

# ‘Just facebook me’: a study on the integration of Facebook into a German language curriculum

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**Abstract.** Student and teacher activity in a closed Facebook group for a tertiary German class was observed during a 12-week teaching semester. This was complemented by questionnaires, semi-structured interviews with students, and teacher reflections in a researcher journal. Collected data were analysed using an inductive thematic analysis followed by a deductive Activity Theory (AT) analysis to explore the tensions between student and teacher expectations of the Facebook component of the course. The analysis showed individual variation in Facebook behaviours. A number of students were reluctant to write in the target language, German, reporting that they felt anxious when required to do so. It became evident that students differentiated sharply between their private Facebook interactions and their interactions in the Facebook group. Students adopted the Facebook group as an authentic language platform and continued to use the page after the course had ended. The Facebook group facilitated high quality meaning-focused target language production within the class group, and the participants were overwhelmingly positive towards their Facebook experience.

**Keywords:** Facebook, German language learning, activity theory.

## 1. Introduction

The aim of this study is to understand the practices and perspectives of students and teachers using Facebook as part of the curriculum in a German language class at tertiary level in New Zealand. Facebook-based activities were introduced into the German intermediate class in an attempt to make German language study more authentic and more learner-centred for English-speaking learners.

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This article will report the experiences of the 12-week period of Facebook integration.

## **2. Facebook in language learning environments**

When Facebook first started to become mainstream in 2007, it seemed to be a platform soon to be replaced by the next wave of social media. Nonetheless, at the time of writing in 2016, Facebook remains the most used communication channel in the world amongst students and young people (Duggan, 2016). Facebook offers easy uploading mechanisms for photos and videos and its interface can be set to over 70 foreign languages, so it is a tool well suited for use in a foreign language classroom. Through Facebook, students can be immersed into the target language whilst simultaneously developing cultural knowledge and sharing German artefacts. Previous work using Facebook in the foreign language classroom includes Mills (2011), who used a Facebook group to make her French class more authentic. Blattner and Fiori (2009) saw great potential in Facebook groups as a platform for building telecollaborative communities in their Spanish language classes, since it was readily available and user friendly. Their learners were able to connect via Facebook with native speakers of Spanish. Blattner and Fiori (2011) used a Facebook site as part of their assessment in their intermediate Spanish class and found that through interaction with authentic Spanish speakers, the students gained a better socio-pragmatic understanding of the language.

## **3. Methods**

### **3.1. Context**

A Facebook group was designed and all students of the language class joined the group (N=21). The instructor of the class started a closed Facebook group and sent out the link to the class and asked them to join the group. The students joined the group and were made administrators of the group. The teacher retreated into an observer role and left the students to construct the platform autonomously. The students were asked to make five posts about various German related topics. The posts had to include three complete sentences written in German. The focus was on meaning and only minor corrections on form were made by the teacher. The posts were not graded, rather they were marked on a pass/fail basis which represented just 2% of the overall mark.

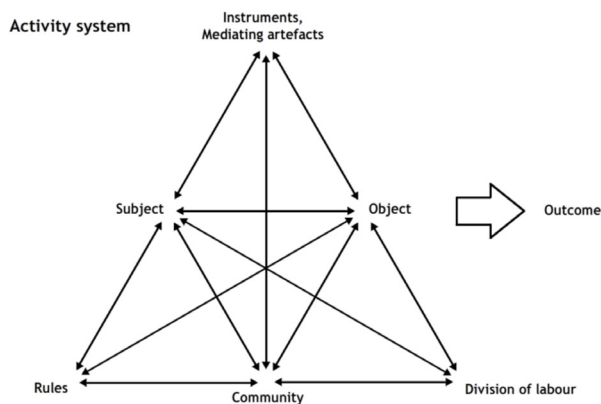
3.2. Data collection

The study used an ethnographic research method suitable for gaining rich data from this relatively uncharted platform (Beaulieu, 2004; Hine, 2005; Markham, 2011). Data collected during the semester included pre- and post- questionnaires, interviews (n=10), a research journal which the first author filled in every day as a participant observer and the archive of the Facebook site containing all the contributions of the students and teachers.

3.3. Data analysis

The data were transcribed and coded using four cycles of inductive thematic analysis (cycles 1 and 3) and deductive coding using AT as a lens (cycles 2 and 4). The data were first coded manually and then NVivo was used for further focus of the data. In the initial stage, the first cycle of coding was of an exploratory nature. The data was fragmented and codes were identified (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). After the initial inductive cycle, a deductive cycle of analysis was applied to the data, with AT elements using Engeström’s (1987) model of subject, object, community, rules, division of labour, tool/artefacts, and outcome (Figure 1). The data was entered into NVivo as predetermined nodes (Ezzy, 2002). The third cycle of coding was conducted inductively to step back from the pre-defined AT elements and to keep an open mind about the data. The final cycle of coding returned to AT components to identify patterns and emerging categories within the AT elements.

Figure 1. Activity system<sup>3</sup>, based on Engeström’s (1987) activity model



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## **4. Results and discussion**

The use of a Facebook group in a German classroom was well received but the students did not actively contribute to the group more than minimally. The data showed that the students enjoyed reading other students’ comments to improve their vocabulary but otherwise preferred to simply observe the activity in the group. Students reported enjoying the platform, and they found it easy to use and familiar, but they also felt anxious about producing posts. Students were conscious of fellow students being able to read their posts and judge their spelling and grammar. Most students were keen users and contributors in the beginning and also towards the end of the semester when the assignment task had to be completed. They did not spontaneously post in the group.

AT analysis revealed three contradictions within the class activity system. The first contradiction was between the subjects and rules and between the subjects and the object: the students resisted the rules for using Facebook as a learning tool. They needed to be reminded to post their required posts. They did not use the Facebook group for spontaneous communication commenting, for example, “Facebook group was not a familiar educational environment for me” and “Facebook intruded into my personal Facebook use”.

The second contradiction occurred between subject and tools. Students commented that “Facebook for learning was too forced” and “I could not read all the comments, it was too time-consuming, I preferred looking at the photos”. In interviews, students report preferring to use Facebook for sharing pictures.

The third contradiction was between subject and division of labour. The teacher was trying to keep a low profile to make the environment more natural, but the students expected more feedback; they commented, “I felt a bit left out that I did not receive feedback”. Still the Facebook group was perceived by the students as part of their educational environment; it did not develop into a social communication group. Students commented that “Facebook means leisure time for me, this was too much work”.

## **5. Conclusions**

The findings of this study raise many issues relating to the use of Facebook in a language class. In this study, although popular with students, Facebook did not lead to the anticipated extensive informal use of German. Some changes may

improve the results. The teacher as the designer of the assignment and also the person who assigns course grades is in a position of power. It may be better to assign the role of a facilitator of the Facebook group to a student, or a student teacher if available, as this may lead to the posts being more spontaneous. Perhaps Facebook communication would be richer if the posts were not part of the final course grade. To ease anxiety about performance in the target language, it may be beneficial if students worked in groups to produce posts for the Facebook group page. With regards to the design, rules and instructions for how to use the group for the assignment need to be explicit and clearly stated. Future developments in social media will doubtless offer new opportunities for extensive free production in a target language.

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