Technological University Dublin

ARROW@TU Dublin

Conference papers

School of Hospitality Management and Tourism

2010

Can we be 'Friends'? Social Networking and Student Engagement in an Academic Environment

Mary O'Rawe
Technological University Dublin, mary.orawe@tudublin.ie

Follow this and additional works at: https://arrow.tudublin.ie/tfschmtcon

Part of the Education Commons

Recommended Citation

Can we be "friends"?

Social networking and student engagement in an academic environment

....

Mary O'Rawe

School of Hospitality Management & Tourism

Dublin Institute of Technology

mary.orawe@dit.ie

INTRODUCTION AND OBJECTIVES

Students' methods of engagement in third level education are very different to those of a decade ago (Cloete, de Villiers & Roodt 2009). There are a number of factors impacting on these changes in students' profiles, expectations and willingness to engage. One of these factors which is addressed by the author is the way in which students now use social networking tools to engage and communicate. Popular new technologies such as wikis, blogs and podcasts are now being used for academic purposes. But what are the roles of such tools? Do they merely aid staff-student communication and student-student communication, do they help lecturers seem more relevant and current, or can they provide an interface for academic material? In summary, can social networking actually enhance the learning experience and if so, for whom?

This paper explores the adoption of social networking (with particular reference to Facebook and Twitter) within the context of hospitality, tourism, event and leisure management first-year undergraduate programmes in the school of Hospitality Management & Tourism, D.I.T. The research is in the specific context of an initiative called "Get Smart!" which targets the personal and professional development of first year students on these programmes. The specific objective of the paper is to examine whether Facebook and Twitter can help students engage more in an academic environment, and whether they are viewed as academic tools to any real extent. A comparison will be offered between Facebook/Twitter and the more traditional virtual learning environment (VLE), in the D.I.T's case Webcourses.

THE EVOLUTION OF SOCIAL NETWORKING

Social networks have been developing at a fast rate over the last three decades (Mazer, Murphy & Simonds 2007). Even politicians have mounted much discussed profiles to promote campaigns and work in general. This form of low-cost direct marketing has undoubtedly been successful, not least in its ability to make the individual appear current and youthful and "technologically savvy" in terms of the student community. Most students are now members of a range of social networking communities such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Flickr, eBay and others. 95% of UK undergraduate students are regularly using social networking sites (Madge, Meek & Wellens, 2009 p. 141). While it is unclear as to exactly what percentage of the Irish third level student cohort use social networking tools, recent reporting shows that one third of the Irish population have Facebook profiles (Lillington, 2010). This rise in popularity has been accompanied by some problems, with

high profile reporting of bullying and apparent paedophile attraction hitting the headlines recently.

Social networking tools may be defined as "online spaces that allow individuals to present themselves, articulate their social networks, and establish or maintain their connections with others" (Ellison, Steinfield & Lampe 2006).

Undoubtedly the most popular and high profile of these is Facebook. Defined as "a social utility that connects you with the people around you" (Ellison 2007) and as "a highly interactive virtual social network" (Mazer et al. 2007), Facebook currently has well over 400 million active users globally (Facebook 2010). It is interesting that Facebook originally began as an online directory for college students, enabling them to "look up people in your school, see how people know each other etc". (Facebook.com) This original format required users to have an ".edu" address to create a profile until 2006. The context of this evolution seems to mean that Facebook still has a collegiate atmosphere and web architecture, including status criteria such as campus status, current programme etc. One might argue that this gives it academic potential. Boulos and Wheeler (2007) identify the link between a variety of Web 2.0 technologies and active learning, highlighting that such interactions aid students to "construct their knowledge better and become 'active knowledge generators' who manage their learning". This academic potential was not, however, found to be relevant by Madge et al. (2009) who commented that social networking sites were "more for socialising and talking to friends about work than for actually doing work".

WHAT PART CAN SOCIAL NETWORKING TOOLS PLAY IN ACADEMIC LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS?

