

SOCIAL MEDIA AS A VENUE FOR ONLINE CLASS COLLABORATION

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ABSTRACT

The role of social media has shifted in recent years. What used to be a platform for socialization has now become a venue for collaborative engagements. Many people, especially in the Philippines, are using social media, specifically Facebook, as a venue for various kinds of interaction and collaboration. This study aims to explore Facebook as venue for online class collaboration. This study examined how students in a course on Environmental Advocacy of the University of the Philippines Open University (UPOU) made use and maximized Facebook as a venue for online collaboration. Although social media was quickly adopted by the practitioners, it is still an area that lacks empirical evidence and academic attention (Babac, 2011). Results of the study showed that Facebook was viewed as a venue for online students to exchange ideas, share resources, collaborate, and socialize. There were also a number of challenges and difficulties faced by the students, among which are coordination, communication, connectivity, commitment, harmonization, and integration. Use of Facebook for this course proved to be a useful tool to foster academic collaboration among students and create ideas for future projects.

Keywords: social media, online collaboration, online learning

INTRODUCTION

The role of social media has shifted in recent years. What used to be a platform for socialization has now become a venue for collaborative engagements. Mangold and Faulds (2009) define social media as the “set of online word of mouth forums, which includes blogs, discussion boards, forums or social networks.” According to Kietzman et al. (2011), people and organizations use social media to share, co-create, and discuss user-generated content.

Some educators, teachers and students find social media as somehow not appropriate for academic discourses and exchanges, while others find it quite conducive and convenient. Social media allows people to participate in conversations instead of merely being on the receiving end. Recent studies showed the evolving role of social media in education and academic networking. In a study by Moran, Seaman and Tinti-Kane (2012), social media was used by faculty members in both their personal and professional lives. Lester (2012)

discussed a successful project made by students in a basic college advertising course that used social media such as YouTube, Flickr, MySpace, Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Ning, Tagged, Google+ and other online social networking sites (SNS) in order to form an integrated marketing communication strategy which serves as an experiential learning process for students. The use of social media, specifically Facebook, in an Information Systems course at a South African University served as “Third space” for student democratic expression, academic networking and learning communities (Rambe, 2012). Social Networking Sites such as Ning was proven beneficial in distance education courses in a case study conducted by Brady, Holcomb, Smith (2010). The results of the study showed that education-based SNS served as a technological tool for improved online communications among students in higher distance education courses.

However, the use of social media among faculty members has been fluid and evolving. In 2011, Facebook was the most visited site for professional purpose, by 2012 this has been replaced by LinkedIn. Faculty identified two top concerns of social media for teaching such as privacy and the integrity of student submissions. There are also challenges such as developing a quality academic discussion and assurance of deep learning (Rambe, 2012).

In the Philippines, most people use social medias specifically Facebook, as a venue for various kinds of interactions and collaborations. Facebook is the most visited site based on the data generated by Alexa (2013). The most visited social media sites in the Philippines are ranked accordingly below:

- (1) Facebook
- (2) Google
- (3) Google (Philippines)
- (4) Yahoo
- (5) Youtube
- (6) Blogspot
- (7) Wikipedia
- (8) Twitter
- (9) Sulit.com
- (10) WordPress

Facebook alone, based on the data by CheckFacebook.com (2013), an independent site that tracks social media trends, the Philippines ranks eighth in the world in terms of the number of Facebook users – with more than 30 million registered users - and ranks second as the fastest growing users.

Despite the popularity of social media, its use has not been fully maximized. According to Babac (2011), social media is a new and rapidly evolving phenomenon that has been quickly adopted by the practitioners but still an area that lacks empirical evidence and academic attention. Recognizing the complexity of social media as well as the ever changing communication landscape, this study used Smith’s Honeycomb Model (2007) for social media in framing the study. The model comprised of seven building blocks: presence, sharing, identity, relationships, conversations, groups and reputation.

OBJECTIVES

This study aimed to examine Facebook as venue for online class collaboration. Specifically, it aimed to:

- (1) Understand how UPOU students view Facebook as a venue for academic collaboration;
- (2) Determine the challenges, constraints, and difficulties encountered by UPOU students in using Facebook for online collaboration;
- (3) Identify the potentials and possibilities of Facebook as a site for online collaboration.

FRAMEWORK

According to Smith's Honeycomb Model, there are seven building blocks for a social software: presence, sharing, identity, relationships, conversations, groups, and reputation. These building blocks are not mutually exclusive and need not all be present in a social media engagement. According to Kietzmann (2011), these building blocks are 'constructs that allow us to make sense of how different levels of social media functionality can be configured.' Each block will allow us to make sense of how environmental practitioners view social media and understand the range of interactions and engagements they use.

