

16 Using Facebook in an Irish Third-Level Education Context: A Case-Study

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Abstract

Social networking sites such as *Facebook* or *Twitter* have become social phenomena, and educators are increasingly experimenting with these new tools in order to find out if they can be used for teaching and learning. However, we can question if the use of social media is really in the process of changing teaching and learning practices and whether Irish students are ready to adopt these new tools. We can also query whether social networking sites can contribute to connecting students and developing the feeling of belonging to a learning community amongst them. In order to investigate these various issues, this chapter offers the findings from a case-study where a *Facebook* page was introduced in a learning context. Based on the comparison and analysis of student and staff participation and usage patterns between a virtual learning environment (VLE) and a *Facebook* page, as well as feedback questionnaires, this study highlights that the social networking site led to a greater level of interactivity amongst students, who enjoyed the informality and accessibility of the page. Yet, preconceptions associated with social media continued to prevail, with students failing to appreciate the educational potential of the site.

Keywords: social media, social networking sites, online learning community, Facebook.

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1. Introduction

Web 2.0 technology facilitates participation and information-sharing on the Internet and has led to the advent of a new era for the Internet: ‘the social Web’ (Kárpáti, 2009). This sharing of content occurs both in the private and public spheres and at a personal and professional level. Ireland has embraced this new age of communication. *Facebook* and *Twitter* are highly present in Irish society. Teachers – and students alike – want to be connected and take advantage of the huge potential given to them by social media. It is thus not surprising to find that they are increasingly adding this technology to their teaching/learning arsenal.

Due to the social nature of these new tools, their successful integration in a teaching and learning context should lead to a higher level of participation from students. Yet, this integration raises a number of questions, especially in the Irish context. Are students and educators ready to change their teaching and learning practices? Are Irish students prepared to adopt these new tools for learning purposes? And can social media really reinforce the bonds between learners in order to strengthen learning communities?

In an attempt to address these issues, this chapter examines a case-study. It observes and analyses online practices of staff and students in a language-learning support context at the University of Limerick where a social networking site (a *Facebook* page) was introduced by support staff to complement an institutional virtual learning environment in an attempt to increase students’ participation by using a media platform which is popular amongst them. The study presents how this addition was received by students. The participation study is complemented by the results from student surveys. The feedback questionnaires focused on students’ perceptions of both platforms and more specifically on their views on the pedagogical values of the sites and of their sense of ‘community belonging’ in both learning settings.

The findings and the ensuing conclusions form the basis for recommendations for further applications of social networking sites in an educational context

and initiate a dialogue on the use of these sites for language learning and for community building in an Irish context.

1.1. Social media and social networking sites

The advance in computer technology, allowing for instant online communication and the easy creation and sharing of user-generated content via web-based and mobile applications, enabled the advent of social media (McLoughlin & Lee, 2007). This interactive dialogue on the net has become a societal phenomenon, entering our lives in various forms and for a range of functions and purposes. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) established a classification scheme for social media types containing six categories: collaborative projects (e.g., *Wikipedia*), blogs and microblogs (e.g., *Twitter*), content communities (e.g., *YouTube*), social networking sites (e.g., *Facebook*), virtual game worlds (e.g., *World of Warcraft*), and virtual social worlds (e.g., *Second Life*). For the purpose of this research, we will concentrate solely on social networking sites. Boyd and Ellison (2007) define the latter as “web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system” (p. 211).

Since they first emerged, the popularity of social networking sites has grown rapidly, as shown by the Alexa global user ranking list¹ – a listing of all sites on the Web, sorted by traffic – where *Facebook* is in second place just behind *Google*. The penetration rate is especially high amongst young people. A survey carried out in 2008 at the University of Limerick amongst 75 language students revealed that 97 per cent of the respondents had a presence on these platforms and that 51.5 per cent had a profile on more than one networking site (Murray, Hourigan, & Jeanneau, 2008). In recent years, *Facebook* has become the overall ‘winner’ in the popularity race. Hew (2011) highlights that its use is “nearly ubiquitous amongst students” (p. 663).

1. Retrieved from <http://www.alexa.com/>

Over the past few years, research on the academic and pedagogical use of *Facebook* is starting to emerge (Hew, 2011; Lampe, Wohn, Vitak, Ellison, & Wash, 2011; Lamy, 2011). This site is often presented as a platform to organise group activities or to discuss course or assignment details (Bosch, 2009; Lampe et al, 2011). Hew's (2011) research review concludes that, although learning purposes are stated by students as a motive for using *Facebook*, in reality its use remains essentially social and the educational function is still very marginal amongst students. The present study will attempt to determine whether these findings can be verified in our research context.

