



Using social media to enhance the first year experience

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This study explores blending virtual and physical learning environments to enhance the experience of first year by immersing students into university culture through social and academic interaction between peers. It reports on the progress made from 2008 to 2009 using an existing academic platform, the first year design elective course *Imaging Our World*, at the University of Adelaide. Over one semester, 120 design students engaged with their peers through an online forum within the host site *Facebook*, in addition to the traditional teaching mechanisms of lectures and tutorials. Students were required to submit work online to Facebook and provide critiques of peers' submissions. Resulting discussions were then transferred into the physical classroom with the aim of building meaningful relationships between peers based on the embryonic online connections. The evaluation process involved pre and post semester questionnaires, weekly feedback from students and project-specific reflections at the completion of the semester.

Introduction

Web 2.0 in design education

Web 2.0 technologies, the participatory web, including social network sites (SNSs) such as *Facebook* and *MySpace*, and content-sharing sites such as *YouTube* and *Flickr*, allow individuals to present themselves, articulate their social networks, and establish or maintain connections with others. SNSs are amongst the most visited sites on the internet, with Generation-Y at the forefront of the popularity surge around the world. However, *Facebook*, currently the most popular SNS on the internet, has not been widely used in tertiary education beyond basic marketing strategies such as universities presenting themselves to prospective students. In spite of this, *Facebook*'s intuitive interface and popularity makes it a very effective tool for developing 'preliminary' relationships between all first year students as it negates key pitfalls such as language barriers and social inhibitions. Students are able to communicate at their own pace and consider comments and responses, rather than being 'put on the spot' in the physical classroom. This was the context for the development of an assessment task that would both educate and assimilate. The success of this tool would lie in the extent to which the initial communication and relationships generated in the virtual environment could be taken into the classroom. *Facebook* was chosen as the host site for the assessment task because of the uniform strength of its features as compared to other popular social networking sites such as *MySpace* and *Friendster*, the image-sharing site *Flickr*, and the open-source software *Moodle*. The site's popularity ensured that many students would be familiar with its layout and operation, while the 'group' and 'event' applications enabled the creation of an accessible, easily-maintained, and highly interactive online forum. Lastly, the 24/7 availability of the site conformed with the 'anytime, anywhere' work attitude of Generation-Y students, including those from overseas.

Who are we teaching?

In order to engage a cohort of students, it is crucial to understand their backgrounds, and their attitudes towards both academic and social life. How students interact with peers and immerse themselves within education varies from generation to generation, and as such the educator must acknowledge and utilise these nuances rather than disregard them. The cohort involved in this study was predominantly made up of school leavers (83%), of largely equal gender bias (54% male), and a mix of local (77%) and international (23%) students. The cohort fits within the Generation-Y label, or as Prensky has branded them, the 'Digital Natives'. According to Prensky, Digital Natives have "spent their entire lives

surrounded by and using computers, videogames, digital music players, video cams, cell phones, and all the other toys and tools of the digital age” (Prensky, 2001a, p. 1). He maintains that the digital culture and environment in which the Natives have grown up has changed the way they think: “It is now clear that as a result of this ubiquitous environment and the sheer volume of their interaction with it, today’s students think and process information fundamentally differently from their predecessors.” (Prensky, 2001a, p. 1). As such the argument stands that the digital culture in which the Digital Natives have grown up has influenced their preferences and skills in a number of key areas related to education. Prensky notes, “our students are clamouring for these [new] technologies to be used as part of their education, in part because they are things that the students have already mastered and use in their daily lives, and in part because they realise just how useful they can be.” (Prensky, 2007; p. 41). The literature also suggests Digital Natives prefer receiving information quickly; are adept at processing information rapidly; prefer multi-tasking and non-linear access to information; have a low tolerance for lectures; prefer active rather than passive learning, and rely heavily on communications technologies to access information and to carry out social and professional interactions.

How do we engage with Digital Natives?

