

THE USE OF FACEBOOK FOR ONLINE DISCUSSIONS AMONG DISTANCE LEARNERS

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ABSTRACT

With the advent of Web 2.0 tools, educators are looking to these new technological tools to examine its potential in enhancing teaching and learning. While its runaway success as a social networking tool is now renowned, the use of Facebook for educational purposes may be considered still at its infancy stage. This paper describes the use of Facebook as a platform for academic discussions among distance learners. It offers a glimpse into how mobile learning via SMS together with Facebook was used to support and enhance the blended learning approach at Open University Malaysia for three courses: Learning Skills for Open and Distance Learners, Company Law and Renal Nursing. Data on user interactions collected were from the "Page Insights" tools available to Page administrators for the whole duration of a course semester. Facebook interactions examined include total number of fans, total interactions, interactions per post, post quality and unique page views. Findings indicate that Facebook does have the potential to draw distance learners to engage in meaningful academic conversations but the quantity and quality of posts very much depends on the timing as well as the topics of discussion.

Keywords: Facebook, social networking, online discussions, distance learners, mobile learning

BACKGROUND OF FACEBOOK

Originally created by Harvard University computer science student Mark Zuckerberg side by side with fellow coursemates Eduardo Saverin, Dustin Moskovitz and Chris Hughes for their own personal use, Facebook has since then become a household name to the world of the computer savvy and even to the not so technologically-literate.

As the story goes, Zuckerberg had initially invented a social site project called Facemash in 2003 and later further expanded and revamped it to cater to the academic needs of Harvard students. He founded The facebook in 2004 which was later renamed Facebook. Facebook's membership very quickly evolved from being exclusively for university students to employees of companies such as Microsoft and Apple Inc. and before long, it became public; anyone from anywhere was able to quickly take part in this new wave of social networking. From then on, nothing could stop the spread of Facebook within the internet community.

Facebook appears to be gaining popularity as time goes by. Facebook's amazing growth as proudly announced in its virtual "press room" include the following facts:

- More than 400 million active users
- 50% of their active users log on to Facebook in any given day
- More than 35 million users update their status each day

- More than 60 million status updates posted each day
- More than 5 billion pieces of content (web links, news stories, blog posts, notes, photo albums, etc.) shared each week
- More than 3.5 million events created each month
- More than 3 million active Pages on Facebook
- Pages have created more than 5.3 billion fans
- More than 70 translations available on the site
- About 70% of Facebook users are outside the United States (Facebook, 2010a)

Social Networking is the term that currently refers to use of online services that facilitate the creation and maintenance of online communities via the provision of a variety of means of interaction (CELT, n.d.). Unlike other online social networking sites such as MySpace.com and Friendster, Facebook is more than the typical online socialization site. Zuckerberg himself describe Facebook as a "social utility" rather than a "social network" in that it was aimed at making it "really efficient for people to communicate, get information and share information" (Locke, 2007).

Facebook in education

"Any technology that is able to captivate so many students for so much time not only carries implications for how those students view the world but also offers an opportunity for educators to understand the elements of social networking that students find so compelling and to incorporate those elements into teaching and learning (Educause Learning Initiative, 2006, p. 2). This view is echoed by Jane Williams of Becta, the British government's educational technology agency. She was of the opinion that "social networking sites can have a positive effect on motivation and attainment across the further education sector" (Coughlan, 2009).

Going more into details, Munoz and Towner (2009) believed that "Facebook provides instructors opportunities and structures by which students can help and support one another (and that it) ... also increases both teacher-student and student-student interaction". Apparently much similar to applications available in any typical learning management systems (LMS), Facebook may be used by course facilitators in a variety of ways to help engage students in the learning process.

