

Student-Controlled Social Networks for Promoting Holistic Development from the Perspectives of Student Coaches

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Abstract—Many previous research works have studied the impact of online social networks for educational purposes. We examine in particular how Facebook is being used as a platform to communicate among students of an on-going student development project run by a local tertiary institute in Hong Kong so as to facilitate promotion and foster participation and interaction. The study focuses on the perspectives from student coaches and evaluate on the facilitation and difficulties in promoting self-initiated holistic development via Facebook. The study shows that instant interaction between participants and student coaches via Facebook can lead to information circulation in a much faster and effective manner compared with traditional communication channels such as email or bulletins. However, limitations are found on the lack of proactive discussions initiated by participants, and the difficulties in establishing active interactions between coaches and participants. This has undermined the effectiveness of promoting to participants' in self-initiated holistic development.

Keywords: Facebook; Learning Support; Social Networks; E-learning Platforms; Virtual Communication; Student Holistic Development, Student Coaches

I. INTRODUCTION: ONLINE SOCIAL NETWORKING AS ALTERNATIVE LEARNING EXPERIENCE

Online social networking has emerged as a popular mode of virtual communication which has basically transformed the ways in which people interact with each other and experience the world. Individuals are now increasingly inclined to develop virtual social relationships via popular social networking websites such as Facebook, Xanga and MySpace, and Twitter. Usually these websites or virtual spaces are equipped with functions to share and publish selected personal information which permits others to know about themselves. More importantly, by using social networking technologies, people can use these platforms to establish relationships as well as maintain close relationships with their real-life friends, colleagues, classmates and family members. Such engagement to keep existing and establish new relationships via virtual communities leads to an ever-expanding sharing culture which allows people to access numerous amount of information from various sources for different purposes (Wasko & Faraj, 2005).

The prevalence of online social networking has paved new ways for the enhancement of social and cultural development in many aspects. The rapid growth and popularity of online social networks such as Facebook among teenagers has not only opened up boundaries between nations and communities, but has also explored the terrain of its function as an education tool that can foster communication, interaction and collaborations

between different parties. For tertiary education practitioners, online social networking can be a learning alternative for students since the learning environment of tertiary institutes itself can also be regarded as a social system between individuals (both students and teaching staff) who have a shared academic context (Hwang, Kessler, & Francesco, 2004).

It is particularly interesting considering that online social networking has been deeply affecting the social and cultural practices of young people, and the fact that a large proportion of the total population of active and popular online social networking websites have been occupied and run by tertiary students (Madge, Meek, Wellens, & Hooley, 2009; Subrahmanyam, Reich, Waechter, & Espinoza, 2008). Yu, Tian, Vogel & Kwok (2010) believe that "students' social networking, especially when the networking increasingly shifts to online, is more likely to be self-initiated learning, in which individuals create a system of information and support by building and nurturing personal links" (p. 1494). Recent research shows that undergraduate students with certain self-regulation capacity are more inclined to interact with their peers so as to get feedback from them in a web-based learning setting, thus improve their academic performance (Wang & Wu, 2008). In addition, university students can also build social capital with the working industry which in various ways enhances their study-work relations (Chakrabarti & Santoro, 2004).

Such potential to link up online social networking and learning purposes is largely contributed by the phenomenon that the young

generation has been deeply embedded with good knowledge and extensive use of web-based technologies. Some describe the teenage nowadays as the Generation Media, alias 'Generation M', who is media-savvy and possess technological know-how and rely heavily on multimedia in their daily lifestyle (Roberts & Foehr, 2005; Vie, 2008). They do not view computers and the Internet as a separate part from their everyday lives; rather it is assumed to be part of it (Oblinger, 2003). Palfrey and Gasser (2008) develops the concept of "digital natives" and call for a new, creative way of teaching and learning for the new generation which is "born digital". Although their arguments have been challenged for its over-generalisation of the impact of technologies on teenagers, ignoring the effect of housing or school locations, access, family background and other factors (Bennett, S., & Maton, K., 2010; Corrin, L., Lockyer, L., & Bennett, S., 2010; Hargittai, 2010; Jones, 2010; Jones & Cross, 2009; Kennedy et al., 2008), their concepts have opened up a new way of assessing technology and its development in metropolitan cities where students in general have already encountered some kind of multi-media technology during their learning experience.

Many scholars have investigated the emerging trend of using online social network to enhance, or negatively affect, learning outcome for the younger generation in the 21st century (Cheung, Chiu and Lee, 2011; Cho, Gay, Davidson & Ingrassia, 2007; DeVoss & Porter, 2006; DeVoss & Rosati, 2002; Perkal, 2008; Vie, 2008; Yu, Tian, Vogel & Kwok, 2010). In particular, in the light of the immense popularity of Facebook as the leading frontier from teenagers in secondary schools and tertiary institutes or the Generation M to communicate and interact with peers, educators and even strangers (Bugeja, 2006; Capriccioso, 2006), it is worthwhile to unearth its potential as a means of communication to trigger learning interest among students. Besides formal academic learning, some also propose the power of Facebook as an interactive platform for informal learning experience (Madge, Meek, Wellens & Hooley, 2009) and supportive services such as peer coaching (Parker, Hall & Kram, 2008).

The challenges for educators are that they need to employ these skills and knowledge and also be familiarised with students' habits of using them so as to maximise the potential of multimedia. In addition, most of these education strategies aim at enhancing traditional academic learning such as literacy and writing skills (DeVoss & Porter, 2006;; Hart-Davidson, Cushman, Grabill, DeVoss, & Porter, 2005; Vie, 2008; Yancey, 2004); however, educators do not often use this platform to foster informal education and facilitate the students to achieve self-initiated learning on different generic

skills for holistic development. Moreover, most these studies do not pay much attention to evaluate the difficulties of initiating or promoting such platforms from the perspectives of teaching practitioners or others parties involved. Educators have to pay effort to establish and maintain energetic virtual communities with encouraging atmosphere that can foster online participation. Understanding whether their effort are effective would be beneficial to the evaluation of online learning in future.