There are many approaches to ensure strong student engagement. Fostering an environment in which students participate actively and develop a sense of belonging in both small and large group settings is highly conducive to effective student interaction. By promoting independence and building layered support networks, students are able to make the transition into university culture more efficiently and successfully, ensuring a more positive first year experience. While opportunities to ask questions, contribute to class discussions and critique peers’ work are all conducive to student engagement, the research continues to emphasize the value of peer interaction both in and out of the classroom (Krause, 2005). As such, the development of academic connections between peers early in university life can promote social interaction and *Facebook’s* immersive social and educational toolset serves as a strong starting point for entry level students. The research literature also suggests that some forms of computer-mediated communication can lower barriers to interaction and encourage more self-disclosure (Bargh et al., 2002) and as such SNSs, such as *Facebook*, may enable connections between peers that would not otherwise occur. The 2008 study showed that through the use of this collaborative learning tool, students were able to engage with their peers and develop some sense of belonging within the learning community. Students were able to develop academic relationships freed from the constraints of the classroom and their own inhibitions, and over the semester discussions evolved from formal academic critiques to informal social interactions. The *Facebook* group facilitated peer interaction in the early weeks of the course when it was evident that such interaction would not take place in the classroom. The relationships formed, however, stayed largely embryonic as there wasn’t a consistent or direct link between the two teaching environments. In order to meaningfully engage the student cohort in the learning process, while simultaneously improving the experience of first year university, the relationships formed between peers must evolve beyond a purely virtual setting.

Methodology

The 2008 study (McCarthy, 2009) established several ways in which to improve the experience and effectiveness of the course. It was apparent that a much stronger link between in-class and on-line environments needed to be created in order to strengthen the face-to-face engagements between peers. It is crucial to remember that an on-line connection is only one factor in forming a meaningful relationship, and that physical interaction with peers is essential for developing the student experience. This factor became the catalyst for blending the two learning environments in 2009. Discussions generated within the online environment were then taken into the physical classroom, be it a lecture or tutorial, and further developed under the direction of the lecturer. It also became evident that the on-line tasks were most beneficial during the early weeks of semester with participation waning during the latter weeks, possibly due to major assignments, exam revision and other courses. For this reason the *Facebook* assessment in 2009 was compressed into an intensive 6-week program to capitalise on the initial enthusiasm and interaction of students.

120 students including 27 international students, enrolled in the course *Imaging Our World*, took part in a pre-semester survey held in the opening lecture. The survey included three broad types of measures: a) demographic and descriptive variables, such as gender, age bracket, ethnicity, and student type; b) *Facebook* usage, including frequency and type of use; and c) attitudinal scales to assess the students’ perceptions regarding ‘on-line’ and ‘in-class’ communication with peers. Responses were measured through Likert scales from 1-7, and additional, open-ended comments. A two-hour workshop took place in the opening tutorial of the course, allowing inexperienced students to become accustomed with

Facebook's layout and operation. Students were shown how to create an account, interact with peers, and take part in the compulsory on-line assessment. For each gallery in *Facebook*, three in total, students were required to submit a series of images or videos every two weeks, and to provide critiques on peers' submissions. The gallery topics were broad in nature, and open to the student's own interpretations, allowing for a wide range of images in each, and a concurrently wide range of discussions. The galleries were open for submissions for a period of two weeks, however remained open for viewing for the duration of the entire course. Students had 24/7 access to two computer labs and could also access the site and submit work through private internet connections. The tasks were worth 15% of the final grade for the course, and students were assessed on three key components: the relevance and quality of the submitted images and videos, the provided descriptions that accompanied the content, and the quality and consistency of their critiques and subsequent discussions. Students were encouraged to submit original imagery and draw on their own experiences and cultural backgrounds for inspiration, but were permitted to submit non-original material provided it was referenced and not copyrighted. Each week a range of discussions that took place within the virtual environment were then transferred to the physical classroom and further analysed. The discussions selected for further debate were based on demographic equality, specifically gender and ethnicity, and its relevance to the topic at hand. In the final week of the semester, students completed a second survey which assessed their experiences throughout the course and the perceived effectiveness of the virtual and physical classrooms.