Some of these include uploading course announcements, announcing events, posting reminders regarding assignments, creating links to educational resources such as video clips and relevant websites as well as facilitating discussions either on the wall or in discussion boards. Such activities help foster conversation and enhance learning in a community of learners. The beauty of this is that students themselves have the same opportunity to take on responsibility and ownership in building their community of learning. They may themselves post announcements and reminders for fellow students, ask questions of their facilitator or peers or help answer other students' queries.

As a matter of fact, Dalsgaard (2006) argued that "learning cannot be managed (but) can, however, be facilitated". As such he suggested that engaging students in social networks may actually empower them in the learning process. When students actively use the tools available, they are actually constructing their own learning environment. This very much concurs with what Owen, Grant, Sayers and Facer (2006) stressed in saying "Social software is about bringing minds and ideas into contact with each other" (p. 11) and that "Identity, space, attention and creativity are all clearly central to the question of how we learn with digital technologies (and) ... are intimately bound up with the ways in which young people may be coming to expect to learn in a digitally rich environment" (p. 30).

Clark (2000) maintained that the difficult part in getting students to take ownership of online discussions is motivating them to take charge, willing to let go of facilitator control and knowing how much to let go. Students need to interact with the facilitator and with other students; interactions motivate them to learn. In this respect, online learning affords ubiquitous interactions and involvement, be it using LMS or social networks. It expands students' learning space and learning time, something that face-to-face interactions simply cannot parallel.

In relation to this, Heiberger and Harper (2008) suggested that the theory of student involvement by Alexander Astin (1984) be used "to support new thinking regarding student involvement with the features of Facebook" (p. 22). According to them, five tenets of the theory that could be used to examine involvement and development are:

- Involvement Requires Physical and Psychological
- Involvement Occurs Along a Continuum
- Involvement Has Both Quantitative and Qualitative Features.
- Development Is Proportional to Quantity and Quality of Involvement.
- Educational Effectiveness Is Related to Capacity to Increase Involvement.

Considering the popularity of Facebook among college students, they further emphasized that educators ought to "explore, create, and use positive, educational, engaging Facebook activities" if they desire to be effective in the delivery of instructional outcomes (p. 24).

While involvement is a social process, it helps shape a student's learning experience and it therefore fosters not only social engagement but academic engagement as well (CELT, n.d.). According to Educause Learning Initiative (2006), Facebook has the potential to make students "feel like they belong and are accepted" (p. 2). Used appropriately, Facebook offers channels for academic and pastoral support which is so crucial in helping distance learners feel connected to their virtual campus, virtual peers and virtual facilitator. Through the creation of community, conversation, collaboration, it has tremendous potential in reducing the sense of online isolation that Walker and McPherson (2007) said is caused by physical and temporal distances as well as diverse learning spaces of distance learners.

Aim of the study and its significance

This study provides a glimpse into what happens when ODL students are directed to Facebook for online discussions; of whether Facebook is able to captivate the attention and participation of ODL learners. Demography-wise, most ODL students are older and study only part time; they are also not as technologically savvy as their full time counterparts in traditional universities.

It would be interesting to examine the group dynamics involved in the social networking community that is transformed into an e-learning community and the extent to which learners participate as well as the patterns of interaction that occur.

The Context

Open University Malaysia (OUM) first used Facebook as a platform for facilitator-learner discussions to support the mobile learning via SMS initiative for three courses that were offered in the September 2009 semester, namely OUMH1103 (Learning Skills for Open and Distance learners), BBUS2103 (Company Law) and NBNS3504 (Renal Nursing). Throughout a period of 11 weeks (from the week before the first tutorial started until the first week for the final examination), two to three SMSes per week were sent to learners. There were five categories of SMSes:

- Content (requiring learners to refer to module and/or reflect on a question posed in the SMS),
- Forum/Facebook discussion prompts/stimuli,
- Motivation (mainly motivation quotes),
- Tips for more effective learning, and Course Management (such as reminders to hand in assignments, dates for mid-semester quiz and final examination).

