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Face to Facebook: Social media and the learning and teaching potential of symmetrical, synchronous communication

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Face to Facebook: Social media and the learning and teaching potential of symmetrical, synchronous communication

Abstract

Social networking offers teachers and learners exciting opportunities to communicate. Web 2.0 and its synchronous communications platforms provide new avenues for teachers to deliver curriculum and facilitate learning. Further, they provide new avenues for students to engage and intensify their own learning. Being able to chat in real-time with a teacher, usually via face-to-face discussions, is something that many students studying in on-campus (or day) mode take for granted, and is something that distance or off-campus students are generally unable to experience. In the evolving, flexible-learning tertiary environment, viable and effective computer mediated communication (CMC) alternatives to face-to-face teaching need to be explored. These alternatives will only work if they prove useful to students. This article considers student reactions to social media as a teaching tool, probing its benefits and limitations. Over the course of a semester, third year on- and off-campus students communicated with an academic, outside lecture times, via the social networking site facebook®. Students were allowed to ask any questions they had that related to the unit. At the end of the semester students were provided with a 10-item questionnaire asking them to evaluate their experience. This study looked at a specific aspect of social networking — synchronous text-based chat — and the students' perceptions of its usefulness for their learning.

Keywords

social media, computer mediated communication, synchronous communication, distance education

Cover Page Footnote

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Introduction

Social networking is the new black. A substantial number of articles about social networking begin by noting the staggering figures for user uptake. In 2011, Facebook was the most frequently visited website, attracting an audience worldwide of 606 million, and almost half of the Australian population were reported to be active users (Ryan & Xenos 2011, p1658). Social media generates great interest as much from the virtual friend as from the educator. There is a growing body of evidence (e.g. Cheung & Lee 2010) suggesting that Web 2.0 and social networking have the potential to increase social connectedness and that students — secondary and university — spend a great deal of time plugged in to all manner of internet services.

The challenge for educators is how to use social media — which is, after all, social — to enhance learning outcomes. According to Cheung and Lee, in conjunction with high-speed internet access, “Web 2 applications have created a new world of collaboration and communication” (2010, p24). Whereas in the United States there is an increasing range of competitors to Facebook, it seems that its domination of the Australian social-networking market is overwhelming (Ryan & Xenos 2011). Facebook has its origins at Harvard University, and given universities' rapid uptake of technologies like email, it was to be expected that Facebook would be looked to by teachers, students and management alike as a potential delivery and communication system (Freeman 2009). Further, Facebook is reminiscent in structure of a more concrete university environment — with walls to write on, and party invitations to distribute — and it is perhaps this, along with its impressive membership, that has driven researchers to investigate the potential of Facebook-based social networking to enhance learning (Bart 2010).

Many studies investigating Facebook (e.g. Roblyer et al. 2010) concentrate on enhancing student outcomes — ability to demonstrate understanding of the unit material, for example — and developing student-centred practices — learners constructing knowledge for themselves — for a day (or on-campus) cohort. Facebook seems to be privileged as the “social site” to which educators turn to develop social connectedness with their students. As such, it is an adjunct to presumed face-to-face teaching, enhancing links built in a physical or actual place (Roblyer et al. 2010). Thus, the sense of community being formed through Facebook is enacted on- and off-line. Although many studies identify great potential for the widening of student networks, more recent studies (e.g. Subrahmanyam et al. 2008) have suggested that, in fact, a student's Facebook community is limited (with rare exception) to pre-established peer-groups. Thus, the friends on-line are known off-line.

In the broader context of a push toward flexible learning, Facebook as a learning tool and a learning environment seems to offer a win-win. It allows institutions to offer dual-mode courses across on- and off-campus cohorts, and develop learning communities that facilitate positive learning outcomes. As Yu, Tian, Vogel and Kwok note, “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” (2010, p1494). In other words, social networking helps establish peer-to-peer, self-motivated learning. Yet the benefits of flexible learning are to some extent reliant upon the same set of assumptions that underpin the scholarly investigation of the uses of Facebook. Specifically, flexible learning is about time management, and it is primarily on-campus students choosing between modes of delivery; off-campus students typically do not have a choice (see below). Thus, on-campus students have pre-existing or ongoing social and professional off-line contact with the university and the teaching staff.