Acknowledging the conceptual deficit of 'Generation M' and 'digital natives', we believe that it is applicable to the Hong Kong tertiary students due to the popularity of Facebook. Most Hong Kong students in general have already had a taste of multimedia and online social networking. Furthermore, Internet coverage is ubiquitous in Hong Kong, and smartphones are becoming more prevalent across all age groups. Indeed, as Cheung, Chiu & Lee (2011) claim in their research on tertiary students in Hong Kong, Facebook is the most popular online social networking site among local university students. Students' motivation to learn can be enhanced (Mazer, Murphy, & Simonds, 2007) and social capital with others can be cultivated (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007) through the use of it.

Some studies in Hong Kong examine on the impact of Facebook on university students' learning (Yu, Tian, Vogel & Kwok, 2010) and its use as intentional social action that is determined by social influence and social presence (Cheung, Chiu & Lee, 2011). However, research in exploring the adaptation of Facebook for co-curricular learning experience among students in Hong Kong has been limited. It may be explained by the common perception among teachers and parents that online social networks like Facebook and MySpace mainly, if not exclusively, serve merely to satisfy students' need for social interaction. Also, it is difficult to draw the distinction between informal learning and the drive for entertainment or social interaction on online social networks, thus making research on this area rather difficult.

II. SCOPE OF STUDY

It was under such consideration that our study chose to experiment the potential of Facebook on enhancing self-initiated and interactive learning in holistic development, which is a student development project in a Hong Kong tertiary institution. We try to utilise the potential of online social networking and multimedia knowledge, reflecting what Henry Jenkins (2006) has terms as "media convergence" as spaces where multiple forms of media intersect, collide and interact in unpredictable ways (p.259-60) which produces new possibilities for self-initiated learning experience.

We attempt to reflect on the experience of some pioneers who had established connections with online social networks for learning and encountered various kinds of difficulties when initiating and maintaining the Facebook groups for the above goals. Hence, in the light of previously limited experience in adapting Facebook for educational purposes, we will pay special attention to evaluate and discuss the difficulties and obstacles of using Facebook as a platform for interaction. Thus, our perspective will be focused on the view from student coaches who developed and maintained the Facebook group for our study.

In order to evaluate the effect of the Facebook Group as a medium for communication of the project, we shall look at the reasons behind the popularity of Facebook in our society. Cheung & Lee (2009) proposes a paradigm based on the uses and gratifications (U&G) commonly used in mass communication research to explain the reasons why people choose a specific medium over others and illuminate the psychological needs behind such choice. The paradigm consists of five values: Purposive value, self-discovery, maintaining interpersonal connectivity, value, social enhancement, and entertainment value. This paradigm is basically applicable to our study of Facebook in arena of co-curricular learning process since it is useful in helping us to evaluate how the users respond to the adaptation of Facebook Group as communication platform for educational purposes.

In particular, we are interested in the aspects of purposive value, maintaining interpersonal connectivity and social enhancement that are highly related to our study. *Purposive value* refers to the value derived from accomplishing some pre-determined informational and instrumental purpose; *maintaining interpersonal interconnectivity* refers to the social benefits derived from establishing and maintaining contact with other people such as social support, friendship, and intimacy; and *social enhancement* refers to the value that a participant derives from gaining acceptance and approval of other members, and the enhancement of one's social status within the community on account of one's contribution to it. We believe that by assessing these criteria we shall have a better understanding of how the Facebook functions as a communication platform between coaches and participants.

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Background of the project

In this study, we investigated students from a community college affiliated with a large-scale university in Hong Kong. The college offers 2-year associate degree (AD) and higher diploma (HD)

programmes spanning science and technology, humanities and social sciences, business and a number of specialized areas for local students after their graduation from 7-year secondary schools. Most students choose to pursue senior-year university education after their graduation and in most cases they enrol in undergraduate programmes in cognate discipline of their previous qualification. Most students aged between 18 to 22. Students of this age in Hong Kong are generally familiar with the use of multimedia in their daily lives.

The project being studied was called Project SUCCESS which was run by the college as an official co-curricular program for students from September 2011 to August 2012. Project SUCCESS (hereinafter, "PS") aims at providing a platform to facilitate the students to plan and record their progress and self-reflection in personal development throughout their year-long participation in co-curricular activities. Participants of the project are expected to search for and take part in a wide range of co-curricular activities to achieve the milestone they set for themselves, and they are required to submit a portfolio detailing their experience and reflection at the end of the academic year. The outcome and objectives of PS are as follows:

- a) Foster the personal growth of students through encouragement of self-initiated holistic development in 8 development areas (Positive Self-Image; Problem Solving; Language Proficiency; Life-long Learning; Social Responsibility; Social Development; Global Outlook; Physical Development);
- b) Encourage students to participate in a wide range of college-wide and external activities year round;
- c) Reinforce students' motivation and commitment to build up a positive attitude towards their studies and self-development.

Several types of services have been provided to students in order to assist them in keeping on their progress in the project. Following the practice employed in the project for the past three years, a wide range of co-curricular activities organised by college and external organisations are brought to participants' attention or promoted via school emails, posters and guidebooks. The guidebook of the project, "Passport to SUCCESS", was distributed to each participant which allows them to systematically record their participation of activities. Guidelines are also given on how to write up their reflections in accordance to different aspects of holistic development, as well as to count the points they have scored for achieving milestones of eight development areas. Students will be assessed and awarded at the end of the

academic year in accordance to their participation in holistic development, the quality of their portfolios and written reflections of their experience throughout the academic year. In order to better illustrate the project's objectives, a timeline listing all the milestones of PS was included in the guidebook "Passport to SUCCESS" for students' reference (Figure 1).

