

Running head: EDUCATIONAL AND OTHER BENEFITS OF A FACEBOOK GROUP

**Educational and Other Benefits of a Facebook Group
for University Students and Graduates in Specific Disciplines**

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Abstract

This article describes a department-coordinated Facebook group for psychology students and graduates. An evaluation of the postings in the past year by the group, with 900 members, showed that the group averaged 2.5 postings per day. The most common types of postings involved (1) information about recent research findings, (2) information about applications of psychological principles, (3) invitations to participate in a study, (4) information related to discipline-relevant work or volunteering, and (5) entertaining information related to the discipline. Anonymous evaluation of the group by 32 members showed that they found valuable and entertaining information on the group page and felt more connected to other students and to the university due to the page. The evaluation also showed that some members were graduates. The findings suggest that department-coordinated Facebook groups have potential to supplement formal university education in psychology and other disciplines and to help students and graduates feel part of a community, even after graduation. Other departments can establish an educational Facebook group by following a simple process.

**Educational and Other Benefits of a Facebook Group
for University Students and Graduates in Specific Disciplines**

This article describes the development and evaluation of a department-coordinated Facebook Group for psychology students and graduates. University departments use many methods of communicating en masse with students, including newsletters, learning management systems such as Moodle used for individual courses, and special brief presentations in class sessions. Another way to interact with students, present, past, and future, is via a Facebook group. Lawson, Kleinholz, and Bodle (2011) started a group to keep in touch with psychology alumni of a small college, and members later gave the group positive evaluations. It is not clear what kinds of content were posted, other than “student of the week” items or how the group benefitted members, other than providing “valuable information.”

Facebook has several potential advantages over these other communication modes. Facebook (1) is already popular with many students, and many students look at it multiple times a day, (2) allows students to interact with each other (Aydin, 2012; Madge, Meek, Wellens, & Hooley, 2009), asynchronously, after taking time to reflect, (3) allows individuals to “like” postings and comments, thereby providing rapid reinforcement for actions of others, (4) allows the posting of visual images and clickable links, and (5) can keep students involved in a group after they graduate. Facebook is worth billions of dollars for good reasons.

Our Australian university, of about 22,000 students, most of whom study online, started a Facebook group for future, current, and past psychology students about five years ago. The group, at <https://www.facebook.com/groups/107427755967286/>, grew gradually from several members to over 900 at present. The group page describes the postings content sought: “Postings provide information about new findings in psychological research; new books on important psychological topics; developments relating to the field of psychology; strategies for academic success; strategies for career preparation; student views of psychology units and other units offered at the university; opportunities for paid work and volunteer work; opportunities for further education in psychology;

events on campus and off relating to psychology; noteworthy achievements of psychology students and graduates; psychological studies being conducted at [the university]; program changes [relevant to psychology students].”

Our group has always been public, meaning that anyone can see postings. However, it is possible to have a closed group, where only group members can see the postings.

One of us (Malouff) has served as a coordinator of the group for almost the entire time. The coordinator role involves mostly admitting new members. This task can be more complicated than one might think because once a group has a few hundred members, cyber criminals try to join to go phishing, and individuals unconnected to the university try to join out of personal interest. We exclude the interested outsiders to avoid troll and other disturbing behavior. There are ways to screen individuals who send a message saying they want to join. One thing we do, if we have any doubt, is send the individuals a Facebook message asking what their connection is to the university. Alternatively, a group could require prospective members to have a certain type of email address signifying association with the university.

Another coordinator task is to calm occasional heated disagreements among members by posting a soothing statement. This comes up about once a year for our group, pertaining to issues such as child sexual abuse. The coordinator of our group also sets and enforces a rule allowing researchers to post an announcement of a study no more than twice, one month apart. This function typically involves asking research supervisors once a year to remind their students of the rule.

Finally, the coordinator can contribute content, make comments, and “like” posts. These activities can be fun for an academic who enjoys operating on Facebook. In total, a coordinator might spend an hour or so a week in coordinator duties.

The most logical academic to coordinate a Facebook group is the one who is the student liaison or psychology club advisor. However, departments can turn to graduate assistants to coordinate a Facebook group.