1.2. Community building

The popularity of social networking site relies heavily on their propensity to initiate a feeling of belonging (Arnold & Paulus, 2010). McMillan and Chavis (1986) have been influential in their studies on defining the concept of 'sense of community'. They highlight four key elements which help build this feeling: (1) membership (the feeling of being part of a defined group which holds boundaries); (2) influence (the reciprocal influence of members on each other, the fact that they all have something to bring and take to the rest of the group); (3) integration and fulfilment of needs (the elements that bind the community together, even though the needs of each member might not be the same, each one expresses what they gain from his/her participation); and (4) shared emotional connection (the feeling of closeness experienced by members, this is often linked to shared history and experience). McMillan and Chavis (1986) establish that there is a link between sense of community and the "ability to function competently in the community" (p. 6); the more developed the sense of community is, the higher the level of participation is. Similarities can be found in the definitions of communities which develop in an online environment. Rotman, Golbeck and Preece (2009) state that online communities are "characterized by being groups of people brought together by a shared interest, who create, through interaction on an online platform, a joint repertoire and common culture" (p. 42). These elements are thus crucial when studying participation on social networking sites and when trying to establish whether community building can occur on these sites.

In the context of this study, it was established that reinforcing the sense of community belonging was a key aspect. As highlighted by Pavlenko and Norton (2007) the sense of belonging has an impact on motivation: “The process of imagining and reimagining one’s multiple memberships may influence agency, motivation, investment, and resistance in the learning of [languages]” (p. 669). Aceto, Dondi, and Marzotto (2010) go even further in emphasising the impact of online communities in the learning process by stating that they “provide the context, resources and opportunities to expand the members’ horizons and awareness of themselves and of other members” which in turn leads to “other forms of learning, such as knowledge and skill acquisition for practical and professional aims” (p. 6). Finding the most appropriate platform to foster this type of learning and to encourage involvement and participation was thus paramount to our study.

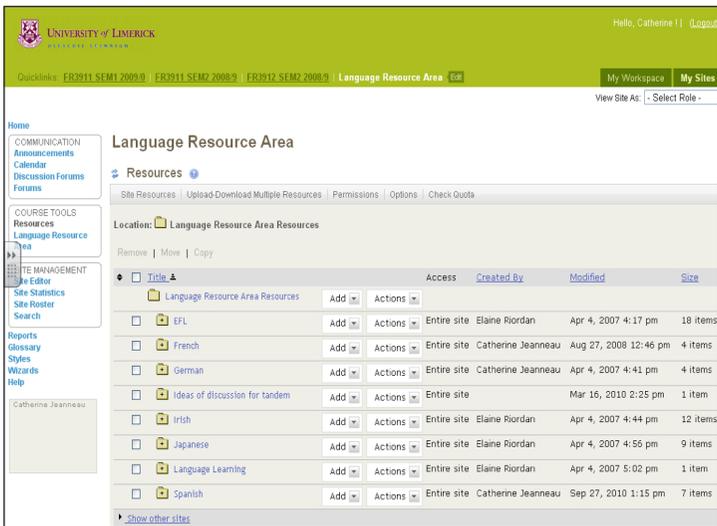
1.3. Social and educational context of the study

Located at the heart of the Languages Building, and a key feature of the School of Languages, Literature, Culture and Communication, the Language Resource Area (LRA) at the University of Limerick offers all language learners opportunities for learning activities (Language Partner Programme, discussion groups...) as well as a range of resources in the six languages taught in the School and at all the levels represented (from ab initio for some undergraduate courses to advanced level, especially for some postgraduate courses). These are provided on a self-access and voluntary basis.

The role of the LRA is mainly to support language learning, to increase learners’ autonomy by fostering meta-cognitive thinking about language learning, to encourage the development and transfer of skills across languages and disciplines, and to facilitate the creation of a community of language learners. The underlying principles for the development of this resource centre were borrowed from research in the field of language advising/language counselling (Mozzon-McPherson & Vismans, 2001) with an emphasis on “helping learners acquire the knowledge and skills to manage their own learning” (Rubin, 2007, p. 1).