B. Introduction of Student Coaches and Facebook Group

Starting from the academic year of 2011, the project runs with the introduction of two new features: Introduction of student coaches and Facebook Group page. While the Project still operating in a self-initiated model, in order to better facilitates student participation, *student coaches* have been appointed to provide guidance and assistance. The coaches being selected had good knowledge about the project objectives and operations as all of them had participated in the project in previous year as student participants. No specific coaches will be assigned to participants individually; instead they serve as a team to offer support and advice throughout the academic year. Involvement of students coaches are voluntary-based, and they are responsible for organizing promotion activities, issuing bulletins, regular updates of the Facebook Group, and offering advice and guidance when necessary. These coaches do not function as leaders or workers; rather they are similar to student mentors who provide support and share information. Students were strongly encouraged in the guidebook to consult coaches for advices on various issues at different stages of the project. Seven student coaches were appointed for the academic year. In addition to the introduction of student coaches, the official Facebook Group of Project SUCCESS (<http://www.facebook.com/groups/projectsuccess2011/>) was launched in October 2011. The purpose of introduction of Facebook Group was to establish an alternative platform to contact with participants, after previous survey with participants from earlier years who claimed that they "did not check their student emails regularly" or "just forwarded them (emails) directly to the trash". It was also observed that Facebook provides a function called "News Feed" and "Notification" which allow users to immediately browse and follow the updates from their friends or groups they have joined. We attempted to explore such function so as to bring all the latest information to participants' attention as soon as possible.

The Facebook Group was officially announced in October 2011 via student emails, on-campus posters and counter promotion during the following two months. Regular promotions were sent to

students during February and April 2012 along with a QR code for easy access, and further promotion counters were also established. The participants had been told that the Facebook Group was the major means for communication with organisers (project owner and coaches), and the most updated information would appear on the Facebook Group and email simultaneously or at least on the same calendar date. Participants were not instructed on how to use the Facebook Group or what were expected from them, as our design was to maintain their usual way of treating and using Facebook as a daily habit. This allowed us to measure the impact of our Group in their daily Facebook activity. The Group has since recruited 134 members as "fans" out of the total number of 522 participants in PS (Figure 2). The group can be viewed by the public without restrictions, but confirmation as members of the group must be granted by the group administrators. The project owner and all student coaches had been assigned as administrators of the group.

Both student coaches and participants were allowed to make posts on the Wall of the group. Student coaches had been using Facebook Group as a major platform to communicate with participants, including delivering and updating latest information about the project, promoting student holistic development activities, distributing bulletins and answering enquiries. Participants, on the other hand, communicated with the coaches not via traditional personal contact methods but via Facebook Wall, hence making a collaborative effort to share all the information related to the project. Postings on the wall of the Facebook Group were not being censored or filtered, and will not be deleted without acknowledgement of the creator of the subsequent posts, although the administrators reserved the right to remove any messages with indecent, obscene and violent content, a right which had not been exercised until the time this article was written.

C. Data Collection and Measure

As aforementioned, our focus will be concentrated on the impact coaches brought to the Facebook Group and the project overall, as well as the difficulties they faced when running and offering assistance on the Facebook Group. The evaluation was conducted on both quantitative and qualitative models. On the quantitative level, we checked the usage among all members who had joined the group as an indication of the effectiveness of interaction between members. We counted the number of posts being made by different parties, the nature of posts, respond rate of posts, and breakdown of these responses according to their functions.

On the qualitative level, reflections had been conducted with the student coaches on the effectiveness of the Facebook group in June. Five out of seven coaches (referred to as Coach A to E hereinafter) who received invitation had been interviewed either face-to-face or via telephone to provide feedback. The core questions of interviews included: the usefulness of Facebook as an

alternative communication platform other than traditional methods such as official email or posters; self-evaluation of their contribution; the difficulties they faced when operating the group; reasons behind the adequacy of responses from participants in the group; levels of interaction between different parties.

Milestones and Timeline of Project SUCCESS

The expected progress of your accomplishments in this scheme is as below:

- ★ Organize and/or participate in **various development activities**
- ★ Keep updating your **activity record**
- ★ Write **self-reflection papers** throughout the period
- ★ Submit your **personal portfolio**

