

facebook™: engagement for transition and retention beyond the curriculum.

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abstract

To plan for the future, we need to take account of emerging trends and find innovative ways to utilise them to engage students beyond the curriculum. In the rapidly changing world of technological enablements, online communities offer an opportunity to engage with students via a medium that many are already comfortable using. Research in socio-linguistically based cultural studies (Thompson, 1984) suggests that establishing a communicative context, which enables the participants to feel on a level playing field, that is, away from the institutional constraints, can elicit a more open exchange of information. This paper suggests that this leads to a greater engagement with students and offers the potential to intervene in 'at risk' cases. In 2008, Murdoch University trialled using Facebook™ as a means of engaging with new students, with some interesting and surprising outcomes. This paper will discuss some of the outcomes, the potential and analyse some of the theoretical underpinnings, which prompted our decision to experiment with online communities outside of the university structure.

introduction

[Tinto's] theories of retention maintain that successful retention programs make a conscious effort to reach out and make contact with students in order to establish personal bonds among students and faculty. Particularly important is faculty-student contact in a variety of settings outside the formal classroom setting (Longwell-Grice & Longwell-Grice, 2007-2008, p. 408)

As a sense of belonging has been positively correlated with student persistence (Hausmann, Schofield, & Woods, 2007), in late 2007 Murdoch University floated the idea of trialling a First Year Facebook™ as a means of engaging students and easing their transition through proactive and personalised communication. There were several considerations, which influenced our decision to attempt to use Facebook™ as our chosen medium of engagement rather than using the university site to host an online community. Initially, as chief product officer for Appirio, an organisation, which helps companies find ways to connect with users on Facebook™ suggests: 'If there are 150 million people in a room you should probably go to that room' (Wagner, 2008). Furthermore, the benefits of Facebook™ as a networking medium is now well established (Hempel, 2009) as is the importance of being involved, or engaging in university life (Terenzinii et.al., 1994). By engaging incoming first year students in a network which is set up specifically for them, and in which they are already comfortable, the benefits in terms of their first year experience are magnified and the potential for retention is enhanced. The primary rationale thus, was a desire to create a sense of community in a forum where students were already 'at home' (Lally, 2002). That is, to 'reach out and make contact with students in order to establish personal bonds' (Longwell-Grice, 2007 p. 408) with, and among students.

an interdisciplinary approach

This decision was informed from an interdisciplinary theoretical framework, which took impetus, not only from education (Tinto, 1990; Northedge, 2003; Terenzinii et.al.) but also from critical discourse analysis (McHoul & Grace, 1995), social semiotics (Hodge, 1988), communication and cultural studies (Thompson, 1984, Rheingold, 1994, Palloff and Pratt, 1999, Preece, 2000 and Zhao et. al., 2008) and media studies (Reeves & Nash, 1996). This interdisciplinary approach enabled the recognition of the importance of power inequities, communicative context and linguistic style as means of reaching out to students to engage with them on a personal level and foster strong positive relationships with them (Longwell-Grice, 2007-08, p.408). When we use institutional sites, we tend to talk about things in the ways we have become accustomed to in our discursive community (Northedge, 2003) which has a propensity to alienate those who are not yet members. Furthermore, regardless of the reassurances we might offer new students, communication on an institutional site will always be constrained by perceived, if not actual power inequities, which form the backbone of discursive communities. As Bourdieu (1981) cited in Thompson (1984) tells us:

Language is not only an instrument of communication or even of knowledge, but also an instrument of power. One seeks not only to be understood but also to be believed, obeyed, respected, distinguished. When the complete definition of [linguistic] competences as *right to speak*, that is, as right to the legitimate language, the authorized language, the language of authority. Competence implies the power to impose reception. (Bourdieu 1981: 20, cited in Thompson, 1984, pp. 46-47)

Moreover, all information that emanates from the university invariably carries with it an implicit formality, which is not required or desired in Facebook™. Certainly, like all other online communities, Facebook™ has codes of conduct. Yet, to facilitate a space that does not require moderation nonetheless opens up channels and styles of communication that would be seen as inappropriate on an institutional site. For example, ‘hey tam, was wondering if youll be in the office on friday, was thinking maybe ill come have a chat xx’ (taken from Ptam at Murdoch on Thursday 12th March, 2009). This level of informality is not something that would routinely pass between a new student and a tutor, nor is it likely to occur in communication with the University as a whole. New First Year students need to be able to be put at ease, or to be able to feel at home enough to speak openly, even if that does mean the occasional ‘omfg! that's sooooo good! *thinks* =Pin’ (comment taken from Ptam at Murdoch 11/3/09).

points for discussion

- What are the disadvantages of Facebook™ as opposed to comparable sites hosted by the institution?
- Who should monitor such a page?
- Where does the responsibility for proactive pastoral care reside?
- Can this initiative be applied in other institutions?
- How can online pastoral care be quantitatively related to transition and retention?
- How can monitoring such pages be accommodated in workload models?
- What about the digital divide?

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