A virtual learning environment was initially developed in 2007 on the institutional learning management system called *Sulis* to add flexibility to the services already offered. This proved to be challenging as this VLE – unlike VLEs set up for online courses, designated modules or specific cohorts of students – had to address the needs of a wide audience ranging from first years to postgraduate students, from language specialists to non-specialists. The established VLE (Figure 1) contains an extensive resource repository, a calendar of events, an announcement space for events and various discussion forums (one for each of the six languages and some for specific topics such as language exchange partners).

Figure 1. Sulis - virtual learning environment - screenshot



Even though the VLE has remained open, a *Facebook* page for the LRA was created in September 2010 (Figure 2). The main objectives of this page are to reach a wider audience and to offer students a platform where they might feel more at ease communicating. The page is maintained by the administrator of the LRA and is frequently updated with information about the language-learning activities (both inside the university and outside the institution), links to useful resources on the Internet, pictures of events, discussions on language-

learning material or popular foreign films. Students are free to ‘join’ the page by becoming a fan or just visit it whenever they like. They can participate by liking a post, commenting on a message or posting a new contribution. The messages posted on the *Facebook* page have progressively replaced the information which was posted on the communication tools of the VLE, where only the resources function is kept updated. In the second year of the study, students were able to access and use either or both platforms.

Figure 2. LRA Facebook page



1.4. Rationale and research questions

In a society where social networking is ubiquitous amongst students, we can question whether the use of social media can affect teaching and learning practices and whether Irish students are ready to adopt these new tools in this new context. We can also query whether social networking sites can contribute

to connecting students and developing the feeling of belonging to a learning community.

In an effort to find answers to these queries, this chapter presents the results of a case-study which focuses on the following questions:

- What are the patterns of use and participation of both staff and students on the institutional VLE and the Centre's Facebook page?
- How do these two platforms impact on students' sense of community?
- What are the Irish students' perceptions of these sites and of their pedagogical value?

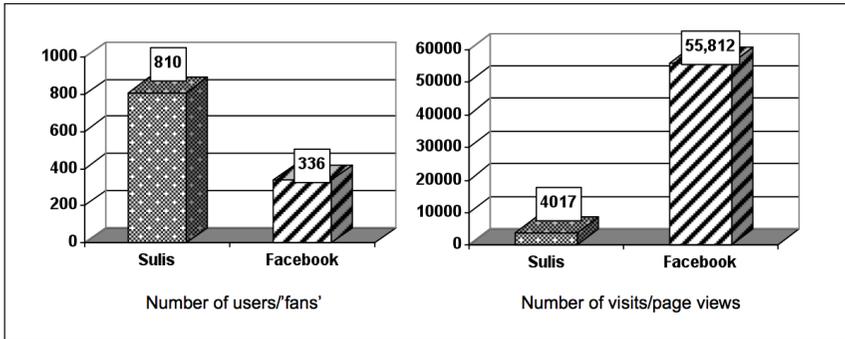
2. Data collection and methodology

In order to address these issues, the online practices of staff and students on two different platforms (the VLE and the *Facebook* page set-up for the LRA) were observed and analysed. The data was collected during two consecutive years, namely February 2010 to 2011 for the *Sulis* site and February 2011 to 2012 for the *Facebook* page. The general quantitative data (number of users, visits, activities...) were collected from the statistical tools on both platforms. A qualitative study of the content of the sites was then carried out (including a study of the posts, likes...). In addition to the data analysis, two online surveys were carried out using *SurveyMonkey* to get feedback from students. The questionnaire pertaining to the VLE was undertaken in Spring 2011 and was accessed by 60 respondents. The questionnaire concerning the *Facebook* page ran at the beginning of February 2012 and was completed by 64 respondents. The latter included a question asking students to compare the usefulness of both platforms. As 55% of the respondents had used the VLE in the first year of the study and the *Facebook* page in the second, or had accessed both in the second year, they were in a position to offer their opinion concerning both platforms.

3. Data analysis and results

3.1. Overall use of the platforms

Figure 3. Number of users/'fans' and visits/page views



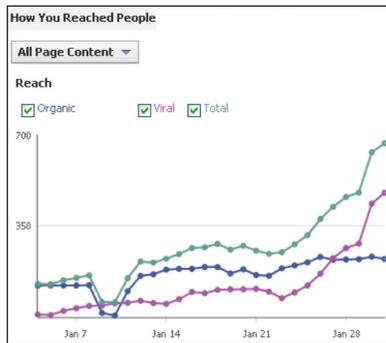
When we observe the overall use of the two platforms (Figure 3), the differences are striking. Even though there are over twice as many users on the VLE, the *Facebook* page was viewed over 55,000 times, as opposed to just over 4,000 visits over a similar timeframe of a year for the *Sulis* site. Some of these divergences in results can be explained by the set-up of the sites.