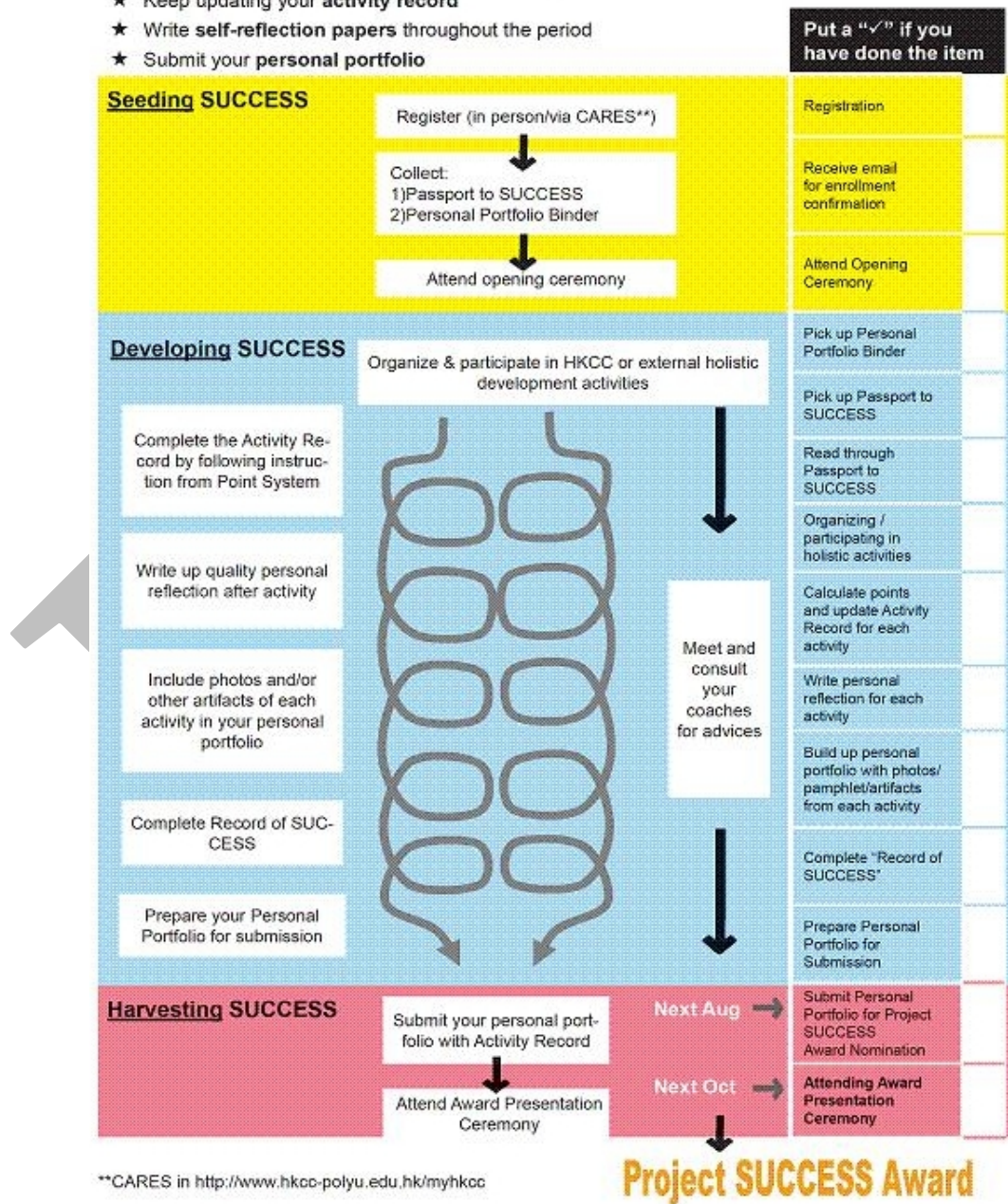


Figure 1: [Milestones and Timeline of Project SUCCESS, 2011-12]



Figure 2: [Official Facebook Group for Project SUCCESS, 2011-12].

IV. RESULTS

A. Statistical Distribution on Posts on the Facebook Wall

Since its introduction, the Facebook Group has been used to be a major, if not the forefront and most important, communication platform for the coaches and participants about PS. A total number of 123 posts had been made on the Wall from 3rd October to 8th June, among which the majority (88.6%) had been contributed by the project owner and student coaches. The following table records the number of posts made by project owner, student coaches and participants (Table 1).

In terms of the nature of the posts, 103 posts were related to information about internal and external activities (including text messages and posters uploaded in jpeg format), contributing 83.7% of the posts, among which the majority (93.2% among activities; 78.0% of total) was posted by project owners and student coaches.

TABLE I. DISTRIBUTION OF POSTS ON FACEBOOK GROUP CREATED (BY IDENTITY OF POST MAKER) (N=123).

	N	%
Project owner/student coaches	109	88.6
Student participants	14	11.4
Total	123	100

In addition, project owners and student coaches also created 10.6% of posts on information about the project, including explanation of 8 development areas, points system, evidence or verifiers of students' participation in activities, advices, bulletins, deadlines and reminders, and miscellaneous. On the other hand, contribution from student participants was evenly divided between activities and enquiries about the project (5.7% each). The following table records the number of posts made by project owner, student coaches and participants (Table 2).

Furthermore, in order to assess the responses made by participants as an indication of whether participants had demonstrated their interests in posts made on the wall, three categories had been used to differentiate different kinds of responses: "comments/replies" referred to texts typed as a follow-up comment to the post. These included

initial response to the post, follow-up enquiries or questions, and suggestions. The “Like” category referred specifically to the number of posts which received ‘like’, instead of the total number of

‘likes’ appeared on the entire wall. The same measure was also applied to the calculation of “comments/replies”.

TABLE II. DISTRIBUTION OF POSTS ON FACEBOOK GROUP CREATED (BY NATURE OF POSTS) (N=123).

	N	% (within)	% (total)
Activities	103		83.7
<i>(by project owner/coaches)</i>	96	93.2	78.0
<i>(by participants)</i>	7	6.8	5.7
Enquiries (by participants)	7		5.7
Project information, advice, reminders, bulletin (by project owner/coaches)	13		10.6
Total	123	NA	100

In this study both types of responses used the number of post for calculation. It should also be reminded that participants could do both actions: they could like the message and also comment and reply them, but the two did not have necessary connections. That is, a post could receive a lot of ‘likes’ without comments being left, whilst a post could have comments without being ‘liked’. Neither way would affect the number of counts on each category. The third category was “No response” which meant that a post received neither typed comments nor ‘like’. It is also worth to note that, in order to accurately reflect the level of participation and interaction from others participants, the person who created the post was not included in the counting, nor was the responses made by any project owners or student coaches. In summary, most posts generally had not received any responses from participants (65.0%). Around 26.0% had received ‘like’ and only 9.0% were responded by texts from them (Table 3).

and communicating; student participants, on the other hand, were in general reactive to what had happened on the Facebook Wall. Participants would follow-up and responded to a few enquiries made by other participants, and posts on the project itself would also be replied which can be viewed as reactive participation; however, they seldom created posts to discuss the project unless they needed to make enquiries about the details or administrative issues. On the contrary, most participants responded very passively towards information on activities, probably

TABLE III. RESPONSES TO POSTS (BY STUDENT PARTICIPANTS ONLY; EXCLUDING THE PERSON WHO INITIATED EACH POST) (N=123).

