

Chapter 31

Facebook's Hidden Potential: Facebook as an Educational Support Tool in Foreign Language Education

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ABSTRACT

As Social Networking Sites have come to play a greater part in our lives, more and more people interact with each other in these environments. Because social networking tools have managed to attract billions of users worldwide, they have also drawn the attention of educators. As the largest social networking site, Facebook has captured the interest of educators and educational institutions, regardless of its desirable or undesirable effects on education settings. However, empirical research on the implications of how Facebook can be utilized in English as a foreign or second language (EFL/ESL) learning and teaching setting is limited. This issue needs further exploration to provide deeper insights and meaningful conclusions. This chapter focuses on the utility of a multicultural Facebook special interest group, FaceLearning, which was created by the authors to support the EFL/ESL learning and teaching. The research attempts to map the potentials and the concerns that arise from the perspectives of three instructors involved in the study to explore the value, role, and educational implications of Facebook for EFL/ESL settings.

INTRODUCTION

Developments in Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) are occurring at such an accelerated rate that it is impossible not to be awed by the revolutionary societal change brought about by these technologies. Permeating into many aspects

of life, social media have dramatically changed the way people interact and communicate. The advent and development of the most pervasive of these social technologies, namely Social Networking Sites (SNS), offer connectivity and interactivity opportunities and have helped create an unprecedentedly interconnected world where everything

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is linked to everything else (Barabási, 2002). The connectivity and interactivity boosted by SNS, in return, have driven social changes in such a way that every node of life, individual and communal, governmental and nongovernmental, profit and non-profit, has been connecting and interacting with people and information alike.

Current developments in technology and social software are significantly changing how learners access information and communicate with instructors and each other. The result is the development of increasingly permeable educational environments (Siemens, 2008) and more and more educators and institutions, therefore, acknowledge the roles that SNS play in the everyday lives of people. As a result, educators and institutions are taking interest in these social technologies so as to understand better and cater for demands, needs, and capabilities of today's learners and instructors. In spite of this interest, researchers focusing on the effects of ubiquitous SNS tools on practice report conflicting findings on the educational value of SNS. Although some proclaim positive findings of SNS use in educational settings (Boulos & Wheeler, 2007; Eteokleous, Ktoridou, Stavrides, & Michaelidis, 2012; Gunawardena et al., 2009), others enunciate reservations due to negative findings (Junco, 2012b; Paul, Baker, & Cochran, 2012; Kirschner & Karpinski, 2010), and yet others report both benefits and drawbacks placing themselves on both sides of the argument (Kuppuswamy & Narayan, 2010; Rosen, 2011). Therefore, in-depth empirical studies attempting to map the educational implications and roles of SNS in relation to learning and teaching contexts are needed to provide a deeper understanding of the role of these technologies and their possible deployment in learning systems.

The global reach of Facebook also makes it a promising place where learners and instructors of EFL/ESL can interact with both native and non-native speakers along with other EFL/ESL learners and instructors. Facebook potentially offers such learners extensive opportunities for

engaging in language activities, increasing their linguistic awareness and competencies. Providing immense opportunities for firsthand experience and interaction with other cultures, Facebook also has the capacity to help increase one's cultural awareness.

In spite of its potential, there has been little empirical research exploring the role of Facebook as an educational tool utilized especially in an online multicultural EFL/ESL setting. For this reason, this research explores the effects of Facebook as a multicultural learning environment to support foreign/second language learning process through instructors' perspective. The study also attempts to identify to what extent students and instructors are willing to learn via Facebook, and additionally to map concerns or problems associated with educational use of Facebook as a multicultural learning environment.

SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES

SNS are reported to compose 29% of all online activities, which indicates that 1 in every 5 minutes online is spent on SNS (ComScore Inc., 2011). Among the reasons for their popularity is the fact that in addition to enabling users to construct their own profiles, SNS allow users to contribute to the construction of other users' profiles facilitating users to further interact, communicate, collaborate and share with each other (Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Smith, 2011; Subrahmanyam, Reich, Waechter, & Espinoza, 2008). SNS, as the leading web based communication and interaction tools in the 21st century, are defined as:

...web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. (boyd & Ellison, 2007, p. 1)

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