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Social networking sites and learning in international relations: The impact of platforms

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Abstract

This article reports on a pilot undergraduate subject that incorporated a range of technology-enhanced learning approaches including online lectures, an online site for in and out of class communications, and strong encouragement for students to blog and use Twitter. This paper evaluates student engagement through the social networking sites (SNS), focusing on the online communication and content platform. We examine whether changing from an educationally oriented SNS platform to Facebook impacted on student engagement and feedback. To achieve this, both empirical data and qualitative student feedback were used.

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Social networking sites and learning in international relations: The impact of platforms

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This article reports on a pilot undergraduate subject that incorporated a range of technology-enhanced learning approaches including online lectures, an online site for in and out of class communications, and strong encouragement for students to blog and use Twitter. This paper evaluates student engagement through the social networking sites (SNS), focusing on the online communication and content platform. We examine whether changing from an educationally oriented SNS platform to Facebook impacted on student engagement and feedback. To achieve this, both empirical data and qualitative student feedback were used.

Introduction

The subject, Model United Nations (MUNs), is an intermediate-level core subject in an international relations major in both a Bachelor of International Studies and a Bachelor of Arts degree. MUNs are experiential learning programs where participants role play as model diplomats to discuss ideas and develop policy solutions to global challenges. Elsewhere, particularly in the US, the use of simulations in international relations has grown and MUNs are a popular international relations teaching tool (Crossley-Frolick, 2010; Glasgow, 2014; Leston-Bandeira, 2012; Taylor, 2013). By contrast, in Australia, there has been limited adoption of simulations and students have little familiarity with them (Engel, 2016). Further, the subject had a high level of online engagement, which has not been common in our faculty. Thus, the subject had a number of challenges for students. In line with tertiary education trends promoting deep and blended learning technologies (Johnson et al., 2016), the subject not only built on technology-enhanced learning principles, but used a flipped classroom approach and authentic learning and assessment tasks. This article focuses on evaluating engagement in the group online social networking site (SNS) that was used to facilitate both content and communication with, and between, students. The SNS is a central element of the subject and one that we had sought to improve over the 2 years that the subject ran prior to this analysis.

The literature on the use of SNSs, such as Facebook, for teaching highlights both the range of possibilities they offer (Cheung & Lee, 2010; Lucas & Moreira, 2009) and the significant limitations (Brenton, 2009; Donlan, 2014; Lieberman, 2014). Most of the assessments of limitations point out that SNSs will fail if they are simply an add-on to the subject and their use is driven by teaching staff. By integrating the platform authentically across the subject and assessments, we were able to achieve a high level of engagement with it. We decided to examine whether changing the SNS would affect student engagement positively or negatively. In 2015, an online, free, educationally focused group site called Wiggio was used for content and communication, while in 2016 we switched to Facebook. With this change we investigated the following questions:

- Did the choice of platform impact the quantity of online interactions?
- Did the choice of platform impact the nature of online interactions?

In order to answer these questions, this article first briefly describes the context and content of the subject. Second, the scholarship on SNSs and teaching is reviewed. Third, data on the use of the different platforms is presented and analysed. Fourth, the article evaluates whether the change of platforms impacted the nature of interactions, highlighting the adoption of new tactics and strategies with the use of Facebook. The paper concludes with a discussion of the implications of our findings as well as limitations and future directions for research.

As with many teaching interventions, it is difficult to determine definitive causality behind outcomes with any particular cohort. Nevertheless, we gathered strong evidence to demonstrate that the use of a SNS enhanced the impact of the MUN subject. In particular, it served to minimise some of the limitations associated with running a simulation within our university's timetabling system. It encouraged students to

use social media in new ways and engaged them with the growing world of digital diplomacy. The switch of SNSs produced a boost in online interaction and saw students think more strategically about how to achieve resolutions that reflected the position of the country they were representing. As an unintentional benefit, the students also noted that they had developed multi-tasking skills by using social media in the classroom.

