation on their choices.

2.2. Collaborative Projects and Document Sharing

Working on a document or project collectively online can be done by creating a Facebook Doc. All the members of the group can assess to the document and contribute to the content of the document. The document is updated straight away after the most recent modification is saved by the author. This feature is akin to Wiki, which allows learners to contribute and build content on a certain topics collaboratively (Matthew & Callaway 2008, Larusson&Alterman 2009). Facebook Doc has the function to create a log about the time and the name of contributors to the content too. However, Facebook Doc can only support text and picture content only.

Microsoft (MS) Office or PDF documents can be uploaded directly to Facebook Group and will be kept in archive. With this feature, lecture notes, tutorial questions, lecture slides, and other documents can be uploaded and shared among all the group members. All the MS Office formats and PDF documents can be open in a new tab of the internet browser without running the MS Office programmes or PDF readers.

2.3. Other Useful Features

In Facebook, "Like" can be used to express support or simple a favorable feeling towards certain posts. In online teaching and learning, "Like" can be used as indicators for certain activities. For example, in a group discussion, whoever has no more comment on a certain topic is required to press the "Like" button. The discussion will be closed when everyone has pressed the button. In another case, when the learners are required to post their group work to be peer reviewed on Facebook Group, the comments which has been revised by any of the group members can be marked by "Like". Other group members can take the "Like" as "revision or action has been taken for that particular comment".

Sending notification on all the activities on the Facebook Group to all the members' is another good feature, which allows the members to follow the updates within the group. The notification will appear on the members' personal page within seconds after the new update has taken place.

"Seen by" is an interesting feature, which shows who have actually read the posts. The "Seen by" link is placed on the first row of the comment area. Hovering through the link will activate a drop down box listing all the names of the group members who have seen the post. Although the working mechanism of this feature is not clear, it still serves as a good indicator for the teacher to get an overview about the participation of the learners in the Facebook Group.

2.4. Bringing the Learning Closer to the Learners

Setting up a Facebook Group for a specific subject makes the social networking site a more formal online learning platform. Although there are other online platforms that can be used in formal tertiary education, Facebook has the advantage as that is the site where the learners actually spending hours of their day at. By utilizing Facebook as an online learning tool, teachers can now

bring the formal teaching into learners' social networking site, after the face-to-face learning session. For the learners, they don't have to purposely log onto several websites to download their lecture notes, watch the podcasts, joining a forum to discuss, and join the collaboration to build content about special topics, as they can do all of these online activities in Facebook. If Web 2.0 technologies bring the learning process towards "anywhere, anytime" (Krause 2005), learning through Facebook is the unique vehicles within Web 2.0 that can bring the learning process even closer to the learners, as the learners are more willing to participate in the learning process that is hosted by the site that they already intended to visit repeatedly (MacCarthy 2010). Learners were more willing to access and learn on Facebook compared to a few university management sites.

3. A PRACTICAL USAGE OF FACEBOOK IN TEACHING AND LEARNING

Facebook was practically used in Biotechnology subject in Inti International University, starting from August to November 2012 (August 2012 semester). The total number of students was 60. The agreement to use Facebook as a formal online platform was achieved through communication with the learners at the beginning of the semester. A Facebook Group was created and the class representatives were requested to add all their classmates to the group. The group was set as "closed group", which means the group could be seen by everyone, but only the group members could see the posts and the content of the group. All the group members were given the right to share in the group. The activities carried out on Facebook Group were recorded in Table 1. These activities were blended with face-to-face lecture, with two hours of face-to-face to one hour of online study.

Table-1. The activities recorded on Facebook Group for the semester

Type of the post	Nature of the post	Posted by	Number of the post	Average number of viewers (number of "Seen by") per post (over 60)
Text Post	Notice or Announcement	Teacher	17	58
		Learner	3	57
	Quiz	Teacher	7	58
	Vote	Teacher	1	60
	Online Forum	Teacher	2	58
	Assignment	Teacher	1	57
	Other communications	Teacher	3	57
		Student	6	56
Video	Vodcast	Teacher	2	58
Ask Question	Short Quiz	Teacher	1	59
	Vote	Teacher	2	58
MS Office or PDF Documents	Lecture Notes	Teacher	4	60
	Assignment	Student	43	59
	Lab related	Student	1	57
Facebook Document	Notice or Announcement	Teacher	2	60
	Assignment	Teacher	1	60

A total of 98 posts were recorded in 14 weeks of semester with different natures, e.g. lecture notes, assignments, notice or announcement, online forum, vote, vodcast, quiz, lab related and other communications. Lecture notes were distributed through Facebook at the beginning of the semester. The content of the lecture notes were in line with the content of face-to-face sessions. Assignments and online forum discussions were posted as a part of the coursework, with marks given to the participated learners. Online assignments submitted by the learners consisted of learners work on certain topics given by the teacher, which have to be read, critiqued, and reviewed by the peers through Facebook, before submitting the final hardcopy to the teacher. Online forum discussions were conducted with the students commented on special designed debatable topics which were related to the syllabus, which the principles and theories were delivered through face-to-face sessions. The topics were open-ended, and the marks were given based on both participation and impact of the comment posted. Some of the interesting points from the online forums were brought back again to be discussed in face-to-face sessions.