This study examined each block to understand the functional traits of various social media activities and the fundamental implications that each block presents to the students as they seek ways to engage their classmates into academic collaboration. The identity block is put at the center since it the most basic requirement of any social software system. It is a way of identifying people in the system and the extent to which individuals or organizations make their identity public in a social media setting (Babac, 2011).

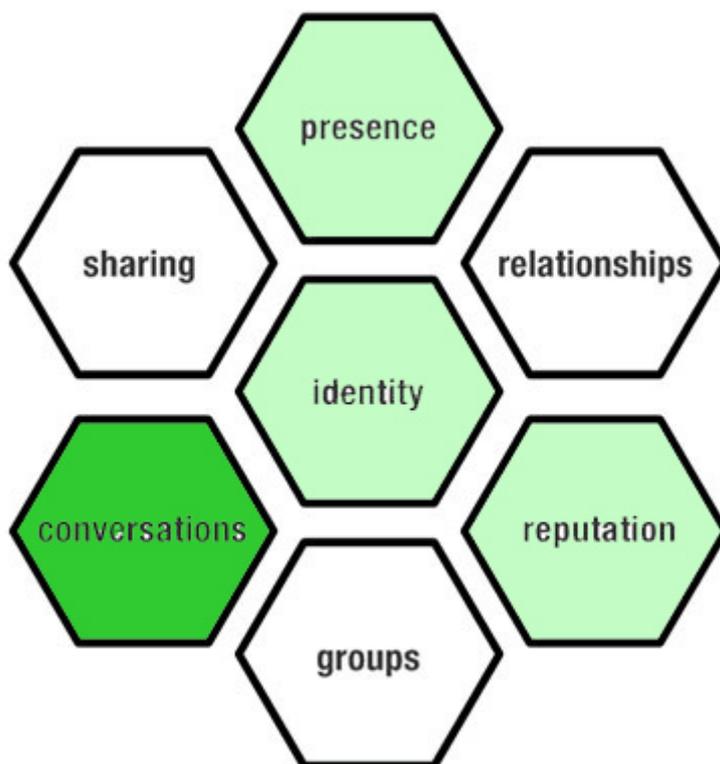


Figure 1: Honeycomb Model (Smith, 2007)

METHODOLOGY

This research made use of a qualitative case study approach in order to describe this particular case in detail (Hancock, 2002). The respondents for this study were Environmental Advocacy class students who are in the second semester of the 2013-2014 Academic Year. Fourteen students participated in the study. After the semester, the students were asked about their views on the use of Facebook for online collaboration in accomplishing one of their major course requirements. Due to difficulty in setting up an interview because of geographical and time zone differences, the students were asked to complete a set of questions about their experiences in using Facebook in their collaborative works. Students were asked follow-up questions to expound on some of their answers.

One of the requirements of the course was to develop the UPOU Green Website – an environmental advocacy using the Internet and online technology (Figure 2).

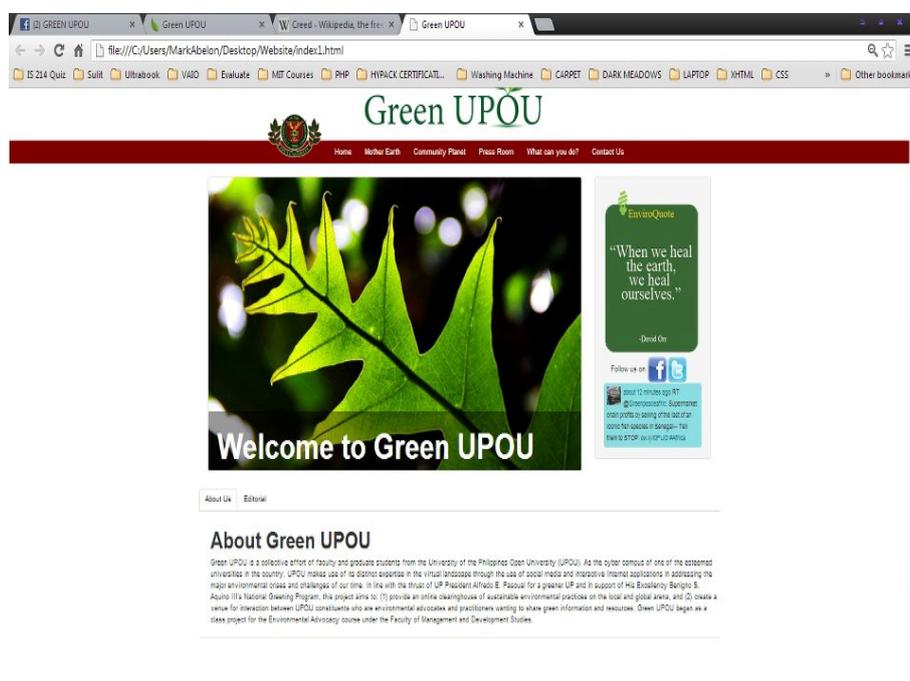


Figure 2: Screenshot of the home page of the Green UPOU

For this class, the use of Facebook was not part of the course design and requirement but was initiated by the students themselves. They created two Facebook groups for each of the major tasks assigned to them – the Design and Development Team; and the Content and Writing Team.

