

## Students' Perspective of the Role of Facebook in Their Studies

Frank Alexander Rojas  
Florida International University, USA

**Abstract:** The purpose of this research was to examine students' perspective of their use of Facebook to further their studies. There were two major findings relating to usage of Facebook: personal, and academically. Students used Facebook to stay in touch with people and wanted to keep Facebook separate from their academics.

Colleges and universities have used social networking sites for a variety of purposes. For instance, college administrators at Ithaca College, Middlebury College, Mars Hill College, and the University of Florida have used Facebook groups, profiles, and pages to promote their departments, services, and recruitment initiatives (David, 2010; Villano & Gullon, 2009). The faculty and staff at the University of Florida claimed to have increased their graduate admissions because of the implementation of a Facebook program in which faculty and staff talk to prospective graduate students through Facebook group discussions about graduate programs (David, 2010).

Facebook can be used for educational purposes. Mazman and Usleuel (2010) developed a structural equation model explaining how students could use Facebook for educational purposes, and sought the students' views of Facebook in relation to its educational usage. The educational usage of Facebook has a positive relationship with its use for communication, collaborations, and resource or material sharing (Maxman & Usleuel, 2010).

Facebook users and non-users were significantly different: Facebook users had lower GPAs and spent less time studying than non-Facebook users (Kirschner & Karpinski, 2010). Students feel an impact on Facebook on their academic performance; most indicate a negative impact: they procrastinate and are easily distracted by Facebook. These users also had poor time management skills. For those students with positive impacts, Facebook was used to form study groups or as another form of communication with their peers.

Some studies (e.g., Hung & Yuen 2010; Schroeder & Greenbowe, 2009) have reported on the implementation of social networking sites into the curriculum. Hung and Yuen (2010) found that the students favored using their social networking sites, especially for knowledge sharing, interactions, collaborations, and learning activities. Also, a majority of students used the sites every week. The students also stated a strong sense of class community.

Schroeder and Greenbowe (2009) studied how students used Facebook in an introductory organic chemistry class. All students in the class were required to use WebCT and participation in the Facebook group was optional. The activity between WebCT and the Facebook group revealed 400% more posts on the Facebook group than on WebCT, with no further discussions on WebCT after one month. As a deadline for an assignment was approaching, activity on the Facebook group would increase. Also, students were not asking their peers for answers, but instead were asking for assistance from the instructors. However, Schroeder and Greenbowe (2009) did not compare the final grades between the Facebook users and the students who did not join the Facebook group.

McCarthy (2010) assessed student use of Facebook incorporated into a design course and concluded most students used Facebook to learn more about people they met in person and in

class. Facebook was useful for students dealing with language barriers and introversion (McCarthy, 2010). Also, students' attitudes towards interactions with other students were mostly positive; discussion on Facebook was supportive and provided a freedom of expression.

To date, however, there are few empirical studies addressing how effectively students or institutions of higher education are using social media. This research concerned itself with one kind of social media: Facebook. Those that exist do not ask for student perspectives on the use of Facebook. This lack of student perspective is unfortunate because students have different collegiate experience. Knowing the ways students use Facebook academically can allow faculty and staff to develop a curriculum that is relevant to the student's perspective, facilitate discussions among fellow students outside of the classroom, and allow for different levels of learning experiences (Chickering & Reisser, 1993).

Therefore, the purpose of this research was to examine higher education students' perspective of their use of Facebook to further their studies. This research answered three primary research questions: (a) To what extent do students use Facebook to further their studies? (b) In what ways do students use Facebook to further their studies? (c) What do students believe are the ways that Facebook can be used by colleges and universities to help students with their studies?

### **Method**

The research design was phenomenology. According to van Manen (1990) phenomenological research seeks to understand the world we live in and comprehend the experiences of those that live in it. Phenomenology was chosen for this research because the researcher wants to study how a phenomenon, Facebook usage, is experienced by research participants, students (Moustakas, 1994).

