

# Facebook as a Learning-Management System in Developmental Writing

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During 2011 to 2013, developmental education was a hot topic at Three Rivers Community College (TRCC), in Norwich, CT. In 2012, Developmental Education PA 12-40 was introduced to rethink the way that developmental education was taught. In Fall 2012-13, all ENG\*K012, ENG\*K002, and ENG\*K100 courses at TRCC were replaced by two academically rigorous courses in reading and writing, taught separately with a tutor in both classrooms. The new courses were piloted. This pilot program was TRCC's response to the State of Connecticut proposal that students could bypass the traditional model of developmental education and enroll directly in college-level classes (Connecticut Board of Regents for Higher Education, 2012). Student success is the aim of both models. In Fall 2011, this legislation had not impacted the practicum. While teaching developmental classes from 2009-2013 at TRCC, the model of 20 students per developmental class was embraced. Technology use had not been a ubiquitous part of the Developmental English curriculum. The following Facebook (FB) model might be suggested for any class, developmental or otherwise.

## Problem

At the time of this experiment (2011-12), most faculty members at TRCC underutilized technology in their classrooms and were concerned about using FB with their students for a variety of reasons, ranging from privacy and security concerns to the idea that FB has no redeeming educational value. The TRCC Director of Educational Technology said TRCC had not tracked social media per se (K. Barfield, personal communication, February 6, 2012). Although there are some exceptions, generally faculty members felt that social media and curriculum clash. Faculty members expressed, "[Social media] is a playground and [traditional classroom pedagogy] is devoted to serious academic and professional endeavors." Further, the push towards Blackboard usage emphasized safety, privacy and security, whereas social

media (such as FB) was perceived as having no guarantees. A "Survey of Ed Tech Needs" was administered in 2010 and out of the 60 surveyed, social networking (FB, Myspace, Twitter) was rated at a low importance. Both skill level and level of importance for social networking (FB, Myspace, Twitter, etc.) were assessed: 18 of the 60 surveyed felt that social networking had a low importance and 15 felt that they had a low skill level.

## Purpose

The purpose of this study was to assess whether FB, as an LMS (Learning Management System) may be used in a developmental writing course, may build a community of learners in ENG\*K012, and may enhance the presence

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of a supportive shared community to build confidence in students' writing and/or sharing their writing. An additional purpose was to determine the level of community in FB as an LMS model in one ENG\*K012: Foundations of Writing course while teaching a second ENG\*K012 course in a traditional manner (e.g., absence of technology). Evaluating the level of improvement in student's writing as a result of building self-efficacy and confidence during the period of the Fall 2011 semester was essential. Finally, the study examined the potential impact on teachers' use of technology (e.g., Blackboard Vista, Web 2.0 tools) in their courses.

## Restrictive Characteristics of the Model

FB has had very limited use by instructors in English courses, especially developmental English courses. This study was based on 1 semester and should be tested over time to determine the effectiveness as an LMS model. Privacy and security has been a hot topic in FB online and real-time discussions and should not be treated lightly. Some students might simply object to creating a FB account; therefore, great care should be exercised to create an optional project for students opposed to being part of the FB page.

First-generation students may not have access to computers and/or don't have a FB account; first-generation students are reluctant to get a FB account because of privacy and security issues. However, as Morante (2011) has said, "If you make it optional, students won't do it." Also, there are many Web 2.0 tools available for use in the classroom in addition to FB. Further, unlike a true LMS, FB does not have a secure means for storing/posting students' grades unlike Blackboard. Therefore, although external FB grading applications are available, they are strongly discouraged due to HIPPA privacy laws. At TRCC, both FB and potential conflicting grade book applications (not related to Blackboard) are not protected by the IT Department. Finally, if faculty members plan to use any Web 2.0 tools, they should notify their

Director of Educational Technology (who will inform administration) prior to introducing these tools into their classes; in that way appropriate supports will be in place if there are any repercussions.

## Model and Demographics

In Fall 2011, two developmental writing classes were taught by the same instructor. A FB page was created for one ENG\*K012 course (experimental) and the other was taught more traditionally (control). Both the experimental group and control group contained students representing both Generation M and first-generation students. In the experimental group, 18 out of 20 developmental students accepted invitations to become members of the class FB page “Early Risers Writing Group.” In designing this practicum, important interviews and sources were accessed to design the most appropriate use of social media with students in developmental education.

