Like our page - using Facebook to support first year students in their transition to higher education. A Practice Report

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Abstract

Facebook is approaching ubiquity in the social habits and practice of many students. However, its use in higher education has been criticised (Maranto & Barton, 2010) because it can remove or blur academic boundaries. Despite these concerns, there is strong potential to use Facebook to support new students to communicate and interact with each other (Cheung, Chiu, & Lee, 2010). This paper shows how Facebook can be used by teaching staff to communicate more effectively with students. Further, it shows how it can provide a way to represent and include beginning students' thoughts, opinions and feedback as an element of the learning design and responsive feed-forward into lectures and tutorial activities. We demonstrate how an embedded social media strategy can be used to complement and enhance the first year curriculum experience by functioning as a transition device for student support and activating Kift's (2009) organising principles for first year curriculum design.

Why use *Facebook*?

The Creative Industries Faculty at Queensland University of Technology (QUT) has a large and diverse first year undergraduate cohort. Approximately 1,500 students commence a variety of single, double and inter-faculty degrees each year. Degree specialisations and majors are available in animation, creative writing, dance, drama, fashion, film and television, interactive and visual design, journalism, media and communication, music, and visual arts. From 2008-2011, the entire first year cohort were enrolled in common foundation units during their first year of study: KKB101 and KKB102. A major priority of these units was to assist student transition to university through the "intentional integration and sequencing of knowledge, skills and attitudes" (Kift, 2009, p. 41) for future success at university and beyond. These skills and abilities included: academic writing and information literacies; foundational creative industries concepts and contextual awareness; creative practitioner identity building; teamwork; entrepreneurial skills.

Various social media platforms had previously been trialled in lectures and course content. The social bookmark site *Delicious* had been used for organising links to unit resources. *Twitter* had been trialled for unit updates and for questions and comments during lectures. Collaborative wiki posts within closed learning environments were incorporated into assessment items. Up until 2011, *Facebook* had been deliberately avoided, mainly due to its reputation as a social rather than a pedagogical platform. However, the use of *Facebook* and *Twitter* by the Queensland Police Service during the Brisbane floods of January 2011 (Bruns, Burgess, Crawford & Shaw, 2012)

demonstrated that social media platforms could be integrated effectively into the communication strategy of a regulated organisation to the positive benefit of the target community. With this as a rapidly emerging model of best practice, the foundation unit coordination team decided to develop and launch a *Facebook* page for the 2011 intake of the Creative Industries Foundation Units.

What were we hoping to achieve?

The foundation unit coordination team hoped to achieve two main goals with a *Facebook* page. First, they wanted to improve the effectiveness of communications to the cohort. Typically, this communication was "one-to-many" or "broadcast" communications from the unit coordinator for the information of all students or significant sub-cohorts of students. This type of communication was served traditionally by bulk emails or announcements posted on the learning management system (Blackboard). This complied with university communication policies relating to how unit coordinators should advise students of updates to their unit of study. However, empirical studies such as that by Roblyer, McDaniel, Webb, Herman, and Witty (2010) point to a large uptake of *Facebook* by undergraduate students (up to 95%). Of particular note in this study was the finding that students "communicate as much with *Facebook* as they do with technologies traditionally used in colleges (e.g., email)" (p. 138). The coordination team could see value in having a channel of communication to students that better responded to their online communication preferences. Having a more student-focused channel would enable the teaching team to better mediate

and support students' transitions to higher education, a key principle of the Transition Pedagogy articulated by Kift (2009, p. 40).

The second goal was to energise communications among the student cohort. The size and diversity of the cohorts in these units meant it was important that students discussed and reflected upon the unit content as it pertained to them and their specific areas of study within the creative industries. The foundation unit coordination team identified that an embedded social media strategy could be a useful way to assist student reflection and validation. They wanted to provide a place that could be a point of reference for the learning community where students could comment on their learning. For many students, *Facebook* is a place where social commentary and ideas are explored and is an "important element of meaning making activities especially where they reconstruct past events and thereby confer meaning onto the overarching university experience" (Selwyn, 2011, p. 171). Given that many students already used *Facebook* in this way, having an official *Facebook* page for the unit would give the opportunity for lecturer-to-student, student-to-lecturer, and student-to-student conversations in an extended and less formal setting than structured classroom discussions. This would assist the teaching team to enact the engagement strategies outlined by Kift (2009, p. 41).