Three voting activities were conducted for electing the assistant class representative, and deciding the date and time for test 1 and test 2. Three videos were posted as vodcast (in two different posts) to provide additional information for the face-to-face sessions, while notices or announcements, and other communications were posted from time to time within 14 weeks of lecture. There was a lab related post in MS word file posted by a learner. The post was contained the results of the laboratory session, which then triggered a discussion among the learners.

The number of posts in Facebook Group showed that in average, there was one post shared everyday within the semester. As each of the posts was embedded with comment area below the post, learners and teacher could interact through the comments area. A total of 305 comments were received in the group throughout the semester, showing a very high online interaction within the group. The highest number of comments came from two online forums with an average of 39 comments respectively, while very few members commented on notices and announcements posted. From the total activities recorded by the Facebook Group, the social networking site has become an interactive center for the learners and teacher, where online teaching and learning activities had been carried out extensively. The interaction and active participation from the learners might not possibly gain without bringing the learning site right into the learner's social network.

4. THE FEEDBACK FROM THE LEARNERS

All 60 learners who had taken the subject had joined the Facebook Group, with 55 of them had sent their feedback voluntarily through questionnaires. The level of agreement was expressed using attitudinal scale of 1 – 5, which 1 represents total disagreement, 3 represents neutral, and 5 represents total agreement. The questionnaire was designed to collect the feedback on general information, Facebook as instructional tool, and active learning with Facebook.

From the feedback on general information, majority of the learners agreed that using Facebook in the subject was useful for their personal development (3.62 over 5.00) and the usage of Facebook had assisted them to understand better on what they had learnt (3.67 over 5.00). Personal

development is referred to two aspects- the knowledge development on the subject, as well as the development in personality, such as the improvement in communication, punctuation, or become more cooperative and negotiable. The active participation on Facebook should have brought better understanding of the subject taught, as the active engagement from the students always leads to better learning quality (Prince 2004, Watkins et al. 2007, Cook&Dupras 2004). The learners have responded that Facebook is able to promote active learning. A strong majority of the respondents have agreed that Facebook is a good platform for online interaction and cooperation, while increased their ability to search for information online. They also have learnt from posting, receiving, and reading others' comments. The feedback on other items is summarized in Table 2.

Table-2. The feedback from the learners on the usage of Facebook in blended learning

Item	Attitudinal Score
Facebook as instructional tool	
It is easy to connect or to reach the Facebook Group	3.80
The media files posted were useful and enhance understanding	3.55
The Facebook based assignments given were clear and easy to understand	3.87
Enough instruction was given to complete the assignments	4.11
Active learning with Facebook	
Facebook is a good platform for online discussion	3.75
Using Facebook in learning has increased learners' ability in information searching	3.84
Facebook has increased interaction and cooperation with the peers	3.50
Commenting and sharing on Facebook has enhanced the learning process	3.69

From the feedback, most of the respondents have indicated that Facebook is a good instructional tool. Majority of the learners have agreed that they could access to the Facebook Group easily, and they could always get the clear instruction from the teacher on what-to-do through the site. Therefore, they have no problem in completing the assignments. They indicated that the vodcasts channeled through Facebook were effective to elevate their understanding, because of the related media files used, as well as the sharing function on Facebook that allows the media files to be played on site, and the discussion about the contents of the media files can be carried out through the comment area embedded below the post. All these feedback indicated that Facebook has enough functions and applications to be used as online delivery tool.

5. CONCLUSION

Facebook has been indicated by the learners as an effective platform in addressing content in formal education. Many online learning activities can be conducted through Facebook. As many learners have personal Facebook account and have used Facebook as primary social networking site, bringing teaching and learning to Facebook means bringing the learning into to the learners social circle. Setting up a Facebook Group in formal education gives the learners a platform where they can discuss, share, and learn among their peers. With these results, we would suggest that by

giving enough instruction, Facebook can be an exciting multi-purpose platform to support blended learning.

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