The number of learners who were sent the SMSes for OUMH1103, BBUS2103 and NBNS3504 were 1173, 243 and 318 respectively.

While the OUMH1103 learners were directed to the Facebook page specifically set up for SMS discussion purposes, SMSes sent to BBUS2103 and NBNS3504 learners asked them to discuss in the LMS forum. The Facebook pages that were created for BBUS2103 and NBNS3504 were just meant to supplement the LMS discussions.

Another difference was that for OUMH1103, the Facebook was solely moderated by a OUMH tutor while BBUS2103 Facebook was moderated by a tutor (for content-related discussions) and a mobile learning team member (for course management aspects), both of whom logged in using the same page administrator identity.

Meanwhile, NBNS3504 Facebook was managed by a Renal Nursing tutor who logged in using her own identity when supporting content-related discussions and a mobile learning team member who logged in using another identity as administrator of the page. Announcements on how to open a Facebook account and how to join the pages specifically set up for the three courses were put up in the respective LMS for each of the three courses to help guide the learners. Help lines via telephone and email were also made available to learners who needed further instructions.

METHODOLOGY

Data on user interactions were collected weekly from the "Page Insights" tools available to Page administrators and also by downloading the Excel file data for the whole duration of 11 weeks.

Page insights enable administrators to see "how well their posts and content are engaging people" (Facebook, 2010b). Besides data on number of fans, other metrics collected were:

- Total Interactions which measures the aggregate count of Wall posts, Likes, Discussion posts and comments on any content such as photos, videos, notes or links;
- Interactions Per Post which is the average number of comments, Wall posts, and likes generated by each piece of content posted by the administrator.
- Post Quality score which measures how engaging the posts have been to users in the last seven days. It shows the percentage of fans that engage when the administrator posts content to the Page.
- Posts that generate a high number of interactions (such as comments or Likes) per fan will improve the post quality score. Posts that do not draw interactions from fans will lower the post quality score. A higher Post Quality indicates material that better engages users.
- Unique Page Views which represents the number of *individual* visitors who have reviewed the pages. This means that each visitor to the site is counted only once, no matter how many pages s/he opens.

FINDINGS

Of the three courses, it appears that OUMH1103 for which discussions on SMS content were wholly directed to Facebook garnered the highest percentage of fans with a following of 700 learners or an equivalent of 59.7 percent of the total number of students who were sent SMSes. The number of fans for the BBUS2103 and NBNS3504 Facebook pages were 49 out of 243 students (20.2%) and 116 out of 318 students (36.5%) respectively. The growth in the number of fans for the three courses is as shown in Figure: 1.