Distance or off-campus students are not in this category. The opportunity afforded by Web 2.0 — namely the erasure of geographical distance — is matched by dramatic technological limitations that are also geographically determined. In other words, internet services become slower and less reliable the further a person is from a metropolitan centre. The requirement for distance students to attend residential school on a university campus, which established some face-to-face communication between student and teacher, has been phased out by most intuitions offering distance education, with varying levels of paper-based or fully online delivery modes. The distance student does not have the opportunities afforded by proximity to select delivery modes. It is distance or nothing. Further, they cannot rely on previously existing social networks as the bedrock of a new learning community. Thus the use of social media for curriculum delivery and learner engagement has significant implications for equity in student experience and outcome.

Distance students, however, like their on-campus fellow students, do have Facebook pages. Thus the question becomes: how can educators use familiarity with social networks to build a virtual on-campus relationship for day and distance students? In this study day and distance students were offered an opportunity to develop a scholarly relationship usually taken for granted by day students — the capacity to speak in real time with their teacher, in this case through Facebook chat. This was a small study and represents the beginning of an exploration of issues of equity and access, as well as student responses too and outcomes from the use of social networks. The primary source of evidence is questionnaire responses; thus, what can be demonstrated is student perceptions of their experience of using Facebook chat.

Facebook chat is a form of social media or networking that involves an open and synchronous internet platform. This makes it computer-mediated communication (CMC). Respondents type messages that are received instantaneously. The platform, small box and instant messaging influences style and content, with short, direct and abbreviated messaging the norm. It differs from, say, telephone calls in that there is an absence of physical communication cues such as timbre or tone. It should be noted also that a chat window sits alongside other pages that the computer user may be accessing, so students can be researching or writing their assignments while “chatting” with their lecturer. Telephone calls for example cannot necessarily be conducted in this way. The lecturer’s availability to chat is indicated via an icon.

It should be noted that opportunities for wide-ranging interactions between teachers and students in general have always been part of the practice of teaching. The capacity to speak either face-to-face or by phone, for example, is part of a scaffolded learning experience offered by many teachers of day and distance students. What is different here is the technology, and its implications for education.

By moving beyond issuing party invitations and writing on walls to synchronous CMC, this study explores the possibility that social networking can enhance the specific learning needs of day and distance students. It looks at the way in which the traditional approaches of teachers can be mobilised and peer-learning enabled through CMC. The specific aspect of social media CMC investigated in the study is text-based synchronous chat.

The Tertiary Context

Since 1972 the School of Applied Media and Social Sciences (SAMSS) and its predecessor organisations have been offering distance education at the Gippsland campus of Monash University, Australia. The campus houses the Off Campus Learning Centre, which oversees the production and delivery of materials for off-campus students and, as such, is recognised as the hub of distance learning for the University as a whole.

Some 30% of the 4,500 students enrolled at Monash Gippsland are distance students, with the added complexity that students are increasingly choosing mixed-mode attendance. That is, they study some subjects (or "units" in Monash terms) in day mode and some in distance mode. Thus distance education is complemented by an on-campus cohort with similar socio-economic and cultural diversities. The tradition practised in the school is one of scholarly materials (such as guides and readers) delivered in hard copy, although there has been movement over time towards multimedia delivery. Digitised (audio and visual) lectures, website unit development and other innovations of delivery characterise the school's approach to distance education.

Quality distance education requires a commitment to the development of resources and innovative teaching that target the distance learner specifically. In the contemporary context, flexible learning and a dual-mode education focus have introduced a new complexity into the provision of innovative distance education. As King points out "the democratising nature of online developments has blurred the distinctions between on-campus and off-campus delivery" (2010, p136). Online enrolment, class distribution and all manner of online university administrative processes mean that a student's experience is universalised across the day and distance cohorts. At the same time, the blurring of the distinctions between modes of delivery has potentially eroded some of the focus upon the distance student and the quality of delivery and experience (King 2010, p136).