About Model United Nations

The use of simulations in the classrooms is, of course, not a new concept (e.g., Glasgow, 2014; Hertel & Millis, 2002). The pedagogical advantages of using simulations as a teaching tool are still being debated but it is generally agreed that they are a useful way of promoting deep learning through active learning (Hertel & Millis, 2002). Our choice of a simulation MUN, has been extensively implemented. As Crossley-Frolick (2010, p. 187) pointed out, more than a million students have taken part in MUNs simulations since the 1950s and there are “more than 400 conferences annually in 35 countries around the world”. Its popularity is partly because it offers a real-world experience for students in a way that traditional teaching methods such as lectures and tutorials can struggle to achieve (Crossley-Frolick, 2010). We utilised recent technological advances to include blended and more interactive teaching methods in our MUN, including online lectures, social media, and SNSs. These were integrated as key tools for students before and during the simulation to increase student engagement with the course material.

As noted above, simulations are not common practice in Australian politics and international relations curricula and the use of technology enhanced learning has been limited in our faculty, thus understanding the students as digital learners (Gallardo-Echenique, Marques-Molias, Bullen, & Strijbos, 2015) rather than digital natives (Prensky, 2001) is very appropriate. Students faced quite a challenging learning environment on a number of fronts. The subject was designed using lessons from the literature on simulation and on teaching MUNs with the aim of promoting deep learning (Engel, Pallas, & Lambert, 2017). The learning outcomes in brief, were for students to develop: a sound understanding of the role and functions of the UN system and the key challenges it faces; capacity to write briefing papers on complex international challenges using primary data; negotiation and presentation skills; and capacity to critically reflect upon personal and societal assumptions.

The MUN was run over a semester with 11-12 weeks of tutorials, 4 of which were devoted to the final assessed simulation. The simulation allowed students to individually choose a country to represent and collectively choose a subcommittee of the United Nations General Assembly to simulate. Then, with guidance from the teaching staff, they chose a current global issue that formed the catalyst for a resolution that they developed and drafted through the simulated negotiations in class. In preparation for the simulation, the coursework consisted of modules on global governance and the UN system, researching and writing country and briefing papers, and international diplomacy and negotiations. The lectures and the subject material were all open education resources available through an open online platform. They comprised both existing open education resources materials and new content that was generated specifically for the subject. Any content generated was licensed creative commons, by attribution, share alike and thus is available for re-use (see <http://course.oeru.org/mun/about/about-the-course/>).

As a flipped classroom was used, students were expected to attend class having engaged with the open education resources, so that they could actively participate in the classroom activities. Driven by a need for greater focus on employability skills and personal development, a 2 hour tutorial format was chosen. This delivery mode was informed by literature that highlights the inability for substantial engagement with complex problems from diverse perspectives in conventional classroom models (Crossley-Frolick, 2010; Hertel & Millis, 2002). Assessment for the subject consisted of a knowledge quiz to ensure that the self-paced online materials had been sufficiently understood, a policy briefing paper (which explained their chosen country’s position on the topic for debate), the simulation itself, and a reflective journal on their experience in the subject.

Students were encouraged to use Twitter and to blog about their experiences in the subject. The teaching team were also active in using Twitter to engage with students. As a discipline with a large amount of fluidity, the technology-enhanced flip classroom contributed substantially to the authentic learning experience for the students. International studies is a field in a constant state of flux, the key issues and

actors change, and everyday happenings contribute to our knowledge and understanding of the field (Leston-Bandeira, 2012). A strong working knowledge of technology is vital to keep up in the fast-paced world of global politics. Further, digital diplomacy emerged a few years ago as a strong current in foreign affairs (Cull, 2011; Plaster, 2013; Bjola & Holmes, 2015) and Donald Trump's presidency has institutionalised this, if not always in positive ways. For international studies careers, students need not just to be able to follow and critically analyse debates, but to create content. Moreover, digital engagement allows students to meet the ideas of thought-leaders within international relations face-to-face and to engage with global politics as it happens (Dunne, Hansen, & Wight, 2013; Reus-Smit, 2012). Thus, we were able to design a subject that is not only innovative within our discipline, but also innovative in terms of educational design.

Social networking sites in university learning

The SNS was used for content and communication both with and between students. The aim was to allow students and teachers to share information, and for students, as MUN delegates, to engage in a form of backroom negotiation and alliance building using posts, chats, and polls. They also shared information and composed working papers and draft resolutions. Students were encouraged to start utilising the space in the lead up to the simulation. They were asked to post position papers for a practice or mini-MUN on the death penalty and encouraged to discuss the topic of the MUN on the site. Hits on the SNS were most intensive during the simulation itself. Student contributions to the online group workspace (and to Twitter) throughout the simulation were counted as part of their contribution to the simulation, which was 20% of their total assessment.