	N	%
Comments/replies	11	9.0
‘like’	32	26.0
No response	80	65.0
Total	123	100

In order to investigate the level of participation by student participants on different kinds of posts, a breakdown of responses was made in Table 4. Generally speaking, enquiries made by participants had attracted responses from others as 85.7% of posts about enquiries had received comments from both participants and student coaches (who by nature were supposed to reply as part of their duties). Only one enquiry was entirely ignored by participants, seemingly because it was judged not directly related to the project itself. Also, information about the project had attracted 61.5% of ‘like’ and yielded 38.5% of comments, replies or further enquiries. An overwhelming majority of posts about upcoming activities were without any responses, as only 17.5% were given ‘like’ and mere 1.9% had received further enquiries or updates (eg. the activity in concern was full; change of application deadline; change of time or venue, etc).

TABLE IV. BREAKDOWN OF RESPONSES TO POSTS (EXCLUDING THE PERSON WHO INITIATED EACH POST) (N=123).

	N	% (within)	% (total)
Activities	103		83.7
<i>Comments/replies</i>	2	1.9	1.6
<i>‘like’</i>	18	17.5	14.6
Enquiries (by participants)	7		5.7
<i>Comments/replies (by BOTH participants and student coaches)</i>	6	85.7	4.9
<i>‘like’</i>	6	85.7	4.9
Project information, advice, reminders, bulletin (by project owner/coaches)	13		10.6
<i>Comments/replies (by participants only)</i>	5	38.5	4.1
<i>‘like’</i>	8	61.5	6.5
Total	123	NA	100

In summary, it is safe to argue from the quantitative evaluation that coaches had been taking up a proactive role in running the information flow

because they had read the information and they did not feel the need to initiate any conversations, for instance asking for opinion from other participants who might also be interested in those activities.

B. Qualitative Evaluation of Activities on the Facebook Wall by Student Coaches

Five out of seven coaches (referred to as Coach A to E hereinafter) who received invitation had been interviewed either face-to-face or via telephone to provide feedback. In general, the coaches responded that they were very satisfied with the positive manner and behavior among participants who have appeared on the Group as they have made use of the Wall for its supposed purpose as the project's communication platform. No commercially-driven, obscene, unpleasant, hatred or aggressive messages have been found on the Facebook Wall, nor have it been used for illegal activities, thus no messages have been deleted, and no members have been warned or removed accordingly. They have commonly agreed that the introduction of Facebook has attracted more attention from students who have or have not joined the project.

Reflecting on the general effectiveness of the Facebook Group since its launch in October, all student coaches generally agree that this is a very convenient way to fulfill their duties and maintain connection with participants since the project does not hold regular activities and meetings. The Facebook group as a medium of communication offers a more flexible and always-ready channel to facilitate their work anytime they are available: between classes, after classes, during lunch time, at home, and also during their meetings with friends. They can also explain what the project is about when being approached by their schoolmates; they can upload posters and information of extra activities via their smartphones whenever they see it in or outside the campus; they can answer enquiries to one person on the Facebook wall and the rest of the "fans" will be able to read them thus reducing the possibility of answering the same enquiry many times throughout the year. The introduction of the Facebook Group has thus enhanced the effectiveness of carrying out their duties.

One of their major observations that deserves our attention and investigation, as stated earlier in our findings, is that most of the 134 participants who have joined the Facebook Group have not been actively initiating discussions on the project among themselves, nor have they been actively suggesting and sharing information about activities to others. Such actions are overwhelmingly performed by the coaches. Most messages being initiated by participants have been enquiries about the administrative issues of the project, including the details of point system, validity of verifiers (person/evidence who could verify one's

participation of a particular event), concepts of 8 development areas, writing of self-reflection articles and preparation of portfolios. We shall exemplify this phenomenon in more details in the following discussion part.

V. DISCUSSION: REFLECTION AND EVALUATION ON FACEBOOK GROUP AS THE PLATFORM FOR INTERACTION

Based on the quantitative data we collected, we tried to examine it with in-depth interviews with coaches on the effectiveness. We shall breakdown our analysis and discussion into four major themes: function of the Group as a contact point; postings on the Wall of the Facebook Group; interactions between different parties on the Wall; and the reasons of passive involvement of participants.

A. Effectiveness of the Group as a Contact Point for Enquiries

In summary, the coaches agreed that the Facebook Group served comparatively well as a virtual place for enquiry. Coaches remembered that last year (when they were participants themselves) they had difficulties to contact the person responsible for the project, and the establishment of an official Facebook Group had bridged that missing gap in offering a converging contact point for enquiries. The coaches were generally satisfied with its function as a platform for initial enquiry. This had been a bright spot for Coach C as this was a more casual way of making enquiries and users would feel more comfortable to raise questions:

"Last year when I was still a participant, I didn't know who to contact when I was writing up the portfolio, so I asked the IK (Information Kiosk of the institute). They told me the name of the person (project owner), his email and (phone) number. I ended up didn't approach him after all. I asked my classmate instead, because it was a bit inconvenient and I didn't know how to explain these questions in email. And it's too formal to ask him. So I asked my friend, [I] feel more comfortable. Making enquiries on Facebook also makes them visible to everyone so we coaches do not have to answer the question too frequently and repeatedly." (Coach C)

Coach A also explained why she saw the Facebook Group as an effective communication platform for participants to make enquiry:

"We are the bridge that links them (participants) up with the project. You ask me questions directly here (on Facebook), I can see it immediately even on mobile, and I or other coaches can reply you ASAP. And everyone sees it! So I don't have to repeat again and again...or repeat it once again at the end of the semester. (It's) Better than doing it on email, because it's a long wait, and you don't know if he or she is getting back to you or not. Even if he or she replies,

it may be a bit late and I've solved the problems myself or I've sought help from classmates already." (Coach A)

As supported by the findings earlier, participants had inclined to turn to the Facebook for initial assistance and advice. Although enquires made by participants had been few in numbers, they were in most cases well-responded, with comments and responses from both coaches and other participants had been posted and 'liked' swiftly. As both Coach A and C stated, the Group successfully acted as an instant contact point, and answers to enquiries from one person could be read by the rest of the group, thus reducing the chance to reply the same enquiry repeatedly throughout the year. In light of the paradigm set by Cheung and Lee (2009), this Facebook Group successfully fulfilled its "purposive value" by satisfying the pre-determined, official informational and instrumental purposes set by project owner and coaches and mutually agreed by participants (Cheung and Lee, 2009).