Boylan (2011) mentioned some examples of teaching activities which are important to include with developmental students: to ask questions, draw pictures, define terms, teach responsibility, and therefore “not limit their learning to one mode of delivery.” Likewise, Burgess (2009), mentioned students should be guided and scaffolded in using technology. “Many students are first-generation students and don’t understand what it means to be in college” (Morante, 2011). According to Cvetkovic and Lackie, (2009), there are several “digital divides” that exist: socioeconomic divide regarding “teens’ use of social networking” and generational divide defined by “use of technology that socially and educationally separates adults from younger people” (p. 6). However, many educators are reticent and tied to their current teaching pedagogical strategies, and they won’t entertain the use of technology to facilitate meaningful interaction with their students. (Bowers-Campbell, 2008).

Educators who have a more constructivist-centered approach and use technology to reach their students help their students to become more engaged with their learning (Cvetkovic & Lackie, 2009; Mazman & Usleul, 2010; Roblyer, McDaniel, Webb, Herman & Witty, 2010). The problem lies in that many educators are reticent and tied to their current teaching pedagogical strategies so much that they won’t entertain the use of technology to facilitate meaningful interaction with their students (Bowers-Campbell, 2008; Cvetkovic & Lackie, 2009). Roth (2009) states “research shows that many faculty [members] are hesitant to mix technology and pedagogy” (p. 125). According to Roblyer, et al. (2010), “higher education faculty remain laggards when it comes to adopting...technology innovations...in sum, students are willing; faculty members are not (p. 134).

However, “professors at Yale University felt that interacting with students on FB broke down barriers between themselves and their students” (Duboff as cited in Siegle 2011, p. 17). Moore (as cited in Burgess, 2009), emphasized the importance; “any means that increase at-risk students’ motivation and engagement should be pursued.”(p. 13). I designed my project to include the affective domain needed. “Electronic mail, web pages and LMSs, such as WebCT increases opportunities for students and faculty to converse and exchange work much more speedily than before, and more thoughtfully and ‘safely’ than when confronting each other in a classroom or faculty office” (Chickering & Gamson, 1991).

In developing my practicum I considered potential risks of social media. Students must realize that whatever is posted on FB can be a permanent record and public; when teachers show students the importance of professionalism on the Web (including FB), students will know whatever they post can follow them into their professional lives, current or future (McIntosh, 2010).

Low cost, ubiquity, accessibility and ease of use are all potential affordances making Web 2.0 technologies more attractive than traditional software in teaching and learning environments (Ajjan & Hartshorne, 2008).

## Goals and Objectives

The following goals helped shape the procedure. Goal 1 was to build a learning community of students through the LMS model. The objective was establishing a comfort zone for a relationship with students and with each other through commonly agreed-upon FB discourse rules. Goal 2 was to affectively use low-stakes familiar technology to motivate students in the affective domain through the low stakes (e.g., 10 points of their participation grade was based on the FB portion of the class). The intended outcome was for students to become more open-minded to FB’s utility and versatility as an educational tool instead of only a personal page to interact with their friends. Goal 3 was to scaffold students into critically examining how the writing skills in ENG\*K012 related to FB as an LMS. Students will write a FB reflection of their experiences and tie it to the objectives. Goal 4 was to have more instructors use technology in their classrooms. I therefore demonstrated to adjunct faculty how FB could be used successfully as an LMS at Adjunct Faculty Professional Development sessions.

## Results of the Practicum

In response to potential student privacy concerns, the Early Risers Writing Group group was private and closed. Only the instructor could permit someone to enter the group. Students were asked to access the FB page a minimum of twice a week. In the end of semester reflections, this was the only difficulty they had with the rules. However, 12 students out of 18 accessed FB at least once a week to post or respond to comments. Second, it was unnecessary to

share personal email addresses because they could use FB messaging to communicate with each other privately. It is important to demonstrate to students how to locate the handouts on FB; in this case, the handouts were archived in the “Docs” section of their FB page.

Students knew that proper grammar was encouraged but not required. However, from diagnostic writing to

final semester writing, grammar, spelling, and mechanics did improve in this more relaxed environment as evidenced by the instructors review. Students’ feedback reflected similar patterns: At midterm, 16 students out of 18 students (approximately 88%) answered “4” (agree) or “5” (strongly agree) to the statement, “I think the class FB page is improving my writing and/or confidence in writing.”

