Exploring International Students’ Learning Experiences with Facebook-Based Applications in the Intensive Mode of Event Planning and Entrepreneurship Course Delivery

The study seeks to explore international students’ learning experiences with Facebook-based applications within the eight-week study block in the context of New Zealand business education. By implementing participant observation and two asynchronous Facebook focus groups, the study aims to identify the nature of students’ engagement with a course group on Facebook as well as the influences related to students’ learning experiences and academic performance.

Background

For nearly a decade there has been a growing interest towards social media in educational research that covers a wide range of areas from practical issues of knowledge sharing to risks linked to online learning environment. What is important to note here, however, is a lack of studies on social media in the intensive delivery mode, specifically in the international business education. It is only ironic considering that a traditional model of course design is now continuously being challenged due to the increased number of international students (Ho & Piven, 2015). Furthermore, the intensive course design creates different challenges, including a high-paced nature of program delivery, time-constrained projects and a necessity to quickly adapt to a new learning environment. In this respect, the issue to address here is to what extent social media, specifically Facebook, may help students meet these challenges.

Aims of the Research

A range of academic research on social media has been developing in relation to students’ social adjustment to unfamiliar cultural and educational environment (Lin, Peng, Kim, Kim & LaRose, 2012). Some scholars point out the importance of Facebook-like
channels in constructing the institution-learner relationships. According to Roblyer, McDaniel, Webb, Herman & Witty (2010, p. 135), “faculty who see teaching as establishing a relationship with students may view Facebook-like technologies as an efficient, even business-like way to accomplish that connection”.

Since educators start adapting social media as a new e-learning platform, it is of interest to researchers and practitioners. The study aims at exploring international students’ learning experiences with Facebook-based applications in the intensive mode of business courses delivery. The theoretical importance of this study is three-fold:

a.) To analyze challenges associated with Facebook-based applications in the international classroom within the eight-week study block,
b.) To assess usability of Facebook-based applications against traditional e-learning platforms such as Moodle from international students’ perspective, and
c.) To identify influences related to international students’ learning experiences and academic performance within the intensive mode of business course partially delivered on Facebook.

**Research Setting and Methodology**

The undergraduate students involved in the study were enrolled in either Event Planning or Entrepreneurship courses that are currently offered at the Auckland International campus (AIC) of Otago Polytechnic (OP) in NZ. AIC has five teaching blocks each year instead of two traditional semesters per year. Each teaching block is comprised of eight weeks of teaching (intensive), followed by a two-week break in between teaching blocks. These teaching blocks allow students to concentrate on fewer courses at one time (two versus four) and to spend more time in the learning environment and less time passing between classes.
The study employs qualitative research methodology in which participant observation of the Event Planning and Entrepreneurship Facebook closed groups has been implemented in triangulation with two asynchronous Facebook focus groups. The data has been collected in two stages: 1) participant observation of Event Planning and Entrepreneurship Facebook closed groups between March 2015 and March 2016; 2) two asynchronous Facebook focus groups in April 2016. Evidence from observational data (stage 1) has been used as stimuli during the focus groups (stage 2). Such an approach allowed researchers to capture international students’ reactions and behavior through the participant observation on Facebook and then use observational evidence to develop and facilitate a group discussion.

The choice of an asynchronous focus group on Facebook was motivated by belief that “asynchronous communication…allows participants to construct more considered narratives, providing a depth that might be absent in uttered data” (Stewart & Williams, 2005, p. 413). A total of 25 Event Planning students and 13 Entrepreneurship students were engaged with the Facebook closed groups during the course delivery. All observation and focus group participants were AIC students, from 21 to 33 years of age, 12 students were from India and 2 from China. A total of 7 Event Planning students and 7 Entrepreneurship students participated in the group discussions on Facebook after the course completion.

Discussion

The preliminary study results indicate that the majority of the research participants welcomes learning opportunities presented by Facebook, specifically for group projects and class announcements. The problem comes, however, when students need to complete formative or summative assessments on Facebook. Due to a highly social nature of the website, students can be easily distracted by their friends’ activities and constant notifications. Preliminary results appear to contradict previous studies on social media applications that state “Facebook’s closed groups are more popular among students than
Having recognized some benefits of Facebook-based applications, the majority of participants tend to prefer Moodle over Facebook for self-directed learning. For example, one of focus group participants views Facebook “for group announcements and off-class discussion” while Moodle is considered to be “a platform for self-learning”. The study has not found a significant connection between students’ academic performance and Facebook-based applications in the course delivery. However, some participants believe that the course groups on Facebook overall enhanced their learning experiences and “allowed better communication outside the class”. Moreover, Facebook class gives students a chance for self-expression. Surprisingly, some students continued posting in groups after the course completion.

The study also identified factors that impact on international students’ experiences and their level of engagement with a course group on Facebook including cultural traits, students’ social skills, a type of class activities, a lecturer’s clear vision and instructions, course content, group collaboration, other students’ engagement, and familiarity with the platform.

Cultural differences pose the first challenge to an international classroom on Facebook. For instance, for Chinese students it takes longer to become comfortable with Facebook due to a lack of experience - the network has been blocked in China since 2009. However, once students adapt to a new platform, they recognize some personal benefits, specifically when it comes to social and networking skills.

In conclusion, emerging from the point of view and experiences of international students, the study enriches the conversation on applicability of social media in the international classroom and produces practical insights into Facebook-based applications in business course design and delivery.
References
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