Setting up and operating the page

The key principles for page set up and operation are outlined below. These principles were discussed and agreed upon by the unit coordination team before the site was released. They were informed by QUT's *Social Media guidelines for Learning and Teaching* (QUT, 2011) and a distillation of social media rules of best practice (Bruns, 2010; Mangold & Faulds, 2009).

Who could see the page and the content?

The page was public meaning anyone could view or "like" it; however the name of the page http://www.Facebook.com/ci.foundationu nits.2011 clearly indicated who it was intended for 2011 first year students in the Creative Industries Faculty. The page was configured as a *Facebook* page (as opposed to a group). Once students "liked" the page, postings on the page's wall would appear in their own personal news feed. (At the time the site was set up, *Facebook* groups did not allow this function). This was the key driver to improving the effectiveness of communication to students; those already using *Facebook* were more likely to see updates about the unit from within *Facebook* than by separately checking email or explicitly visiting the unit's Blackboard site.

Did students have to be friends with the lecturer or other students?

No. It was important to establish an identity for the unit page that was distinct from that of any individual member of the teaching staff. Madge, Meek, Wellens, and Hooley (2009) summarise that "students thought the use of Facebook was most importantly for social reasons, not for formal teaching purposes…. [Furthermore,] most were not overly keen on the idea of being contacted by their tutors via Facebook" (p. 152). By setting up a distinct page for the unit of study rather than

attempting to channel conversations via a member of the teaching team's personal identity, the students were sent a clear message that this was a source of information and forum for conversations. It was not an expectation of personal association with other users of the page. As per the operating principles of *Facebook*, liking the page did not mean the student was declaring a "friendship" with a member of the teaching team or even necessarily with their peers.

What got posted to which channel and when?

Deciding what the coordination team should post where and when to post it depended on the nature and intent of the information. For broadcast communications, email, Blackboard, and *Facebook* were used in a cascading overlapping hierarchy. Email was reserved for formal matters of extreme importance and only sent on three or four occasions per semester. All emails were replicated on Blackboard Announcements and *Facebook*. Blackboard announcements were for more regular updates on unit material, points of clarification etc. and posted once or twice per week. All Blackboard announcements were replicated on *Facebook*.

In addition to relaying the broadcast communications, the unit coordination team posted many additional, less formal and more incremental updates about the unit on the *Facebook* page. These included: links and resources useful for study and assessment; images taken during lectures and tutorials; responses to assessment queries, especially around due dates; weekly questions about the learning material for student reflection and comment; general points of interest and assistance associated with study and the

first year student experience. Updates were made at least daily, and many times a day at times of peak activity.

Who posted and how?

From day one, the page was also open for student contributions. The unit coordination team would check the page at least once a day and during times of peak activity this would rise to many times per day. Monitoring happened at all times of the day to ensure rapid responses to student queries. To share the workload, three members of the teaching team had responsibility for monitoring and posting to the page. All these posts came from the foundation unit "identity," ensuring the student experience of responses was consistent. In keeping with the social nature of the platform, the language and tone of the coordination team's posts were deliberately less formal than email or announcements, even seizing on opportunities to link internet "memes" to unit material or the wider student experience. All posts were carefully considered to model appropriate online behaviour to students.

Did the students have to use Facebook?

No. The most important principle was that students were free to engage with the unit *Facebook* page on an opt-in basis. The aim was simply to "go where activity was already happening" (eLearning Services, 2011, p. 1) and give students the choice to participate in conversations about their learning in a more familiar, more porous and less formal setting than the walled community of a learning management system. Through the deliberate design and careful implementation of the unit

communication protocols, the *Facebook* page operated not as a replacement for any existing official communication strategies or online resources, but rather an additional resource that complemented them.