### **Participants**

Purposeful sampling is important when considering the larger population of the site. It allows the researcher to define the site and the sample to be used to explain the experiences of the population (Seidman, 2006). Nine students were interviewed: two graduate and seven undergraduate students. Two were males and seven were females. The ages ranged from 19 to 27.

### **Data Collection**

Data was collected via interviews. An interview is defined as a purposeful conversation, usually between two people, that is directed by an individual who wants to get information from the other (Seidman, 2006). The researcher developed a set of questions to guide the interview process because the researcher could not find an instrument that was appropriate from other studies. Also, the researcher wanted to be able to control the line of questioning (Creswell, 2009). The questions were reviewed by three faculty members.

All interviews were face-to-face and participants indicated a willingness to participate in the interview; each interview lasted approximately 20-30 minutes, and there was no compensation. Since the institutional review board granted exempt status, consent was obtained orally. At the start of the interviews, the researcher provided an introduction of who the researcher was and a detailed explanation of the project. After the introduction, the researcher made it clear that continuing in the study entailed informed consent. The researcher required that all of the participants come up with their own pseudonyms to maintain anonymity. No student was interviewed who did not consent to participating or to having the interview recorded.

## **Data Analysis**

Analysis did not occur until all of the initial data was collected. This reduced imposing generalizations on participants further along the study (Seidman, 2006). Initially, the researcher wanted to do themes, but discovered that there were not enough data to convey themes. The researcher decided to organize by answers and see if there were commonalities across participants' responses to each question. For example, the researcher looked at all the responses for question one. The researcher noted that six students responded with an instance of how they used Facebook to keep in touch with their family. Then the researcher decided to quote students who provided the most substance for that commonality.

## **Trustworthiness**

Maintaining trustworthiness is critical in any qualitative research. To confront possible subjectivity biases, the researcher held a learner perspective and avoided conversations where the researcher would have to share his own experiences. If a student asked about the researcher's experiences with Facebook, the researcher would keep the answers short and generalized. The author would then ask a question relating to the study. During the data analysis phase, the researcher was intentional about asking himself how well what was being revealed reflected the perspectives the students held (Creswell, 2009; Seidman, 2006).

## **Discussion of Key Findings**

Key findings are presented in accordance to the three research questions: (a) students use Facebook for their studies; (b) students use Facebook for their studies in different ways; and (c) students have certain beliefs on how Facebook can be used to further studies.

## **Extent Students Use Facebook for Their Studies**

Six students use Facebook to communicate primarily with people they already know, such as family members or current friends. Itachi said, "I only use Facebook for personal use. I use Facebook to communicate with families and friends. Close families like my mother, brother, uncle, aunt, and grandfather from Dubai." Cassandra said she contacted both friends and family at the same time:

I guess Facebook helps you feel you are still part of your life when you are away. You can still look at their pictures, look at what they are doing, and see your younger siblings or younger cousins growing up. My cousins are really young and changing all the time. My aunts are taking pictures and saying what they are doing. I can pretty much watch them grow on Facebook.

Amarylis said, "I like to be personally connected with my friends who are overseas." Students used Facebook to know how their friends have been doing. The students stated that they liked to look at their friends' comments, pictures, and posts to compare them with their current life. Results are similar to Quan-Haase and Young (2010) and Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe (2007), who stated that students used Facebook to distract themselves and keep in touch with friends.

Four students did use Facebook for their studies at one time, but only two of the students used Facebook frequently academically. Sofia provided an interesting example of using Facebook for curricular purposes. She stated an instance of cheating:

I have heard a lot of people use it just to get answers. If people needed answers for homework or they had an online test they get answers from the group. I've heard people complaining about it especially because a class had a Facebook group and there were like 300 people in the Facebook group. The professor found out and wanted to get everyone in trouble, but he couldn't because it would have been the whole class. So then he

decided to get the ones that created the group in trouble. I don't know what else happened but yeah that's what I heard that he was like really mad because of that.

Jamos said he did use Facebook indirectly for academic purposes:

Academically, is not related to classwork or my research in particular, but I use Facebook to keep up with current news of biology by the links my friends post. My friends usually post science articles, new experiments, and latest research. That is the quickest way I hear about it. My friends are very nerdy so at least once a day I do this. I rarely used groups. Personally I think it is a conflict of interest with professors as friends. The way I use it works out for me.