Social networking is a core element of our subject and research. It has been argued that social media in education increases social connectivity (Cheung & Lee, 2010) and encourages a collaborative learning process (Lucas & Moreira, 2009). Social media is said to condition students to new ways of conveying information through digital spaces (Ebner, Lienhardt, Rohs, & Meyer, 2010). Shemberger and Wright (2014) noted that both Web 2.0 theory and connectivism apply to the use of SNSs in the classroom. Web 2.0 refers to the way that users can co-create content on the internet, whereas connectivism refers to the way that students in the learning environment "share information and establish a relevance to the content as knowledge in a dynamic experience" (Shemberger & Wright, 2014, p. 64). However, connectivism can be difficult to achieve in university subjects as they are not based on organic connections rather ones constructed by teaching staff. Salavuo (2008, p. 128) concluded that to successfully use SNSs in education, the principles of "participation, presence and ownership" need to be prioritised. Through these students feel a sense of control (Donlan, 2014; Salavuo, 2008).

There are contrasting opinions on the use of SNSs for learning and teaching. Shaw (2016) found that Facebook was a useful tool for connecting students across the world to one another within, and beyond, the classroom. Shaw used Facebook to cultivate and enhance a sense of global awareness amongst students. Brewer, Begleiter, Anderson and Isaacs (2015, p. 171) illustrated how teachers can incorporate Facebook into the classroom during the 2012 US election to facilitate "lively, creative interactions." In contrast, Darling and Foster (2012) found that Facebook was an inappropriate tool for use in the classroom as it blurs the lines between public and private space for the students, and that students were reticent to engage with SNSs for educational purposes (see also Donlan, 2014; Escobar-Rodriguez, Carvajal-Trujillo, & Monge-Lozano, 2014; Lieberman, 2014; Salavuo, 2008). Indeed, Lieberman (2014, p. 30) argued that "students may not be willing to use Facebook as an education tool." Rambe and Ng'ambi (2014) looked not just at privacy concerns, which tended to be higher amongst female students, but at how underlying power relationships play out on Facebook. Thus, women's preference for privacy was explained in terms of gender norms emphasising privacy for women and their fear of negative judgements. However, they concluded that when based on transformational teaching practices the use of Facebook could foster empowerment particularly for quieter students or those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

For Hope (2016), these various relations and challenges mean treating SNSs as a traditional teaching tool can only result in difficulties. Indeed, the literature contains quite a number of examples demonstrating this, from which Brenton (2009) concludes that many attempts at collaborative learning fail because the purpose of the SNS is not sufficiently connected to the teaching program and assessment. This means that lecturers dominate the space (Rambe & Ng'ambi, 2014) and students do not develop sufficient

participation, presence, or ownership of the activity, which undoubtedly negatively influences the benefits of using SNSs: indeed it counters the aim of getting students involved as co-creators and constructors of knowledge. For example, Donlan (2014) in an online survey of student views about Facebook found that a high proportion of students indicated interested in co-creation, however, when she set up a Facebook page for three modules of a subject, only a small proportion of students engaged in co-creation (see also Irwin, Ball, Desbrow, & Leveritt, 2012). However, in this case the SNS was an add-on, used mostly for sharing additional content and, at times, for communicating administratively with student. Thus, it was not well-integrated into the subject and students did not feel ownership of it: a point Donlan (2014) acknowledges to an extent. Indeed, in most cases, SNSs are used in education only to communicate information (Lieberman, 2014). In contrast, in the MUN subject it is a central tool integrated into assessment, it is used for communicating between students and is used in co-production of assessable documents (i.e., resolutions). As such, this literature on the use SNSs is not readily applicable to the active pedagogy deployed in the MUN subject.

The literature indicates that SNS use amongst students for communication is growing and that students tend to rate communications they initiate more highly than those initiated by teaching staff (Donlan, 2014; Lieberman, 2014), again highlighting issues of control. However, Donlan's (2014) own research also found that at least some students were reluctant to share content related to assessment tasks. In contrast, in the MUN, communication and sharing were rewarded as they contributed to participation marks, thus we did not expect to have such concerns expressed.