The higher numbers on the VLE can be explained by the fact that the site was manually populated by the staff of the centre with all the students learning a language in the School. Although access to the site does not automatically equate to use of the site, a vast majority of the students who were given access to the VLE logged in to check it out. However, out of the 810 actual users, 30% accessed the site only once; we may assume they did so out of curiosity.

Conversely, the number of 'fans' on *Facebook* does not truly reflect the number of users of the Facebook page, as users do not need to have 'liked' a page to be able to visit it. The actual number of users is thus more difficult to ascertain. The data from Figure 4 shows how some posts were 'reached', i.e., accessed, over a one-month period. The 'organic reach' line corresponds to the number of

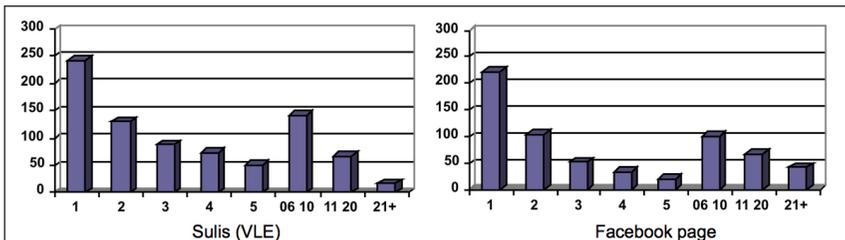
unique people, fans or non-fans, who saw the post in their news feed or directly on the *Facebook* Page whereas the ‘viral reach’ data refers to the number of unique people who saw this post from a story published by a friend. This graph thus highlights the ‘viral’ nature of *Facebook*: the information passes from user to user via their ‘Wall’. This can explain the high number of page views, as the information was transferred from user to user.

Figure 4. “Reach” of the Facebook page over a one-month period



Moreover, we can also speculate that a page viewed does not necessarily equate to a page read. So we cannot assume that the information, while displayed on students’ profile, is taken on board.

Figure 5. Frequency of use of both platforms over a one-year period



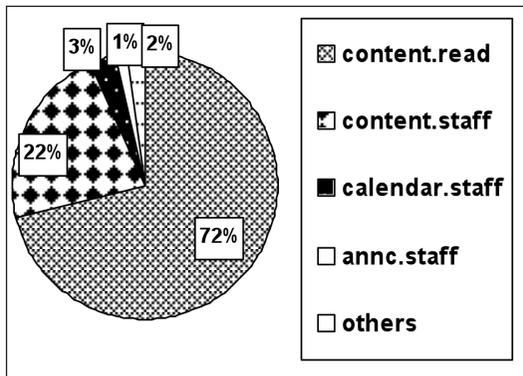
Interestingly, the graphs on [Figure 5](#) reveal that overall, the pattern of use is similar on both platforms, with a high percentage of unique visits, a steady

decrease in numbers up to 5 visits, and a significant proportion of users who can be classified as frequent users (6 visits or more). The only noteworthy differences in this pattern of use are the higher ratio of 6-10 visits on the VLE and the larger amount of users with more than 21 visits on *Facebook*. But overall, the frequency of use is not significantly higher on *Facebook*, as it could have been expected from a medium so widely used by the target audience.

3.2. Details of activities on the platforms

We can note that the VLE is primarily accessed to read content and the other activities (adding content, updating the calendar, posting information) are restricted to staff even though the setting of the VLE allowed students to post as well (see [Figure 6](#)).

Figure 6. Types of activities on Sulis - total: 5283



This tends to show that from a student point of view, both the *Sulis* and *Facebook* sites are used in a similar way, mainly to access and read content. However, differences appear when we observe the types of activities and interactivity on both platforms ([Figure 7](#), [Figure 8](#), and [Figure 9](#)).

The most salient feature when observing [Figure 7](#) is the discrepancy in the level of staff participation between the two platforms. This can be explained by the

nature of the participation on both sites. On the VLE, staff frequently shared useful resources for students (links, material...). This represented 83.5% of all the staff participation on the site.