Juliana said, "I have a lot of friends from my classes. I ask them for help." Amy stated how she asked for help on an assignment:

Once in a blue moon I ask my friend for help or advice on an assignment. Sometimes I put it up on my status and ask what should I do, can somebody help me, and has anyone taken this course before?

Students did use Facebook for curricular purposes, but in a limited fashion. Consistent with Mazman and Usluel (2010) and McCarthy's (2010) results, students who saw Facebook as a tool to enhance their studies did use it for that purpose. Students would use Facebook communicate with peers, or get to know them better. Some of the students used it to help facilitate group communications. Students have also used it to get help with their assignments or ideas for projects.

Students were more open to use Facebook for co-curricular purposes. Students who were in on-campus organizations would use it to communicate with their members and organize events. Sofia said, "I have a lot of groups for my organizations I am in and also for FIU." Juliana said, "I am in the elementary education group. But I do not do anything with [the group]." The students stated that they had positive results by using Facebook as a medium of communication. Students reported that members and other invitees would show up or participate in on-campus events or other student sponsored events.

### **Ways Students Use Facebook for Their Studies**

The students, who did use Facebook for curricular purposes, said that they used the group feature to communicate with other students in their classes. The students would create a Facebook group and invite each other to join the group. Also, some students would post on their walls questions related to their assignments and their friends would provide them with help.

Nancy provided a good description of the extent she used the groups for academic purposes:

One of my classmates did not have a cellphone. She said to add her on Facebook. We would instant message each other for homework assignments, information, meeting, and general information about the chapters we are reading. Also, on group assignments and when we are working on a PowerPoint, we would send each other our portion of the work on Facebook. Instant messaging worked because everyone would response right away.

Denis used the group feature for group projects:

Sometimes I am in a group project with people, like in education class. We form a group on Facebook and that is how we communicate with each other. We like talk about our assignments and what we have to do. What we each have to do for our project.

Sofia discussed the features that some students, in a finance class, used to cheat:

People were sharing answers for the homework and it was online homework. I guess somebody in the group talked to the professor and showed him the group. There were

like two or three people that created the group and he wanted to get them in trouble, on probation or something with the university.

The ways in which Facebook was used by the students is similar to how the students in Schroeder and Greenbowe (2009) used Facebook. Facebook groups were used as a discussion tool for a chemistry class. However, in this study, the students who used a Facebook group for a class did not use it for discussion and instead mostly to exchange basic knowledge. Also, the positive experiences by the students are similar to McCarthy's (2010) results; students' attitudes towards interactions with other students were mostly positive.

Eight students did not feel comfortable being Facebook "friends" with a professor. This is consistent with the prior findings of Malesky Jr and Peters (2012) who reported that students did not feel comfortable being friends with their current professors, and female students were more reluctant to be friends with their professors than were male students.

There were different ways students used Facebook for co-curricular purposes. Three students joined groups that helped them communicate with other members who belonged to their on-campus organization. They would post events and reminders about upcoming events. It also allowed the students to "friend" each other. Three students joined a department's Facebook group page. However, only one of them was actively engaged in the group.

### **Students' Beliefs on How Facebook Can be Used to Further Studies**

Seven of the nine students do not believe Facebook should be used by the university to help them in their curricular activities. Four students specifically said that they want to keep Facebook separate from their academic life. Three students believe that Facebook can help them in their studies. These students would want their professor to create a Facebook group so that the class can join and participate in discussions.

Seven students did not want to use Facebook in their studies. Three students said they would not mention anything to their professor on how they can use Facebook for their classes. Itachi strongly opposed any Facebook adaptation for academic usage:

I wouldn't because I've chosen to keep Facebook secretive not for any other purposes. Just because I use Facebook to communicate with friends or family and I don't involve anything political or school related material.

Similarly, Jamos opposed the use of Facebook in a class; he even said that if it was required he would do the minimum requirement:

I would not tell them to use it. Do not think it is needed. If it was going to happen anyways I will still partake in it. However, I will only read posts and not contribute to the group.