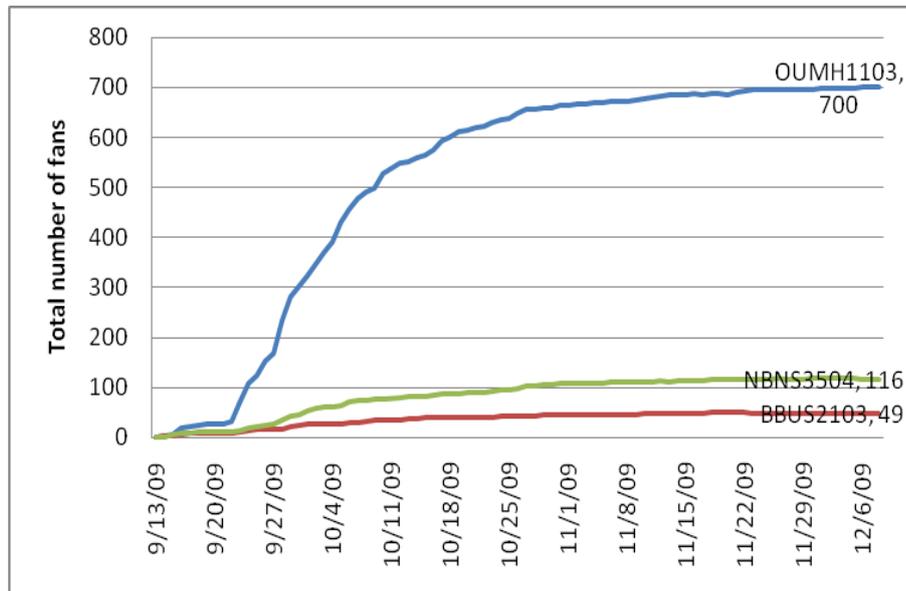


Figure: 1
Line graphs showing growth in number of fans

Meanwhile, the highest total interactions for each of the three courses' Facebook page is as shown in Table: 1. For OUMH1103, the highest number of total interactions was 163 about three weeks after the start of the Facebook discussions when there were 432 fans. Meanwhile, for BBUS2103, the highest total number of interactions was 10 about six weeks from the first posting. For NBNS3504, the figure was 9 and it was also after three weeks of interactions. Based on the percentage of highest total interactions divided by the total number of fans, it seems for all three courses this occurred when course management SMSes were sent; OUMH SMS encouraged learners to join the Facebook discussions, BBUS reminded students that assignments were due, and NBNS SMS reminded learners to try online practice questions in the learning management system.

Table: 1
Analysis according to total interactions

	OUMH1103	BBUS2103	NBNS3504
Total number of fans	432	43	59
Highest total interactions	163	10	9

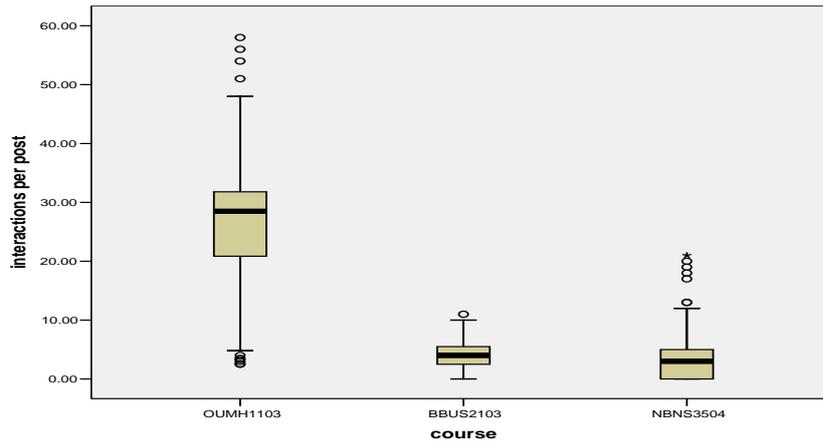


Figure: 2
Box plots of interactions per post

As for the analysis of interactions per post (see Figure 2), it may be seen that OUMH1103 had the highest median as compared to BBUS2103 and NBNS3504. However upon examining the quality of post, BBUS2103 had the highest median.

This indicates that while BBUS had the least number of fans, the posts were more engaging as it drew a higher number of fans who discussed a particular post on several occasions.

Another interesting point to note is that for OUMH1103, while there were many interactions per post, the posts were not that engaging.

That is to say, many learners posted a response or two and not many learners posted more than one time to a particular thread of discussion.