Figure 7. Staff and student participation

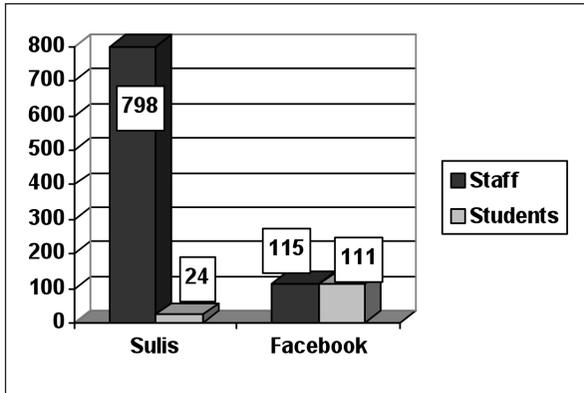
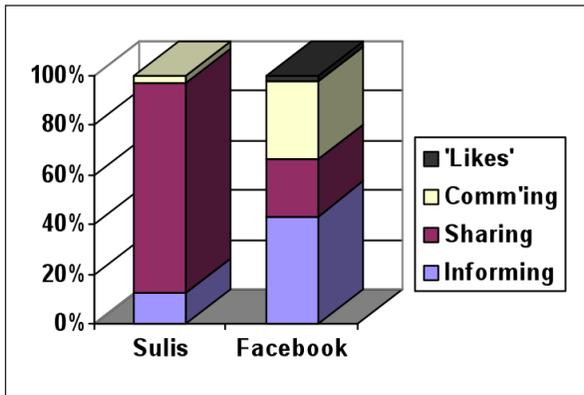


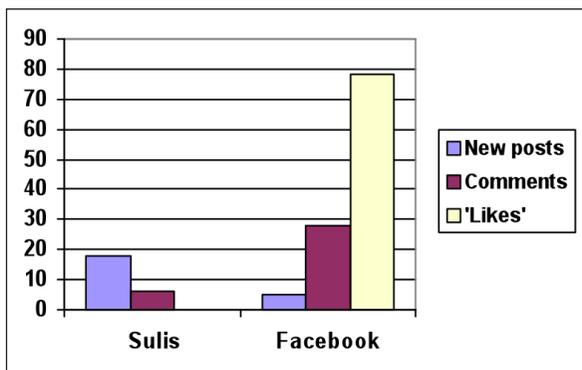
Figure 8. Types of staff participation



As detailed in [Figure 8](#), this function is far less developed on the *Facebook* page (22.5% of all posts) which is used more extensively to inform students (e.g., events in the School, language-related events in the country, new material

acquired by the centre, funding opportunities...) and to communicate with them (e.g., queries about future material to be purchased, survey of favourite foreign movies, response to students posts or comments...). *Facebook* thus seems to hold a more dialogic function. This observation is reinforced by the overall level of student participation, which is five times higher on the social networking site (Figure 9). Even though 70% of the student participation is limited to a 'like', it shows an involvement and a certain level of engagement with the content of the page. Furthermore, the number of comments is also four times higher on *Facebook*, which supports the idea that *Facebook* contributes to a higher level of communication.

Figure 9. Types of student participation



It is revealing to examine in detail the types of posts which elicit the highest level of participation amongst students. On the *Sulis* platform, students react mostly to messages about ways to improve their language learning, about useful resources and their access. Figure 10 provides an example of these messages, with the particularity of being a message initiated by a student. On the *Facebook* page, pictures of events and messages linked to cultural aspects seem to get the highest number of 'likes' and comments. Figure 11 illustrates this point. It would tend to show that *Sulis* is used more as a pedagogical tool whereas *Facebook* is used as a social and cultural tool. The study of the students' feedback will confirm this remark.

Figure 10. Sample of exchanges on Sulis

02/22/2010 11:07:42		Subject: MUSICI...FRENCH STYLE!
PM		
STUDENT	Hey Guys,	
Last edited: 02/22/2010 04:07:42 PM Messages: 10	Some of you may have already heard about it, but "Deezer" is a brilliant website I came across while I was in France over the holidays. Basically its like Youtube but just for music, and the sound quality is excellent. In France, you can play virtually any song you like, its almost like a dj and will learn what type of music you like depending on what you select. You can play all the current top chart music. Its already a big success across Europe (God, it sounds like they're paying me to write this!)	
	<p>Anyway, my point is this site is a great way to listen to new FOREIGN MUSIC which is a good idea for all us Language Learners! e.g if you select "BEST NEW FRENCH" playlist it will play lots of french songs that are popular at the moment. If you create a profile on the site, you can then create playlists to which you can save new songs as you come across them. You'll then have them to play whenever you want! Heres the address :</p> <p>www.deezer.com/</p> <p>Believe me, its well worth a look at least. This is the fun side of language learning! If you find music you like in a language you are studying, then thats definitely an incentive to improve your level. Definitely a site to add to your favourites. Sorry for the long-winded message!</p> <p>Have fun, David</p>	
02/23/2010 09:52:23		Subject: Re:MUSICI...FRENCH STYLE!
AM		
STAFF	Merci David,	
Last edited: 02/23/2010 09:52:53 AM Messages: 17	I am on Deezer all the time! I think you put your finger on a great topic: music for language learning. So come on people (especially those of you who are just back from Erasmus/coop), tell us what music/artists you discovered!	
	Catherine	
02/25/2010 09:32:24		Subject: Re:MUSICI...FRENCH STYLE!
PM		
STUDENT	Merci David,	
Last edited: 02/25/2010 01:32:24 PM	J'adore la musique francais sur l'internet! A mon avis, c'est tres interesant. Malachy	

