

Use of Facebook Group Feature to Promote Student Collaboration

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Abstract – This paper presents the experiences of implementing Facebook group to promote student collaboration. The conclusions are supported by student comments and by quantitative results of a survey. Facebook group had built in features and infrastructure to support class collaboration. Facebook has many advantages over other medium. Many of the students are actively using Facebook for social communication. It is a natural extension for them to extend their preferred method of communication to academic purposes. This experiment was highly successful for the faculty and the students involved. Facebook groups have great potential to enhance student learning and student collaboration.

Keywords: Facebook group; collaboration; social networking; group chat

INTRODUCTION

Internet has drastically affected the daily activities of life in today's world. The internet has changed the way people connect, communicate, and interact. Some of this is possible through social networking sites. It has been shown that social networking sites are a part of young adults' everyday life ranging from an average of 10 to 30 minutes every day [1].

To this day, surveys at random schools have shown that computer technology is playing a minimal role for most students. Even though computer usage has changed some in the past decade, computers are not an integral part of subject matter instruction in U.S. schools [2]. Also, the internet is playing an increasingly important role in not only the students' social life, but also academic life [3]. According to a study in *The Chronicle of Education* in May 2010, 80% of professors use social media. From this, a potential idea of using Facebook to engage students was born [4]. Twitter (another social network site) has also been considered as a valuable academic resource for the classroom [5].

Facebook was started in 2004 as a social communication tool, initially only for students. For some, it quickly became an addiction [6]. As of 2011, it has been reported that Facebook had 750 million active users spending 700 billion minutes per month on the site. Since 2006, Facebook is the top visited website. Now with mobile technology, more than 250 million of the 750 million total people access the site through mobile devices [7]. Also, approximately 92% of college students are already on Facebook and they visit the site on average six times a day. As of last year, the average user is connected to 80 community pages, groups, or events [8, 9]. It is no wonder that Facebook is one of the fastest growing online resources. It is even a great at provoking discussions in the classroom [10, 11]. One author describes Facebook as "an interactive, image-laden directory featuring groups that share lifestyles or attitudes." Many students find it addictive and that proves itself due to the fact that 250 million hits are recorded each day. This ranks Facebook 9th in overall traffic on the internet [12].

Many researchers and academic commentators are investigating social networks impact on society. Certain people will even pose as a returning student in order to find out more about college life [13]. There have even been some predictions that Facebook will introduce education accounts in the next three years [14]. It remains to be seen if social networks could have an effect on students' grade point averages outside of the classroom. If social networks were to be incorporated into the classroom, would that help a student's performance [15, 16]?

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A great advantage of Facebook is that it is already a highly connected community that students are actively participating. Although many other alternatives exist, such as collaborative tools in Blackboard (course management tool), emails, group discussions, etc., it is hard to find a medium such as Facebook, which is specifically built for communication and collaboration, for today's students [17]. Voluntary student participation was very poor for collaborative tools and email list serves. By associating grade percentages to collaboration, one can increase student participation; however, it was very artificial in nature. Students participated to get the grade rather than for truly collaborative purposes. Furthermore, teens use of emails and instant messaging was dropping; while, social networking was increasing [18].

Most of the students are already actively using Facebook. It is a great opportunity for educators to leverage Facebook to create a learning community, which is a vital part of student education [19]. There is a significant difference in the perception of faculty and students in the role of social networking in the context of education [20]. Students are much more open to using Facebook as an educational tool than the faculty and many students are more than ready to incorporate Facebook into their education. This only leaves faculty willing to adopt this new medium for communication and collaboration.

Facebook brings up serious questions of privacy for both faculty and students [21, 22]. In extreme cases, Facebook posts have led to employees being fired from their jobs. Overall, students have far less privacy concerns than faculty. Facebook has recently implemented "lists" to address or enhance privacy. One can now post on a wall with a specific audience in mind. If one posts on a wall and only selects family, only friends designated as "family" will be able to see the post and comment on it. It does require bit of managing, but it does address some of the privacy concerns.

