



The potentials and pitfalls of social networking sites such as *Facebook* in higher education contexts

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Popular social networking sites such as *Facebook* demonstrate an emerging opportunity for students and educators within formal higher education contexts to share ideas, celebrate creativity and participate in an environment which offers immediate feedback from others who belong within a specific network. As this is an emerging use of the technology, an autoethnographic approach has helped capture the potentials and pitfalls of incorporating social networking within higher education. The findings highlight implications for the key stakeholders in higher education.

Keywords: *Facebook*; social networking; higher education; autoethnography

Introduction

There is an increasing social and cultural expectation that technology should be ubiquitous within peoples' daily lives (Bateman & Oakley, 2009). Such convictions undergird the application of technology within educational contexts, linking together two key trends identified in the *Horizon Report 2011* (Johnson, Smith, Levine, & Haywood, 2011). These include that we now expect flexibility in order to work, learn, and study whenever and wherever we wish to (Willems, 2005), and that the increasingly collaborative and socially-connected nature of our worlds is changing the way that work and study is being conceptualised. The incorporation of social networks is a relatively new addition to HE, involving the blending of formal and informal learning. Social networks are defined by the users' abilities to develop an online profile of themselves within a bounded system, indicate with whom they would like to share connections, and view the connections made by their friends (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). Livingston (2008, p. 395) notes that "while social networking is to some degree displacing other forms of online communication (email, chatrooms, website creation), it incorporates others (instant messaging, blogging, music downloading) and remediates yet more (most notably, face to face and telephone communication)". Thus, the typical features of a social network site include the ability to blog, share personal photos, documents, videos, and web resources, instant message (IM), plus integrate other add-in applications such as polls. The popular social networking sites that are becoming more common in higher education contexts include *Facebook*, *Flickr*, *MySpace*, *Twitter*, *YouTube*, *Yammer* and *LinkedIn*.

Facebook in higher education

Facebook (www.facebook.com) is self-described as a social utility which connects people with friends and others. Beyond simply connecting, social networking sites such as *Facebook* "not only attract people but also hold their attention, impel them to contribute, and bring them back time and again – all desirable qualities for

educational materials” (Johnson, et al., 2011, p. 12) . According to a number of studies, between 78% (Fogel & Nehmad, 2009) and 95.5% (Lampe, Ellison, & Steinfeld, 2008) of all enrolled students in HE have indicated that they use *Facebook*. Concentrated memberships of students on *Facebook* is not surprising given that this social network site originated in 2004 as a means of informally connecting college students (Ellison, et al., 2006; Grossman, 2010). However, this social network is now accepted broadly. Lipka (2007) has reported that adults are a fast growing group on *Facebook*, identifying teaching staff from HE as amongst this group. More specifically, in research conducted for Pearson Education, Tinti-Kane, Seaman & Levy (2010) report that 80% of educators have at least one social network account, that *Facebook* is the most popular of these, and that 30% of the educators use these social networks to communicate with students. Finally, institutions themselves are establishing *Facebook* accounts for the purposes of marketing, such as to recruit students (Roblyer et al., 2010).

Research methodology

Johnson et al. (2011) caution that any discussion or investigation that relates to the adoption of new technology also needs to consider the important constraints and challenges that arise from the perspectives of numerous resources, such as the personal experiences of those at the ‘coal face’ of daily use. For this purpose, an autoethnographic methodology was used in this research. Autoethnography (Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Sparks, 2002) – an examination of the self, the social context and the research itself – enabled the authors the opportunity to explore their personal experiences as participant researchers on the use of *Facebook* in HE contexts in order to share not only the benefits, but also the pitfalls.

Findings

Through the examination of these personal experiences, the authors found that while there are a number of potentials in using the technology, there are also as many pitfalls that warrant consideration and evaluation. These findings, along with supporting case study exemplars, are detailed in Bateman and Willems (forthcoming). For the purposes of this brief publication, the findings are summarised below.

Potentials

The potentials found within this research of using *Facebook* in higher education include that it provides: an alternative learning management system (LMS) to the institutions formal system; a social community for a geographically dispersed cohort; an opportunity for peer teaching; and a resource sharing opportunity, especially when the existing institutional LMS block certain media.

Pitfalls

Similarly, a number of pitfalls for both staff and students were identified. These include: deliberations over whether to ‘friend’ or not to ‘friend’; issues surrounding the provision of an electronic identity, including privacy issues; identity theft and impersonations; public domain challenges and the sharing of information; taking of things out of the particular context that they were meant and misusing this information for less than savoury purposes; stalking and cyberbullying; virtual integrity; and issues relating to intellectual property (IP) and copyright.

Conclusion

Should *Facebook* be used for formal teaching and learning experiences in HE? While we are strong advocates for the use of new technologies as pedagogical supports to enhance student learning; we are also cautious and critical consumers of emergent technologies in this advocacy. As a reflection of this, we have identified some of the potentials and pitfalls from our use of *Facebook* in the context of higher education which warrant serious consideration prior to adoption. Further, we note the dearth of policy to promote the responsible and critical uses of such emergent technologies in academia. This is a situation which requires rectification. We recommend further research into the use of *Facebook* and its application to higher education in order to help guide the establishment of such policy for the benefit of staff, students, and academia at large.

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