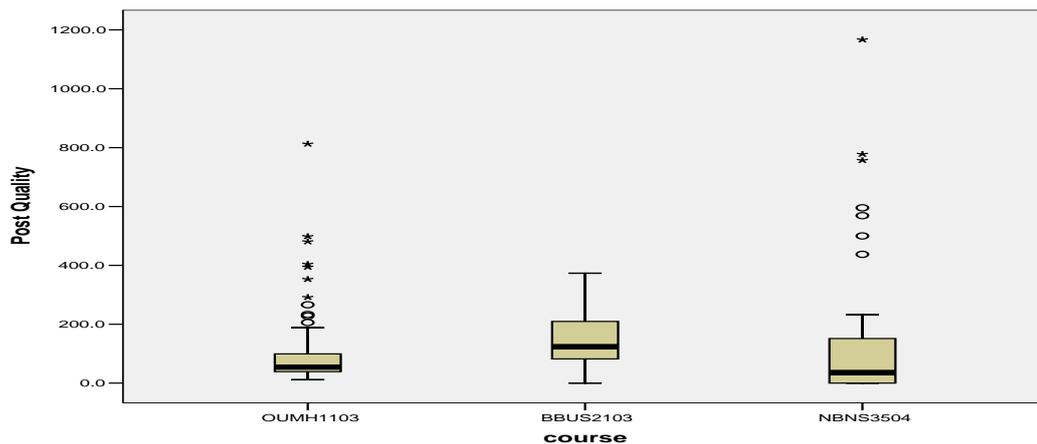


Figure: 3
Box plots of post quality

Analyses according to unique page views (see Figures 4, 5 and 6) show that the ⁷⁷ highest number of unique page views for the three courses were 169 (OUMH1103 –

when there were 432 fans), 13 (BBUS2103 – when there were 46 fans) and 22 (NBNS3504 – when there were 44 fans). This suggests that not all learners log in everyday and that at best for the September 2009 semester, for OUMH1103, BBUS2103 and NBNS3504, only 39.1 percent, 26.5 percent and 50 percent of the fans respectively logged in at any one time. This could be due to the fact that participation was not compulsory and no marks were allocated for the Facebook discussions as compared to online discussions in the learning management system forums. Checking with the date the highest number of unique page views occurred, it was found that the date very closely responded to the point of time where the highest number of total interactions was registered for the three courses. From the line graphs it could be observed that the trend was that the number of individual visitors who reviewed the Facebook pages slowly increased at the beginning of the semester and generally first peaked three weeks from the beginning of the Facebook interactions. There was also a general decline in the number of unique page views towards the last three weeks before the start of final examinations.

