

Enhance “Book Learning” with Facebook

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Abstract – This paper will discuss the use of *Facebook* at the University of South Carolina. The *Facebook* networking site is used in an introductory freshman course, UNIV101-Engineering Honors to do what Blackboard, WebCT and other course management software is intended to do: keep students up to date with communication and posting of assignments. The paper will also discuss how students in a UNIV101 course are using Facebook as an online meeting/sharing space for their project teams; this facilitates file-sharing, frequent communication, etc. The paper will also discuss other unique ways that *Facebook* is being used for communication, such as sharing educational experiences and for student advising.

Keywords: electronic communication, instructional tools, Facebook

INTRODUCTION

Facebook is one of the foremost social networking websites with over 10 million registered users. It is made up of over 40,000 independent networks based around schools, companies, and regions. *Facebook* was launched in 2004 and is now the seventh most trafficked site on the web and the number one photo-sharing site.[Facebook:Press, 3] The required information for creating a *Facebook* account is minimal: only a name, birthdate, verifiable email address and status (high school, college, company, n/a) are required. The information that a user can post and share is sizeable. A minimal profile will include name, network, and school status; however, users may expand their profile to include the following types of information: basic, contact, personal, education, work, courses, and a profile picture. A typical profile is shown in Figure 1. The information and tools available to users are listed in Table 1.

Facebook is available at 80% of colleges and universities and is free to join. It is estimated that 85% of students on these campuses have a *Facebook* account and check it up to 6 times a day. Some universities have discouraged the use of *Facebook* for security reasons; the University of New Mexico went as far as temporarily banning *Facebook* in 2005 citing security concerns; this issue has since been resolved with complete site encryption, university recommendations for data and identity protection, and by instructing students not to register with their university NetID password [UNM Press Release, 11]. Another concern is that this technology is a distraction in the classroom, much like crossword puzzles and text messaging. Some professors caution students against its use by warnings in syllabi [Bujega, 2]. University Administrators at many institutions use it to look for student conduct violations [Woo, 11], alcohol violations and harassment [Brady, 1].

Tracy Mitrano, Director of IT Policy and Computer Policy & Law Program at Cornell University, hosted an Educause Live online seminar titled “Facing Facebook and Other Social Networking Technologies.” This seminar discussed the good, bad, and future of social networking technology. Mitrano explained the power that social networking technology has to provide interaction and a sense of community. She also discussed how some faculty and university administrators are using *Facebook*- the most innovative were using *Facebook* to keep in contact with Alumni, and professors forwarding *Facebook* alerts to their cell phones to remain accessible to their students.

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This paper will discuss how *Facebook* is being used at the University of South Carolina to enhance traditional ‘book learning.’ *Facebook* is being used by the university community in courses, informally among students, and also for mentoring and advising.



Figure 1: Sample Facebook Profile <http://www.facebook.com/sitetour/profile.php>

Table 1: Facebook Tools

| | |
|----------|--|
| Friends | Friend List |
| | Social Timeline |
| Wall | allows users to post messages on a bulletin board in one's profile |
| Photos | unlimited photo uploads, ability to 'tag' users |
| Shares | share content from Facebook or anywhere else on the Internet with your Facebook friends. |
| Notes | much like a blog or online journal, also allows one to import an outside blog |
| Groups | start or join a group- these range from Student Organizations to common interest/politics |
| Events | organize or find an event |
| Messages | send and receive messages to/from facebook users |
| Account | Settings |
| | Networks |
| | Notifications |
| | Mobile |
| Privacy | Basic visibility rules as well as granular control over the information you post to the site |

FACEBOOK AT THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH CAROLINA

BACKGROUND

We do acknowledge that *Facebook* is not the only social networking site available to users. However, *Facebook* is ideal for college students because it is based on verified networks; you associate yourself with a company or school by registering your verifiable email address from that institution. For example, only users with a “sc.edu” email address are able to join the University of South Carolina network. Accounts from MySpace, Friendster, and other

social networking sites are not compatible with *Facebook*. However, one study has shown that most incoming freshman at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill created a *Facebook* account during the summer before arrival at the university. [Stutzman, 10] Also, *Facebook* does allow users to import content from outside sites such as MySpace.