Much of the literature on SNSs focuses specifically on Facebook. In our initial offering of the MUN (2015), Wiggio was used as the online workspace. It was selected because it offered some features that were just emerging in Facebook such as polling and document sharing, is freely accessible and provided a distinct professional space for communications, not mixed with SNSs. Further, the argument in the literature that using platforms such as Facebook or Google+ blurs the lines between personal and professional lives for both teaching staff and students, influenced the choice (Donlan, 2014; Escobar-Rodríguez et al., 2014; Lieberman, 2014; Salavuo, 2008).

By 2016, Facebook had the same functionality or greater than Wiggio. The capacity to set up group pages that students can *join* without the need to become *friends* reduced concerns about privacy. Student feedback in 2015 indicated that they would contribute more if it was on Facebook and this was supported by the findings of Ezell (2016) and Schroeder and Greenbowe (2009) who noted that many students are already spending a substantial amount of time on Facebook, thereby making it an obvious SNS for the teacher. Escobar-Rodríguez et al. (2014) point to the familiarity and accessibility of Facebook as a particular advantage (see also Salavuo, 2008). Thus, in many ways, we are responding to student's perceptions of what would enhance their learning. Finally, we were also reacting to the increased use of SNSs as a tool for political and diplomatic engagement. A Facebook group for each of the classes was created, with instructors as administrators in the group. In both years, students were told that this was an exercise in learning professionalism in the online context.

Student engagement in MUN: Wiggio versus Facebook

To assess the impact of SNSs on learning, previous studies have reviewed students' interaction with the technology (Jaffar, 2014; Caliendo, 2016), undertaken surveys (Brewer et al., 2015; Shaw, 2016) and examined how students engage with SNS's such as Facebook and Twitter (Churcher, Downs, & Tewksbury, 2014). To identify student engagement via Facebook, Jaffar (2014) examined student activity with the Facebook page set up for his subject on anatomy education for second-year medical students. We also collected specific data in the form of likes and comments, much like Caliendo (2016). Further, we undertook a form of survey through analysis of the reflective journal (Brewer et al., 2014; Churcher et al., 2014; Shaw, 2016). However, we adopted a more multi-dimensional approach than most studies to date. In summary, the data collected (with ethics approval) were:

1. participant observations by the teaching team and informal feedback across the classes;
2. the official student subject evaluations;
3. the student's (de-identified) reflective journals; and
4. the group workspace (Wiggio and Facebook) usage statistics and content analysis of the level and type of engagement on them.

Other possibilities would be anonymous surveys, one-on-one interviews, or focus groups interviews. The journal asked students to reflect critically on their technology use in the subject, though it can be noted that an anonymous approach may have provided different insights. Still we were able to triangulate the journals against levels of participation and student surveys giving confidence in the analysis. Further, we collected a greater range of sources than most of the studies cited above and our sample size was larger than most existing studies.

In 2015, there were 55 students across three tutorial groups. There were two primary teaching instructors covering the three tutorials and extra technological support from the university's learning, teaching, and curriculum department. In 2016, there were 129 students across six tutorial groups and again a primary teaching team of two. This means our sample size, while still limited, was larger than many existing studies researching SNSs (e.g., Brewer et al., 2014; Caliendo, 2016; Shaw 2016; White, 2013). One of the instructors overlapped over the 2 years. In both cases, the students were primarily young. There was one mature age student in 2015 and just over 60% of the students were female. In 2016, there was one mature age student and 67% female students. These demographics reflect the general make up of students in the faculty. More detailed demographic data was not collected, however the university does attract a high proportion of first-in-family students.

In 2015, students were initially reluctant to engage on the Wiggio site. Many students felt challenged by it either technologically or in other ways. However, over time many found it to be a useful tool and the 2015 reflective journals produced 12 positive comments made regarding the use of SNSs, including: "I found the simulation and the online engagement through the wiggio site in particular to be quite a lot of fun"; and "I participated more in the online forums, in which I was able to suggest amendments, vote and suggest a plan for the simulation."