There was also a strong integration and cross promotion of the Blackboard site and *Facebook* page. In Orientation Week, each student was sent a personalised email welcoming them to the unit, pointing them to both the Blackboard site and Facebook page, explaining the purpose of both resources and clearly outlining the unit communication protocols. The Blackboard site and the *Facebook* page each carried prominent links back to each other. A "Like Box" plug-in object was embedded into the Blackboard site to enable students to view the unit coordination team's postings on *Facebook* directly from within Blackboard without even the need for a *Facebook* account. URLs for both the Blackboard site and *Facebook* page were included in the unit coordinator's email footers as a matter of course.

What was the impact?

Activity

A total of 839 people "liked" the *Facebook* page during the course of the year—the number of enrolled students at the end of semester 2 was 1,184. The "reach" of each post generally varied from 300 to 500 persons. Posts were also regularly "liked" with popular posts receiving in excess of 100 "likes." This was a useful real time indicator for teaching staff that showed which materials students were noticing. There were strong correlations between page activity (new fans liking the page, student generated posts, reach of posts and likes of posts) and assessment due dates,

suggesting students were actively engaging with the learning community at times of greatest need.

Transition and support

The page functioned as a social communication channel meaning that coordinators could respond with considerable agility to issues and misunderstandings that students held about assessment or unit concepts. Doing this in a public context (as opposed to on email in or in a private student consultation) meant that clarifications and responses were immediately available for the benefit of the entire unit cohort. As the semester progressed and students were more comfortable posting to the page, they started to answer each other's assessment-related questions or post links to articles and content they found helpful. The coordination team monitored these for consistency and accuracy but very rarely needed to intervene. Because the coordination team were able to see these conversations between students that were usually held "backstage" (Selwyn, 2009), they were able to gather feedback in real time, make changes to the unit accordingly and let the students know they were doing so.

Design and engagement

Each week a question was posted on the *Facebook* page that encouraged students to reflect on their learning from that week. These were framed quite deliberately, so that student's responses could be used to illustrate topics in the following week's lecture and tutorial. Even simplistic and off-hand responses to questions became important points of departure for learning. For example, when asking students to reflect on what they hoped to gain from

working in a team during the semester, some students responded with "a headache" and "frustration." These responses were acknowledged and used in the following week's lecture as a basis for understanding how to act and approach others when working in a team situation. Incorporating these *Facebook* responses in the "official" unit material became a way to validate students' emerging and developing ideas about course content and their experience in the unit. (One student even blogged that they "felt famous" for their post having been featured in the lecture). The *Facebook* page became a venue for multifaceted conversations about learning which the unit coordination team were able to feed into the curriculum, making it truly engaging and learner-centred.

Outcomes of the Conference Session

Teaching and support staff that had not yet taken the step of using social media in their professional duties used the session as an opportunity to seek feedback on their concerns about the practice. These concerns fell into two broad areas - risk management issues and workload implications. Also present in the session however were a number of people already using social media in their capacity as a higher education professionals. This mix of participants made for a useful exchange of ideas and informed discussion.

Risk management issues raised included how students behaved in an unregulated public domain. Those with experience in the area felt that student behaviour was generally more professional when academic staff were using the social media channel in an authentic and engaged way. Peer exchanges on curriculum matters

were also generally correct. The element of corporate risk was also raised - did universities support the use of social media in teaching. The presenter's university did support this practice but within the framework of its social media guidelines. Most other users of social media also reported no issues in this regard.

Workload implications were centred on the ability to monitor the activity of the user community in an effective, timely and responsive manner. The general consensus among users of social media was that that this could be time consuming (in the presenter's experience especially around assessment times) however the "lightweight" nature of the interactions and the interface itself, coupled with the broad reach of their responses meant that over the long term it was an efficient way to communicate with the students. Moreover it was *effective* because it allowed for genuine and open interchanges from all members of the learning community.

Finally, a number of those attending expressed a desire to now incorporate social media into their professional practice.

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