There are 27,805 registered *Facebook* users in the University of South Carolina network; currently 151 of these registered users are faculty members. [Facebook:Press, 3] Some universities have discouraged the use of *Facebook* for various reasons mentioned previously. However we don't see *Facebook* as a distraction anymore than a newspaper or cell phone. Nor do we see it as a danger; each user is given absolute power over who is able to view their profile and over what parts of their profile are accessible to each individual. We see the use of *Facebook* as an opportunity for faculty and students to enhance learning. Examples of these opportunities are discussed below in the context of use in courses, sharing educational experiences, and advising.

FACEBOOK IN UNIVERSITY 101

The use of Facebook is encouraged and incorporated in a College of Engineering section of University 101, "The Student in the University." This course recently received recognition from U.S. News and World Reports as the number one program for first-year students in the country. The "university" part of this course introduces and exposes the students to living and learning opportunities such as sex education, alcohol and drug abuse education, the library, and the career center. The additional course content seeks to develop, implement, and assess a learning experience that includes simple system concepts, complex system concepts, and experiential learning about these simple and complex systems. This class was made up of freshman engineering honors students. The students were divided into learning teams by a University of South Carolina Counseling Center staff member, Dr. Robert Reinhart, who used the Keirsey Temperament Sorter as a team formation tool. All students took the Keirsey temperament test on the Internet and were asked to bring their results to class. During class Dr. Rinehart presented the different personalities and the qualities of these personalities. For the purposes of group work, he then divided the class into teams based on their personality types so that each team would have a balance of people with different personality types. [Craig, 3]

Students in this course were already familiar with *Facebook* upon its inclusion in the course. The students were encouraged to connect with each other and to contact the instructors via *Facebook*. Each team setup a *Facebook* group which consisted of the team members and invitations to the instructors and teaching assistant. The student teams use *Facebook* for communication and assignments. Messages sent through *Facebook* show a thread- meaning replies to an original message are grouped together, similar to viewing a conversation. Discussion boards are also useful for group project planning and conversations. One student commented "*Facebook in UNIV 101 is an excellent tool to aid learning and to facilitate the teamwork involved with groups. The "Groups" tool in Facebook is ideal for providing a close network where students can contact each other, become acquainted, and get to know their professor while still avoiding the hassle of calling or sending email. Communication is made easier, as this is a tool students regularly use for their own devices, therefore making it more likely that students will receive any messages or notes from fellow classmates.*"

The students were assigned a project that involved the disassembly of a fishing reel to understand its function. The teams discussed the assignment on *Facebook* via messages, wall posts or discussion board. They posted their completed assignments on their group discussion board and also uploaded photos or drawings of the mechanism. The instructors are able to view and comment on the posts as well as participate in any discussions. Figure 3 shows how the first class project was submitted on one team's Discussion Board. This assignment involved the disassembly of a simple system and a written explanation of the mechanics that govern its function; in this case the simple system is a fishing reel. The course still includes additional assignments, such as written essays, research papers, and formal presentations of a more traditional format so as to help students develop appropriate communication skills.

The utility of *Facebook* for the student is that it allows them to function in their chosen "online"space. Each user has a profile which they are able to expand to include a personal blog, interests, activities, and course schedules which can be monitored by the professor and used to incorporate meaningful examples and projects into the course.