The differences between students primarily stem from the distinction between the physical inhabiting of the institution as a day student and the geographically remote (and potentially isolating) experience of the distance student. In other words, the daily enactment of being a student in the physical environment of the university is fundamentally involved in creating the student identity. The centre court for this enactment is the tutorial teaching space. This is what the distance student forgoes, and is what all curriculum development and innovation seeks to address. Is it possible for social networking to not merely mitigate against, but effectively erase the part of the distance experience that denies the interaction of students — the face-to-face contact with the scholar? In other words, does social media, specifically synchronous CMC, provide a method of teaching that enhances the learning outcomes for distance as well as day students by providing a virtual real-time environment? It is in this context that Facebook chat was explored as a potentially innovative educational tool for learning for the distance student, as well as day students. Using the principle of "let's go to the students", a pilot study was initiated into the use of synchronous communication on Facebook with day and distance students. It should be noted that this study had modest goals — to measure student perceptions of CMC — and that it represents the beginning of broader research, not an attempt to provide definitive answers.

Computer-Mediated Communication

CMC is of significant scholarly interest. Over the last decade there has been a dramatic shift in the accessibility, number of users and availability of CMC. The contemporary expression of CMC is

social media, with the numbers of student users alone warranting significant study. CMC is focused on the use of computer technologies to deliver curriculum and facilitate learning and teaching. Although CMC is not always equivalent to interactive learning environments that employ social media (through CMC), there are significant links to, among other things, incorporating digital literacy capabilities and defraying the isolating aspects of distance learning.

There is debate about the broad effectiveness of this approach. Several authors have championed its use in educational settings (Jonassen, Davidson, Collins, Campbell & Haag 1995; Simpson 2005; Lund 2006). Some, chiefly Barnes, Marateo and Ferris (2007) and Oblinger and Hagner (2005), have declared CMC to be an essential tool in teaching today's "Net Generation" students. Barnes et al., for example, argue that these students "express a need for more varied forms of communication and report being easily bored with traditional learning methods" (2007, p2), while Glenn (2000) similarly noted that today's students flourish in interactive learning environments.

A specific concern relates to "pandering" to the Net Generation's "self-reported preference for immediacy" (Barnes et al. 2007, p2). It has been argued that using the internet to immediately access information has taught these students to expect immediate answers, and subsequently impaired their ability to delay gratification. The use of CMC, then, runs the risk of reinforcing a reliance on the educator as a source of information at the expense of independent investigation, encouraging the completion of work with minimal effort and/or discouraging sustained concentration. Conversely, it is also argued that immediate feedback reinforces learning (Carlson 2005; Barnes et al. 2007) and allows a person to spend more time on a task (Skinner 1938). Increased time spent researching a topic has the potential to strengthen connections between pieces of information, and helps develop a holistic map of the field of study (Jonassen, Davidson, Collins, Campbell & Haag 1995).

It should also be noted that immediacy in the context of distance education is a significant development. The delay in submission of work and feedback creates a disjunction between the learning and skill development and the feedback. In this case immediacy does not mean that there is an expectation that a question be answered immediately; rather, it means that there is an arrangement that allows a conversation to take place at specific times.

Although interest in the pedagogical value of CMC is consistent, the research focus to date has been limited. There is an emphasis in the research, for example, on transmitting an educator's image to remote students (Jonassen et al. 1995). Several studies have looked at asynchronous (email) and synchronous (real-time) text-based CMC in the acquisition of a second language (Eröz-Tuğa & Sadler 2009; Lamy 2004), but little has been done on assessing the benefits of CMC in a university context.

Both synchronous video-conferencing and text-based chat allow for an immediate response to questions, and allow students to engage directly with an educator. While these examples of CMC deal with time (for example, time taken to deliver materials and time taken to answer simple questions) there are also inherent constraints (Crystal 2001). A technical limitation of video-conferencing is the requirement for significant bandwidth to function optimally. Thus the communication can be compromised by poor reception or breaks in service.

A constraint of synchronous text-based chat is that students ask and answer questions in abbreviated language (Herring 1999; Lotherington & Xu 2004; Jenks 2009). This has the potential to blur the boundaries between formal learning environments (the language and context of the classroom) and informal (peer-to-peer). This is an issue that arises specifically with dissociative

technologies like email and text messaging, where the combination of the abbreviated and/or colloquial written message, the removal of physical proximity and the speed of message delivery (in the case of synchronous messaging) can manifest in students mistaking register and etiquette (Freeman 2009).