In a survey, over 50% of faculty recognized that Facebook has the potential to be a useful academic tool and over 90% stated that Facebook provides an open line of communication between faculty and students [23]. Some students have gone as far to say that they feel comfortable using it to connect with other students to discuss homework assignments and a few have even said they consider it valuable to their academic success [24]. For the Facebook users that access their profile each day, it has been shown that 82% of those people update their profile on a daily basis [25].

Social Networking is a powerful presence in students' daily activities. Students preferred choice of communication is via status updates on social networking sites and texting on phones. It might not be obvious to those not using social networking communication tools, but sites like Facebook have made communication very efficient and very convenient. Since communication is done asynchronously, one does not waste time, waiting to connect to someone, before starting communication. Once communication is sent, it is expected that person will receive and respond. Two parties no longer need to find common time to communicate. Each communicates at his/her own convenient schedule. Mass communication is seamlessly integrated into social networking sites such as Facebook. One can communicate to all, specific group, or even just one person. Students communicate seamlessly with friends, clubs, family, and even their professors.

Facebook has improved the functionality of "groups." Facebook groups can be used to create a group that share a common interest. The new changes include notification of members when a post is made on the group's page. This will allow instant notification of all members. Another improvement is group chat. If you are online on Facebook, you are automatically connected with all other online members of the group in a group chat feature. Groups can be created as "open," "closed," or "secret." "Open" setting has bit of privacy issues since anyone can see posts on the group's wall. "Secret" has high privacy and cannot be found by users and requires an invitation to become a member, but new members have to be added in one at a time. This requires that you know the Facebook ID of all your students. "Closed" has the best of both options. Only members can post and read but each member can invite themselves to the group. Faculty would only have to confirm their membership to the group. Closed groups require very little setup and management and yet provide all the privacy advantages offered by Facebook.

IMPLEMENTATION AND OBSERVATION

A Facebook group for a freshman introductory problem solving and programming class was created. By leveraging Facebook capabilities and students preexisting participation in Facebook, the goal was to create an environment to promote student collaboration. Participation in Facebook group was voluntary and participation was not tied to any grades.

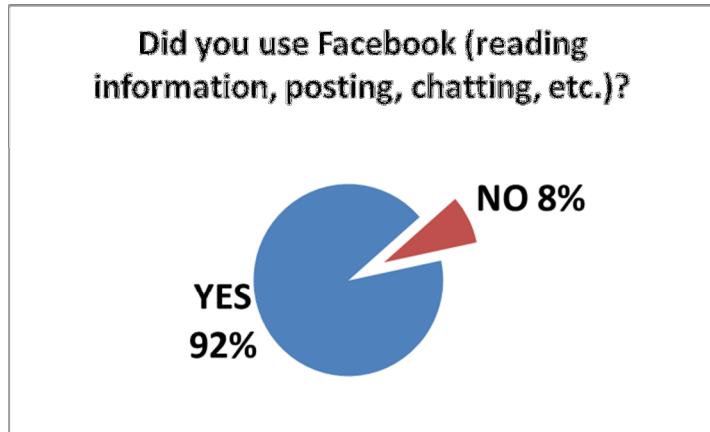


Figure 1. Student participation

Out of 37 students, three students (8%) did not actively use Facebook. However, the three students agreed to participate, resulting in 100% of the students participating. Students were asked to search for the group and request membership. Few of the students had trouble locating the group due to misspelling the group's name. Beyond that issue, populating the group was a seamless process.

For the first few weeks, faculty made an effort to respond to and interact with students on Facebook group. Once students got comfortable interacting with each other, faculty reduced participation. This allowed students to collaborate with each other. Faculty participated when needed, but purposely gave students in class ample opportunity to respond to help requests.

Students responding to another student's request were amazingly fast. As shown in the following excerpt (Facebook ID and picture icon were stripped out to hide the students' identities), it only took 12 minutes for a student to respond. Most request for help got responses within 30 minutes.

StudentA I don't know why this file won't open any help?

May 3, 2011 at 3:54pm • LikeUnlike

StudentB make sure the file that you are trying to read from is in the same folder as the one you are trying to write to

May 3, 2011 at 4:06pm • LikeUnlike

Student responses during late hours were also very fast, as shown in the following excerpt.

StudentA sorry... dont understand why you used those #'s??

