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Advantages and Risks of Using Facebook to Communicate with Students: The Christchurch Earthquake Context (0263)

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Introduction and Background

Significant disruption was caused to life in the city of Christchurch in New Zealand as a result of the February 2011 earthquakes and the operation of the University of Canterbury was no exception to this. The aim of this paper is to present the background to and the results of the second phase of a study into the use of Facebook as an additional communication channel in large classes at the University of Canterbury in the wake of the February 2011 earthquakes.

The structure of the paper includes a summary of the first phase of this study; with this being followed by the results and discussion of the advantages and risks of having the Facebook groups from the perspective of the students in the courses.

First Phase of the Study

The first phase of the study (Nesbit & Martin, 2012) described and analysed how Facebook had been used in two large classes at the University of Canterbury as an additional communication channel in the wake of the February 2011 earthquakes. The literature review that was part of this first phase of the study was related to a number of aspects including student engagement (Fredricks et al, 2004), the concepts of social learning theory (Vygotsky, 1978), social communication and social media in educational settings (Nesbit, 2008, Hemmi, Bayne, & Land, 2009; Nesbit & Martin, 2011), and the use of social media in the wake of a crisis (Palen, 2008; Nesbit & Martin, 2011; Veer, 2012).

The classes that were part of the first phase of the study included a first year information systems course (taught in both semesters of 2011) and a second year accounting information systems course (taught in the second semester of 2011). The February 2011 earthquakes took place on the second day of the first semester and the second semester was disrupted by a snow storm. The students were surveyed about the use of Facebook across the three courses with responses coming from 211 of the 936 (22.5%) of the students that were enrolled. The respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement with a series of statements that are shown in Table 1, with this also showing the number of respondents who agreed, were neutral, or disagreed with the statement. This summary shows high levels of agreement for the first three statements. The fourth statement regarding requiring students to join the Facebook group had significant levels of disagreement, with this being consistent with the idea that Facebook would be an additional form of communication and also related to the courses being mandatory for some groups of students.

Statement	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Didn't Join	Total
Having the Facebook group made it easier to ask questions and have them	169	17	1	24	211

answered	(80.0%)				
Having the Facebook group helped me feel part of the class	129 (61.1%)	47	11	24	211
The class should have a Facebook group created every semester	185 (87.7%)	21	5	-	211
All students in the class should be required to join the Facebook group	49 (23.2%)	81	81	-	211

Table 1 –Statements the Students Were Asked to Rate and Summary of Responses (Nesbit & Martin, 2012)

This first phase also presented the results of an open ended question where the respondents had been asked to indicate their reasons for joining or not joining the Facebook group. The main reasons cited for joining the group were: access to information and updates; being easier to communicate; and getting answers to questions. The main reasons cited for not joining the group were: Moodle was sufficient for requirements; was unaware of the group's existence; not using Facebook that much; not being able to find the group; and forgot to join the group.

Also presented in the first phase of the study a representative sample of student responses about their perceived advantages and risks of using Facebook in the way it had been in these courses. These responses were not formally analysed, with this being the main purpose of this phase of the study.

The main conclusion to the first phase of the study included that the decision to use a social media tool in these courses as an additional communication channel appears to be well justified from a student perspective, provided that it is not made a mandatory requirement for all students in these courses particularly as these courses were either required for the students' undergraduate degree or were required for a specific major.

Research Method for this Study

When the students were surveyed for the first phase of the study they were asked open ended questions as to what they saw as being the advantages and risks of having the Facebook groups created for their courses.

The responses to the two questions were analysed to identify themes, with the responses then being coded to identify which themes were identified the most frequently. The themes were then sorted into descending order of how frequently they were referred to in the responses.

Results

As shown in Table 2, of the students who responded to the survey 155 out of 211 (73.5%) responded to the question asking what they saw as being the advantage of having the Facebook group for the courses, and 139 of the 211 (65.9%) responded to the questions asking what they saw as being the risks associated with having the Facebook groups.