Moreover, McDonald and Elias (1976, cited in Jonassen et al.) suggest that in a traditional classroom the “teacher contributes up to 80% of the verbal exchange” (1995, p16), but only 10 to 15% when using CMC (Winkelmans 1988, cited in Jonassen et al. 1995). Thus the technology itself may require a teacher to modify their teaching approach when interacting with students.

Hampel (2006) and Jonassen et al. (1995) argue that instructors employing CMC channels are more akin to facilitators who support learning. As co-facilitators, students are encouraged to take an active role through goal-directed behaviour; for example, finding and evaluating material, generating questions and discussing ideas.

Although informal interaction and “facilitating” learning are quite different, both are interesting from a social-learning point of view. Communicating with students via social networks (as opposed to structured learning-management systems such as Blackboard or Moodle) has the potential to enhance the students' perception of the educators' approachability. In an environment where teaching is evaluated based on students' perceptions, this may be desirable for some academics. There is reason to be cautious, however, when using social-networking sites to develop approachability or accessibility, as

... these sites do not operate according to normative notions concerning power and sexual hierarchies between adults and youth. Because of this, teachers might undermine their ethos by creating their own profiles and adding their students as “friends” ...
(Maranto & Barton 2011, p37).

In other words, a necessary and important separation between teachers as teachers and teachers as friends is broken down through the nature of the CMC itself, with ramifications for the teacher and the learner.

The transmission model used to bridge distance is not all that CMC offers the educator. Jonassen and colleagues argue that learning is a social, conversational process in which “the thinking and intelligence of a community of performers or learners is distributed throughout the group” (1995, p9). Collaboration, then, scaffolds learning and supports the development, testing and evaluation of context-specific hypotheses. It is this that Jonassen et al. argue is essential for the construction of knowledge.

Little of the contemporary research focuses on student perceptions, however. It remains unclear whether students themselves perceive CMC mediums as possessing pedagogical benefit. In other words, what do the learners gain from the technology and its usage? This is one of the questions that prompted this study.

The Study

The aim was to explore the issue of student perceptions of the use of CMC by assessing the perceived social-interactive and learning benefits of Facebook chat. Although Facebook has several functions — among others, wall posts and news updates — the synchronous text-based CMC was of particular interest in this study.

Text-based communication between Facebook users is free of charge regardless of geographical distance. It is a synchronous text-based CMC medium: teacher and student converse through typed messages in real time.

Twenty students volunteered to participate in the study. They were undertaking at least one of two third-year Psychological Studies units at Monash University's Gippsland Campus. They were enrolled in either day or distance modes. Students were given permission to add the lecturer as a "friend" on Facebook, which provided them with the opportunity to "chat" in real time with the lecturer outside regular lecture and tutorial hours.

During "NetMeetings" between a student and the lecturer, students were allowed to ask any questions they had that related to the unit. The length of each session ranged from 10 seconds to 15 minutes, but the length of any "conversation" was not limited arbitrarily.

At the end of the semester, students who had used Facebook to communicate with the lecturer were provided with a questionnaire. The questions concerned user familiarity, communication (preferred features, for example), quality of the CMC, quality of feedback from the lecturer and usefulness. Students were also asked for their opinion regarding the potential of the tool for educational use. The 10-item questionnaire contained five Likert-scale questions and four short-answer questions (Appendix A).

The data from the questionnaires was analysed using both quantitative and qualitative measures. Responses to open-ended questions were examined to identify themes and patterns. The answers revealed that most students (18 of the 20) considered themselves to be either "extremely" or "very" familiar with the features of Facebook ($M_{\text{Likert rating}} = 1.55$ [$Mode = 1$], $SD = 0.69$). Fifteen (75%) thought that Facebook was either "extremely" or "very" reliable ($M = 2.00$ [$Mode = 2$], $SD = 0.73$). All of the respondents had used Facebook in the last six months, with students reporting that they use Facebook either "every day" or "every few days" ($M = 1.25$ [$Mode = 1$], $SD = 0.44$).

