Turning Social Networking into Social Learning

Katie Bruffy, Unitec Institute of Technology
Eileen Piggot-Irvine, Unitec Institute of Technology

Abstract 2012-319
Saturday, May 26, 2012
4:05 PM
20-minute oral presentation (including questions)
(Visions Lounge)

The use of online social networking has grown exponentially over the past several years. Facebook, the most popular online social networking service (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickuhr, 2010) has grown from one million active users in December, 2004 to more than 800 million active users in October, 2011 (Facebook, 2011). The sport management industry has capitalized on online social media as a new method of communication, a form of communication co-created with the consumer (Balloul & Hutchinson, 2010). It is also used to reach a large audience (Mahan & McDaniel, 2006), create greater awareness, and increase attendance/sales (Schoenstedt & Reau, 2010). The impacts of social media within the industry are evident, but as academics, should we be embracing social media within our own practice of teaching?

Incorporating asynchronous (online based) learning with synchronous learning (face-to-face) to form a blended learning environment has been found to create a more efficient and effective learning environment (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004). It also creates a community of enquiry that allows for “free and open dialogue, critical debate, negotiation and agreement – the hallmark of higher education” (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004, p. 97). Studies involving the use of Facebook (a form of online social media) as an asynchronous environment have produced encouraging results amongst higher education. Facebook has been found to provide students with a sense of belonging (McCarthy, 2009), help students ask questions they do not feel comfortable asking in class (Bosch, 2009), assist with arranging group projects (Madge, Meek, Wellens, & Hooley, 2009), and increase levels of teacher trustworthiness (Mazer, Murphy, & Simonds, 2009).

Although several studies have investigated the use of Facebook within academia, gaps remain within the literature. One of those gaps is investigating the use of Facebook as a non-required additional course resource where student involvement with a course Facebook page is not tied to the course grade. Also, the effect of creating a blended learning environment where multiple cohorts have access to the asynchronous learning environment has not been studied. The purpose of this exploratory study was to fill the holes in the literature by investigating the impacts of implementing social media as an optional asynchronous resource and to promote interaction between first year and second year students studying similar course topics: a blending of cohorts.

A non-random, convenience sample consisting of students enrolled in two sport marketing undergraduate classes within a department of sport in New Zealand were asked to participate in the study. One of the courses is a required course of all first year students within the department and the other course includes just second year students majoring in sport management. There were 133 students enrolled in the first year course and 33 enrolled in the second year course.

This study used an action research methodology. Action research, as used in this study, is a four stage process involving reconnaissance (current situation analysis), implementation, evaluation, and reporting phases. Action research also includes an iterative process of reflection, planning, and acting. It is a continuous improvement approach - a form of evidence-based, reflective, developmental inquiry. This action research methodology is also considered to be beneficial to explore teacher-based improvement (Piggot-Irvine, 2003).

A literature review and a quantitative pre-test questionnaire were used to inform the reconnaissance phase. The review of literature highlighted the use of social media to create a blended learning environment. In addition to the support of the literature, the results of the pre-test questionnaire suggested that the use of Facebook as an additional resource could be an appropriate platform to create the optional asynchronous learning environment. Out of the 103 respondents, 92% were Facebook users and only 5.8% of the respondents were not interested in using Facebook as a resource. These findings provided rationale for implementing the Facebook page.
The implementation phase involved the launching of a Facebook group page that was created and managed by the course lecturer. Joining the Facebook page was optional for students and was not tied to any of the course requirements, having no direct bearing on student success. Within the first week there were 77 followers of the Facebook page and 482 page visits. The interaction on the page was closely monitored and co-created between the students and the lecturer. Descriptive statistics on how many active users, posts, and visits to the page were recorded for each week of the semester. Also, observations of student engagement in and outside of class were continually made. These observational findings were analysed in the evaluation phase.

The evaluation phase began at the completion of the course. Data was collected in a qualitative post-test questionnaire and several semi-structured interviews. The questionnaire consisted of four open-ended questions about the students’ involvement and the impact the Facebook page had on student learning, socialization, and course interest. Four semi-structured interviews were used to provide further understanding of the impacts of implementing the Facebook page as a means of blended learning. The qualitative data was analysed by thematic analysis. Initial findings of the evaluation phase suggest that Facebook had a moderate impact on the students’ learning, socialisation, and engagement with the course in and out of the classroom. The results also suggest that the page positively impacted student interest in studying sport. The effects of combining two cohorts in an asynchronous environment, however, had both positive and negative impacts. The larger network of students contributed to human capital by providing a larger range of possible discussion, but the large network also negatively challenged some students to post messages on the course Facebook page because they lacked trust with the students in the other course.