The second comment accords with our observations that the quieter students were much more active in the online debates than they were in the physical debates in the classroom. These observations were in the form of notes kept by each teaching instructor during and at the end of each class. They indicated that the majority of students in this category were female and that they were active online, leading debate on particular issues and drafting resolutions.

Table 1 summarises the Wiggio usage data for all of the tutorial groups combined and demonstrates a fairly intensive use of the platform. There were variations between the groups with Group 1.1 having almost twice the level of engagement than the others. This group consistently applied themselves to self-directed learning more than the others. Group 1.1 frequently raised questions about subject content in the online platform, thus it was clear that a large number of students had completed the online activities. There were also, on occasion, questions from Group 1.1 demonstrating that they had undertaken the extension activities. The way the groups used the technology also varied with one group having a high use of polls, one a medium usage and one with no online polls of delegates. Thus, the groups adjusted the use of the technology to suit their learning styles.

Table 1
2015 Wiggio usage by posts and replies/comments

Tutorial group and number of students	Posts	Average per student	Replies/ comments	Average per student
1.1 (18 students)	74	4.11	224	12.44
1.2 (20 students)	71	3.55	108	5.40
1.3 (17 students)	61	3.58	125	7.35
Total (55 students)	206	3.74	457	8.31

The data show that the average number of student posts was fairly consistent across tutorials. However, Group 1.1 was more active in all types of engagement than the other two groups. Overall, students posted on average 3.74 times on the Wiggio page while the average number of replies/comments was a bit more than double that at 8.31 per student.

Table 2 provides the Facebook usage data from the 2016 cohort. It illustrates a lower per student engagement in comparison to those in the 2015 Wiggio cohort. The average number of posts per student

was only 2.00 in 2016 and the average number of replies/comments was 5.68, whereas in 2015 the averages were 3.74 and 8.31 respectively. Even when comparing the two tutorials with the highest number of replies/comments, the distinction is clear. In relation to posts, the most active tutorial on Wiggio had an average of 12.44, while the highest tutorial on Facebook was 9.66. This initial data suggested greater student engagement with Wiggio as opposed to Facebook, contrary to our expectations and ideas from the literature.

Table 2
2016 Facebook usage by posts and replies/comments

Tutorial and number of students	Posts	Average per student	Replies/comments	Average per student
2.1 (23 students)	23	1.00	145	6.30
2.2 (22 students)	36	1.63	134	6.09
2.3 (24 students)	66	2.75	80	3.33
2.4 (21 students)	41	1.95	129	6.14
2.5 (21 students)	40	1.90	71	3.38
2.6 (18 students)	53	2.94	174	9.66
Total (129 students)	259	2.00	733	5.68

This anomaly in the data was explained when we explored data from the Facebook Chat/Messenger function, which was not available in Wiggio. This allowed students to send private messages to other students, or groups of students within the class group. Importantly, the students do not have to be friends with each other on Facebook to use the function and because students were members of the same Facebook group, their messages did not end up in spam or junk folders, which would ordinarily be the case for messages from non-friends.

In the first week of the simulation in 2016, students approached us to inquire whether they could use this function for private negotiations, and if so, how they would be assessed on it. It was encouraged and confirmed that this engagement would be assessed if delegates added the appropriate teaching staff member to the chat. Assessment considered not just the number of discussions but their nature – whether it focused on the topic and was diplomatic. Teaching staff only intervened when there was undiplomatic behaviour being exhibited. As per Table 3, there were a total of 33 Facebook chat-groups, with a range 2 to 13 per tutorial. Overall usage was very high with a total of 2,371 messages sent during the 4 weeks of simulation, an average of 18.38 messages per student, although there was variation between groups and students.

Table 3
2016 Facebook chats by groups and number of chats

Tutorial	Facebook chat groups	Number of chats during class time	Number of chats outside class time	Total number of chats
2.1	2	46	217	263
2.2	4	38	155	193
2.3	6	216	316	532
2.4	6	78	176	254
2.5	2	119	220	339
2.6	13	74	716	790
Total	33	571	1800	2371

The variation between tutorials in the number of chat groups and chats not only reflected the level of engagement but also the ease or difficulty of the group in reaching a resolution. This, in turn, was influenced by the complexity of the debate topic and the countries' represented. Group 2.6 had the most difficulty reaching a full resolution and the number of chat groups and chats reflect their attempts to resolve the impasse. Group 2.1 only had two chat groups but used them very effectively to reach a full resolution. For Group 2.6, chats were often used to garner support for new draft resolutions or working papers during the class, while Group 2.1 used the chats to plan, as blocs, how to strategically push their respective agendas through the committee. Even when recognising the different underlying dynamics, the level of activity demonstrated the commitment that group 2.6 displayed to achieving a resolution.