B. Posting Activity Information on the Wall

Coaches being interviewed all agreed that it was useful to put up as much information as possible about internal or external activities on the Facebook Wall. They believed that they would have a reliable source to search for activities, and they would be constantly updated with the latest information. Consequently, it aroused their interest to join more activities.

However, they also observed that they had been the major source of information about internal or external activities whilst participants had rarely posted activities they believe may be of interest to other participants, an observation which was coherent with the statistical findings in the previous section. They also noted the fact that their posts on activities have hardly been responded in any sense. Coach B described her feeling about such situation as follows:

"I am fine with posting a lot of messages about these activities for them, and I don't mind if they don't post frequently, but deep in my heart I would not feel extremely happy when I've made 30 posts a month and no one ever giving me a 'like' except you (Project owner). Yes, I understand that they have read these posts, and they do not need to respond even if they find them interesting. But...still, somehow, if someone likes my posts, I would feel that my work has been acknowledged. I'll be happier." (Coach B)

Coach D also offered her view on the overwhelming majority of posts made by coaches and the lack of such posts from the participants: "It is my duty to post all the information about activities from "CC" (the institute) or outside it. But I think the Facebook would have more influence if the participants post more on what they know and what

they are interested in. I believe many have joined activities outside ("CC"), but I seldom see them sharing up there (on Facebook). After all, Facebook is about sharing. It's been a one-way traffic so far in my opinion." (Coach D)

In other words, although coaches believed that they had made an impact on allowing participants to receive a lot of information about co-curricular activities being offered by the school or other external organisations, they harbored some kind of expectations on more active participation from the student participants. However, Coach C had a more lenient attitude towards this lack of response or active posting behavior among students:

"I didn't expect that frankly (lack of posts from students) Don't expect too much from them. They saw the 'notification', read it, and fine. They know it and that's good enough. They don't have to tell me if they'll join it or not. I'll be happy to know but I don't think they need to tell us. No one is ever gonna give comments on an activity unless they have questions about it such as when's the deadline or when's the date and venue, etc. That is normal." (Coach C)

Coach A was more optimistic about the lack of responses from participants:

"I think that means our jobs are successful. Because our information has been so detailed they do not need to ask any more questions and they know how to join them. Isn't it a good thing? If they keep asking you questions that means our information is not enough." (Coach A)

In summary, the coaches believed that while it is worthwhile to continue the current practice of uploading information about activities, it would fulfill the promise of Facebook as the online social networking for sharing if participants could share their information on activities more frequently and actively. While it was believed that students had been relying more on the Facebook to receive information than other traditional communication channel such as student email accounts, the assumed self-initiation of participation and sharing of information for the benefit of others were not observed, which to some extent defeated the purpose of Facebook as a platform for information sharing. Optimism, however, can also be taken from the statement by Coach A. Her view can also offer another side of the story for the lack of participation as a reflection of sufficient information being delivered; hence participants require no extra support. Such dilemma of views requires further research for explanation. This again proves that, this Facebook Group successfully maintained its purposive value among coaches by achieving its pre-determined informational and instrumental purposes, as students realised its function as information provider.

C. Interaction between Participants among themselves and with Coaches on the Wall

Elaborating on the situation for posts on activities, some coaches expressed their views on the situation that they had not been able to explore the possibility of using the Facebook Group as an interactive channel to communicate with other participants. They believed that participants had been largely passive readers of information. Coach B offered her view as below:

“You can see only a handful number of them are active members, I recognize them all [laugh]. Most of the enquiries are made by them; most of the time it was them who replied to our posts on reminders or information like the portfolio stuff or the verifier. I don’t know if the others have ever noticed these posts since most of them have “dived” (a local slang for disappearing from the sight of the public for a long time) and never give feedback or comments or even like those posts.” (Coach B)

Coach C also shared a similar view on the lack for responses on posts about the project:

“We can’t initiate discussions effectively. I posted a couple of messages gently reminding them it’s time to write reflections and prepare for their portfolios. Only one or two did reply and ask questions about how to do this and that, or how to count points, or what to do with verifiers. The responses were even less than our post that wished them Happy Chinese New Year at the start of the year! [big laugh].” (Coach C)

Some also argued that the Group had been reduced to the level of coach-participant communication, while no dialogues could be found among participants themselves who discussed and shared among themselves directly on issues related to the project or activities they had joined. As Coach E explained:

“No one shared their experience of joining activities. Yes, the Facebook Group has been very effective in telling them there are many activities to join, but no one tells others whether these activities are good or not. Maybe they are saving the words for their portfolio, I don’t know. But...(there is) no interaction really. It’s like they (the participants) don’t know each other so they don’t chat; they only come up and ask questions when necessary.” (Coach E)

The feedback from coaches illustrated the fact that, although they tried to make full use of the Facebook to deliver their messages, no constructive and constant interaction could be maintained between coaches and participants. It was even more the case among participants themselves as they never openly shared their experience about joining activities or what they have learnt from them with others on the Wall.