The answers were analyzed through thematic approach. Answers given by the students were examined and coded guided by the Honeycomb Model as a framework. Themes that emerged were further reduced after comparing and contrasting the categories.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Facebook as a Venue for Academic Collaboration

This study showed that Facebook has evolved into a venue for academic collaboration, not just for socialization. For this study, the students maximized the use of Facebook in accomplishing and completing their course requirement on developing a website. Despite

the presence and the students' active use of the MyPortal, UPOU's official online classroom, it appears as a second nature for most students to use Facebook in their collaborative work. The following themes emerged on how students view Facebook as a venue for academic collaboration:

- **Exchanges of Ideas**

The students viewed Facebook as a platform for exchanging of ideas, experiences and insights. Although they were able to exchange ideas in the MyPortal, they were more comfortable and more open in exchanging ideas, experiences and insights in Facebook, which they considered as an alternative platform for their exchanges. Although the setting up of a Facebook account was not required, the students automatically set-up accounts without the teacher's instructions for their exchanges of ideas. In a study by Deng and Tavares (2013), where they examined the experiences of students in online participation in both MOODLE and Facebook, it was concluded that participation in Facebook was more active than MOODLE. They noted that this is brought up by several factors such as usability and habits, perceptions, social presence roles and rules.

The students set up a private group wherein only their group members will be able to identify them and share their posts. This implies that in as far as exchanging of ideas is concerned, students were still careful to reveal their identities to users outside of their group.

The sharing of one student captured this view:

"It served as another platform for exchange of brilliant ideas."

Avram (2014) pointed out that Facebook in higher education allows efficient communication among users especially in getting answers to their various education-related questions, and even to debate on the concepts taught in their subjects. For this course, students were able to freely exchange ideas and even argue on some issues through Facebook. Students regularly post their ideas without much screening thus allowing for a freer and a more dynamic conversation.

According to the students, their exchanges of brilliant and unique ideas were quite useful. They were able to use these ideas not just in their assigned work in class but also in their everyday lives. Their exchanges of ideas and experiences were applied even to their work and other aspects of their lives. One student captured this view in this quote:

"It also became a means for everyone to exchange ideas, learnings and experiences that are not only helpful to the assigned course work, but likewise helpful in everyday life."

- **Sharing of Resources and Materials**

Facebook accounts are also seen as a venue for uploading and sharing of resources and materials individually researched by the students. Both Facebook accounts set-up by the students were inundated with links, resources and materials that served as inputs to their assigned major course requirement. In a study done by Glowatz and O'Brien (2013), Facebook allows the students to participate in academic interaction regarding the module as well as share information. In a similar study by de Villiers (2010), postgraduate students used Facebook as an optional venue for academic conversation, the active participation through sharing of resources initiated by the students has helped and enhanced their learning.

This implies that the sharing functionality of Facebook as indicated in the Honeycomb model was widely used and maximized.

Students also noted that by reading and going over the materials uploaded by their classmates, they were motivated to be more environmentally conscious. According to one student:

“The various information and materials posted or displayed in the Green UPOU website will also enhance the level of knowledge, awareness and motivations especially of the people who have green minds and concern over caring and nurturing the environment.”

Coklar (2012) in McLoughlin, Catherine and Lee (2014) noted that Facebook was advantageous in sharing information, generating interest and creating motivation to facilitate formal learning.

- **Networking and Collaboration**

The Facebook accounts also served as avenues for networking and collaboration, which includes future collaborative projects on environmental advocacy. Students found social media ideal for collaborative projects even for students with various fields and expertise. One student noted:

“The activity is highly collaborative, as it made people of interdisciplinary fields, minds and efforts worked. Having to meet and discussed with the others and collaboratively work via social media/ internet open up stream of information.”

La Rue (2012) in McLoughlin, Catherine and Lee (2014) noted that “a peer to peer learning environment was established that encouraged student co-creation of knowledge artifacts.” Facebook allowed students to network and collaborate with each other without the fear of being out of order since it was not the official class venue. They were able to get to know the individual strengths and backgrounds of each other in relation to the accomplishment of their course requirement and for future collaboration.

This implies that the relationship block also exists as students have formed an association that led them to look forward to a collaborative activity.

- **Socialization**

The students also used their Facebook for socialization. They were able to get to know one another on a more personal level, and became friends with some of their classmates. One student noted:

“... it paved way for new friendships and academic collaborations among the students.”