Course	Semester	Enrolled	Responses to Survey	Responses to Advantage Question	Responses to Risks Question
INFO123	Semester One	278	69	61	55

Information Systems & Technology	2011				
INFO123 Information Systems & Technology	Semester Two 2011	491	78	52	41
INFO243 Accounting Information Systems	Semester Two 2011	167	64	42	43
	Total	936	211	155	139

Table 2 – Responses to the Survey

The responses relating to the advantages of having the Facebook group for the courses were analysed and there were a number of themes identified in the responses. These themes are shown in Table 3 along with the number of times each theme appeared in the comments.

Perceived Advantage	Frequency
Information – ease of access to information	89
Easier Communication – an easier platform to use than the Learning Management System	74
Timely – faster access to information and answers to questions	47
Lecturer Contact –easier to make contact with the lecturer	37
Feeling Connected – feeling more connected with the course and the university	23
Earthquake – specific mentions of the impact of the earthquakes	18
Prevailing Technology – a technology that is used by most people	10
Snow – specific mention of the disruptions caused by snow storms in the second semester	10
Assessments - finding out information about assessments	8
Mobile Phone – specific mention of being able to access facebook from mobile phones for no cost	3

Table 3 – Themes Relating to Perceived Advantages of Having the Facebook Groups

The responses relating the risks of having the Facebook group for the courses were analysed and there were a number of themes identified in the responses. These themes are shown in Table 4 along with the number of times each theme appeared in the comments.

Perceived Risks	Frequency
No risks (explicitly stated)	51
Comparing answers and seeking help with assessments	34
Irrelevant postings	25
Not everyone has facebook or checks it regularly, or has internet or computer access	15
Incorrect postings	11
Possible risks were dealt with by the lecturers responding quickly	8

Privacy	7
Distraction from study	4

Table 4 – Themes Relating to Perceived Risks of Having the Facebook Groups

Analysis, Discussion and Conclusions

That the most frequently cited themes relating to the advantages of having the Facebook groups were to do with accessing information; communication and timeliness (Table 3) is not a surprise given the nature of what social media is all about and are consistent with the responses to the first statement in the summary of results from the first phase of the study where 80% of the respondents had agreed with the statement “Having the Facebook group made it easier to ask questions and have them answered” (Table 1). The next most cited themes were related to feeling connected and contact with lecturers (Table 3), with this being consistent with the responses to the second statement in the summary of the results from the first phase of the study where 61.1% of the respondents agreed with the statement “Having the Facebook group helped me feel part of the class” (Table 1).

The responses to the question about the perceived risks of having the Facebook group were of interest in that of the 139 students who responded to the question, 51 (36.7%) responded saying that there were no risks in having the Facebook pages (Table 4). This shows that while the literature pointed to the use of social media having the potential to become very valuable in a higher education setting, providing there is awareness of some of the risks and challenges in the use of social media in an educational setting (Nesbit, 2010), that over one third of this particular group of student respondents did not identify any risks in having the Facebook groups.

That some students were using the Facebook group to seek what appeared to be “too much” help with assessments was identified by most students as being a risk, along with irrelevant postings and that not everybody has access to Facebook through either not having a Facebook account, internet access or access to a computer (see Table 4). The issue of seeking too much help with assessments was elaborated on with some of the comments with some indicating that “at least the lecturers could see who was getting too much help”. The issue of irrelevant postings was commented on by some who indicated that many of these were deleted by the lecturers reasonably quickly. The issue of not everybody having access to the Facebook group is problematic if this approach was to be made a requirement for the courses, particularly as the two courses involved in the study are mandatory for some groups of students.

Many of the advantages identified by the respondents are likely to be shaped by the context of the earthquakes that caused the initial disruptions and that continued throughout the year, and to a lesser extent the snowstorm that caused disruptions in the second semester. That more than a third of the students perceived there was no risk associated with having the Facebook groups may be due to the risks being very minimal compared to the benefits in what was a very difficult time. This suggests that a study relating to the use of social media in higher education in similar ways to this study, but without the context of natural disasters, may highlight some differences to the findings of this phase and the first phase of this study.

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