Data was also broken down into usage during and outside class times. Notably 76% of the messages were sent outside of class, indicating a high level of preparation for the next simulation or consolidation after a tutorial. The 24% of messages sent during class were private strategising and communications between chat-group members.

Despite the initial indication of lower posts and comments/replies in 2016 versus 2015, the data from Facebook chat clearly demonstrates that students were, on average, far more active. On average, each student sent 18.38 messages via chat, compared to the highest average posting for one tutorial in 2015 using Wiggio, which 12.44 posts and the overall average of just over 8. Facebook chat allowed students to think more deeply and strategically about how they should conduct themselves throughout the simulation and to act on their reflections whenever they arose. Chat also contributed to the continuity of the discussion across the 4 weeks of the simulation as students were generally discussing matters between classes, they did not have to spend the first half hour of class re-familiarising themselves with the status of the debate.

We consider that the technology facilitated a more active, engaged and authentic simulation experience for students. It augmented the face-to-face debate and simulated informal diplomatic negotiations, which typically take place outside of formal meetings at international meetings and conferences. It also added further depth to the assessment structure allowing the contribution of quieter students to be better assessed through their participation in shaping and framing negotiations in the online sphere and through document drafting. It allowed students to play to their individual strengths.

In both years, it was observed that there was a degree of pushback in the classroom against the engagement with social media early in the semester. Yet, this significantly reduced as the weeks progressed and during the simulation most of the students were actively engaged in debates on SNSs. The very positive student survey data indicates that this engagement while driven at least in part by assessment requirements was driven too by their engagement with the subject. The 2016 subject survey showed students satisfaction of a 2.25 out of 3 compared to a faculty average of 1.77. This may have been assisted by the teaching team's active demonstration of how digital diplomacy is currently working, often showing the classes things that key world leaders or foreign offices had been sharing or posting online. Further, the team attempted to lead through the example of their own online presence.

Impact of the change in platform on the nature of student interaction

As outlined in the introduction, the analysis examines not just whether the quantity of communications was impacted by the change in platform, but also whether the nature of communications changed. There was a significant change in extent and quality of negotiation skills and techniques. Interestingly, this finding accords with those of Schroeder and Greenbowe (2009) who compared participation on a WebCT platform and Facebook and found that although not all students joined the Facebook group the quality of the participation was enhanced through the use of a SNS.

As noted, improved negotiation skills are a key subject learning outcome linked to the need for students of international relations to develop strategic thinking capacity. The ability to negotiate, strategise, and form alliances are crucial skills for building resolutions on contemporary issues. MUNs and simulations, offer a particularly good setting for students to develop these skills through the ability to work towards an outcome in a structured, multilateral, and hands on way (Crossley-Frolick, 2014; Obendorf & Randerson, 2013; Shellman & Turan, 2006; Taylor, 2014).

The need to negotiate and strategise was recognised by students in the 2015 cohort. For example, one student said:

I enjoyed the UN model simulation as having knowledge that you have learned and then being able to put that into practice, is more effective and impactful for learning. It has also helped me understand the way in which the United Nation processes work a lot better.

The 2016 switch to Facebook and the use of the chat function, in particular, led to students engaging in more complex and sophisticated levels of negotiation, strategic planning and activity. They did this both

during and outside of class. In class, this was generally around debate tactics, for example one dialogue went:

Country Y to country X: 'do you want to say your point to everyone maybe?' Country X replies with a thumbs up. Country Y: 'start a new moderated caucus on it?' Country Z: 'Good call, we should.'

Other examples of specific comments with groups were: "Don't delegate time to the chair, give it to people for the paper"; and "Let's shut down the caucus?" At least one student actively commented on the development of such tactics in their reflective journal:

Moreover, an effective strategy that I learnt during the simulation was the yielding of time. Although I only used it once during the last simulation, it was fun to watch other states yield their time so that countries with opposing views could be blocked out.