Research regarding the potential roles of such online communities in academic learning is still in its infancy, although there is current evidence of a steep increase in interest in the area. Beer (2008) points to the "burgeoning academic interest in this phenomenon". Minocha & Thomas (2007) raise the bar further, stating that it is the responsibility of universities to present courses in "collaborative networked environments". Maznevski and Chudoba (2000) support this from the perspective that today's graduates may be required to work in virtual teams and therefore require digital literacy skills. They point to several leading organisations including IBM and Nokia who use social networking as a core collaborative tool.

 The pedagogical potential of social networks has been recognised whereby they offer opportunities to share knowledge, ideas and individual and group activities (Dalsgaard n.d.) Advantages include access to information, and emotional and material support (Donath

2008), an opportunity to get to know lecturers better (Hewitt and Forte 2006), more opportunities to develop personal relationship with peers (Mazer et el. 2007), and a greater disposition to self-disclosure (ibid.). The literature also points to the benefits of using social networks to solve coordination problems of groups (Cho, Lee, Stefanone & Gay 2005). However, making the progression from using social networks as communication tools to their application as more academic tools to supplement/replace traditional teaching is not without its problems. Furthermore, many dissenting voices remain. Eberhardt (2007) presents arguments both for and against social networking as a valuable educational experience and points out that it may indeed interfere with students' learning and development.

FACEBOOK IN AN ACADEMIC CONTEXT

There are a number of contexts where Facebook has been employed to support a third level academic learning environment. Forming groups for academic purposes, where peer learning takes place, is one such example. Used in this manner, social networking can obviously have impacts on learning, however, the over-riding context is still one of networking and social interaction.

Other examples have emerged, including a range of initiatives where Facebook is used as a means of assisting *social integration* into third level life. Useful studies have explored how pre-registration engagement with a college Facebook network can aid first year students in making the transition to third level (Madge et al 2009). In this context, Facebook was described as the "social glue". Other universities (e.g. Birmingham City University's School of English) have also used Facebook to set up pre-induction groups for incoming students, again to improve transition to third level and to enhance social cohesion between students. Similarly, third level providers have attempted to develop their own, closed "university only" social networking system to build student communities (the University of Westminster's "Connect" site was developed in 2007 to help students keep in touch with classmates by building profiles, uploading photographs and all the main features also offered by Facebook. A number of questions therefore arise.

Is a sufficient rationale for using Facebook in an academic context that students like it and use it a lot? Or do we need an evaluation of its pedagogical potential??

Do social networks have a role in creating and sharing information, or are they just for socialisation?? An evaluation of the potential of social networks in academia requires looking beyond building relationships and examining how they affect student learning.

Why do students/staff not use Facebook for academic content??

While academic staff acknowledge the growth of Facebook and other social networking tools among the student body, the motivation to use such a network may not always be strong. It is not solely the case that students do not want to interact with staff on Facebook. Although the author has not carried out primary research from this perspective to date, there is evidence to support this. Cloete et al. (2009) pointed out that lecturers are sensitive about maintaining their credibility as professionals and are often using social networking for purely social purposes.

A range of disadvantages regarding social networking related to the lecturer's perspective has been identified. These include time delays and increased waiting time causing frustration (Lantz 2001), and students posting negative messages on a lecturer's Facebook Wall which can be viewed by others (Mazer, Murphy and Simons 2007).

Of course this discussion assumes that a lecturer has a Facebook profile and is competent in using it at the outset, which may not be the case. Undoubtedly, demographics also have a role to play here.

Cloete et al. (2009) concluded that one of the main reasons why Facebook is not considered as an academic tool is that lecturers already have a dedicated "secure" site where they can post module content and communicate with students e.g. Webcourses or Blackboard. The same study also found that the majority of lecturers who have Facebook accounts prefer no interaction with students on Facebook.