Nineteen students (95%) reported using Facebook to contact the lecturer during the semester; with two (10.5%) stating that they did do so "every few days", eight (42.1%) "once a week" and six (31.6%) "once a month". Three (15.8%) identified that they contacted the lecturer "less than once a month". All students rated Facebook as either "extremely" useful or "very" useful as a tool for contacting the lecturer ($M = 1.37$ [$Mode = 1$], $SD = 0.50$).

Of the 19 students who made contact with the lecturer via Facebook, all selected "chat" as particularly useful. Nine (47.4%) also selected "messages (email)", three (15.8%) chose "news feed (notifications)", three (15.8%) chose "status updates (comments)", one (5.2%) selected "friend requests" and four (21.1%) chose "wall posts". All thought that the lecturer was able to provide adequate responses to their questions using Facebook.

In response to the question “*In getting answers to questions about unit material and assignments, how would you prefer to communicate with your lecturer?*”, 17 students (85%) selected “web-based chat”. Ten (50%) chose “email”, one (5%) chose “phone”, two (10%) selected “one-on-one, face-to-face” and four (20%) chose “classroom, face-to-face”. Finally, 18 (90%) students thought that Facebook was an appropriate teaching tool.

The thematic analysis revealed that students’ communication was largely assessment-driven. Many of the questions posed by students on Facebook were associated with assessment tasks. One manifest theme was immediate feedback. It became obvious that the rapid turnaround of information was important to students. Several students acknowledged how helpful it was to receive information pertinent to completing an assignment in a timely fashion. For example:

I got a quick response so I could quickly move along to the next part of my assignment. Blackboard responses from other students often make me more confused, so a "straight" answer from the lecturer was extremely helpful.

I got an answer straightaway and was able to continue on with my assignment.

Having Facebook chat makes these responses instant so you do not have to wait around all day for an email.

Being able to use Facebook to contact lecturers makes me feel more comfortable about asking questions or asking for feedback. Facebook is a more informal tool, and in my opinion will create greater engagement with students.

It was a quick and effective way of getting information and answers.... Being an off-campus student, it meant that I could be studying/doing assignments in the evening and the lecturer was available to assist with questions.

Survey responses revealed that one of the benefits of the “chat” option was, again, the immediacy of communication. For example:

Useful if lecturer is online. Quicker.

I found chat useful as it allowed for a quick reply and it meant you could see if you were able to get into immediate contact with the lecturer.

This was helpful when I had a question that I needed an answer to quickly, so did not have to wait for email or [a] Blackboard reply.

Chat enabled me to ask questions and get an immediate response, which was very helpful whilst writing my essay. I was also able to contact the lecturer during the weekend when I am usually writing my essays.

It is helpful to be able to log on and see your lecturer on Facebook, as it means you can ask a question and get an immediate response. As I am off-campus and working full-time, I appreciate being able to get a quick response.

I have found it is much easier to contact or ask questions via Facebook, as I can ask questions as I think of them. I am unlikely to call a lecturer and even less likely to see a lecturer at their office as I can never remember what times they are available. I have also found the feedback to be more instantaneous, which is helpful when asking questions relating to assignments.

Quick reply like having a conversation but don't need to call or drive down. Don't have to move from computer and lose train of thought.

I found this quite useful as I received an instant reply to my question. It also meant that if I didn't understand the lecturer's reply, I could say so, and they could attempt to answer my question in a different manner.

Despite this broad appreciation of the benefits of Facebook, there were some concerns. Respondents expressed concerns over privacy, and the use of a social space as a teaching space:

...for some students they would prefer to keep their private life away from the lecturers, or may not have a Facebook account, therefore [Facebook] should not be the only way that students can contact people.

...having a separate Facebook account purely for work purposes may be beneficial to the lecturer and possibly students. Whilst having the lecturer use their personal account does make the lecturer more accessible and personable, it does pose an issue of breaching lines between teacher and student. This is a personal choice of the lecturer, though, and has not in my experience hindered the advantages of having Facebook as a communication tool with the lecturer.

I think email is better; Facebook is more a social way of communicating, would prefer to keep that separate from uni!

