

Contextual language learning: Educational potential and use of social networking technology in higher education

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Abstract. This study investigates the potential and use of social networking technology, specifically Facebook, to support a community of practice in an undergraduate-level classroom setting. Facebook is used as a tool with which to provide supplementary language learning materials to develop learners' English writing skills. We adopted the technology acceptance model to examine students' initial expectations and perceptions of, and attitudes toward the use of Facebook as a learning platform for sharing of knowledge and class experiences. Data were collected both qualitatively and quantitatively from 18 students who were enrolled in a semester-long English writing course at a public university in Taiwan. Findings indicate that Facebook provides an easy-to-use interface for learners to leverage the social networking skills that are part and parcel of their everyday world and to generate shared knowledge among each other within a small group environment. Given the fact that college-age students are already proficient with Facebook and other social media, language teachers should take advantage of that situation by incorporating Facebook into classrooms. It is also suggested that language teachers consider their expected learning objectives and outcomes while utilizing Facebook for its educational purposes and meaningfulness.

Keywords: Facebook, social networking, knowledge sharing, language learning.

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1. Introduction

The improvement of information and communication technologies has resulted in the emergence of online social communities (Ito et al., 2008). In today's knowledge-based society, the necessity of sharing knowledge assets in a global or electronic collaborative fashion is not necessarily inevitable (Chu & Kennedy, 2011). In the twenty-first century's world of global citizenship, the adoption of web tools can boost participation in global citizenship; web-based technology lends itself to facilitating both teachers and learners taking advantage of learning opportunities. Furthermore, the Internet can enhance educational administrators' effectiveness (Ajjan & Hartshorne, 2008). Today, with economic, social, and cultural policies being driven by the need for globalization and bounded by contextual constraints, education faces a changing era of new technologies of information and communication, and rapid construction and sharing of diverse knowledge.

Social networking technologies now provide more effective tools for communication in educational contexts by facilitating personal interaction and enhancing a sense of community among students (Brady, Holcomb, & Smith, 2010). For example, Facebook usage is growing significantly, due to its accessibility and capacity to deliver educational information to students (Roblyer, McDaniel, Webb, Herman, & Witty, 2010). In Taiwan, English is learned as a foreign language since it is not generally used outside of language classrooms. In foreign language education, Facebook-mediated pedagogy can help sustain active participation, as Facebook allows instructors to design meaningful environments. They can do so by engaging learners in the use of target languages, along with access to multimedia, authentic material and on-demand course references and support (Blattner & Lomicka, 2012). In spite of these benefits, evidence shows that some students still struggle to see the value of social networking technologies for learning and teaching (Bennett, Bishop, Dalgarno, Waycott, & Kennedy, 2012). Therefore, this study provides an overview of educational potential and use of social networking technology in higher education, and describes the methodology used specifically in language classrooms. We also summarize the implementation experiences of the instructor and students involved and present the key findings as well as practical recommendations for researchers and educators.

2. Method

The instructional design is based on contextual learning, a constructivist-driven teaching and learning concept (Imel, 2000). Being a prevalent social networking

technology, Facebook is widely used by today's young students worldwide. After posting, friends can read and respond immediately. Therefore, it is convenient and fun to communicate and share thoughts. By incorporating Facebook in course management, instructors can present information in such a way that students are able to construct meaning based on their experiences (Wang, Woo, Quek, Yang, & Liu, 2012). In this study, we explored how students used and made sense of Facebook. We have observed this pedagogical practice since 2012. Findings of this research were drawn from our preliminary results from a semester-based implementation of Facebook at a public Taiwanese university in the first year of research. Eighteen Taiwanese students who enrolled in a junior English course with a focus on writing participated in this study.

The Facebook presence was a private group so that only invited student members could participate. We considered previous work (Shiu, Fong, & Lam, 2010) about Facebook and its uses in education. The following are our research questions: (1) How do instructors utilize and react to using Facebook in a university-level language course design for educational purposes? (2) What are student perceptions and attitudes towards Facebook use within the context of a university-level language course?

Mixed methods were employed to assess the data from qualitative and quantitative perspectives. The survey questionnaire and the open-ended questions addressed to the students were adopted from Huang (2012), considering the contextual learning environment in which Facebook was used. The modified questionnaire consisted of the following major categories: course dimension, technology dimension, environmental dimension and learner dimension. Descriptive analysis (e.g. mean, standard deviation, frequency distribution) was conducted using the SPSS statistical software package version 16.0 for the sixteen valid surveys collected. Based on the predetermined themes, open-ended comments were grouped into categories; initial succinct points were included in the results to support findings.

3. Discussion

The teaching goal of this language course was to help students cultivate their English writing knowledge and skills through the use of Facebook in addition to the required genre practice of writing. Because the instructor specializes in technology-assisted learning, he believes that setting up a customized Facebook group page could provide opportunities to share knowledge, exchange information and communicate with classmates according to the thematic discussion issues. His teaching philosophy is influenced by his doctoral and master's programs'

training. He indicated his viewpoints about technology-supported curriculum and instruction as he applied Facebook for pedagogical applications.