As outlined earlier, most of the chats were outside of class time and here use was even more strategic. The following is an example of one student inviting other ASEAN countries to form a group:

Hello fellow ASEAN members! This group is to strengthen our alliance in order to ensure peace and security within the South East Asian region. This will help during the simulation next week as we try to encourage countries that are not directly participating in the dispute to side with us, in order to strengthen our overall position within the South China Sea issue.

In 2015, although we had spent time working with students to understand the importance of blocs in the UN system, there very limited bloc formation during the simulation. Thus, the change in 2016 was an exciting development and one facilitated by the technology. Further, students noted the role of the technology in developing their strategies in their 2016 reflective journals:

One aspect I enjoyed utilising in my diplomatic process is using social media, namely Facebook as a way to communicate with delegates, signing on amendments, working papers etc. It was also a great method to strategize with like minded delegates using Facebook messenger to send quick messages to others to further influence on the debate.

By creating a Facebook group chat we were able to effectively coordinate as a team and develop strategies in response to changing events. For example, when other States introduced objectionable Draft Working Papers, or when we needed to change the direction of the debate due to unpopular responses from otherwise 'neutral' States.

There was a lot of online activity and communication between many members of our class throughout the week. We all worked together to create a Working Paper which accommodated States policies.

Overall, it was found that chat forums were used between classes in two particular and distinct ways, first to proactively plan out how blocs of states would conduct themselves during a forthcoming class, and second, reactively, to respond to what happened in a previous class, in a type of informal reflection.

One benefit of the use of embedded technology identified in the students' journals in both years was what we call, for want of a better term, multitasking or developing adaptability within the simulated learning environment. During the simulation, students were required to complete a range of activities, these include speaking, voting on procedural and substantive matters, discussing strategy, ensuring that they had signalled their intention to speak to the chair and communicating informally with other delegates. All the while, students were also expected to draft working papers, draft resolutions and amendments to the formal documents, which would become resolutions of the committee. Students made mention of adaptability and multitasking in the different data collected:

I found it initially difficult adjusting to the procedures of the UN, as well as the spontaneity of the process. As the weeks progressed, I found that it was easier to contribute when I focused on getting my point across, as opposed to giving a speech. (2015)

... additionally as a result, I improved my multitasking skills as I tried to keep up with multiple Facebook chats, what was being said in class and writing amendments. (2016)

Another challenging skill I had to learn was to multitask, especially having to listen to people speak whilst people were also talking in the Facebook conversations as well as Tweeting and uploading documents; it was very difficult trying to keep up. (2016)

Prior to taking MUN, students may have been required to juggle multiple assessment tasks for different subjects at once, or juggle studies, work, and personal lives. However, they may not have completed a task like the simulation requiring them to split their attention and time in a multiplicity of ways. Whilst cognisant of the fact that students would have to multitask, it was not envisaged that this would be a substantial outcome of the MUN. This demonstrates the value of analysis of data, in this case, reflective journals, which indicated that many students felt that it was a significant skill developed through the subject and one that would be of benefit in the future.

Conclusion

One of the key benefits of MUNs is that different students learn in different ways and MUNs add diversity to teaching methods (Obendorf & Randerson, 2013; Shellman & Turan, 2006). By effectively assimilating a SNS into the subject, it had increased capacity to respond to diverse learning styles. Observational data indicated that the SNS use provided students who were normally quiet in class with new avenues for participation and these were often women. This provides some support for Rambe and Ng'ambi's (2014) proposition that SNSs used with transformational pedagogy can empower students from diverse backgrounds, however more research is required to show a strong link.

The digital learners had complex relationships with technology, learners were slow to start on some platforms (Wiggio and Twitter) and felt comfortable with others (Facebook), yet did not always completely understand their full functionality. With Wiggio, students eventually understood it and accepted its value as an authentic working tool. Nevertheless, the 2016 data strongly indicates that the students were significantly more comfortable using a familiar SNS and this enhanced their use of it and, consequently, improved the engagement with the subject. Thus, this experience contradicts the literature focusing on privacy concerns (Darling & Foster, 2012; Donlan 2014; Escobar-Rodriguez et al., 2014; Lieberman, 2014; Salavuo, 2008), indeed there were no concerns expressed from students about mixing their private and student lives. The very high level use of the various Facebook functions, 3,363 posts in total in one subject of 129 students, provides concrete empirical support for the case that Facebook's familiarity, accessibility, and the time spent on it, make it an ideal teaching tool (Escobar-Rodríguez et al., 2014; Ezell, 2016; Salavuo, 2008; Schroeder & Greenbowe, 2009).

