

TECHNOLOGY IN PEDAGOGY

Series



Facebook for Teaching and Learning: By Dr Erik Moberand

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Over the years since its inception, Facebook (FB) has become the social network site of choice by University students. Selwyn (2007) describes how Facebook has become an integral part of the “behind the scenes” college experience. Singapore has 77.8% internet penetration and a high usage rate for Facebook.



By using Facebook, instructors can take advantage of and use the student space, says Erik Moberand, an Assistant Professor of Political Science at the National University of Singapore. He teaches on topics including the politics of development, social policy, popular culture and politics, and political finance.

In the session, Dr Moberand shared his experience with using Facebook in Honours modules over the past years and he suggested some ideas for getting started.

Collaboration in syllabus writing

In the year 2008, Dr Moberand had the students in his seminar-style Honours module class on “Money and Politics” to prepare syllabus and readings for his class (Class size: 25 students). He gave a list of core readings and illustrative readings that is important for the class to get started.

Every week he got two students to lead the seminar rather than him hijacking the discussion. These students would then assign readings – video clips, images, journal articles, or papers – for the entire class and is shared with their peers. For this sharing and for enabling students to do the class work in their familiar space, he set up a Facebook group for his class. The group was a closed group and invited his students to join the group.

The results? He transformed his students from learners to teachers, which improve outcomes. His students made connections between concepts in class and the real world with in the Facebook environment. The informality helped students to express themselves better and also broke down the boundaries – the academic and social boundaries.

Pedagogical advantages that Facebook offers

Dr Moberand highlighted the following features that he liked and prompted him to explore using Facebook in his class:

1. Engage students in a discussion

Dr Moberand assigns two students to lead the discussion. These students post the relevant reading materials and puts down a description on their plan for the discussion. Students engage in the discussion before the face-to-face (F2F) class. Dr Moberand then takes a few minutes before each seminar to check the discussion on FB and this would enable him to take the discussion easily from FB into the F2F seminars. He also awards marks for student participation with a few percentage points.

2. Allow students to easily post and view video clips and pictures

Facebook allows for posting and sharing information with the ability to include notes, and upload videos and pictures. He realised that students found materials that they can easily relate to. This fosters student interactivity and creates student-generated content. Dr Moberand indicated his liking of a clean and simple interface which allows for easy sharing as large percent of students are using it and will get their materials with a click within their space.

3. Bring the learning environment to students' social space

Dr Moberand felt that FB increases accessibility and breaks down false boundaries. He also sees that as he moves from the academic space like the IVLE to the social space, the need for students to move back and forth between academic and social becomes unnecessary. In the examples he showcased, he pointed out that most of his class discussions happened in the middle of the night. Hence breaking down the boundary between academic and social and moving into the social space of students makes it easy for him to capture their interest.

As students are socializing in their space, they come across interesting articles and will immediately post them for the class to read. Students can easily access FB on mobile devices, so using FB in the class allows them to participate in academic activities while on the move. Dr Moberand felt that this would not happen if they were to post in academic spaces like the LMS. This informality helps students to express themselves better.

Summary of Feedback/Suggestions from the Discussion

Following the presentation by Dr Moberand, a lively discussion followed touching on issues related to using social media in classes – both small and large classes, comparing using Facebook to the learning management systems or blogs, and forming ideas on how they could use Facebook in their classes.

- When a participant wondered if it would be feasible to use FB for large classes, other participants proposed using tutorial groups to create individual FB groups. Then each tutorial group facilitated by a tutor could discuss their issues on their FB group. Finally, a class FB group

could then be used to post the summary of the individual FB discussions. This will then allow the instructor and the class to view post before a F2F class discussion.

- Some participants using blogs felt that they could supplement their blogs with FB groups for sharing of information as blogs act more as a platform for reflection and is expository while FB is not.
- One participant said that he would try using FB during classes, to enable the shy students in his class to participate.
- Others suggested using it upload video presentation of students and allow students to review their peer's presentation.

Finally, it was acknowledged that students are using FB for academic purposes on their own. Dr Mobrand noticed that students were holding a mock diplomatic meeting in another colleague's class using FB groups for coordinating within their team. This was something that students had done on their own without any instruction from the lecturer. It goes to show that many students see FB as a natural way of communicating with their peers on academic matters even if instructors do not command them to do so. Hence, it is clear that students are already using FB for learning purposes and so it is important for instructors to exploit it to the benefit of both the teachers and students.

Q & A Session

Following the presentation by Dr Mobrand, a lively discussion ensued and listed below are some questions from the subsequent Q & A session.

Q: As learning becomes socialized, will students get distracted? Will the quality of learning get affected?

EM: Facebook is a distraction. But, I favour distraction and want them to be distracted and we are actually taking advantage of that distraction. Instead of showing videos to their friends, they can become distracted with our class happenings.

Q: How do you mark student participation?

EM: I mark student participation in FB similar to that of participation during in-class discussions. I generally look for the quality of the responses – looking for students who express interestingly and the frequency at which such interesting responses are posted.

Q: Do you restrict the length of the posts or comments?

EM: No. I do not set a limit to the comments and posts. As for the length of the comments, lengthy discussions are quite common in F2F class discussions; students do give lengthy responses and if we don't encourage those, students would stop participating. So, the same would apply here as well. But in general, good comments are concise.

Q: How much do you control the discussions in FB?

EM: I am okay if the discussion goes slightly off the topic but I will intervene when that happens too much. In the early days, when interesting debates came up, I used to intervene, get involved in the participation and offer my comment. Once I wrote my comments, the discussion usually would die down soon. After that experience, I slowed down on commenting immediately. However, I read the comments and pick out useful things that are important and bring them into the classroom for F2F discussion.

Q: How often do you initiate a discussion?

EM: Usually the two students leading the discussion that week will initiate the discussion and the discussion happens until the F2F seminar is held, after which it slowly sizzles out.

Q: How long do you keep the comments? Do you showcase good comments/posts?

EM: I keep some comments for my own reference and clean them up from time to time. However, I have never tried showcasing good comments for future use. But we do a great deal of discussion on comments and posts.

Q: How different is the discussion from using chat and discussion in IVLE?

EM: Similar but this environment is more receptive and attractive as it is trendier among students. IVLE appears to be more of an academic platform for students. Using discussions in an LMS environment is moving students into the locked-down mode which removes the very openness and the ease in usage while in FB.

Q: How much additional work is required to use Facebook?

EM: Thinks it requires less time and work. The time taken is for me to read the comments before class. But it is time well spent, as it gives me more sense of students' understanding and allows me to prepare for class. This gives me a good idea of their understanding of the reading posted and does not require to guess on what is working and what isn't.

Q: What are some problems that you have encountered?

EM: What's gone wrong – I did not face any huge problems. But I have heard from colleagues in secondary schools that students write inappropriate comments. And recently it has also been reported in the newspapers that students may get confused and post personal comments into the FB group.

Q: Did you encounter resistance from your students? Did they feel it was an invasion of their privacy?

EM: Students did not think it was an invasion of privacy as I allowed them to create fake account specific for the class.