Cassandra provided some suggestion on how professors could use Facebook in their classes; she was hesitant about the idea of Facebook being used in classes:

If I wanted to say something to the professor I guess they can send out messages on Facebook. Make a group on Facebook. I know some people that are anti-Facebook and people who do not get on Facebook all the time. If the professor made an assignment that was on Facebook and you had to go to it, then that might make that student feel stereotyped or offended because they are not on Facebook.

Itachi's, Jamos', and Cassandra's responses are similar to the findings of Teclhaimanot and Hickman (2011) and Malesky, Jr. and Peters (2012), who concluded that most students would find it inappropriate for their professors to use Facebook because it would invade their personal privacy.

Two of the students said Facebook would be beneficial for them in their class. Sofia said,

I would just tell them [the professor] to make a Facebook group for the class. It is actually really helpful because I don't use it for cheating or anything like that but sometimes, you know, you don't go to class and you need some information that the professor gave out, but you don't know anyone in class. But being [in] a group, you can see what happened in class or people [can] have the same questions as you. You can get an answer and get help with the homework and study so actually [it is] really helpful.

The students said it would help them get to know other students in their classes and in the program. It would allow them to ask questions related to class topics or program specific questions. This is similar to results Ryan, Margo, and Sharp (2011) report on doctoral students in a research class with a Facebook group created by the instructor; cultural and student tips helped students acclimate to their program.

Seven of the nine students stated positive opinions about how administrators can use Facebook to help them further their co-curricular activities. Seven students said that they would want departments to make Facebook groups. Sofia said, "More Facebook groups [are] helpful, just not for cheating. Being in a group forms friendships and it is easy to talk to others, including administrators." Nancy stated that administrators should do the following:

[They] should include the policies for the department in a group. It is a business outlet. I feel like it is the young thing to do. There can be fun ways to address issues. If the administrators constantly update statuses, then they can receive feedbacks.

Jamos was excited to provide his answer:

Hmm that's good! I like how you worded this question. The Marine ecology department, where I did my Masters, had a Facebook group where I could like them and be informed of seminars. It was a great way to advertise seminars and events. I have not experienced that here at FIU. This was in Portugal.

Within these groups they want information pertaining to that office, such as office hours, event information, event reminders, and staff information. Junco (2012) found that Facebook activities, such as commenting on posts, creating or RSVP'ing to events, and viewing photography, were positive predictors of co-curricular activities. These are the same activities that these students would look forward to in Facebook groups created by administrators.

### **Limitations**

There were some limitations to this study. Also, not enough students participated to determine a difference between undergraduate and graduate students. Another limitation was that the researcher may have used terms that the student may not have understood. For example, when the researcher used the word *co-curricular*, some of the students seemed confused and it may have led to students' not associating co-curricular activities as part of their studies. Also, the researcher did not press on the topic of cheating. At the time of the study, the researcher thought that students would not have wanted to share experiences similar to Sofia's.

### **Recommendations for Future Study**

The study added to the current literature by researching how students use Facebook and their thoughts on using Facebook for studies. However, further research is needed regarding the relationship between students' priorities, personalities, and how they view the usage of Facebook to enhance their curricular and co-curricular learning outcomes. Also, separate studies in each of the colleges available at a university can provide information on whether there are differences or commonalities in the different ways students use Facebook based on the college. To replicate this study using mixed methods or quantitative methods with a larger sample would allow for generalization to a larger population, and reduce researcher's personal biases and idiosyncrasies.

Also, group comparisons and associations can be further analyzed and generalized to the population. If mixed methods are used, the researcher can still find themes in complex social behaviors (Creswell, 2009) on Facebook. One aspect that should be examined is how students are using Facebook for cheating purposes and its frequency. This study revealed a situation in which Facebook was used to cheat for a class.

### **Recommendations for Instruction and Practice**

The results of this study can be used for instruction and practice in higher education. One way it can be used for instruction purposes would be to not use Facebook at all. The majority of the students in the study stated they would not want Facebook to be used for curricular purposes. If the majority of other students in a university share the same sentiments, then perhaps the professor should not use it at all.