In traditional physical classrooms, it might be difficult for students to continue their learning in a self-regulated and contextual approach because of certain factors: number of students, time constraints, or lack of intrinsic motivation from the learners. Followed by the classroom activities, Facebook helps connect students to structured learning tasks and enables them to produce formative feedback, along with reflections on given assignments (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Facebook online discussion

Penn's 2011 commencement. What do you learn from his message?
Q4-1: 請問你/妳從丹佐．華盛頓2011年賓州大學的畢業生演講中，學習到了什麼？
<http://youtu.be/paPeq7liP8o>

 丹佐．華盛頓為2011年賓州大學畢業生演講
丹佐．華盛頓為2011年賓州大學畢業生演講 Penn's 2011 Commencement Address by Denzel Washington
講者：丹佐．華盛頓 2011年5月16日演講 翻譯：洪曉慧 編輯：朱學恆 簡繁轉換：洪曉慧 後製：洪曉慧...
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 **Vera Wang** 洪志嘉 I agree with Denzel Washington and your thought ! All of these let me learn more and more !
January 9, 2013 at 1:52pm · Unlike · 👍 1

 **曾昱穎** I think Denzel Washington's speech is very interesting. He expressed the hope that everyone can look ahead. Do not go backward for their own. So that at least you can see in front of what hindered.... See More
January 11, 2013 at 7:24am · Unlike · 👍 1

 **Karen Wu** 曾昱穎 Thank you for sharing us always look ahead and don't do backward. Each failure means the successful stride. These are so important that I haven't note in Denzel Washington's speech.
January 11, 2013 at 8:59pm · Unlike · 👍 1

As a young professor, the instructor has more recent exposure to digital technologies than older professors, and he keeps up with very up-to-date information. On the Facebook page of his class, he sorted out theme-based questions

for discussion and helped students improve their critical thinking by sharing their knowledge collectively in a written feedback format. Students were able to apply knowledge to cultivate their writing and their problem-solving skills. Along with gaining knowledge in writing skills, students were encouraged to share their own ideas in writing and interact with others when performing writing assignments. Facebook’s characteristics facilitate students’ communication because students can post and receive messages in a one-to-one and in a one-to-many mode.

This supplementary process reinforces the contextualization by adding the educational value of adopting Facebook in educational settings –levels of communication and collaboration increase, as do deeper levels of reflection. The instructor also reported positive effects on observing student engagement in the Facebook-supported network. A Facebook group provides better motivation for students to perform writing tasks due to the blended instructional design of onsite course teaching and Facebook community interaction. Table 1 shows the mean scores and standard deviation among the selected variables based on the five-point Likert scale: learner satisfaction (LS), course effectiveness (CE), perceived usefulness (PU), perceived ease of use (PEU), peer feedback system (PFS), learner community support (LCS) and instructor response timeliness (IRT).

The results show that the participating students were highly satisfied with the design of the Facebook-supported learning community, especially with the course’s effectiveness and perceived usefulness of the functions that Facebook provides.

Table 1. Profile of student response to the survey

	LS	CE	PU	PEU	PFS	LCS	IRT
Mean	4.61	4.71	4.41	3.50	3.21	2.95	4.63
S.D.	0.45	0.38	0.60	0.49	0.44	0.70	0.50

Writing tasks are read by the instructor and peers. Their reflections can present strengths and weaknesses of the texts they read or video clips they watch. Observation by peers can raise students’ awareness of improving their writing accuracy in an implicit way. Nonetheless, since there was no direct corrective feedback received from the instructor and other peers focusing on the writing per se, the students cannot benefit from using the form-based feedback as guides for improving their grammatical mistakes, word usage and content revision. Teacher feedback on students’ writing is critical in a traditional classroom, as it is when the writing is completed in Facebook. Although writing can be enhanced from peers’ constructive comments, students still prefer teacher feedback. Finally, the instructor claimed that “it would be advantageous if Facebook could customize its

reply function by providing a threaded response underneath each original post”. In this way, tagging the person who leaves the original message is not necessary and discussion centered on the same topics can be grouped together. Overall, Facebook has contributed to the effectiveness of course design and promoted learners’ satisfaction about the teaching of English writing.

4. Conclusions

Today’s higher educational community has gradually adopted social networking technologies into curriculum design. Facebook is used frequently by university students and may be a potential tool to integrate into university courses. Such education-oriented social networking technologies provide viable tools for educators hoping to expose students to the potential educational opportunities and meaningful inquiries in subject domain learning. Findings from this study help to provide an overview of some initial research on the use of Facebook as a contextual interactive environment in educational settings. Both the instructor and students are receptive to incorporating Facebook as an academic platform, having identified the potential benefits and drawbacks of using Facebook.

In addition to the perceived “benefits through enhanced communication, interaction and flexibility in course content delivery” (Irwin, Ball, Desbrow, & Leveritt, 2012, p. 1230), this study can suggest how to better utilize Facebook to meet the needs of instructors and students. Equally important, concerns over student privacy and safety in Facebook for education-based purposes also needs to be addressed by imposing limits regarding the community’s accessibility. Social networking technology, as stated by Irwin et al. (2012), “is well-received [; however], it is still unclear if and how Facebook can enhance student learning outcomes. Continued investigation of Facebook use in [higher] education may provide further insight” into pertinent issues as well as effectively organize established community support aligned with the curriculum development and course teaching goals (p. 1230).

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