Housing academic content on the college's server may also be important in terms of academic credibility. Can Facebook offer this? The question may be posed as to whether lecturers harm or enhance their credibility by using Facebook?? Showing an understanding of modern student culture is one thing, but engaging and fully communicating quite another. Lecturers may be hesitant to "self-disclose" (Wheeless & Grotz 1976) on Facebook. While lecturers often disclose information about themselves by sharing anecdotes or personal/professional experience as examples to bolster lecture content, Cloete et al (2009) highlighted a number of reasons why academics may be slow to demonstrate the same behaviour in social networks.   Research appears to show a link between students' level of engagement and a lecturer's website content (such as Webcouses). O'Sullivan (2004) found that students indicated more positive attitudes (in the respects of motivation and affective learning) towards a module and a lecturer when the website material included high levels of self-disclosure.

TWITTER'S EVOLUTION

Founded in 2006, Twitter is emerging as a new model of social creativity. The key elements of the Twitter platform - social networks, live searching and link sharing appear, to date, to be enduring. So why is Twitter not as attractive as Facebook to D.I.T.'s third level students? Does the limit of 140 "characters" prevent students from embracing this culture? Further research is warranted here, as, in the author's experience, injecting Twitter into a conversation can fundamentally change the rules of engagement.

BACKGROUND TO STUDY

Get Smart!

The Get Smart! initiative was developed by the author in 2008 in response to a number of themes and challenges which had been identified in the most recent school review of the activities of the School of Hospitality Management and Tourism.

These challenges included student engagement and retention aspects, professional and personal development, lack of information literacy and confidence in this area, poor communication skills and ongoing problems arising from a basic lack of written English, inherited partly from second level education.

Despite all these areas being already addressed in curriculum content, it became clear that something more innovative was needed. Get Smart! is a programme that is designed to communicate with students in their language, and to sit laterally across their modules and form an integrating mechanism. The Get Smart! initiative commences in induction where techniques such as mind-mapping aid new students' understanding of how all modules inter-relate, as well as their own role in maximizing learning through self-management, professional responsibility, group management and information management.   Get Smart! workshops each year further attempt to inter-relate modules by combining module lecturers, students and guests in a fun and engaging manner.

Get Smart! draws on the theoretical underpinnings of a skills curriculum and, supported by a personal development planning process, strives to achieve positive results in students' academic learning, employability, professional practice and self-development.

The Get Smart! Project was awarded a Teaching Fellowship for the academic year 2009/2010 based on its potential for strategic innovation and enhancement of learning. As part of this teaching fellowship, a variety of web 2.0 tools was employed to sustain collaboration and dissemination of information. As well as establishing a blog and wiki to report on project progress, Get Smart! also featured a Facebook group and a Twitter presence. These were used in parallel to the virtual learning environment of choice in D.I.T., which is Webcourses. (O'Keeffe, Harvey, O'Rawe, Gaubaudan & Gonzalez 2009)

This paper discusses the efficacy of these platforms in student engagement, and assesses the potential of Facebook for academic learning. Data from a survey provides an insight into how first year students are using Facebook and Twitter, two widely adopted social networking sites. A number of conclusions are then drawn.

METHODOLOGY

Research questions:

- To what extent are first year undergraduates in the School of Hospitality Management Tourism, D.I.T. engaging with a Facebook group set up to support their Get Smart! initiative?

- Do these students view social networking, and Facebook in particular, as a valid and attractive medium for academic learning?

Data collection:

A survey was distributed to a sample of first year undergraduates within the School of Hospitality Management & Tourism in May 2010. Questionnaires were distributed personally by the author and a usable total of 50 was achieved. It is intended to repeat this survey with modifications early in the academic year 2010/11.