Figure 11. Sample of exchanges on Facebook

Language Resource Area UL
September 29, 2011

What is your favourite foreign movie? I want to make a list of recommendations of good French/Germany/Spanish and Japanese films to watch. Could you give me some suggestions? Thanks, merci!

Like · Comment · Share 1 12

Mark Tuite likes this.

[Redacted] run lola run - german movie
September 29, 2011 at 4:13pm · Like

Language Resource Area UL yes, cool movie (and we have it in the LRA!)
September 29, 2011 at 4:20pm · Like

[Redacted] 'das wunder von bern' is pretty good too - another german movie
September 29, 2011 at 4:22pm · Like

[Redacted] Das Experiment (German) is a great thriller/suspense movie!
Le fabuleux destin d'Amélie Poulain (French) is of course a classic!
Anything by studio ghibli, for Japanese or Shimotsuna monogatari and fish story are also just genius!
September 29, 2011 at 4:38pm · Like

Language Resource Area UL Keep the suggestions coming! I will then make a list of the ones we have in the LRA and will try to purchase a few of the most popular ones we don't have!
September 29, 2011 at 4:45pm · Like

[Redacted] La Haine (FR), La Mar Adentro (ESP), Pan's Labyrinth (ESP), Battle Royale (J), La Belle Et La Bete (FR), Delicatessen (FR), Confessions (J).
September 29, 2011 at 4:51pm · Like

[Redacted] The Orphanage and Cronos (ESP)
September 29, 2011 at 4:55pm · Like

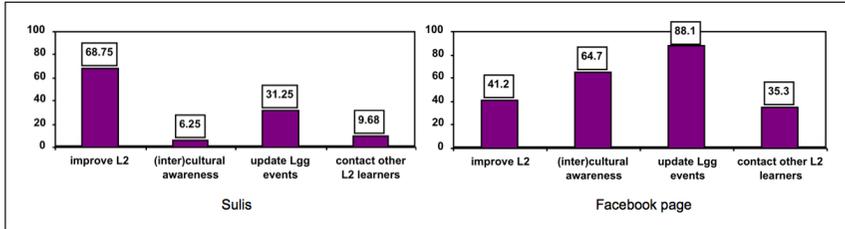
[Redacted] Das Leben der Anderen (The Lives of Others) is an excellent German one. Der Baader-Meinhof Komplex is quite good too.

3.3. Feedback from online users

To complement the data analysis from the two sites, two surveys were carried out to get feedback from students. The first survey focused on the VLE and the second on the *Facebook* page with an extra question asking students to compare the two sites if they used both. The results from these questionnaires can be divided into three broad categories: usefulness of the sites, participation on the sites and sense of community or community building.

3.3.1. Usefulness of the sites

Figure 12. Usefulness of both platforms (in %)



The data from Figure 12 reveal students' perception of the usefulness of the two sites. The majority of students opt for the educational value of the VLE and the informative value of the Facebook page. The informative role of the VLE also represents a sizeable proportion of the replies; it could be explained by the calendar and announcement functions of the site. More interestingly, it is worth noting that the students view the Facebook page as a good tool to raise (inter)cultural awareness and the educational function of the page is also acknowledged, though not receiving a majority of approval. The social aspect of the Facebook page is also highlighted with 35% of students stating that it is useful to contact other language learners.

When asked to compare the two sites and express their preferences, students place Sulis strongly ahead for educational purposes (73% against 27% for Facebook) citing the larger availability of learning resources as the reason for their choice: “The Sulis page provides access to many more resources which I find very helpful”, “there is more information on Sulis to help language learning”.

