



Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia, Inc

Engaging Communities

Proceedings of the

31st HERDSA Annual Conference

1-4 July 2008

Rotorua, New Zealand

Beckenham, A. (2008) Face off online: Pedagogy and engagement in social network sites, in *Engaging Communities, Proceedings of the 31st HERDSA Annual Conference, Rotorua, 1-4 July 2008: pp 66-70.*

Published 2008 by the
Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia, Inc
PO Box 27, Milperra, NSW 2214, Australia
www.herdsa.org.au

ISSN: 1441 001X
ISBN: 0 908557 73 6

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Face off online: Pedagogy and engagement in social network sites

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The rapid uptake of social networking sites offers considerable opportunity for pedagogical practise in terms of engagement with students and distribution of learning environments, At the same time, it poses significant challenges in terms of equity and the ethics of social engagement with students. This paper uses Facebook as an example to canvass issues which call for systematic attention in the move to students as 'friends' online.

Keywords: Facebook, pedagogy, equity, social networking

Introduction

The rapid uptake of internet use since the development of the World Wide Web has been well described as a significant driver of change in higher education. In the last decade, considerable attention has been devoted by the academies to integrating technology into teaching, and to the design and delivery of online learning and web based courses. As Terry Flew has observed, new forms of educational media, drawing upon the capacities of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) create tremendous opportunities for innovation in higher education, but also present unprecedented challenges for the sector and a need to rethink traditional ways of doing things (Flew 2002, p. 163). This paper argues that the recent development and rapid uptake of social networking sites presents yet another new set of challenges for the sector, and a particular need to rethink established ways of engaging with students and their communities.

Reactions from the tertiary sector to the use of technology in education have always been mixed. Initially, a 'shovel ware' or transmission approach was common, with the primary tactic being to load as much course material as possible on line and describe it as 'flexible delivery'. A fine example of practical attempts to move away from the transmission model and use ICTs to make education more responsive to student needs was Diana Laurillard's notion of a conversational framework for teaching. Laurillard developed this framework as a model against which one can specify what digital technologies can do, capturing the essence of university teaching as an iterative dialogue between teacher(s) and student(s) which operates at a discursive, theoretical, conceptual level and at the active, experiential, practical level (Laurillard 2000). A somewhat opposite approach was espoused by Tara Brabazon, who described internet education as "digital hemlock" and argued that a focus on the whiz and bang of new media is no solution to overcrowded lecture theatres and laboratories and the increasing number of students who must work,

sometimes several, part time jobs to cope with financial pressures (Brabazon 2002, p. xi). Currently, it seems there is a general acceptance that ICTs have a significant role to play in pedagogical practice, although the degree to which they are used still varies considerably, depending on factors such as individual predilection, university policies and performance indicators, and the characteristics of the educational projects being undertaken.

However ICTs are used, it is reasonable to claim that while features such as e-mail, wikis, blogs and bulletin boards may require teachers to be considerably more responsive to, and engaged with their students, ICTs have not to date undermined traditional academic hierarchies, or abrogated traditional academic responsibilities to any significant extent. The lecturer may no longer be able to claim to be the fount of all knowledge, and may be expected to respond to e-mail queries in double quick time, but they are still the lecturer, and are of course, still expected to treat students in an ethical and equitable manner. For example, the University of Canberra states in its Code of Professional Ethics that “the University upholds the principles of justice and equality of opportunity, and seeks always to identify and remove unjust structures in the University community and in the wider society”. The practical application of these sentiments is not so clearly described, but it is also reasonable to claim that making particular friends of some members of a student cohort would be somewhat problematic in the context of equitable, or indeed ethical, behaviour.

Enter Facebook. Facebook is one of the more prominent social networking sites (SNSs) which have attracted large numbers of users in recent years. SNSs generally provide a facility where an individual may offer a profile though the site for others to peruse, with the intention of contacting or being contacted by others, to make new friends, renew or maintain old acquaintances, establish romantic relationships, network amongst business peers and so forth (Gross and Acquisti 2005; Snyder et al 2006).

In 2007, I was encouraged by some ex students of mine to join a ‘group’ on Facebook, which was a network of students seeking a facetious reconciliation between two of the largest universities in the ACT: the Australian National University and the University of Canberra. Without considering the consequences, I joined, and was soon inundated by e-mails informing me that many people, some of whom were entirely unfamiliar to me, wanted to be my friend. The issue became even more prominent when a junior tutor in the faculty sought my advice on an appropriate response to current students who had elicited her friendship via the book. “Friend” is a word rich with connotations (and denotations) of care, warmth, affection, loyalty, intimacy and even patronage. In the context of Facebook the connotation appears to be considerably more diffuse. As Ackerman observes,

People have very nuanced behaviour concerning how and with whom they share information. People ... have very complex understandings of people's views of themselves, the current situation and the effects of disclosure. Yet, access control systems often have very simple models. (Cited in Dwyer, 2007)

This is certainly the case with Facebook, which offers very limited options in terms of ‘how do you know this person?’ In effect, one can claim people quite unknown as

friends. This is illustrated by a experiment conducted by a Facebook user, who claims to have used an automatic script to contact 250,000 users of Facebook and ask to be added as their friend. Some 75,000 people accepted the offer (Gross and Acquisti, 2005). More recently, shortly before the Australian Federal election in November 2007, the then opposition leader, Kevin Rudd, had more than 15,000 friend requests. Here the connotation appears to be more a general appreciation of admiration or curiosity, and the motive perhaps to be to acquire as many contacts as possible, rather than a desire for patronage, affection or intimacy.

