

Chapter 78

Does Facebook Provide Educational Value?

An Overview of Theoretical and Empirical Advancements of Affordances and Critical Issues

Stefania Manca

Institute for Educational Technology - CNR, Italy

Maria Ranieri

University of Florence, Italy

ABSTRACT

Facebook has received considerable attention in a number of research areas. However, its educational value has not been fully confirmed and results from the mainstream educational paradigms are contradictory. A number of experiences related to the educational use of Facebook as a technology-enhanced learning environment are also flourishing. In these, Facebook has been used as a unique, or at least as one, learning management system tool, or as a platform for educational purposes. This chapter focuses on these issues, providing a wide overview of the current literature on the educational value of Facebook considering both theoretical positions and empirical findings. Furthermore, a few preliminary guidelines about Facebook usage are provided, pertaining to pedagogical, institutional, technological, and ethical issues. The chapter finally provides some hints about emerging trends and areas that deserve further research, such as professional development, academic practice, and location-based learning.

INTRODUCTION

Of the various online social networking sites (SNS), Facebook is now the most popular, with more than one billion monthly active users (Facebook, 2013). To date, Facebook has received considerable attention from a number of research areas, ranging from social and behavioral sciences, economics and law to business and marketing. Indeed, in the social sciences there is a huge amount of research about the

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implications of Facebook for identity and self-presentation, friendship articulation and privacy concerns (see Wilson *et al.*, 2012).

Dozens of papers have also appeared in specialized journals and have been presented in thematic conferences in the field of education, with contrasting results in terms of Facebook's educational value. The focus has mainly been on students' and teachers' usage of social networking sites (Hew, 2011; Yang *et al.*, 2011) with a special emphasis on teacher/instructor presence and self-disclosure (DiVerniero & Hosek, 2011; Mazer *et al.*, 2009), students' attitudes (Espuny *et al.*, 2011), impact on academic performance (Kirschner & Karpinski, 2010), appropriate professional behavior (Ferdig *et al.*, 2008; Hutchens & Hayes, 2013), or as a tool of professional development in lifelong learning (Pimmer *et al.*, 2012; Ranieri *et al.*, 2012).

Generally, the literature suggests that SNS are mainly used in education as tools supporting existing social relationships and enabling the maintenance of social capital (Ellison *et al.*, 2011), but their value as a learning environment is still questioned. On the one hand, scholars have cautioned against using Facebook for educational purposes (e.g., Selwyn, 2009). Since students seem to be reluctant to use it for academic purposes, it is suggested that the focus should move away from its educational uses and consider Facebook as a place for socialization (Madge *et al.*, 2009). On the other hand, scholars have emphasized the potential of social networking sites for learning in so far as they would support 'the process of building networks of information, contacts and resources that are applied to real problems' (Anderson & Dron, 2011: p. 87). As also pointed out by the connectivist approach (Siemens, 2005), the shift of focus from the group to the network as the locus of learning relies on a concept of learning based on exploration, connection, creation and evaluation within networks that connect people, digital artifacts and content.

However, regardless of scholars' views on the topic, we should indeed recognize that the number of people using Facebook is growing rapidly with a very high adoption rate. This could provide, for instance, an opportunity for blended and distance learning in so far as people would already be familiar with the features of this tool, reducing the risk of technological frustration which very often undermines the success of learning at a distance. Another element that must be acknowledged is that there is an increasing amount of experience whereby Facebook has been used as a unique, or at least as one, learning management system (LMS) tool, or as a platform for educational purposes. This seems to indicate that there is a need for a better understanding of whether, and eventually how, to use Facebook in education.

Beyond formal education, Facebook is also gaining attention in professional development and life-long learning, especially for teachers and academic faculty population. Though empirical studies about its effectiveness for these purposes are still at an early stage (e.g., Ranieri *et al.*, 2012), the role that SNS and Facebook in particular may play in the field of life-long learning would deserve certain attention. Another issue to be further investigated is undoubtedly the integration of mobile technologies into social networks, of which Facebook is the most widespread. If scholars have been stressing the advantages provided by mobile devices to locate learners and deliver information that is time and place relevant, new challenges related to location-based services, such as privacy and surveillance at a distance, are progressively gaining interest. These two topics are among the areas requiring further investigation.

This chapter aims at providing an overview of current literature on the education value of Facebook through both theoretical positions and empirical findings, outlining a map of the most common educational uses of Facebook, and at exploring the extent to which Facebook's pedagogical potential - usually mentioned in the literature - is actually translated into practice. First, it will present and discuss the current debate around the educational value of Facebook, then it will attempt to synthesize the main empirical

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