

## Chapter 25

# Social Media as Technologies for Asynchronous Formal Writing and Synchronous Paragraph Writing in the South African Higher Education Context

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### ABSTRACT

*This chapter reports on a study—conducted in 2011—that employed two social media networks, Facebook and MXit, as educational tools at one university in South Africa. MXit is a South African-based social networking application. The study involved a cohort of second year Bachelor of Education in English undergraduate students at this university as its participants. The latter were required to utilize Facebook and MXit to engage in both asynchronous formal writing and synchronous paragraph writing, respectively. All this took place outside participants' tutorial class schedule. In this study, participants were able to produce asynchronous formal writing samples in varying degrees using Facebook. Similarly, they were also able to produce synchronous written paragraphs using MXit even though some paragraphs displayed a high degree of linguistic textisms. Other affordances that these two social media technologies offered the participants in this study are: anytime, any day, and anywhere asynchronous and synchronous learning; asynchronous and synchronous feedback; virtual incidental learning; socially situated online learning; and Presence Awareness Learning (PAL). In conclusion, the study suggests that there are further affordances that these two social media technologies can offer higher education. These are: supplemental teaching and learning; cloud storage for teaching and learning materials (in the case of Facebook); virtual platforms for revision; digital platforms for micro-teaching and micro-learning (in respect of MXit); and value-added platforms for just-in-time mobile teaching and learning.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Social media technologies (e.g., Facebook, MySpace, LinkedIn, Twitter and YouTube) are not only outpacing other consumer media technologies in terms of user subscriptions, but they are also increasingly becoming technologies of choice for younger users worldwide. The latter, particularly, embrace social media technologies both on and off higher education (HE) settings of which they are mostly part (Barnes & Lescault, 2011; Chaka, in press; Davis III, Deil-Amen, Rios-Aguilar, & González Canché, 2011; Joosten, Pasquini, & Harness, 2013; Roblyer, McDaniel, Webb, Herman & Witty, 2010; Tinti-Kane, 2013). This social media uptake by younger users resonates with one of Duggan and Brenner's (2013) findings that young people in the United States (U.S.) are more likely than their older counterparts to use social media. It also strikes a chord with the South African social media usage trends in terms of which young adults are in a pole position for social media usage, albeit older users are rapidly catching up with them (Meier, 2013; World Wide Worx & Fuseware, 2012).

However, in spite of the overall uptake of social media by both younger and older users in South Africa, the use of social media technologies by students and learners is still not viewed positively, especially within educational settings. In the process, two contradictory parallel scenarios seem to have developed. On the one hand, social media technologies – in particular Facebook, MXit and WhatsApp – are frowned upon in most HE settings as they are perceived as anathema technologies that distract students from their academic work. On the other hand, students tend to use these technologies both addictively and religiously on a daily basis (Chaka, 2012a, 2012b, 2013). The same contradictory reactions to the use of social media in the HE sector of Zimbabwe, is reported by Zanamwe, Rupere and Kufandirimbwa (2013). Given young users' spiraling use of social media technologies in the HE sector, it is worthwhile investigating the

educational affordances these technologies have for these users and for the HE sector in general. Thus, this chapter sets out to explore some of the educational affordances of Facebook and MXit (a South African social networking and instant messaging application) in a given South African higher education setting. It does so by focusing mainly on the deployment of Facebook and MXit as mobile platforms for teaching and learning one English language module.

Based on the points cited above, this chapter argues that in this context, Facebook and MXit, especially as leveraged from students' mobile phones, serve as technologies for presence platforms that help harness *anytime, any day and anywhere* asynchronous and synchronous learning, virtual incidental learning, socially situated online learning and presence awareness learning (PAL). Against this backdrop, this chapter first provides an overview of Facebook, MXit, sociability, socially situated online learning and presence awareness learning. Second, it reviews the relevant literature on the usage of Facebook and MXit within educational settings and advances a theoretical learning framework for both Facebook and MXit. Lastly, it presents a descriptive and experimental study involving Facebook and MXit conducted at one university in South Africa together with its findings, recommendations and conclusions.

## FACEBOOK, MXIT, SOCIABILITY, SOCIALLY SITUATED ONLINE LEARNING AND PRESENCE AWARENESS LEARNING: AN OVERVIEW

Facebook is a social networking site (SNS)—and thus a social media technology—that has in-built features such as: profile; wall; notifications; messages; friends; events; chat; groups; photos; nearby; options; search; and news feeds. In addition, it boasts add-ons like status, check-in, and timeline. These features enable registered users

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