The project owner shared similar views on the lack of interaction between participants and coaches. Monitoring the operation of the Facebook Group, the project owner described he had tried in various ways to initiate responses from the participants, but in general the replies were few. He “liked” almost every post he and the coaches made, in the hope that the notification every “like” generated would caught the attention of participants, who would ask questions or seek support from there. However, information about new updates, notices or reminders seldom led to further enquiries on the Wall. Instead, surprisingly, the project owner revealed that he “received phone calls from participants who said they wanted to ask something about the notice they saw on Facebook Group”. Such reluctance to initiate enquiries on Facebook by participants meant that the Group helped the project owner little in reaching out to participants and evaluating their progress throughout the year.

These opinions shows that self-initiated discussion of self-learning experience in activities could not be observed, and the lack of responses and interaction had prevented coaches as well as the project owner to assess the impact of activities on and offer support to their holistic development until they submit their portfolios at the end of the academic year. Influence on promotion of self-initiated holistic development could not be effectively assessed, hence making it difficult for participants to receive evaluation, feedback and advice from coaches or others on their progress.

Such observation points to the limited effectiveness of the Facebook group in establishing its “social enhancement” value for both coaches (Cheung and Lee, 2009). The lack of interaction with participants, largely due to the passive nature of other members, meant that the coaches could not gain substantial acceptance, approval and encouragement through other members of the group, and their constant contribution were not acknowledged adequately that could match its status as coaches (although not an authoritative leading figure). Such passive response to posts by other members was caused by the absence of “interpersonal interconnectivity”, which affected the construction of an encouraging atmosphere which tied its members to this virtual community. This will be discussed in the later part of the discussion.

D. Reasons behind Passive Responses on Making or Replying Posts

In response to this overall lack of active participation from the student participants, coaches had various views and explanations of their lack of incentive to take a more proactive role in initiating discussion or sharing useful information. One major reason commonly shared was that, although Facebook is generally regarded as an online social

networking platform or the usual perception of participants in expressing their views openly and replying rapidly, surprisingly students did not feel 'natural' or comfortable to raise questions openly and publicly on the Wall.

Coach D made this point very clear when asked about why few had responded to the posts by highlighting the functional nature of such Group as information provider:

"Yes they use Facebook everyday...but they are not used to this, because this Group is not a chat group. This is where they receive information; it is not a personal group. Just like reading Yahoo news, you read it and receive some information only, you seldom log in to make posts and discuss with others. People just think they don't know most of these members; it is not like a group between friends where you can talk freely and like their comments. This page is not like that." (Coach D)

Coach B further elaborated on the relationship between the nature of such Facebook Group and this sense of alienation between members:

"We have too many members in 100 and something. Maybe they are shy of making enquiries publicly on Facebook, because they are afraid of being teased by others for making unwise or useless questions, because you don't know these people, you feel uncomfortable and embarrassed to ask. It's not like asking friends when they feel free to do so even if that question may sound stupid. Also, on Facebook you leave comments to your friends only, and this group is not one of their friends, so they do not have such practice of leaving comments. It's different." (Coach B)

For Coach B and D, this was a rather general practice or common behavior among student Facebook users, who did not feel necessary to initiate discussion and interaction between other members because they did not rate this group at the same level as their chatting group with friends. This view was also echoed by Coach C, who argued that "once they have read the information, that's the end of it. They do not need to reply." Coach E also mentioned that "...to them, typing messages and chatting with friends is different from making formal enquires" so it is normal for them to be refrained from posting enquiries on the Wall. One possible explanation, hence, lies in the fact that members of this group did not feel attached to some, if not most, of these other members like their Facebook friends. This Facebook Group was merely considered as a platform for them to receive information and updates about the project, but not the same Facebook where they maintain friendship, social network and social capital daily. The ability for an online social network is to "maintain interpersonal interconnectivity" by establishing and maintaining social support, friendship and intimacy (Cheung & Lee, 2009); yet

the project clearly lacks the two latter factors and can merely provide seemingly one-way support. In other words, this Facebook group fails to satisfy the condition of "maintain interpersonal interconnectivity", and was merely was a functional tool which the project made use of to get in touch with them frequently, rather than a social tool which allowed them to cultivate social capital and build up social networks.

Departing from similar standpoint, Coach E however came up with an alternative reason which explained the problem on the administrative level:

"...they do not know who is responsible to answer their questions. Most people would not check who the administrators are. So they may be afraid of their questions being answered incorrectly by others who are not the coaches. Then they end up asking other friends. Also, some may think that they would prefer to ask these questions privately, so they would not raise them on the wall." (Coach E)

In addition, Coach E also pointed to the possibility that related to the fundamental nature of the Project SUCCESS (PS) itself which to some extent explained the observation made by other coaches aforementioned:

"Project SUCCESS is a unique program. It doesn't offer activities to its members; it is like a salesperson: they don't make their own goods; they sell them only. So it is difficult to encourage the participants to be very actively engaged with the project since you don't have your own activities to sell, unlike other programs which have their own activities and they can share their photos or common experience or topics for chit-chat after dinner. As a result, they have weaker sense of attachment, and they do not feel the need to make friends with other members. When members don't become friends, it is much harder to maintain relationship and build a tight network on Facebook. So it is no surprise that they treat it as a place to collect information and seek advice." (Coach E)

Her opinion indeed leads to a thoughtful point about using the Facebook as a social network site to promote school activities, which relates to the ability to "maintain interpersonal interconnectivity" raised by Cheung and Lee (2009): On what basis can Facebook be used to keep users interested in sharing information, if it can not establish a friendship-like atmosphere and subsequently build a social network? When PS is not an project that can naturally glue its members together through different kinds of activities and form a solid social network, the existence of Facebook may be employed merely as a tool, a contact point, an information provider, that initiates and generates attention, without the power to sustain a prolonged interest and engagement between members. Thus, their habit on Facebook messaging and posting cannot be entirely transplanted to their treatment of PS Facebook Group, consequently

losing its nature as an online social network for interactive discussion and sharing. Again the Facebook group clearly lacks the latter two factors and can merely provide seemingly one-way support. This is the challenge that requires careful rethinking for educators who wish to transform the net-surfing habit from daily use to education for both formal and informal learning purposes.