Results
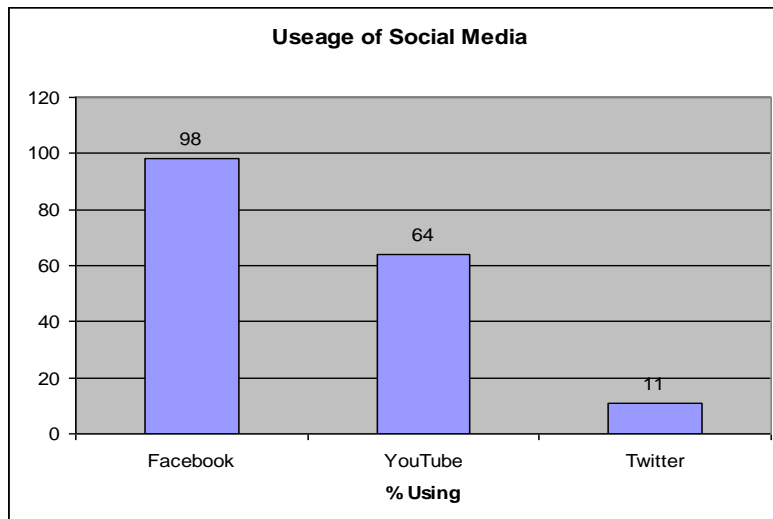
Fig. 1 Students' use of social media

98% of students surveyed had an active Facebook profile, compared with only 11% who were using Twitter. This low usage of Twitter had already come to light in the early stages of the Get Smart! initiative where it was evident that students were not "following" Get Smart! on Twitter. Other social networks were also highlighted by the students, including YouTube (64%) and Ebay. None of the students was signed up to Linkedin, a tool which endorses a more professional, employment-oriented approach.
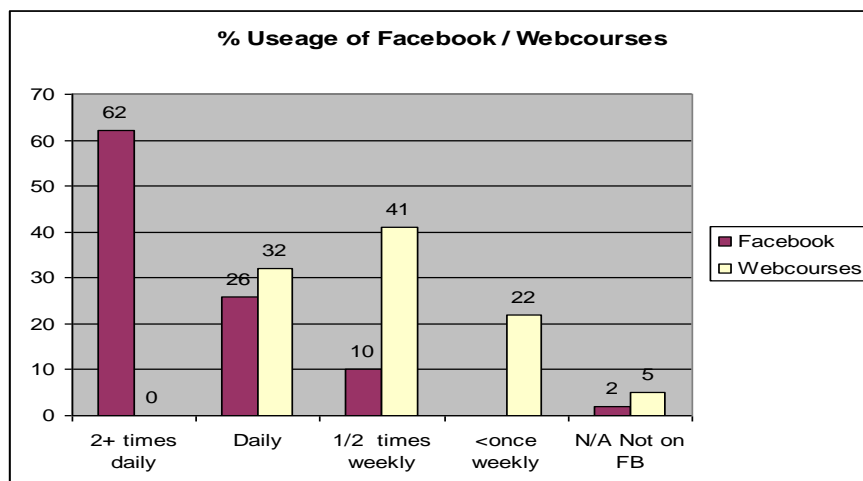
Figure 2: A comparision of usage of Facebook and D.I.T.'s Webcourses

A key aspect of the study was to compare usage of Facebook with D.I.T's VLE, Webcourses. 62% of students checked their Facebook account twice or more each day (one student indicated a response of "every three hours"). No students indicated a similarly frequent interaction with Webcourses. The most frequent response for Webcourses was once or twice a week (41%). Thus, expectations that students are reading messages on Webcourses and interacting with material are generally not correct. This is reinforced by the author's primary experience. It is, however, still uncertain whether social networking is hindering academic learning by wasting time which could have been spent on academic work, or whether it actually enhances the learning experience.

All of the students sampled used the full range of functions/activities offered by Facebook, i.e. checking or amending their profile, checking news feeds, sending messages, joining groups, writing on the "wall", uploading and viewing photographs and adding friends/developing new relationships. None of these respondents had used the discussion board or chat facility in Webcourses. Again, this would indicate a perspective of Webcourses as being only for basic "academic" purposes (i.e. downloading lecture material and related activities).

Students use "chat" primarily for reasons of speed and convenience (Ward 2005), where they are already online. Why, then do they not use the same facility in Webcourses when it is similarly available? First year students do not seem to regard Webcourses as part of their overall communication system. The author's research reflects this.

There has been a noted shift towards the use of blogs, instant messaging, RSS feeds and podcasts to engage with students. Academic practitioners need to go where the students are, rather than expecting them to come to us.