February 28, 2011 at 11:13pm • LikeUnlike

StudentB was just following the numbers from the question

February 28, 2011 at 11:14pm • LikeUnlike

SURVEY RESULTS

A survey was administered at the end of the semester. The data collected gives strong evidence, that Facebook groups can be utilized to enhance student to student collaboration.

Active and frequent student participation was very high at 92%, as shown in Figure 1. Students did not receive any compensation for participating on Facebook and their use of the Facebook group was driven by the opportunity to improve their learning experience.

Privacy was one of the biggest concerns resulting from incorporating Facebook group. Faculty privacy issues were resolved by having a policy of not "friending" undergraduate students and using Facebook only for academic purposes. Student privacy issues were a concern for faculty, but the survey showed that students were not very concerned with privacy issues. Figure 2 shows that only two students (6%) were very concerned or concerned. In fact, 32 students (92%) had no or little concern at all.

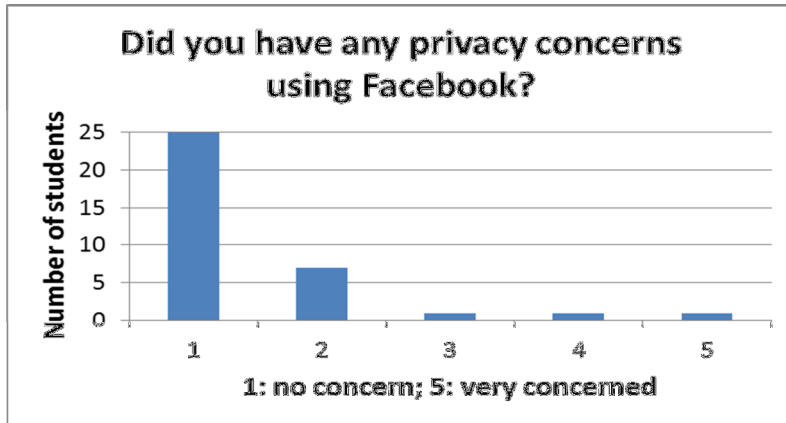


Figure 2. Privacy concerns

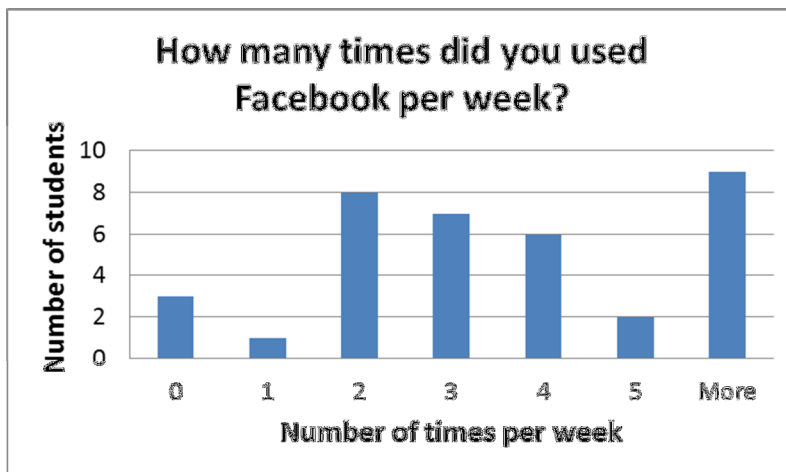


Figure 3. Number of times a week Facebook is used

33 students (92%) checked Facebook at least once a week and 32 students (89%) checked it at least two times a week, as shown in Figure 3. Furthermore, over half of the students had the Facebook group notify them via the phone or email, as shown in Figure 4. Notification would occur when someone posts a comment on the group page. A combination of high frequency of activity and over half of the students having notification turned on, explains the fast response to questions posted on Facebook group. Students were attracted to this fast response as shown in following responses to “What did you find most useful on Facebook?”