In using Facebook chat, the quality and sophistication of students' negotiation skills and strategic thinking improved. Gallardo-Echenique et al.'s (2015, p. 172) notion that digital learners "realize the possibilities and potentials of digital technologies" was apparent as, with the switch to Facebook, they initiated the use of the new functionalities to engage in more sophisticated strategising than with the use of Wiggio in 2015. In 2015, students relied instead on the polling function in Wiggio – in some classes extensively – to see whether they could garner support for particular motions, which did not facilitate the kind of strategizing and alliance building that Facebook chat did.

Facebook is not just a tool for communicating information to students, it needs to involve "participation, presence and ownership" (Salavuo, 2008, p. 128) and to have students feel in control. The SNS presence in our case was instructor initiated, thus it could be argued that students did not have full ownership or control but, in fact, students did take ownership of the platform initiating new uses, particularly through the use of Facebook chat, which was wholly initiated by the students. This was because it was an active and integral part of a subject rather than just a passive tool for passing on information. The use of Wiggio and Facebook enriched the subject by allowing students to experiment with negotiation and strategising in the safe space of a mediated SNS group. Importantly, it allowed students to develop and refine crucial skills that will be useful to their later lives and careers, a point that many of our student acknowledged in their reflective journals. The key implications for improving student learning through SNSs in higher education are that their use needs to be integrated in the subject material rather than just as an add on and

the use needs to be authentic, even if it is encouraged by assessment structures. In other words, SNSs need to have a specific function in teaching pedagogy. The technology need to be utilised and linked to the subject contents and/or assessment tasks for a specific purpose for example, providing up-to-date engagement on a topic, links to learning networks on particular issues or activities involving peer-to-peer communication that are integrated into the subject. Finally, this research confirms that giving students a sense of control also seems to be vital in successful SNS use. In this case, it was done through students' control over the content and direction of the debate and how and when they engaged in online negotiation.

SNSs will be part of many twenty-first century workplaces and students need to understand and explore their functionality for study and work as part of their professional development. One difficult issue for instructors is that technology is evolving rapidly, and new features and platforms, such as Google Classrooms, are constantly developing. This means ensuring that the best SNS platform is utilised by regular innovation and testing.

Social media integration throughout the simulation developed the important skills of multitasking, negotiation, and strategic thinking. Students extended their skills thanks to this unconventional assessment task. The focus on SNSs also modelled to students the benefits of engaging with digital diplomacy in real time. Such engagement is important in a discipline that needs to be anchored in the real world of global politics (Dunne et al., 2013; Reus-Smit, 2012). In terms of the further potential uses of SNSs, one is integrating students in other countries in learning in real-time, which the MUN did in a small way in 2015. We subsequently developed a series of online subjects with both open access and accreditation pathways, yet after early support for the project, it has faced significant institutional constraints and barriers, in particular around entry-standards to subjects and issuance of qualifications. Nevertheless, educators should aim to cross the divide between the Global North and the Global South and SNSs might be a vital tool in doing this.

Limitations and future improvements

The study, of course, has a range of limitations. Further demographic data could reveal differences between the cohorts in terms of access to mobile devices and internet at home, though there is no reason to suspect major changes between the years. The university has good on campus connectivity, which also reduces differences. However for countries or regions with limited campus and at home connectivity, running this program would certainly be difficult. The study was conducted at only one university in one discipline. Different universities in different locations may produce different results.

In terms of future improvements in the MUN, we are currently focused on improving student's public speaking and negotiating skills and are thus examining teaching literature on this. In addition, we are refining the content of the main written assessment task, the briefing paper, to ensure student's take a sophisticated approach to it. In terms of future research on SNS, we are interested in evaluating the role that SNSs can play in problem-based learning case studies and whether this can be done authentically. If deemed viable, we will trial these in a range of subjects at different levels of the curriculum.

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