75% of students had joined the Facebook group specifically created for Get Smart! Those students who had not signed up offered reasons including

- "Get Smart! is purely for academic material",

- Privacy concerns (four students),

- "Never got around to it" (two students),

- "Worried that lecturers will see my profile" (three students),

- "Didn't know about it" (two students).

Respondents in general had a very low level of membership of "academic" Facebook groups, citing only DIT library services and their own programme group as examples.
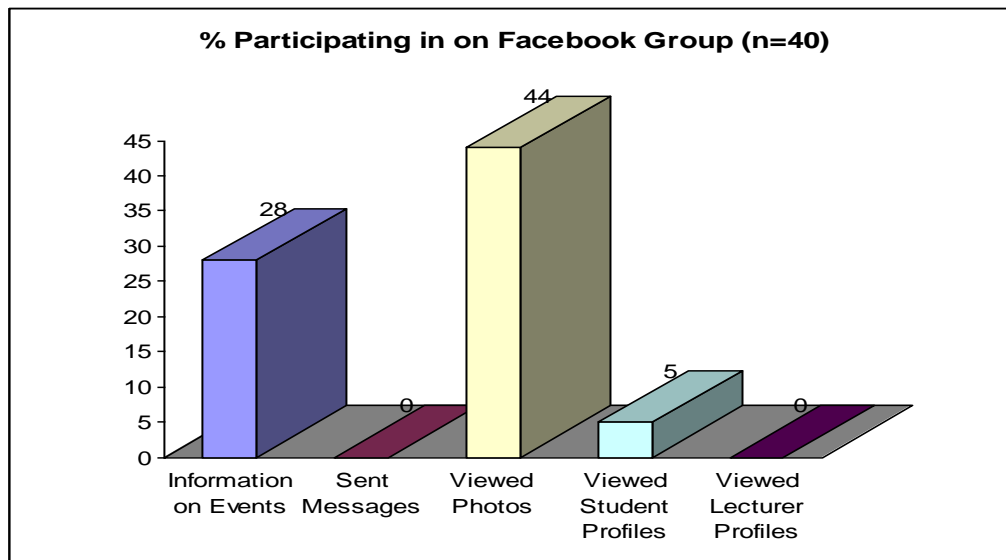
Figure 3: Activities performed in the Get Smart! Facebook group

The above chart shows the activities engaged in by those students who are members of the Get Smart! Facebook group. As may be observed, the main activity is viewing photographs. These were photographs of various Get Smart! events, including a workshop where all first years interacted through themes of personal and professional development, career planning, and socialisation. The implications of visual learning may be important here. Traditional platforms such as Webcourses are not strong on these features and may need to become so if they are to encourage more interaction.
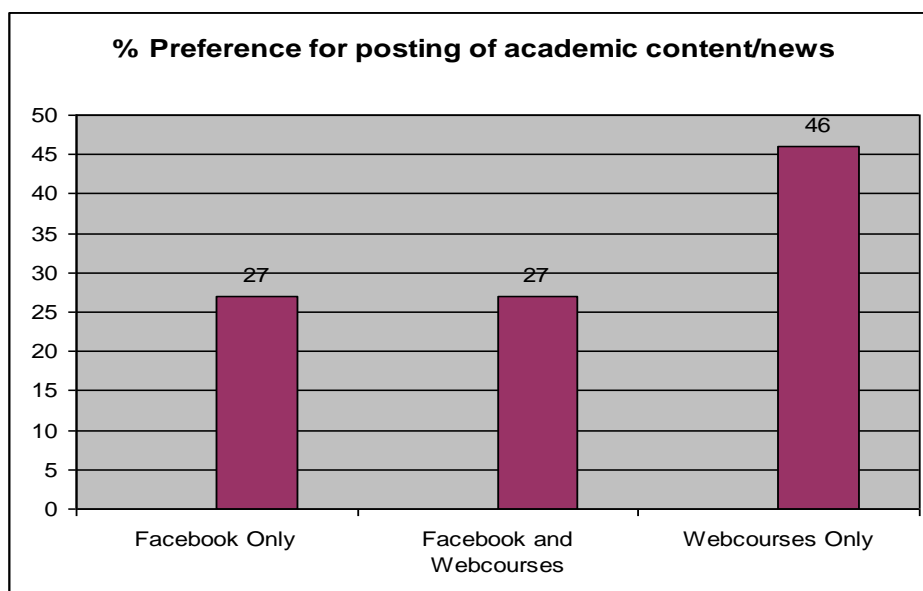