- “Because someone is always on Facebook; anytime I posted question it was answered within 20 minutes”
- “usually if I asked a question, it was answered in like five minutes”
- “being able to get responses on programs at most any time of the day”
- “almost instant response; also many minds > 1 mind”
- “ability to communicate with my peers and learn from their mistakes”
- “being able to ask questions”
- “sharing of ideas”
- “just the fact that interaction was made easy. I was able to post a code and description, and within 30 minutes I had a response.”
- “people almost always online”
- “easy way to get help from smarter students in the class”
- “ease of access”

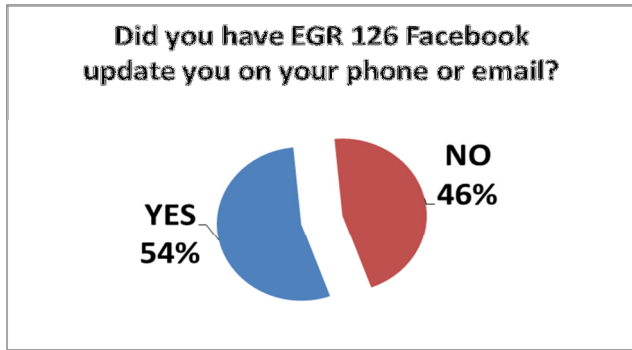


Figure 4. Mobile Facebook results

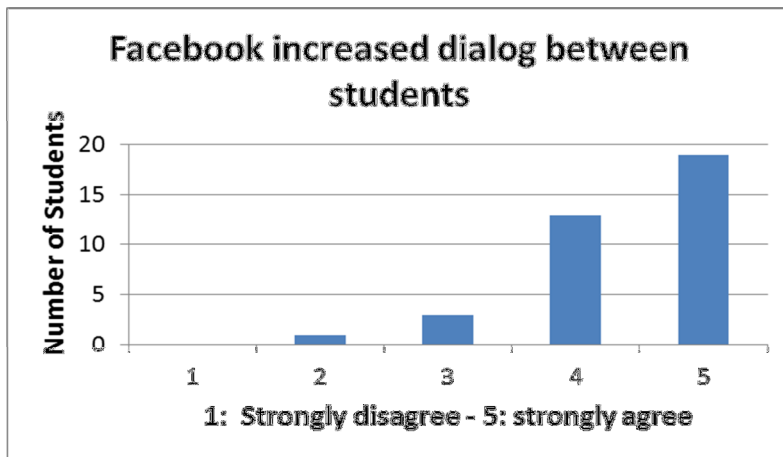


Figure 5. Facebook interaction among students



Figure 6. Facebook's influence on learning

The key result is shown in Figure 5. 32 students (89%) stated that Facebook group increased dialog between students. This was evident in the many discussion threads on Facebook and also from comments given by students during the survey.

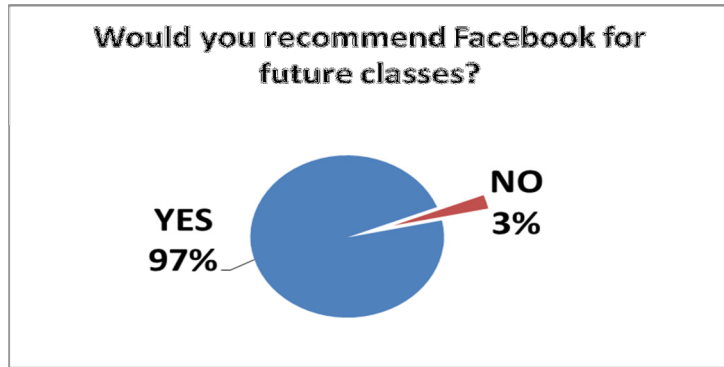


Figure 7. Future recommendations of Facebook

The consensus among students is overwhelmingly in favor of Facebook group helping their learning, as shown in Figure 6. 24 Students (67%) found it helpful while only four students found it unhelpful.

Almost every student (except one student) in the class recommends use of Facebook for future classes, as shown in Figure 7.

CONCLUSION

In the context of this study, a Facebook group was an overwhelming success in promoting collaboration among students. Student satisfaction is evident in the very positive comments concerning their experience during the semester. Common comments from students were fast response, access to other students, access to help at odd hours, opportunity to discuss and observe another students mistakes and solutions.

Students are heavily active on Facebook. By leveraging their preferred method of communication, academia can benefit greatly by using Facebook groups to enhance student collaboration.

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