Using Facebook in University Teaching: A Practical Case Study

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Abstract

This article describes a case study of the use of the social networking site Facebook as a means of interacting with students at the University of Malaga. Using Facebook has allowed teachers to interact more with students, moving away from traditional one-way communication towards a multi-way communication, with students taking on an active role. This experience has shown that using social networks can help to improve the set of competences reflected in dissertations written by students studying Economics or Business Studies. The experimental nature of this initiative has also made it possible to identify advantages of communicating through Facebook.

1. Introduction

Web 2.0 provides a space for interaction and communication that allows for collaboration in content creation (Collins & Moonen, 2008). So-called social software (Kesim & Agaoglu, 2007) brings together tools that enable users to tag content (internet bookmarking services such as Delicious), create content (blogs and microblogs such as Blogger, Wordpress and Twitter), share content (Flickr or Youtube), construct spaces for collective creation (wikis), and various social networking sites (Facebook or LinkedIn) (Dabbagh & Reo, 2011; Kitsantas & Dabbagh, 2010).

In the last few years, new media have had a major impact on teaching methodology (Ellison & Wu, 2008). These media have been used for their potential to be used in the teaching-learning process within higher education (Brown, 2012; Wheeler, 2009; Ajjan & Hartshorne, 2008; Churchill, 2009; Ellison & Wu, 2008; Top, Yukselturk & Inan, 2010; Çağlar & Demirok, 2010). Nowadays, university students spend part of their time making use of Web 2.0 tools. This group is made up of so-called digital natives who have grown up with the development of new technologies (Prensky, 2001; Ajjan & Hartshorne, 2008). This has resulted in the need to analyze how Web 2.0 can be used in an educational environment (Griffith & Livanage, 2008, Otta & Tavella, 2010). According to Armstrong and Franklin (2008), the slowness in incorporating social media into university teaching methodology is having a
negative impact on its privileged position in the system of knowledge generation and transfer, since other sources are emerging which enable the creation and diffusion of information.

The use of social software in university teaching lends a collaborative dimension to teaching and allows for an increase in interaction between all those involved in the teaching-learning process. As a consequence, the student assumes a more active and relevant role (Collins & Halverson, 2010; Cress & Kimmerle, 2008; Schroeder, Minocha & Schneider, 2010; Wodzicki, Schwämmlein & Moskaliuk, 2012).

The benefits of using new technologies have been amply demonstrated. Laru, Näykki and Järvelä (2012) discuss a number of studies that demonstrate the benefits of blogs (Churchill, 2009; Ellison & Wu, 2008; Yang, 2009; Halic, Lee, Paulus & Spence, 2010; Wheeler, 2009, Hemmi, Bayne & Land, 2009; Xie & Sharma, 2008), wikis (Cress & Kimmerle, 2008; Wheeler; 2009; Hemmi, Bayne & Land, 2009) and social networks (Arnold & Paulus, 2010). However, like Meyer (2010), they also highlight the lack of empirical studies into the impact of Web 2.0 in higher education.

With this in mind, the present article describes a case study involving the use of the social networking site Facebook as a means of interacting with Business Economics students at the Faculty of Economics or Business Studies at the University of Malaga.

The initiative undertaken by teaching staff addressed a number of different points of interest. Firstly, the aim was to develop a communications platform that would compensate for the deficiencies of the virtual campus and enable multidirectional communication between students and teachers. Secondly, it was instructive to assess the potential of social networks to improve teaching and help students obtain the competencies required by the course. Thirdly, the initiative was experimental in nature, which enabled the identification of the possibilities offered by Web 2.0 tools to teachers and to investigate which aspects of the teaching methodology could be improved by the use of social networks.

2. Methodology and teaching practice design

The European Higher Education Area (EHEA) has resulted in new study plans being developed which are orientated towards the acquisition of a set of skills by students. This has provided an opportunity to include the new skills which the current reality demands of future graduates. This new context is shaping teaching methods and assessment strategies and should serve as a reference for innovations in teaching in the area of business management.

Martínez, Vallejo and Calahorro (2011) analyzed the competencies included in the degrees awarded by economics and business administration departments in different universities to determine which appeared most frequently. They found that the most frequent instrumental competence was native language oral and written communication. Among the personal competencies, teamworking emerged as having a high frequency. Self-directed learning appeared most often compared to other systemic competencies. Finally, another competency that was seen quite often was that related to knowledge and use of ICT.

In addition to focusing on teaching the required competencies, educational innovation must also take into account the new technologies which are available when designing the teaching-learning process. Given that students newly entering university education already have an ongoing and natural involvement with social networks, these systems therefore have great potential to be used as knowledge transfer and teaching tools. In addition to the universal nature of social networks (Figure 1), one would have to add the fact that access to content is quicker and communication is almost instantaneous. Even though the existing virtual platform is specifically designed to facilitate teaching activities, social networks provide a better way of interacting with students.

In the academic year 2010–11, teaching staff on the course Business Economics II decided to adopt social networks as a resource to complement the university’s virtual campus. This initiative was designed to test the following hypotheses:
1. The use of social networks helps improve and increase interaction with students, encouraging debate and discussion on topics of interest.

2. The use of social networks facilitates the acquisition of new skills included in the new degrees.

Facebook was chosen for this initiative since this is the most widely used social networking site among university students. For this same reason, Facebook has been chosen for other educational innovation initiatives (Dabner, 2012; Ellison, Steinfield & Lampe, 2007; Ellison & Wu, 2008; Valenzuela, Park & Kee, 2009; Roblyer, McDaniel, Webb, Herman & Witty, 2010; Forkosh-Baruch & Hershkovitz, 2012).