A literature search conducted in December 2007 revealed a small, but growing body of academic literature on the implications of social networking, which largely centres around privacy concerns, including the development of digital dossiers (see, for example Snyder et al, 2006; Gross et al, 2005; Dwyer 2007; Donath and Boyd 2004). However, the implications of social networking for academic practice do not appear to have yet attracted any sustained attention. The only paper located which related directly to this issue describes the preliminary results from a survey of students at a mid sized public university in the US. The authors were concerned with the “links between student perceptions of faculty and encounters with faculty on the Facebook, and to establish baseline data about students’ attitudes toward faculty presence on the site” and stated their intention to continue their investigation via “in depth interviews with both students and faculty to obtain a richer sense of how social norms are emerging on the site and how students and faculty are negotiating privacy concerns and managing their Facebook identities” (Hewitt and Forte 2006). This latter has evidently not yet been published, so it seems fair to conclude that there is no research available at the time of writing on faculty perceptions of Facebook. My curiosity piqued, I sent general e-mail query to academic colleagues at the University of Canberra. The e-mail read as follows:

I was recently persuaded by some ex students to join a group of theirs on Facebook (the UC ANU reconciliation group). All well and good, but I am now getting a lot of requests to sign up various ex and current students as ‘friends’ to write on walls, to do various quizzes etc.

I’m very curious to know if other academic staff have had the same (or similar) requests, and if so, what you think/do about it. Eg, would you acknowledge a current student as a Facebook friend - or only an ex student? If only ex students - how ‘ex’ do you think they should be?

I’m also interested in any comments you may have on issues of professional distance and staff codes of conduct in relation to online social networking - Facebook in particular, but if you’ve had experience (good or bad or indifferent) that relates to student relationships with, eg MySpace and YouTube that would also be very interesting.

I anticipate that social networking will become a much greater part of academic engagement - wld very much appreciate your input/advice.

I should note here that the query was made during a non teaching period, garnered only a small number of replies and is not presented as a systematic or representative sample of

the faculty population. Furthermore, many of the academics who responded did not directly answer my questions. Nevertheless, the results suggest that there may be a significant polarisation of views, with two respondees adamantly opposed and three very enthusiastic. Reasons for opposition included reference to a previous unpleasant experience with an overly familiar student and a general comment of ‘too many complications’. One enthusiastic proponent of the site wrote about signing up current students:

I have been setting up a Facebook site for my subjects since last semester, and I also use it with the clubs and societies I work with ... I also keep in touch with my UC College and Hong Kong and Singapore students using Facebook. ... Facebook is worth over \$US10 billion and it is one of the best marketing systems in history... ever. (de Percy, personal communication, February 6, 2008)

Another was highly enthusiastic about the potential for maintaining contact with alumni:

I joined specifically to make an alumni group for UC Japanese Program ... I told a few students about it, then it took off. I believe we have about 64 members, and majority of them are graduates. It really helps to keep in touch with ex and current students and create a place for those ex-students of Japanese Program to find each other and exchange information ... It is also handy to share information - I post some articles or information on Japan related issues to share with the group. (Kinoshita, personal communication, February 7, 2008)

The above respondent’s comment on marketing is apposite. As Donath and Boyd observe, participants in social networking sites make a wealth of personal information publicly available “...users of on-line social network systems should be aware of the value of the data they are making available on-line – and the ways in which it can potentially be used.” (Donath & Boyd 2007, p. 77). Certainly there are rich fields here for social network mining, in particular the potential to track student profiles, to foster relationships with alumni, and to develop new means of student engagement, distributing the learning environment well beyond the confines of the classroom or the University web space.

However, equity and ethics are the spaces in which dragons lurk. The integration of ICTs into education has been accompanied by concerted effort to ensure that all students have the necessary access and literacy to benefit from various modes of online delivery. Academics need to consider carefully whether, by engaging in what McRobbie has described as ‘network sociality’ they unintentionally exclude students who do not have the capacity or inclination to put their profiles online. Given the diffuse connotations of the notion of ‘friends’ on Facebook, it may be sufficient to simply decide that Facebook friends are not friends in the commonly accepted understanding of the term, but as McRobbie has also noted, with regard to social networking and the creative industries, network sociality “...has generated a form of ‘PR meritocracy’, whereby familiar patterns of social exclusion on the basis of gender, race, ethnicity, social location, and other factors continue to occur, but they are based less upon overt discrimination than upon the

question of who has the time and capacity for after hours social networking” (Cited in Flew 2008, pp. 104 - 105).

I can propose no satisfactory conclusion to this discussion, but it is timely for academics to consider the issues raised, and for university administrations in general to develop more nuanced codes of online conduct which ensure that in reality or perception, no students are disadvantaged by these recent developments in online engagement.

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