Results

The 2009 pre-semester survey outlined the student demographic and showed significant shifts in *Facebook* popularity and usage from the 2008 cohort. Firstly there was a much higher percentage of existing *Facebook* users within the group, 91% compared to 75% in 2008. The survey also indicated that 61% of students logged onto *Facebook* at least once a day compared to 35% in 2008. The intensity per visit also increased, with many students indicating they stayed 'actively' logged in for up to an hour, while others stated they often stayed 'inactively' logged into *Facebook* while browsing other sites. The type of use also changed with students indicating they used *Facebook* more frequently to learn about people they met socially (mean response of 4.1 in 2008, to 4.9 in 2009 using a Likert scale ranging from 1-7), and in class (3.9 in 2008 to 5.1 in 2009). Not surprisingly there was a continued lack of pre-existing social networks within the cohort. This can be attributed to the large percentage of school leavers within the group, the range of academic programs the students were enrolled in (within 120 students, 7 University programs were represented), and the large variation of student ethnicities. The pre-semester survey showed that 64% of students had no '*Facebook*' friends from *Imaging Our World*, while 97% had less than five.

The post-semester survey revealed the students' attitudes towards both virtual and physical classrooms and their perceptions regarding the successful blending of the two environments. Many students responded positively to the virtual space as it helped negate common first year pitfalls such as language barriers and introversion, as one student noted, "the online galleries were less intimidating than the physical classroom, which was particularly important at the start of semester." While an international student stated, "I was able to comment on their work at my own pace which made it much more comfortable." The virtual environment helped initiate fledgling connections between students: "as a first year student we don't really know anyone, so the *Facebook* group was a simple and effective way to start putting names to faces." This proved highly beneficial in the first two weeks as it "established connections throughout the class that may not have otherwise been there." The incorporation of online discussions into the physical classroom proved to be significant in both the development of peer relationships and academic growth, as one student noted:

I really enjoyed this assignment as I find it quite daunting to speak up in front of a whole class, especially if at first you don't know anyone in the class. It was good that the submissions were brought into the classroom the following week, however, because we could talk about the work with an established platform which made it easier to debate in the lecture while also providing a more rewarding discussion.

Further benefits of the blended learning environment were made apparent through attitudinal scales relating to interaction between peers and open-ended comments discussing the course. There was a significant increase in the academic interaction between local and international students (mean response of 5.0 in 2008 up to 5.7 in 2009), as well as general interaction, both academic and social, between peers (5.7 in 2008 up to 6.4 in 2009). Many students attributed this to the strong link between virtual and physical spaces. Students noted the ability to gain feedback from multiple sources: "constructive comments and healthy discussions improved student creativity and output", as an advantage of the online

environment, as well as the ability to generate specific academic connections: “the *Facebook* tasks were great as they provided freedom to express ideas, hence generate discussion as well as finding like-minded peers.” The benefits of the blended learning spaces included face-to-face discussions: “the assessment allowed us to converse with others in class and form connections that developed into friendships”, a stronger link between design theory and practice: “the lecturer’s ability to tie in our work with specific theoretical concepts in class improved my understanding of the course content,” and the level of engagement with the cohort, due to its “modern way of interacting and communicating ideas”, as another student noted:

This part of the course set it apart from all others. The interactivity of the assessment made it so enjoyable. It was a great way to learn about the other students in the course and it was interesting to use social media as a means of assessment and academic interaction.

Conclusion

Both the 2008 and 2009 studies show that the virtual classroom hosted by *Facebook*, provided a platform for students to generate preliminary academic and social interactions with peers in first year university, while meeting the learning needs and attitudes of Digital Natives. In 2008 these interactions stayed largely embryonic due to a disconnection between the virtual and physical learning environment (McCarthy, 2009). A physical classroom allows students to interact in a face-to-face environment, essentially transforming the impersonal virtual interaction into a meaningful connection. The 2009 study indicated the blended learning environment increased peer interaction and academic engagement, two key factors in a positive first year experience. This teaching approach will continue within *Imaging Our World* in 2010.

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