Class members communicated to their instructor at least three private messages a week which were answered within 24 hours. Students used the Wall daily to ask questions about homework, clarify any confusion, and brainstorm ideas about major assignments. They remembered to complete their required FB homework during their instructor’s absence. Students expressed that they missed their face-to-face class time during their “week on FB,” but their communication was strong and homework completed.

Students’ attendance was determined through a time and date stamp of who posted. Attendance records were kept initially based on individual students’ posts. To receive the full 10 points, they had to post and actively engage through responses to others. Initially, the instructor responded to someone’s post and prompted “Other thoughts?” This method was effective and 12 out of 18 students earned 10 points through FB participation.

Students were informed not to post or share unacceptable comments, foul language, or distasteful links to the FB page. Early Risers Writing Group students did not like Mywritinglab, and they expressed this on FB and in

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class. The instructor made Mywritinglab optional for the remainder of the semester and used it only for extra practice.

Students treated their FB page as they would the physical classroom space, and once they became comfortable and at ease on FB, it translated into the class environment. Establishing rules from day one ensured continuity of expectations for appropriate in-class and FB interaction.

The level of community was assessed by both the experimental and control groups taking the SCI 2: Sense of Community Index Survey. The initial question ‘How important is it to you to feel a sense of community with other community members?’ concluded that the total sense of community was correlated with this question.” Based on these results, the Early Risers Writing Group experimental group (71%) valued the sense of community more than the control group (50%). Both groups had almost an equal number of students who left the question blank. The FB page remained open at students’ requests.

After the Fall 2011 semester, approximately 40 adjuncts from a variety of TRCC academic disciplines attended a workshop for approximately 12 hours (four-hour sessions) and were required to complete an article for a newsletter of how they would use the proposed tools/suggestions in their courses. On the final day of each adjunct professional development workshop, a FB Faculty Usage and Familiarity with FB Survey was distributed to 39 adjuncts with 31 responses to at least some of the survey questions. The results were as follows: 24 faculty members were familiar with FB; 18 faculty members had either a personal or professional FB account; 16 faculty members used FB to reconnect with people; and two faculty members felt it is acceptable for teachers to “friend” students, 11 felt neutral/undecided about this topic, nine felt undecided about students “friending” teachers, and four faculty members felt it is acceptable for students to “friend” teachers. Related to mechanics of usage 13 faculty members knew how to adjust their FB privacy settings, 12 used FB chat, messaging and the “Wall,” two were familiar with the “Docs” feature, six were familiar with creating a FB page other than a personal page, six would consider using FB in the classroom and 11 were undecided/neutral about the matter, and seven felt that FB may improve students’ writing with 14 undecided/neutral. Seven felt that FB can be used as both a social and teaching tool, 14 were undecided/neutral, and 10 felt it was a social tool, not a teaching tool. This workshop for adjuncts—who often teach developmental education—unfortunately was not repeated.

## Recommendations

Although this practicum was born from the ETC proposal to use Web 2.0 tools in TRCC classes with the directive to report the results back to the ETC, many faculty members at TRCC were unsettled about using FB with their students for a variety of reasons. For example, many had privacy and security concerns regarding the idea that FB’s purpose is for social networking. Also, faculty members were generally unwilling to use technology in their classrooms unless they perceived the educational value of using it there.

The Connecticut College System has introduced a secure version of a social networking tool called “ConnSCU Commons” which is like FB, Twitter, and Linked-In combined. At the time of writing this paper, faculty and staff could create accounts, follow each other, and post; however, there is a possibility that ConnSCU Commons could be introduced to students.

## Conclusion

Two of the course outcomes for ENG\*K012 were to (a) write responses both in paragraph and short essay format based on ideas developed from assigned readings and in-class discussions, and (b) develop proficiency in expressing

ideas in correct, complete sentences and in unified, coherent paragraphs. The ENG\*K012 Early Risers Writing Group demonstrated these outcomes throughout the semester; specifically, through the FB experiment, the Early Risers Writing Group completed end of semester FB reflections which were structured five paragraph essays.

Based on the research and this study, FB is an excellent way to introduce developmental students to the eventual move towards technology in their classes, especially as a segue to Blackboard Vista and the new social networking site ConnSCU Commons. Many of the utilized components of FB are features found in Blackboard, such as posting documents, discussing questions, emailing, and chatting. The data gathered reflects that teachers are reluctant to use technology and more specifically Web 2.0 tools, although it has been shown that students are open to using technology that is familiar to them. As Rice (2011) shares, “students are saying they want to see classes taught more like how they live their lives” (para. 11).

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