E. Other opinions

In addition, some coaches observed that participants had restricted their use of the platform to text-based message only, while other media forms such as images, audio files, videos or hyperlinks had not been explored or deemed necessary by them. In the light of their comparatively advanced knowledge and familiarity of Facebook, this may suggest that participants may treat the Facebook Group as an enquiry front or contact point of enquiries, instead of a communication platform where they would engage in as a supplement of the progress of the project regularly if not frequently.

F. Overall Evaluation of the Facebook Group as an Interactive Promotion Channel

Adopting the paradigm suggested by Cheung and Lee (2009), the Facebook Group in study was only partially successful in establishing a virtual community that can be related to the project in their real-life and bridged the communication gap left by the less prevailing means of student emails. The group was successful in delivering and sharing information about various kinds of information that could reach the participants, hence supplemented emails as the front-line contact point, fulfilling its purposive value as an online social network. However, its functions to “maintain interpersonal interconnectivity” and “social enhancement” could not be observed as participants and coaches were largely reduced to a one-way, giver-receiver relationship. Few interactions were initiated from participants and the group could not construct a communication platform that gradually encouraged participants at all levels.

The progress shows that while students had been able to use the platform to make enquires and provides more options on joining activities, they have not been successfully using it to record or share their own information as they heavily rely on coaches to deliver information for their use. Hence, as shown in our discussion, we have been unable to evaluate whether the participants can initiate self-disciplined participation in a comprehensive manner, which requires active posting, reports and interaction from participants with other parties in order to showcase their progress of the project.

VI. FUTURE WORK

We have observed some interesting points that may well be useful for enhancing the Project and other similar student-initiated holistic development projects, although the project is in its pilot run and yet to complete. Our study on the impact of Facebook Group, points to three directions for future research which may lead to more fruitful discussion on the impact of using online social networking system such as Facebook as platforms for communication and promotion of activities.

First, it is the first year for the project studied to have its own Facebook group and it would be beneficial if more follow-up research can be obtained from different years of experience for thorough comparison. It is particular worthwhile to explore if student coaches and participants have been able to explore some previously unused features on Facebook, such as the ‘event’ creation function and the uploading of audio and video clips, to enhance communication and interaction among themselves. This also links to a concern that Vie (2008) raises about whether instructors (or project coordinators in our study) have the similar level of familiarity of the online social networking culture and technical know-how of web-based technologies that can match their students (p.10), so as to assist or assess their learning experiences via Facebook.

Moreover, the rapid popularity of smartphone, especially among the teenagers, has made these online networking as mobile as we can imagine. As Coach A stated in the previous section that we can always check if someone has left a comment or posted an activity or enquiry almost instantly via mobile phones, the flow of information and response time has been compressed to a high level. It would be helpful if we can unleash such potential and apply them to activity organization and coaching impact.

Last but not least, as this study reveals, there is a common practice of using Facebook as communication platform on a daily basis, but the habits of using it maybe culturally specific as people from various cultural experiences may have different attitudes or practices of using Facebook for various purposes. Thorough investigation on the local habits among teenagers in Hong Kong may enrich our research on Facebook as an education tool.

In this paper we focus on the perspectives of student coaches and the project owner because we would like to examine the concerns, problems and obstacles of introducing Facebook as a promotion and communication platform for student activities and projects. The views from participants and other evidences on their self-learning process, as well as their experience of utilising the Facebook Group, can be analysed and incorporated in the future work.

VII. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, our study demonstrates the introduction of Facebook Group to a student development project called Project SUCCESS run by a Hong Kong tertiary institution. We found that Facebook enables the student coaches with a better platform to offer support to participants in terms of information update and announcement than traditional communication channels. As checking and updating Facebook is fast becoming a daily habit for students, the potential of online social networks as such could be further explored to keep contact with members of different affiliations and groups, and circulate information that can be useful for learning purposes.

However, despite these encouraging signs, this study reveals the struggle of establishing an online network for learning purposes that can produce the same level of penetration and influence by holistic development activities on the same medium. We learn from the study that the successful elements that make Facebook a powerful social tool may not be easily transformed into a drive for self-initiated learning process without additional effort and adjustment. The learning nature has affected the way participants actively participate in communication and discussions, and the subsequent difficulties in establishing (or mimicking) friendship-like relationship with different kinds of members hinder more in-depth support of self-learning and self-discovering process.

Thus, it is worthwhile to conduct more in-depth research on the challenge of preserving and adopting the on leisure online social networking among younger generation to virtual sites for specific educational purposes that can maintain similar level of self-initiated and interactive participation. More comprehensive research would surely provide valuable insights into the Facebook phenomenon among students as well as teaching practitioners in the near future, and the ways in which educators can make better use of the potential that online social networking system can bring to the enhancement of student development especially in co-curricular learning situations where the goals and objectives of their learning activities cannot be explicitly evaluated by marks and assessments.

Many educators have proposed that we should not underestimate the emerging effect of the Internet and its consequential social networking environments on students' learning experience in formal or informal settings. Our study attempts to observe the adaptation of online social networking for educational purposes, and whether or not it can lead to favorable outcome on self-learning experience and holistic development. It also demonstrates the limitation of using Facebook to enhance interaction between both participants and activity organizer for

co-curricular activities. Self-initiation and interactive learning among students require constant exchanges between both parties, and the immense popularity of Facebook offers a new opportunity for educators to consider various kinds of approaches to connect with participants and foster their holistic development.

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