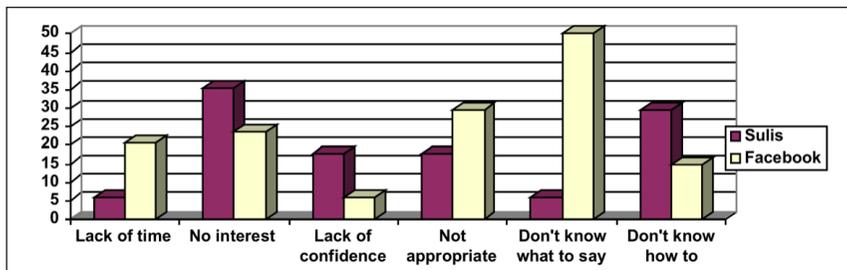
Preconceptions concerning the two platforms also influence their choice: “I use the Sulis page as I associate that with college work. I use Facebook as a social site, I do not use it for educational purposes”. When it comes to ease of use, ease of access and overall enjoyment of the platform, the trends are reversed, with Facebook topping the poll (77% versus 23% for the VLE): “Facebook, as it feels socialable [sic] and more enjoyable rather than Sulis”, “Facebook is easier to

access and gives you info fast, without having to search for it". Finally, we can also notice that several students recognise the value of both platforms but for different functions: "I suppose they are both good, but for different purposes", "Sulis is more useful for serious revision, but the LRA page [on Facebook] is something I would check regularly", "Sulis is a better source of academic resources so I prefer this".

3.3.2. Participation on the sites

Only 12.8% of respondents to the questionnaire concerning the VLE acknowledged they had posted a contribution to the site as opposed to 31.1% of respondents of the *Facebook* survey.

Figure 13. Reasons for not contributing to the sites (in %)

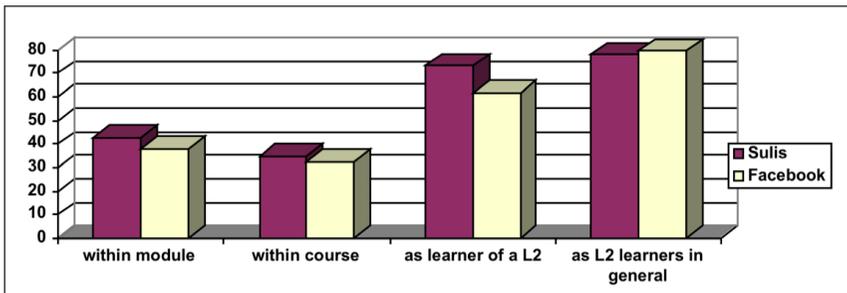


A comparison of the reasons for not posting on the sites reveals some noteworthy differences (Figure 13). While lack of confidence and technological know-how does not seem to be an issue on *Facebook*, students do not seem to know what to say (50% of respondents) and do not feel it appropriate to post contributions (29.4% of respondents). The comments offered by some students shed some light as to the reasons why these feelings prevail: "I haven't found anything worth sharing I guess" and "sometimes I feel afraid to post on it but I do feel it is useful". It would be interesting to explore whether students might feel that they do not have enough expertise to post on a page 'owned' by someone they might perceive as an expert (administrator of the centre) and open to all the other language students. In parallel, students suggested more interactions

between students as a way to improve both sites (“*not enough people are getting involved in it which is such a great pity*”), though several added that they did not know how this could be achieved: “*It a great source of new and interesting information but unlike the ULSU [student union] page, people don’t communicate as much - I don’t think it’s really able to bring people together that much. Anyways, the work that is done besides that is amazing. It’s a great promoter of the events and meetings so I don’t think there is much else to be doing!*”.

3.3.3. Sense of community and community building

Figure 14. Contribution of the sites to building group identity (in %)



When asked about their perception of the sites’ contribution to the ‘building of a sense of group identity’, we can observe no notable differences between the two platforms (Figure 14). The Facebook page receives a slightly lower percentage for the ‘specialised’ category, such as group identity within a module or as learner of a specific language. This might be explained by the existing groupings per language in the resources and forums section of the VLE site on Sulis.

The students’ comments once again bring some insight into their way of thinking. For the VLE, one student remarks that: “*Sulis is too impersonal to get any sense of group identity*”. As for the networking site, students state that “*most language courses have already established their own Facebook Groups*” and “*each major*

option sets up their own Facebook that builds a group for us. [...] Any queries are usually put on these pages". It would suggest that students do not feel the need to post on the sites put in place by the institution as they already have their own site, where they feel more comfortable communicating. Finally, amongst students' suggestions on how the sites could be improved, several students mentioned that a more 'specialised' approach would be beneficial: "*maybe a tab for each language so quick access for each student in respective fields of study*", "*by having posts in different languages*".