It is easy and free to join Facebook and to establish a group (just select "Create Group"). Once a group is created, the initial group coordinator and initial members can invite others to join. Course announcements about the existence of the group can help keep the group growing.

After observing solid growth in our department-coordinated Facebook group year after year, along with increasing numbers of seemingly valuable and interesting posts and comments, we decided to complete a formal evaluation of the group.

Method

Evaluation of the Facebook group involved (1) analyzing posts on the group page and (2) obtaining evaluation ratings from members.

Participants

The group had 900 members at the start of the evaluation. All members could post material, comment on other postings, and indicate that they like a posting or comment by clicking "like." The group included men and women, of various ages, but there was no way to determine the mean age of the entire group. A randomly selected sample of 20 members showed that 3/4 had female names and appearance and 1/4 had male. That percentage roughly reflects the sex split of students studying psychology at the university.

Thirty-two members completed anonymous evaluation questionnaire (3.6% of the group). Thirty were women; the mean age for the sample was 35.9 years ($SD = 12.1$). On average the respondents had been members for 20.6 months ($SD = 14.5$ months). Twenty-four respondents were current students; 8 were graduates.

Procedure

Analyzing posts

We began the analysis when the group reached 900 members in mid-2015. We used a random numbers table to choose 20 dates in the prior 12 months and then searched for all postings on the group page on those dates. We also recorded the number of comments for each, the number of likes, and whether the posting consisted mostly of a link to online content. We coded the postings

into categories that we developed based on our informal observations of postings on the page (see Table 1).

Member evaluation

For two weeks after the group reached 900 members, we pinned to the top of the postings site of the group page an invitation to members to complete anonymously a brief online evaluation of the page. We asked the questions listed in Table 2, which focus on potential educational and other benefits of the Facebook site.

Results

Postings

Inter-rater reliability

We calculated inter-observer reliability relating to the information obtained from the Facebook group page. We independently counted the number of posts on the 20 randomly selected days. This turned into a surprisingly complex task. For some reason unknown to us, Facebook showed slightly different dates for some of the same postings when viewed from the Facebook account of one of us versus the other, so we each independently evaluated posts using the account of one of us (Johnson). Another complexity was that the location of postings on the site varied with the date of the most recent comment on the posting. We initially made a total of 48 posting decisions and agreed on 43 (90%). We made final decisions and agreed with no difficulty that there were 48 postings total. With regard to whether each of the 48 postings provided a link to external information, our agreement rate was 45 of 48 (94%). We made final decisions about this rating by consensus. For the 48 agreed posts during the 20 days, the intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC) for number of comments per post was 1.00 (100% agreement). For number of likes, the ICC was 1.0 (100% agreement). The coding of postings into content categories was an iterative process that involved our altering content categories as needed to capture the content as well as possible. Hence, inter-rater reliability statistics would not be meaningful. We made the final content coding decisions on the basis of consensus once we finalized the categories.

Main postings results

The analysis of group posts on 20 randomly selected days in the prior 12 months showed 48 total posts, an average of about 2.5 per day, from a total of 37 members. Of the 48 posts, 40 (82%) included a link to an online article. The links were to videos, online studies, online articles, radio segments, web sites, or photos. The average post had 4.2 comments ($SD = 6.6$; range 0 to 35) and 8.0 likes ($SD = 15.0$; range 0 to 73).

Table 1 shows the total number of posts in each content category. The most common content areas were reports of research findings and reports of applications of psychological principles.

The post with the most *comments* was by one of us, Malouff, and provided a link to an article about a new law in California requiring psychotherapists to report admissions by their clients of viewing child-pornography. The 35 comments presented views in favor of the new law and against it, along with related matters. The post with the most *likes* (73) was a description of the experiences of an actor/student performing in the play *Romeo and Juliet* for girls in a juvenile detention center.

There were no posts in the sample offering textbooks for sale. However, several sales postings usually occur at the end of an academic term, even though there is another Facebook page specifically for selling textbooks.

Evaluations

Table 2 shows the responses of respondents to the questions about whether the group page provided valuable information of various types. Most respondents viewed the page as providing several different types of valuable content, including recent discipline-relevant research findings and real-world applications. However, most respondents did not view the site as providing information relevant to employment. As a result of this finding, we put on the site a call for more employment-related postings. Over the following few weeks, members posted dozens of relevant job postings and a link to an online site that members can search for themselves. Table 2 also shows responses

about the extent to which members viewed the group as helping them feel connected to each other and the university. Most respondents indicated that the group had these positive social effects.