There are indirect uses for which professors can use Facebook. For instance, in a psychology class, a professor can provide blurred profiles of other students in maladaptive behaviors. Also, in a business ethics class a professor can provide profile examples of how employers judge a candidate based on the moral and ethical decisions posted on a profile. Based on the students responses for professor involvement, as long as the professor does make Facebook the primary tool of learning, then students would be fine if Facebook were used as examples of topics.

Using Facebook in a co-curricular setting would be viewed appropriate by most students. Administrators could use Facebook to promote programs and departments that are available to students. Having group discussions based on an upcoming event would be beneficial in engaging students before an event. Also, a department can do weekly giveaways where students would have to answer questions, show up to an event, or talk to someone in a department to receive gifts.

Based on the results of this study and literature (e.g., Malesky, Jr., & Peters, 2012; Teclehaimanot & Hickman, 2011), it is recommended that departments not use Facebook to have direct contact with students. For instance, it is recommended that an administrator not use Facebook to have instant messages with students. Instant messages with a student would require that the administrator be friends with the student.

### **References**

- Bowers-Campbell, J. (2008). Cyber "pokes": Motivational antidote for developmental college readers. *Journal of College Reading and Learning*, 39(1), 74-87.
- Chickering, A. W., & Reisser, L. (1993). *Education and identity* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Creswell, J. W. (2009). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- David, J. C. (2010). New friend request: The relationship between Web 2.0 and higher education. *Journal of Student Affairs*, 19.
- Facebook. (2012). [www.Facebook.com](http://www.Facebook.com)
- Hung, H., & Yuen, S. C. (2010). Educational use of social networking technology in higher education. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 15(6), 703-714.
- Kirschner, P. A., & Karpinski, A. C. (2010). Facebook and academic performance. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 26, 1237-1245. doi: 10.1016/j.chb.2010.03.024
- Malesky, L. A., Jr., & Peters, C. (2012). Defining appropriate professional behavior for faculty and university students on social networking websites. *Higher Education*, 63, 135-151.

- Mazman, S. G., & Usluel, Y. K. (2010). Modeling educational usage of Facebook. *Computers & Education, 55*(2), 444-453. doi: 10.1016/j.compedu.2010.02.008
- McCarthy, J. (2010). Blended learning environments: Using social networking sites to enhance the first year experience. *Australasian Journal of Educational Technology, 26*(6), 729-740.
- Morris, J., Reese, J., Beck, R., & Mattis, C. (2010). Facebook usage as a predictor of retention at a private 4-year institution. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice, 11*(3), 311-322.
- Moustakas, C. (1994). *Phenomenological research methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Pempek, T. A., Yermolayeva, Y. A., & Calvert, S. L. (2009). College students' social networking experiences on Facebook. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology, 30*(3), 227-238.
- Quan-Haase, A., & Young, A. L. (2010). Uses and gratifications of social media: A comparison of facebook and instant messaging. *Bulletin of Science, Technology & Society, 30*(5).
- Ryan, S. D., Magro, M. J., & Sharp, J. H. (2011). Exploring educational and cultural adaptation through social networking sites. *Journal of Information Technology Education, 10*(1547-9714, 1547-9714), 1-1-II.
- Schroeder, J., & Greenbowe, T. J. (2009). The chemistry of Facebook: Using social networking to create an online community for the organic chemistry. *Innovate: Journal of Online Education, 5*(4), 9.
- Seidman, I. (2006). *Interviewing as qualitative research: A guide for researchers in education and the social sciences* (3rd ed.). New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Teclehaimanot, B., & Hickman, T. (2011). Student-teacher interaction on Facebook: What students find appropriate. *TechTrends: Linking Research and Practice to Improve Learning, 55*(3), 19-30.
- van Manen, M. (1990). *Researching lived experiences: Human science for an action sensitive pedagogy*. New York, NY: State University of New York Press
- Villano, M., & Gullon, M. (2009). Student services go social. *Campus Technology, 22*(6), 24-27.