Overall, then, students expressed an appreciation for immediate feedback. The data also indicated that, given the opportunity, the majority of students would contact a lecturer at least once a week, and that they prefer synchronous communication (chat) over asynchronous communication (email).

Students' responses suggested that providing them with immediate feedback facilitated the researching (and writing) of their assignments. The immediacy of the response meant that time was not lost seeking specific information. Acknowledging their understanding of the material and addressing their concerns seems to have facilitated their engagement with the material; this, potentially, contributed to more structured and goal-oriented investigation (see Jonassen et al. 1995).

This seemed to be particularly important for distance students who have no face-to-face access to their lecturers, and therefore infrequent opportunities for immediate feedback. The contact these students have with their lecturers is "usually limited to feedback on the assignments" (Hampel 2006 p. 112).

Benefits and Disadvantages

The findings here are consistent with Barnes et al., who suggest that by merging the evolving work paradigms of net-literate students with established teaching techniques, “educators can tap into the distinctive proficiencies of their students while ensuring focused learning and positive outcomes” (2007, p. 5). In other words, familiarity with social networking is a useful pedagogical platform.

There are several potential benefits in using text-based communication. Social-networking sites, with their reliance on short, simple text messages, mitigate the difficulties for users on slow internet connections. As another example, Facebook runs inside the user’s web-browser of choice, requiring no additional software that must be learned. Furthermore, it has been argued that the use of emoticons may, to a limited extent, substitute for non-verbal cues available through video-conferencing or face-to-face communication, and although some have argued that they are culturally specific, may assist in reducing ambiguity in text-based communication (Walther & D’Addario 2001).

Interestingly, another potential benefit of using text-based communication tools, in particular over video-conferencing, is that this form of contact is relatively “faceless”. Although, as Feenberg (1989, cited in McCabe 1998) contends, people have increasing control over how they manage their online persona, the perceived anonymity allows them to ask questions they would perhaps not ask in a face-to-face interaction. While much has changed since Feenberg made this observation, and there are now serious issues around internet privacy, the specific technological characteristics of internet communication do still provide for a level of anonymity in the specific areas of synchronous and asynchronous communication (chat and email) as well as gaming (Second Life is an example of the deliberate management of an online persona or avatar). In the context of learning and teaching, this is a double-edged sword. It can provide a space for nervous or timid students, for example, to ask questions in a less intimidating environment, but can also suggest a level of protective anonymity (dissociative behaviour) that provides space for inappropriate language, commentary or engagement.

In this study the students overwhelmingly reported that they had been on Facebook before the study, and thus had a pre-existing familiarity with the technology. Students were reassured by the real-time dialogue with their lecturer. To this end then, CMC was perceived favourably by distance and day students as actively scaffolding their learning. The synchronous communication provided distinct benefits, including overcoming or neutralising distance.

The data indicated that the majority of students completing the survey felt comfortable contacting the lecturer at least once a week — a finding consistent with reducing “unapproachability” and establishing an environment where the student-teacher division was legitimately blurred, and where students were encouraged to engage with the material. The ownership of engagement, the move from teacher-directed to learner-focused learning, is inherent in distance education, as it relies on the motivation of the individual. However, CMC and the relatively newly accessible Facebook chat (along with interactive learning environments) offer another opportunity to support distance-education learning by providing an equivalence of on-campus availability, thus neutralising one possible limitation of off-campus study.

Furthermore, while communication between students and educators can occur in a variety of ways, importantly, when the student communicates with the lecturer using CMC the onus is on the

student to formulate questions and therefore engage with the material. For a session to be successful, students must come prepared with ideas and questions (Hampel 2006). A supplementary benefit of text-based interaction is that the act of writing itself compels students to formulate and express their ideas clearly so they can be understood. This helps them develop higher-order thinking, and examine their reasoning (Harasim 1990; McCabe 1998).

It is clear, then, that CMC offers sources of communication that can augment existing media and complement existing methods. It is also clear that the specific CMC opportunities to enhance learning that are afforded by social networking are vast. Being able to speak with a teacher in real time over any distance does go a substantial way towards neutralising distance, encouraging participation and creating a collegiate environment.