4. Discussion and limitations

Overall, it is possible to say that the students surveyed enjoy having access to a *Facebook* page and prefer the informal feel of the social networking platform, especially when it comes to the sharing of information on events and cultural aspects. The study of the participation patterns indicates that *Facebook* tends to encourage more communication from students (even if their involvement is often limited to 'likes') and that it generally promotes activities of a dialogic nature with a focus on social aspects, which proves positive in a language learning context.

The analysis of the data reveals no strong opposition to the adoption of these new tools in a different context. On the contrary, the high rate of access to the *Facebook* page shows that students are, at the very least, curious about the use of the networking site for a different purpose than the one they are familiar with. The general trend of this case-study, including the various comments by the surveys' respondents, suggests that students reacted positively to the integration of a *Facebook* page in their learning environment.

However, preconceptions pertaining to each site continue to prevail. Students perceive the virtual environment as an adequate study tool and the *Facebook* page as a social one. Our study brought similar results as [Hew's \(2011\)](#) findings concerning students' perception of the educational value of *Facebook*, as some of the students' comments on our survey point out to the

fact that a proportion of them fail to appreciate the educational potential of the social networking site.

Furthermore, while the *Facebook* page encouraged a higher level of participation from learners, the level of student to student communication was nevertheless not as high as originally anticipated. As this case-study was carried out in a language-learning support context, there was no scope to introduce and explain to students the educational value of the social networking site while running the experiment. Despite being familiar with these technologies, most students have not used them for educational purposes. Therefore, it seems important that educators facilitate the integration of these new tools by showing students how they can be applied more in educational endeavours and how students can benefit from this use.

The findings from our case-study also confirm that the value of social networking sites such as *Facebook* in the creation and development of online learning communities is not to be underestimated. A high number of students indicate that the *Facebook* page contributed to building their sense of community belonging as learners of a foreign language. This can be explained by the fact that social networking sites increase the opportunities for staff-student communication, but more importantly student-student communication. They also provide an environment where all the factors contributing to community building can be gathered: defined boundaries (with the list of fans visible on the page), influence (with the various postings contributing to increase students' knowledge and know-how), fulfilment of needs (with the possibility for students to post queries or find information on the page), and connection (with the ubiquity of *Facebook*, its viral nature and its affordance – with the 'likes' for example). In the field of language learning where community building is an important factor in developing the skills required to speak a language, social networking sites thus have a pedagogical value which cannot be ignored.

However, it is important to highlight that definitive conclusions cannot be drawn from this case-study as the sample of students surveyed was narrow and the

study context was limited to one learning scenario. Further investigations in this field would be encouraged to substantiate the findings from this study.

5. Conclusions and future recommendations

This case-study shed some light on the integration of social networking sites in a learning environment, and specifically in a language-learning context. It highlights that, while Irish students are not resisting the introduction of this new media in their learning arsenal, they fail to fully grasp the educational value of these new tools. A greater involvement from teaching staff, both in terms of promotion and participation on the site, could change these views. If educators were to change their practices, students would be more inclined to follow suit. It also seems important to introduce students to the pedagogical value of social media so that they can approach it with a different frame of mind.

A different approach would be encouraged to promote a higher level of participation amongst students. Indeed, feedback from students emphasises that the ‘one site fits them all approach’ adopted by the LRA might not suit all students, as some would find it more comfortable to participate in a more ‘specialised’ community of practice. Therefore, a *Facebook* page set up in the context of a module or a course would probably be easier to manage and could be better perceived.

It would also be worth investigating whether students’ lack of contributions could be linked to the fact that they did not feel that they ‘appropriated’ the site, as the communication on the site is dominated by the administrator of the centre who also ‘owns’ the sites. This can be inferred from the fact that students created their own pages where course issues and problem-solving take place at a more ‘manageable’ level. The surveys also show that students attributed their poor posting record to the fact that they did not know what to say. It would be interesting to find out whether they did not feel they had the authority or the knowledge to contribute, or if they were afraid to ‘lose face’ as they were unaware of the level of expertise of the other users. A smaller-scale *Facebook*

page would thus be probably less daunting and could potentially lead to a higher level of participation.

To finish on a positive note, several students have highlighted the prospective value of *Facebook* within this learning context, pointing out that: “*Facebook has lots of potential!*” (Student questionnaire, February 2012).

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