For this initiative, a Facebook group was set up to enable communication with students. The final number of members of this group was 166.

At the end of the course, a survey of students was carried out using the virtual campus with the aim of measuring their opinion of the proposed initiative. A total of 75 students responded to the survey of whom 95% confirmed that they were members of the Facebook group.

3. Results

The initiative was assessed positively by students, with 4.1 out of 5 considering it a good idea to extend the use of social networks to other courses. In addition, students indicated that the Facebook group created as part of the initiative had a positive impact on their level of motivation in the course and that the quality of the content and comments shared was adequate (3.8 out of 5) (Figure 2).
Student participation resulted in the creation of 420 topics or new entries. Some 85% of these were created by students. This result demonstrates that students played an active role in sharing information and resources with the rest of the group.

The entries and open topics posted to the group were intended for sharing videos, resources and links to news items that were of interest to the course. These generated a total of 1017 “likes” and 2254 “comments”. The different types of contribution show a completely different communicational reality from that observed in the previous academic year, which arose from the exclusive use of the virtual campus as a platform for communicating with students.

During the 2009–10 academic year, communication was exclusively unidirectional. The social networking site has increased interactivity and generated a space in which communication is multidirectional. In addition, the increase in communication within the social networking site has resulted in greater use of the virtual campus by students.

As well as the quantitative aspect, a positive evaluation was given of the quality of contributions, the resources shared and their relevance to the course contents. Hence, the findings confirm the hypothesis that social networks help create an inter-connected space for horizontal communication in which students take the initiative and become more involved.

Moreover, the use of Facebook has facilitated the acquisition of a number of competencies (Figure 3). Those which have benefited most from the use of social networks (use of ICT, ability to convey information, group learning skills, teamworking skills and socializing skills), correspond to those which appear with the highest frequency in business administration degree reports awarded by universities (Martínez et al., 2011). From this, it can be concluded that the use of Facebook is a valid option for improving the new set of skills defined by the EHEA.
4. Discussion and conclusions

Having fulfilled the objectives of the proposed educational innovation, the experimental nature of the initiative has allowed a number of additional findings to be identified:

1. The network has facilitated the use of new teaching resources.

Video is one tool which supplements very well the information given in class. Students respond particularly well to images and video. In addition, teachers recommended blogs, which have been incorporated as a vehicle for acquiring knowledge, and unedited resources from the network have been used in paper format. Students participated by contributing new digital resources which enhanced the nature of the group conversation.

2. The network represents an extension to the classroom.

Using a social network introduces the concept of 24 hours a day, 7 days a week to teaching. Class does not finish with the end of teaching in the physical space; instead, it moves to the virtual space. Students share resources on the network which are related to the material discussed in the classroom, generating conversation at any hour of the day.

3. The tutorial group takes on a greater significance.

Doubts or problems brought up by students on the network are frequently resolved by the students themselves. During tutorials, students participate more while the teacher plays a smaller role. Discussions generated through debating a query strengthen the teaching-learning process.

4. The teaching-learning process becomes more flexible.

The deterministic nature of teaching guides with regard to planning content and activities to a fixed time is not appropriate within the new context. Proposals put forward in the online environment can be transferred to the classroom, modifying the planned timetable. In such cases, the teacher must decide on the suitability and appropriateness in terms of the teaching objectives each time a change occurs.

5. Web 2.0 tools are collaborative in nature.
Students participate in social networking in a collaborative manner. Resources are shared on the network which are of interest to all, for example, grant applications or employment opportunities where the students participate competitively. The culture of collaboration encourages teamworking throughout the course.


Within social networks, the teacher-student relationship takes on a horizontal character due to the nature of the medium. This enables greater interaction and participation on the part of the student and increases their trust in their interlocutor.

7. The relationship between teachers and students continues for a longer period of time.

Links between teachers and students migrate from the chosen platform to other environments. An interesting observation is that contact within other social networks moves to more professional platforms such as Twitter and LinkedIn. Hence, within the short to medium term, teacher-student relationships become professional-professional.

The teachers who took part in the project gave a positive assessment of the outcomes and believe that this is an approach that should be developed with the aim of improving teaching practices. Similarly, students expressed a very high level of satisfaction with the possibility of improving their learning experience using a network which they already use habitually.

The findings reached demonstrate that students adopt an active and participatory role in the teaching-learning process. While the virtual campus enables unidirectional communication from teacher to student, social networking allows for more fluid, inter-connected multidirectional communication.

The use of communication platforms such as Facebook has had an influence on the degree to which students acquire the new competencies covered in the new degree courses. It has proved particularly useful in improving skills related to the use of ICT, the ability to convey information, group learning, teamworking and socializing skills.

The experimental use of Facebook in teaching has also resulted in other advantages being observed which were not anticipated at the outset of the initiative. It is possible to use new resources for teaching, to continue interaction in the online space, plan tutorial groups, take advantage of the culture of collaboration that predominates on the network, benefit from the informal nature of communication and, finally, maintain links with students into the future.

Due to the scarcity of practical investigations and initiatives in relation to the use of social networks, it is advisable to be cautious in interpreting the findings. The outcomes described above could have been influenced by the novel character of the initiative, since innovation in itself stimulates participation. As such, it is possible that extending the use of social networks more generally in teaching could result in a lower level of participation than that which was observed in this study.

This study has indicated changing assessment strategies as an area that should be investigated in future studies. While the involvement of students throughout the course was evaluated very positively, it should be noted that the assessments have generated some unsatisfactory results. This disparity between findings should be investigated in future initiatives involving the use of social networks in teaching in order to ascertain the causes and establish possible explanations.

References