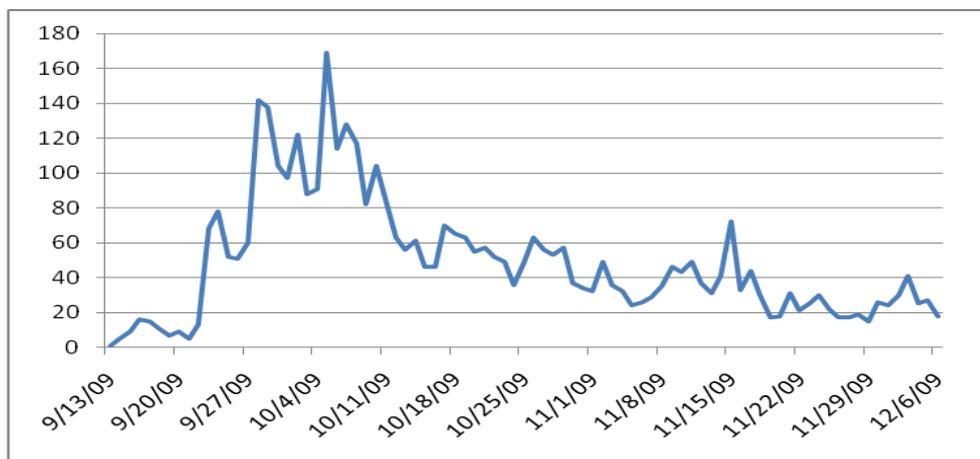


Figure: 3
Line graph showing number of unique page views for OUMH1103

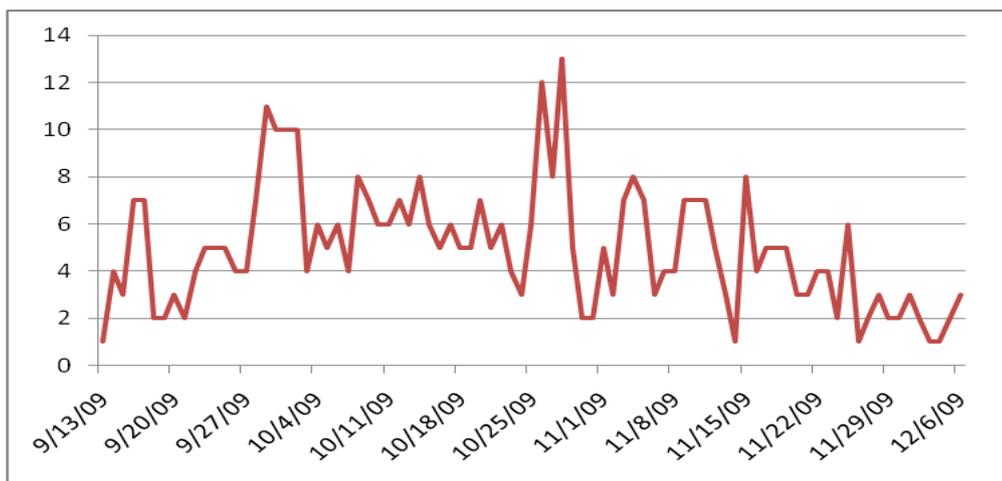


Figure: 4
Line graph showing number of unique page views for BBUS2103

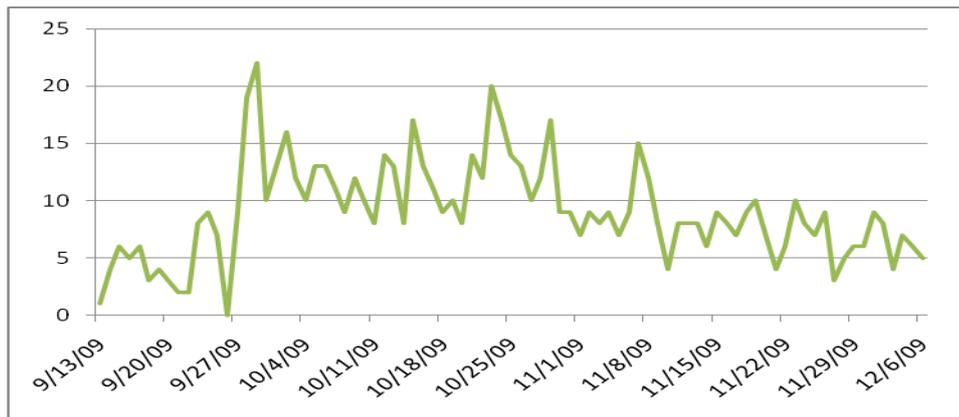


Figure: 5
Line graph showing number of unique page views for NBNS3504

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

From the findings of this study, one may conclude that Facebook does have the potential to be used for online academic discussions, either as an alternative to learning management systems commonly used in distance education or to complement such platforms. Using appropriate text messaging prompts or stimuli, learners could successfully be drawn to interacting online.

The posts could engage learners in sustained conversations as with other online forums. It may also be successfully used across different fields of study. Simply put, the involvement of learners could achieve the desired quantity and quality, depending on the facilitator, the content and the timing of the prompts. Further research could be conducted with regards to the extent to which discussions in Facebook achieve the level of thinking and the intensity desired. In addition, the role played by the facilitator could be examined in an attempt to identify facilitative questions/responses that draw in the crowd.

Investigations into the differences between the interaction process of discussions in Facebook as compared with those in learning management systems might reveal how this social networking platform maintains/changes how, what and why students go online for discussions.

An interesting aspect that may also be studied is the activity of 'lurkers' who log in to read posts but do not offer their opinions; the extent to which it happens and to what extent learning occurs for this category of students. In knowing that, designers of online learning could well incorporate appropriate content/discussions for the benefit of 'lurkers'.

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