Course management software such as Blackboard and WebCT is popular for posting assignments, bulletin boards, announcements, and online gradebooks. However, students in this course preferred the use of *Facebook* to Blackboard. One student commented on the interactivity in *Facebook*: “*Facebook helped us connect with our classmates in University 101. Compared to Blackboard, Facebook allows the students to interact, whereas in Blackboard the professor does everything.*”

Another student commented on how *Facebook* allows users to truly connect: “*Blackboard dims in comparison to Facebook. One, it is not widely used by students, and two, the setup and tools available on Blackboard does not facilitate becoming truly acquainted with other classmates and your professor as much as Facebook. Facebook has the advantage of being much more intimate, bringing education to life outside the classroom, and yet still maintaining that necessary boundary between class and free-time. In-depth classroom communication can take place on Facebook all the time, such as posting on walls, and through messaging all along side the regular use students get out of Facebook everyday. This cannot occur on Blackboard. However, the combination of Facebook and Blackboard is a good one, taking pure grades and formal messages on one side and merging it with close-knit communities and communications on the other, creating a valuable blend. If both could actually be merged, THAT would be a true asset to both students and professors. Despite the reservations that many professors harbor against Facebook, I believe the overall usefulness of it far outstretches these drawbacks. (Such as inappropriate material.) This could be avoided if pure class dealings were confined to groups only.*”

The image shows a screenshot of a Facebook discussion post. On the left, there are three hand-drawn diagrams of a fishing reel. The top diagram is a side view of the reel with the label 'Durango' written on it. The middle diagram is a top-down view of the reel, showing the handle and the spool. The bottom diagram is a detailed cross-section of the reel, showing the internal gears and components. On the right, the Facebook interface shows the post title 'The Three Amigos Discussions' and the topic 'Simple Systems: The Fishing Reel'. The post is by Wil Waninger, dated Nov 14, 2006. The text of the post describes the mechanics of a fishing reel, mentioning components like the drag, drive gear, pinion, oscillation gear, spool, bail holder, and bail arm. It also mentions an anti-reverse switch and the importance of proper assembly.

Figure 2: Simple Systems Assignment

SHARING
EDUCATIONA

L EXPERIENCES

In addition to the use of *Facebook* in the U101 course, it is also being used in other innovative ways for facilitating communication. When we encourage the use of *Facebook*, we do stress that we are using it in an academic environment and should behave accordingly, meaning that any information gleaned from other sources should be cited appropriately.

A student used *Facebook* to create a photo album for engineering related activities. In this album he added photos of different experiments conducted during an engineering laboratory course, an example is shown in Figure 3. He also posted results from these experiments as shown in Figure 4. These posts were not made as a course requirement, but as an intellectual information share with his fellow students who are also very engaged on *Facebook*.



Figure 3: MTS Machine

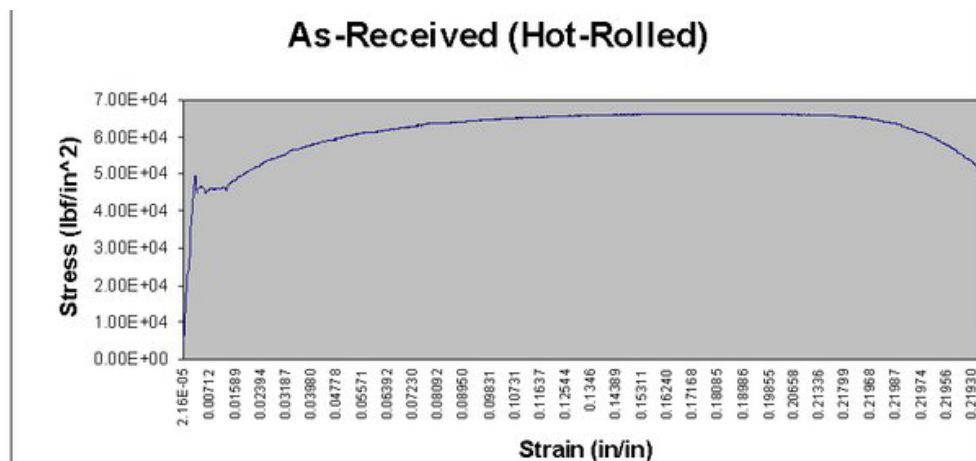


Figure 4: Stress Strain Diagram

ADVISING GROUP

An open *Facebook* group was created by the second author as an open forum for students whom he serves as mentor and/or advisor, See Figure 5 .