Fig. 4: Students' preferred medium for posting academic content

A key focus of the research was to explore students' attitudes to Facebook/Twitter as a more academic platform in comparison to D.I.T.'s VLE. As the usage of Twitter was so low, this can be discounted from the discussion.

Despite their overwhelming engagement with Facebook, only 27% of students felt that they would like to see module/academic content posted there as its main location. This compares to 46% who felt that academic material should be reserved for Webcourses, as one academic colleague pointed out "so that they can ignore it there!" 27% of students felt the two sites could potentially be used in conjunction with each other.

Finally, students indicated that they were most likely to read an email from a lecturer on Facebook (60%), followed by their D.I.T. student email account (21%) and least likely to read such an email on Webcourses (19%).

CONCLUSIONS

Although these results are only specific to a sample of first year undergraduates from the School of Hospitality Management & Tourism, D.I.T, and are, furthermore, within the context of a non-assessed programme called Get Smart!, it would be surprising if similar trends were not found elsewhere. (Madge et al 2007).

Here a clear picture has emerged whereby students saw Facebook as a social tool and did not fully endorse its use for formal teaching purposes, although there were very open to receiving messages through this medium and there *are* opportunites for more informal learning. It seems that academics should exercise caution in moving into a social networking space that students clearly feel is "theirs" and which is seen to be for social rather than academic purposes. If students are so engaged with Facebook outside their academic life, why are they so hesitant to use it for academic purposes? Does this signify a measured reluctance based on an evaluation of its limits in academia, or an unwillingness to engage generally with their programme or lectures? The author suspects the latter, as many of this cohort of students also failed to engage with the Get Smart! initiative through the other channels such as the VLE Webcourses and text tools.

However, perhaps the hesitancy towards using Facebook for academic purposes does not only lie with students. Cloete et al. (2009) found that lecturers, too, utilise Facebook only for social purposes and prefer other vehicles to both interact with students and as components of their teaching strategy. Further research would also be merited in this area.

The relative newness of these tools does make it more difficult to assess how they may develop over time. More understanding is needed of usage profiles of students in a certain college/faculty.

There are clearly wide and varied opportunities for more detailed research into the use of Facebook, Twitter and other social networking tools. The author plans to develop this preliminary study in the academic year 2010/11 to attempt to give a more disaggregated view of how and why students use social networking in academic environments.

It would also be useful to perform a comparative analysis of online/ distance education programmes as different levels of engagement are often evident within such student cohorts.

Engaging with third level students is problematic in today's crowded environment of media platforms and messaging. It can be accurately observed that many of the current undergraduate generation move between blurred boundaries between online and offline worlds and use a combination of networks. Academics compete for the students' attention with a range of tools and activities. Facebook is a legitimate component of this set, Twitter less so. The debate is not so much whether to use Facebook in an academic environment, but for what purposes? The author debates whether it really matters WHAT gets posted on Facebook? Perhaps it is sufficient just to use it at all; this may be enough to help lecturers appear relevant. As Esposito (2007) commented, "Relevance assures student engagement, and engagement assures student success."

Programme leaders should explore a continuum which ranges from viewing Facebook soley as a means for students to engage with each other and socialise at one end, to a student-lecturer communication tool in the centre, and ultimately to an understanding and embracing of Facebook as a full virtual learning environment.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Beer, D. (2008), Social networking sites...revisiting the story so far: A Response to Danah Boyd and Nicole Ellison, *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, vol. 13, pp. 516-529.

