

Chapter 14

The Collaborative Animation Forum in Facebook: Learning Partnerships Across Australia, the United States and Singapore

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ABSTRACT

This chapter reports on the use of Facebook as the host site for a collaborative international animation forum between student cohorts from the University of South Australia in Australia, Penn State University in the United States of America, and Nanyang Technological University in Singapore. From July to December in 2012, 69 animation students from the three institutions took part in the forum. Students were required to submit work-in-progress imagery related to major assignments, and provide feedback and critiques to their global peers. Locally, resulting discussions were often transferred into the physical classroom, be it a lecture or studio, for further dissemination between peers. Internationally, students took on new roles, with more experienced students mentoring their peers. The evaluation process of the international online learning environment included informal discussions between associated teaching staff, and a post semester survey providing participating students with the opportunity to critically reflect on the experience. The findings of the study are discussed in light of the growing use of social media to support mentoring, learning and teaching in tertiary education, particularly in the fields of design and digital media.

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INTRODUCTION

This study evaluates the use of *Facebook* as host site for a collaborative international animation forum for participating student cohorts from the University of South Australia in Australia, Penn State University in the United States of America, and Nanyang Technological University in Singapore. It builds upon the research carried out between 2008 and 2011 at The University of Adelaide, where *Facebook* was used to host online learning environments for both first and final year student cohorts. (McCarthy, 2009; McCarthy, 2010; McCarthy, 2012). The principle aim of the research was to assess *Facebook's* effectiveness for providing students with the opportunity to interact with peers from around the world. Within this aim were several sub-objectives:

- To provide students with the opportunity to learn about new areas of animation;
- To provide students with a learning environment that fosters engagement with course material;
- To provide students with the opportunity to learn from a range of sources via global peer critiques;
- To provide students with an environment that improves the overall learning experience of the course.

BACKGROUND

Beyond a tool to connect people, the Web has become a medium for participation. Users are not limited to receiving information – they can comment, collaborate, and create their own content. Web 2.0 technologies have changed the learning landscape (Keen, 2007). These technologies enable participation, communication, personalisation and productivity, and as Bryant (2006) states, these are all elements of what it means to be educated in a networked age. In the tertiary

education sector it is now possible for learners and teachers to collaborate locally, nationally, and internationally, in a virtual environment. Groups and individuals, learners and teachers, are connected in different ways and are able to contribute to shared projects. Social network sites (SNSs), such as *Facebook*, allow individuals to present themselves, structure their social networks, maintain existing connections and begin new ones (McCarthy, 2012). SNSs allow the creation of common interest groups which promote participation and collaborative learning, and in doing so can create a sense of community (Ng'ambi, 2011; Rambe, 2012; Valenzuela, Park, & Kee, 2008; Tynes, 2007; Bruns, 2008; Kirkwood, 2010). SNSs are immensely popular, and are among the most trafficked sites on the Internet, with *Facebook*, *YouTube* and *Twitter* all ranking in the top ten sites globally ("Top Sites," 2013). *Facebook* is the most popular of these SNSs, with over one billion monthly active users at the time of this writing (*Facebook*, 2013). Despite being known primarily for social networking activity, *Facebook* is quickly being recognised as a respectable e-learning platform (Bosch, 2009). It was chosen as the host site for this research for several reasons; including its popularity; familiarity; ease-of-use; accessibility; and its in-built educational toolset (McCarthy, 2012; Duffy, 2011; Richardson, 2006; Palloff & Pratt, 2007; Mazer, Murphy, & Simonds, 2008). Within the past five years *Facebook* has also been successfully trialled and implemented into curriculum across several tertiary institutions around the world (McCarthy, 2009; McCarthy, 2010; McCarthy, 2012; Rambe, 2010; Rambe, 2012; Shih, 2012; Irwin, Ball, Desbrow, & Leveritt, 2012).

In 2008 *Facebook* was trialled as an online learning environment when it was incorporated into the first year design course *Imaging Our World* in the School of Architecture, Landscape Architecture and Urban Design at The University of Adelaide. 100 students, including 23 international students, took part in the study. Every two

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