Figure 5: Advising and Mentoring Group

The name of this group is "Wally's Mentee's and Advisee's" and was purposely chosen to emphasize that the group is "owned" by all three individually and collectively. The group description is as follows: *"This group is for the mentees and advisees who are assigned to Wally and for those who would like to be mentored and/or advised by Wally. The rules of order for this group are simple: everything that takes place on Facebook will be of a professional nature--Wally will monitor this to make sure!!!! What will happen in this Facebook page can follow the rules of chaos--pose your questions/comments and anyone can have a shot at answering/commenting. This Group is meant to encourage peer and near-peer interaction. Wally will monitor the discussion and will add his comments/corrections as needed. Anything related to your university experience can be posted on this site!!!! Have fun and learn."*

INTEGRATING ELEMENTS FROM A WHOLE NEW MIND

We use Daniel Pink's book, A Whole New Mind, to introduce students to the six essential abilities that will be necessary for survival on our "new flat earth": Design, Story, Symphony, Empathy, Play and Meaning. Our use of *Facebook* serves as practical and familiar illustration of several of these senses.

Design: Functionality is no longer sufficient; "Design- that is, utility enhanced by significance- has become an essential aptitude." "Today it's economically crucial and personally rewarding to create something that is also beautiful, whimsical, or emotionally engaging" [Pink, 4]. *Facebook* was created with an intuitive user interface and a straight forward design. Its ease of use and good design are one of the reasons college students prefer it to other social networking sites such as MySpace and Friendster.

Story: "When facts become widely available and instantly accessible, each one becomes less valuable" [Pink, 5]. The current generation of college students is more likely to reach for Google than a dictionary or encyclopedia. Facts and information are quick and easy. The value of story is that it captures information, knowledge, context and emotion. The Notes function on *Facebook* allows users to share stories about what is going on in their lives. Users can add photos to their notes and also "tag" friends who are mentioned in the notes.

Symphony is described as "putting the pieces together" [Pink, 6]. *Facebook* describes itself as "*developing technologies that facilitate the spread of relevant information through social networks, allowing people to share information online the same way they do in the real world.*" When a user logs in to *Facebook*, their home page displays a personalized News Feed. The news feed will show any new postings to groups, as well as new photos, notes, and groups added by friends. *Facebook* is an excellent example of symphony because it is a place where people bring many elements together- school networks, friends, clubs, organizations, politics, news, music, etc.

Empathy is "the ability to imagine yourself in someone else's position and to intuit what the other person is feeling" [Pink, 7]. An important element of the *Facebook* profile is a user's "Status." Status allows you to let others

know where you are and/or what you are doing. Status has six preset options but also allows the user to customize the field as they wish. The customized option is most popular, and students often provide detailed information about what they are doing that day. For example, if a student posted his status as "Studying for 2 engineering exams" Friends respond by posting on his wall "I've been there before, good luck!" or "Study hard but don't forget to get some sleep." Students show empathy through their comments by showing that they can put themselves in other people's shoes and see the situation from another individual's point of view.

Play is an important part of life and manifests itself in games, humor and joyfulness [Pink, 8]. *Facebook* has an element of play in that it is interactive and allows 'tags' to bring other users into discussions and pictures. It also includes "The Friend Game" which allows users to see how well they know their friends. Pink quotes a University of Pennsylvania professor, Brian Sutton-Smith, who says "The opposite of play isn't work. It's depression. To play is to act out and be willful, exultant and committed as if one is assured of one's prospects." Students using *Facebook* are playing in a productive way; they are seeing connections within their own social system and gaining an understanding of chaotic systems.

Meaning can be anything that gives purpose or direction to an individual's life. Daniel Pink proposes two ways to begin the search for meaning: "start taking spirituality seriously and start taking happiness seriously" [Pink, 9]. *Facebook* incorporates the sense of meaning by allowing people to list their spiritual beliefs and/or include meaningful quotes in their "About Me" profiles.

CONCLUSION

In summary, *Facebook*, offers many tools that have the ability to facilitate communication and connectivity, ultimately enhancing learning among students and the university community. When viewed in light of the six senses outlined above, *Facebook* can also be seen as a tool to aid in the understanding necessary elements for success in this competitive conceptual age.

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