8 Can Facebook or wikis hook learners instead of the schoolbook?

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Abstract

In this paper I will report on a personal experimentation with Facebook and wikis as collaborative learning tools. The aims of implementing these strategies were to develop students' writing skills and to change their attitudes towards learning in the digital age. I delved into this research because I do believe that learning in the new millennium has grown beyond the boundaries of the four walls of the classroom. I have a strong conviction that informal learning through networks is a significant additional (if not an alternative) environment for language practice and use. Having in mind that Facebook is currently considered as a popular means of entertainment among students and wikis are trendy among teachers, I have tried to integrate both in an educational project with pre-determined learning objectives and outcomes.

1. Introduction

The present study focuses on 2 groups of Tunisian students' perceptions of using Facebook and wikis to develop their writing skills. It is worth noting here that the status quo of teaching at the University of Gafsa as well at other Tunisian

universities urged me to do this empirical study. In fact, Students no longer bring their books/copybooks to the classroom and no longer do the assigned homework. Another issue is the time devoted to the writing sessions, which is not enough to develop their writing skills.

This set off my curiosity to undertake the present study in addition to positive claims towards technology integration like those of Johnson, Levine, Smith, & Smythe (2009) who advocate that "[t]oday, advances in technology have connected students with more information and people than at any other time in human history" (cited in Taranto, Dalbon, & Gaetano, 2011, p. 12), thus "challenging and changing the way we teach" (Bauleke & Herrmann, 2010, p. 33).

2.   Literature review

In addition to the earlier established learning theories, behaviourism, cognitivism, and constructivism, a new theory called connectivism was introduced in 2005. Learning in the digital age has become experiential, rapid, changing and emerges from collaboration and competition, and web 2.0 technologies are viewed as "versatile, affordable, and widely available" (Taranto et al., 2011, p. 13, see also Kisber, Stewart, & Mitchell, 2013).

2.1.   Why Facebook?

In the Tunisian context, Facebook is the forerunner social networking platform. It "contributes to unintentional or unplanned learning that results from other activities, regardless of [whether] those activities are academic or non academic" (Kerka, 2000, cited in Kabilan, Ahmad, & Zainol Abidin, 2010, p. 181).

Additionally, Abbitt (2007) states that there has been "tremendous growth in the popularity of websites focusing on social activities and collaboration" (p. 1); this would include platforms such as Facebook. Selwyn (2009) also "claims

that Facebook reflects a good model of learning by its collaborative and active participatory roles of its users" (cited in Mansor et al., 2014, p. 16).

Furthermore, Kabilan et al. (2010) agree with Godwin-Jones's (2008) point of view that tools like Facebook help to a great extent to upgrade correspondence and human connection, can conceivably be tackled for the sake of learning and mastering languages, and have become new sites for potential research (Bloch, 2008).

2.2.   Why wikis?

The second type of digital platforms I opted for is wikis. They allow students to "work together to compose a single, collaboratively authored document, or they help each other with their own individual documents" (Morgan & Smith, 2008, p. 80).

According to Ribble (2009),

> "[a] wiki is a collaborative website composed of the continuous cooperative work of many authors. [... A] wiki allows anyone to edit, delete, or modify content that has been placed on the website using a browser interface" (pp. 148-149).

Moreover, Kane and Fichman (2009) "propose that wikis replace textbooks by utilizing available content" (cited in Te'eni, 2009, p. 20), which can make communication easier among educators and students.

3.   Method of the study

Since I intended to explore the perceptions of tertiary-level learners regarding the evolution of their writing and collaborative skills, a quantitative paradigm seemed a suitable approach to the study.

3.1.   Participants

I opted for having 2 groups of 1st year university students of English. Both study writing strategies once a week. The total number of students in these groups is 60. The first, composed of 27, used Facebook, while 33 students in the second group used a wiki. The age range was between 19 and 22. As far as gender is concerned, there were 47 girls and 13 boys.

3.2.   Materials and procedures

Two different questionnaires were administered to the participants in each group before the start of the study. It lasted one semester and by its end, my students were asked to fill in two distinct surveys: one for each group to see whether their attitudes have changed or not after using Facebook and Wikis and if they were helpful in developing their writing skills.

Prior to the administration of the questionnaires, I had meetings with the participants, I explained the purpose and content of the experiment and maintained that their identity and the information they provide would be handled confidentially. Finally, I stated that they could also choose not to partake in this study and leave it at whatever time they so wished (Dowling & Brown, 2010; Heighman & Croker, 2009).

4.   Results and data analysis

Based on the data collected from the questionnaires and surveys, I will present the results first in terms of statistics, and then I will delve into the analysis taking into account the objectives of the study.

4.1.   Facebook vs wiki

73% have been part of the Facebook community for more than 3 years. Just 5% had an account on a wiki before the beginning of this study.

During the study, 68% of the students stated that they log on to Facebook very frequently: At least once a day and for more than 2 hours/day and 27% log on twice or 3 times a week; whereas 32% log on and use wikis in their own time.

While 72% of the total number of students who joined the Facebook group actively participated in the group by posting/commenting, 59% did so in the wiki group.

Out of the total number of the two groups:

- 72% said that the classroom writing session is not enough to develop their writing skills.

- 7% said they write from time to time in English outside the classroom (SMSs or chat).

- 63% admitted having difficulties in writing and these vary from one student to another.

- 84% showed readiness to develop their writing skills through digital tools. In fact, I have noticed that my students' attitudes went through a noticeable change: they became more willing to write and more productive.

- 91% considered the feedback from their peers and the teacher supportive and boosted their confidence, further motivating them to interact and write.

4.2. Facebook and wikis vs classroom

Fascinatingly, while technology is often said to generate seclusion, most of the students seemed to feel that using Facebook or the wiki had the contrary effect when compared with traditional, teacher-led classes, the students again responded quite positively.

- 69% of my students said they prefer digital writing tools. According to them, "learning with technology is always fun".

- 82% of them concurred they like using technology.

A broader analysis revealed that some shy and introvert students partook in the activities in both platforms more than in the classroom.

5.   Discussion

The results of the data analysis reveal that the participants, after a certain time, look at their cohort as a family. Inozu (2010) states that if the group is really coherent, "students become more motivated to interact and this contributes to a creation of a positive group dynamic that increases the effectiveness of lessons" (p. 1061). Ushioda (2003), however, draws attention to the negative effects of "peer group influences and classroom counter-cultures" (p. 97) and points out how these can end up in collective demotivation and collective disaffection.

In fact, what I remarked throughout this study supports Inozu's (2010) view. My students have shown a noticeable inclination to collaborate via digital environments that aim at liberating learners from the somehow repressive immediacy of the classroom.

Finally, as opposed to the claims of "death of the teacher" in the digital age, the participants emphasised the important role of the teacher in guiding them and motivating them and in creating a good group climate.

6.   Conclusion

Based on the data and students' views in this study, Facebook and wikis have been shown to boost confidence, motivate and foster learning and hook students.

Perhaps with such digital tools, our students who are increasingly web 2.0 proficient will become managers of their learning with the help of peers and teachers.

Unfortunately, educators have been slow to recognise the importance of digital literacy and the potential of such platforms as tools for learning has not been fully tapped into by English as a second or foreign language stakeholders.

Amid this fervour to use technologies, teachers must not neglect the pedagogical side. However, we have to upgrade our skills, update our knowledge and change our traditional teaching practices. Within this preview, Prensky (1998) states that "[w]e must get our teachers – hard as it may be in some cases – to stop lecturing, and start allowing students to learn by themselves" (p. 3).

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