Discussion

The results of the evaluation suggest that our Facebook psychology group page had a substantial number of postings, comments, and likes. The content varied widely and served many purposes, including supplemental education for students, continuing education for graduates, helping students and graduates feel as if they are part of the group and part of the psychology department, helping researchers recruit participants, and providing students with comic relief relating to their studies. It could be that the sheer size of the group, now including over 900 members, contributes to the value of being a member in that many individuals are available for posting, commenting, and liking.

Most of the students responding to the evaluation questionnaire viewed the group page as providing valuable information regarding psychological research findings, applications of discipline-related principles, volunteer opportunities, and matters relating to education opportunities and requirements. However, most respondents did not view the page as providing information regarding job openings. In response to that finding, we posted a request for members to provide more information about job openings. Over the next several weeks, members responded with many postings of relevant jobs. That surge in job postings could be valuable, as work in discipline-related jobs gives students opportunities to learn how to apply their knowledge and it provides financial and other rewards for the prior learning of the student.

Most evaluation respondents viewed belonging to the group as helping them feel a connection to the group and to the department. That sense of connection and the social support that typically goes with it could help the students, especially distant ones, continue on with their studies. Future research might examine the impact of a department-coordinated Facebook group on student retention.

The limitations of the evaluation of the Facebook group include the relatively low response rate with regard to the evaluation questionnaire. That low rate of response may have been due to the members frequently being invited to participate in studies and feeling overstudied. Another limitation was the purely descriptive nature of the data we collected relating to ratings of members and postings on the group page. It is possible that the respondents were not representative of the total membership. Further, the results might not generalize to other departments in much smaller or otherwise different departments or universities or in much different cultures. The strengths of the evaluation method include the collection of both self-report and archival research data, including objective data on membership and number of postings.

Some instructors have used Facebook as a free online course learning platform for a specific course (e.g., Cain & Poliscastrì, 2011; Forden & Carrillo, 2014; Wang, Woo, Quek, Yand, & Liu, 2012). The present discipline-wide use promotes learning, while also serving many other education-related functions for a much wider range of students over a much longer period of time. The present use is also less directive, with almost all content coming from students.

The present findings add to those of Lawson et al. (2011): (1) information about a large Facebook group (900 members) that has existed for several years, (2) information about the content and frequency of postings, comments, and likes, and (3) information about beneficial social effects of belonging to the group, which could be valuable to student retention. The present article also provides a link to the group, allowing others to see postings and to borrow links.

Other departments could attempt to replicate the success of our Facebook group, starting with creating a group and inviting students to join. The departments could use our Facebook group and similar ones specific to their discipline as models. To find department-coordinated groups in a specific discipline, search Facebook.com for [discipline] students. Postings in public group are visible to anyone with a Facebook account; to see postings in closed groups, one must join the group.

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Table 1

Content of postings on 20 randomly selected days in the prior 12 months

Content	Number	%
Research findings pertaining to psychology	15	31%
Applications of psychology	8	17%
Invitations to participate in a study	7	15%
Information relating to a course, graduation, or being a student	6	13%
Work or volunteer-related matters	4	10%
Entertaining or amusing content related to psychology	4	8%
Media reports of personal experiences with a psychological disorder	2	4%
Information about buying or selling psychology textbooks	0	0%
Other	2	2%

Total	48	100%
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Table 2

Evaluation ratings of members (32 respondents)

Question	Number responding	
	Yes (%)	No
Does the student psychology Facebook page provide valuable information regarding:		
psychological research findings?	28 (88%)	4
matters relating to obtaining education?	26 (81%)	6
volunteer opportunities ?	25 (78%)	7
how to apply psychological principles?	20 (62%)	10
experiences of individuals with psychological problems?	18 (56%)	14
employment opportunities?	15 (47%)	17
Does the student psychology Facebook page:		
help you feel connected to others with similar interests?	30 (94%)	2
present entertaining aspects of psychology?	28 (88%)	4
help you feel as if you are a part of [the psychology discipline at our University]?	27 (84%)	5