Avram (2014) supported this view and noted that Facebook in education creates the starting point for adequate socializing, which allows members of an academic community to get to know each other better. Some of the students who were living or working in the same area were able to get together and were able to develop friendship.

This implies that the group block also exists as students were able to form communities and sub-communities.

Challenges, Constraints, and Difficulties

Students do face challenges, constraints and difficulties in using Facebook in their project. The following are their major challenges:

- **Communication**

One of the challenges faced by the students in using Facebook as a venue for online collaboration was communication. Maintaining regular communication among class

members is the biggest challenge especially since most of the students enrolled have their own work and responsibilities to attend to.

Despite this hurdle of sustaining regular communication, the students were still able to find ways to get in touch with one another. They were guided by the deadlines thus pushing them to become innovative and creative in finding ways to communicate. Some students left private messages aside from their posts.

- **Coordination**

There is also difficulty in coordinating with one another through online mode since they have different schedules and time zones. Some of the students were located outside Philippines, in Maldives, Papua New Guinea and other parts of the globe. This place a difficulty for synchronous coordination and students would have to rely on asynchronous means of communication. This has implications on meeting deadlines since they have to wait for one another to join in and have a group discussion.

- **Connectivity**

Connectivity has different meanings in this context. One aspect is concerned with difficulty in going online so it took some time for the group members to collaborate. One reason for this could be poor Internet connectivity. For some, Facebook was blocked in their offices so they were not able to work during office hours. It was good that they also made use of other software such as google drive, Gmail group and other google apps and yahoo. One student did not have a Facebook account or did not want to use Facebook. However, she was eventually influenced to join Facebook in order to be able to connect with the group.

- **Commitment**

Level of commitment by students varied. Some students were not diligent enough to find out their responsibilities and roles so most of them joined late in the discussion in the Facebook. Not everyone contributed to the class project which somehow affected the output. The most active ones in the Facebook proved to be most committed in completing their course requirement.

- **Harmonization**

Another challenge is to harmonize interdisciplinary people to work well. Students have different experiences, work and educational background. It needed creativity and resourcefulness among them to create the project, organize the materials and eventually come up with the group consensus on which direction to pursue. This was very evident in their Facebook postings.

- **Integration**

The biggest challenge was how to integrate all the ideas of the different groups. Each student has his or her own ideas on how to come up with the class project. The large amount of data collected by each group member and posted in the Facebook site proved to be difficult to organize, integrate and come up with coherent information required for the project. Despite this greatest challenge, the students were able to integrate all the materials and complete the course requirements.

Potentials and Possibilities

Although there were a number of difficulties and challenges faced by the students, they do recognize the potential and possibilities of Facebook. However, not all students were in favor of using Facebook. Eventually, those who were not Facebook users were obligated to use it as majority of the class were using them. These are the themes that emerged from the answers of the students:

- **Empowers students**

Facebook has the potential to empower more and engage the learners in academic discourse. Due to its feature of interactivity and ease of use, students will be empowered to contribute to the discussion instead of just lurking in the online classroom. Ophus and Abbit (2009) noted that many students found potential benefits to their course work. Among the reported benefits were ease and convenience of communicating via Facebook.

- **Allows open discussion**

Students were able to discuss more freely and there was spontaneity in the discussions. Students had the freedom to post new topics or anything that they feel has relevance to their class project. Unlike in the regular online classroom, it is usually the teacher who sets how the discussion should proceed. In Facebook, the students are able to freely post whatever their thoughts and ideas are.

- **More interactive**

The interactivity feature of Facebook allowed the students to share more and participate more frequently. Majority of the students were Facebook users and found that Facebook is quite interactive. This interactivity feature of the Facebook encourages them to post and participate more often.

- **Allows sharing of resources**

The students were able to share online resources more easily and were able to get feedback, even short responses using the 'Like' button.

CONCLUSION

Social Media such as Facebook proved to be a useful tool in fostering academic collaboration among students. The functional blocks of social media that were identified by Honeycomb (2007) exemplified how the students made use of Facebook which allowed for the completion of their course requirement. Although there were challenges along the way, Facebook was still the preferred platform by most of the students when it comes to communicating, collaborating and sharing of resources. Schroeder and Greenbowe (2009) supported this by concluding that students used Facebook more frequently and more dynamically than the regular learning management system. By understanding how students view Facebook as a venue for academic collaboration, distance learning teachers will be able to maximize its use in enriching students' learning experiences. This study has shown that the use of Facebook facilitated the completion of the course requirements. The final output of the students, which was a green UPOU website, showed how the students were able to maximize the functionalities of Facebook and overcome challenges along the way. However, one of the implications of the use of Facebook is the realization of the need to carefully plan the integration of Facebook use in the instructional design of the course. It should be designed to complement and supplement MyPortal or any other type of Learning Management System (LMS). The possibility of including it as part of the assessment could be explored.

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