In terms of disadvantages, the principal issue identified by the students was the blurring of "social" and "educational" domains, together with privacy concerns. The strong student emphasis on timely feedback also put pressure on the lecturing staff to be online and to reply as soon as possible. This may have the effect of increasing workloads unless students are given clear directions on what they can reasonably expect of the lecturing staff.

A potential issue that educators also need to remain cognisant of is that Facebook and other social-networking sites are "for-profit" commercial enterprises. By using them to deliver curriculum advice, for example, we are exposing our students to advertising and asking individuals (both staff and students) to move beyond the protected sphere of the university. As the students noted, there are concerns over privacy that are directly relevant to the use of the public space of the social network. CMC itself is not restricted to Facebook, of course, so perhaps one option is to use university platforms rather than public ones.

Conclusion

Synchronised communication — social-media chat — was generally perceived positively by students. A quickly answered question allowed students to spend more time completing their assignment. Further, they formulated questions and answers in writing. The immediacy of the response and the irrelevance of distance, along with anonymity, all helped the students in completing the unit.

It is important, however, to distinguish between CMC and the specific social network of Facebook. There needs to be more research on the broader uses of multiple CMC platforms, rather than simply equating its effectiveness with that of Facebook itself. Concerns about privacy and the potential confusion of modes (social versus education), as well as exposure to advertising, need to be taken seriously if these forms of scaffolded learning are to be implemented more broadly. Educators need to be mindful about the rates of uptake and usage of Facebook. The largest cohort of new students at the Monash Gippsland campus is mature-age students who have come through TAFE or other post-secondary pathways. Not all of our new learners are net-savvy generation Xers; consequently, not all students have used Facebook, or are familiar with it. Therefore a blanket use of social networking to address specific disadvantages (distance, for example) could potentially introduce another set of discriminating factors.

A word of caution too, there is a significant time component for this form of teacher availability. If synchronised chat communication is to be incorporated into teaching more uniformly, it needs to be done with an awareness of the resource-intensity of the practice. Educators will need to be

adequately resourced with the time to provide this level of learning support. This was a pilot study with a small sample that, while it can claim some representativeness, should be followed up by more-comprehensive studies that employ rigorous qualitative and quantitative research techniques, so educators can fully develop an understanding of not only student perceptions, but the relationships of this form of CMC to learning outcomes.

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Appendix A

Effectiveness and Usefulness Survey

Please tick the appropriate boxes. Your help is very much appreciated.

1. Do you have a personal Facebook page?

- Yes No

If yes, how familiar are you with Facebook's features (e.g., chat)?

- Extremely
 Very
 Somewhat
 Only a little
 Not at all

2. How reliable is Facebook?

- Extremely
 Very
 Somewhat
 Only a little
 Not at all

3. Have you used Facebook in the last six months?

- Yes No

If yes, how often?

- Every day
 Every few days
 Once a week
 Once a month
 Less than once a month

4. Have you used Facebook to contact your lecturer this semester (i.e., Semester 1, 2010)?

- Yes No

If yes, how often?

- Every day
 Every few days
 Once a week
 Once a month
 Less than once a month

5. Overall, how helpful have you found Facebook as a tool for contacting the lecturer?

- Extremely
 Very
 Somewhat
 Only a little
 Not at all

6. Which features of Facebook, if any, did you find particularly useful in interacting with the lecturer? (Tick as many as apply, and we would appreciate any comments)

- Chat
.....
- Messages (Email)
.....
- News Feed (Notifications)
.....
- Status Updates (Comments)
.....
- Friend Requests
.....
- Photos
.....
- Wall Posts
.....
- None of the above

7. In your experience, do you think that, using Facebook, the lecturer was able to provide adequate responses to the questions you posed? (We would appreciate your comments.)

- Yes No
.....

8. Do you have suggestions for how the lecturer could have been more helpful?

- Yes No

If yes, please explain.

.....

9. In getting answers to questions about unit material and assignments, how would you prefer to communicate with your lecturer?

- Web-based chat
- Email
- Phone
- One-on-one, face-to-face
- Snail mail
- Classroom, face-to-face

10. Is Facebook an appropriate teaching tool for the students of Monash University?

- Yes No

If no, what would be your suggestions for change?

.....
.....
.....

Thank you very much for taking the time to complete this survey. Your input is invaluable