Boulos, M.N.K. & Wheeler, S. (2007), The emerging Web 2.0 social software: an enabling suite of sociable technologies in health and health care education, *Health Information and Libraries Journal,* 24, pp. 2-23.

Cho, H., Lee, J.S., Stefanone, M. & Gay, G. (2005), Development of computer-supported collaborative social networks in a distributed learning community, *Behaviour & Information Technology,* vol. 24, no. 6, pp. 435-447.

Cloete, S., de Villiers, C. & Roodt, S (2009), Facebook as an academic tool for ICT lecturers. *Research presented at the annual meeting of SACLA*. Eastern Cape, South Africa, pp. 16-22.

Dalsgaard, C. n.d. Social networking sites: Transparency in online education, in Cloete, S., de Villiers, C. & Roodt, S (2009), Facebook as an academic tool for ICT lecturers*, Research presented at the annual meeting of SACLA*. Eastern Cape, South Africa, pp. 16-22.

Donath, J. (2008), Signals in Social Supernets, *Journal of computer-Mediated Communication,* vol. 14, pp. 231-251.

Eberhardt , D.M. (2007), *Facing up to Facebook*, Wiley, Interscience about Campus, pp. 18-26.

Ellison, N. (2007), Facebook Use on Campus: a Social Capital Perspective on Social Network sites, *Presentation at the ECAR Symposium*, Boca Raton, FL, December 5-7.

Ellison, N., Steinfield C. & Lampe C., (2006), "Spatially bounded online social networks and social capital: The role of Facebook", Paper presented at the *Annual conference of the International Communication Association*, June 19-23, Dresden, Germany.

Esposito, A. (2007), Saving Face(book): Engage through Facebook and retain relevance, *Academic Advising Today*, 30 (3).

Hewitt, A. & Forte, A. (2006), Crossing Boundaries: Identity Management and Student/Faculty Relationships on the Facebook, *CSCW'06* [online] available at http://www.cc.gt.atl.ga.us/grads/f/Andrea.Forte/HewittForteCSCWPoster2006.pdf.

Lantz, A . (2001), Meetings in a distributed group of experts: comparing face-to-face, chat and collaborative virtual environments, *Behaviour & Information Technology*, vol. 20, no. 2, pp. 111-117.

Lillington, Karen (2010), Too Much information. What Google and Facebook know about you, *Irish Times*, May 29.

Madge, Clare, Meek, Julia, Wellens, Jane & Hooley, Tristan (2007), Facebook, social integration and informal learning at university: 'It is more for socialising and talking to friends about work than for actually doing work', *Learning, Media and Technology,* 34: 2, pp. 141-155.

Mazer, Joseph. P., Murphy, Richard E., & Simonds Cheri (2007), 'I'll See You on "Facebook"; The Effects of Computer-Mediated Teacher Self-disclosure on Student Motivation, Affective Learning and Classroom Climate', *Communication Education*, 56: 1, pp. 1-17.

Maznevski, M.L. & Chudoba, K.M. (2000), Bridging Space over time: Global Virtual team dynamics and Effectiveness, *Organisation Science*, vol. 11, no. 5, pp. 4730492.

Minocha, S. & Thomas P.G. (2007), Collaborative learning in a Wiki Environment: Experiences from a software engineering course, *New Review of Hypermedia and Multimedia*, vol. 13, 2, pp. 187-209.

O'Keeffe, M., Harvey, J., O'Rawe, M., Gabaudan, O. & Gonzalea, M. (2009), Teaching fellowships: Using wikis, blogs and social networking tools to enhance collaboration and participation, *Proceedings, Ascilite*, Auckland, New Zealand.

O'Sullivan, P.B., Hunt, S.K. & Lippert, L.R. (2004), Mediated immediacy: A language of affiliation in a technological age, *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 23, pp. 464-490.

Ward, D. (2005), Why users chose chat: A survey of behaviour and motivations, *Internet Reference Services Quarterly,* 10 (1), pp. 29-46.

Wheeless, L.R. & Grotz, J. (1976), Conceptualisation and measurement of reported self-disclosure, *Human Communication Research*, 2, pp. 338-346.