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Using Facebook as a tool to enhance communication and student interaction in Distance Education

Distance education has proven to be a boon to millions of learners worldwide who would otherwise have been unable to earn a degree due to scheduling or distance limitations. While the definition varies according to the source, Moore, Dickson-Deane & Galyen define distance education as “the effort of providing access to learning for those who are geographically distant” (p. 129). Despite the enormous advantages to distance education, one of the limitations is relatively less interaction between learners and educators and among learners.

Benefits of interaction in distance education

Moore (1989) hypothesized that interaction in distance education should include interaction with content, with the instructor, and among the students. Kurtz (2014) summarized the research from the social-constructivist pedagogy literature that demonstrated “active involvement of the learner with the teacher and peers” enhanced knowledge (p. 254). It has been proposed that incorporating social media in distance education can enhance communication, collaboration, and learner satisfaction (Brownson, 2014). Specifically, Powers, Albussain, Averbek, & Warner state that:

Social media networks enable students to define what and how they want to learn. They choose their own tools, pursue their own content, and establish social networks to help support them. It is really almost “just for me” learning that is personalized to the individual (p. 244).

Facebook is especially popular and well suited for use in distance education as it “helps establish peer-to-peer, self-motivated learning” (VanDoorn, 2013, p. 1). This paper will examine evidence that explores how the use of Facebook increases student interaction and overall satisfaction.

Use of Facebook in blended learning

Kurtz (2014) assessed students’ perceptions and student interactions using Facebook along with a learning management system in a three-credit graduate course. Specifically, she was interested in four questions that focused on the students’ perceptions of the two applications in terms of differences, impact on learning, how they encouraged active participation, and overall contribution to learning. This course consisted of both face-to-face weekly class sessions and online learning activities. Results showed that students still valued the course website to facilitate individual learning. However they rated the use of Facebook highly in terms of active participation and interaction with classmates. They also rated the use of Facebook higher than the course website in terms of overall contribution to their learning. The vast majority of students expressed interest in using Facebook for future coursework. This data demonstrate the value of using Facebook to enhance interaction between students and self-perceived increase in learning and satisfaction.

Lim (2010) used mobile learning to compare the outcomes of facilitator-learner discussions in three blended learning courses. Learners received an SMS regarding either course

content (e.g., read and reflect), discussion prompts, motivational quotes or tips for course success. For one course, learners were directed to use Facebook for their SMS discussion purposes. For the other two courses learners were directed to the class LMS. Total interactions were tabulated, interactions per post, post quality score, numbers of fans, and page views were analyzed. Learners in the course directed to Facebook generated the highest percentage of fans (almost 60%) vs. approximately 20% for those directed to the LMS. Despite the increased number of posts on Facebook, however, the posts were not necessarily of better quality. Lim concluded that the use of Facebook has the potential to increase learner participation in meaningful interactions. It would have been interesting to compare student perceptions and satisfaction between the two different methods.

Erdem and Kibar (2014) also investigated students' thoughts about a blended learning format using Facebook asynchronously to facilitate discussion. In a blended learning course Facebook was used to facilitate some of the out-of-class discussions. At the end of the semester, students were asked to complete a 50-question survey using a Likert scale rated 0-10, querying their thoughts on the blended learning model using Facebook. The results showed that while face-to-face learning was scored somewhat higher than blended learning, students did find Facebook to be beneficial and a useful tool to facilitate communication. In particular, they liked the immediacy of access and their high degree of familiarity with Facebook.

Use of Facebook in distance education

Esteves (2012) from the University of the Philippines Open University evaluated Facebook as a technique to increase learning and student engagement in a course titled *Web Design and Publishing*, taught entirely online. All students were asked to create a Facebook account and were enrolled in the course's Facebook group. The course manager tracked all

student activity, including postings, which/how many posts were “liked” by students, items that were posted, and general student activity in the group. As part of the course evaluation, students were asked how well they liked having Facebook as a tool in the course. Three-quarters of the students found Facebook to be a beneficial part of their course. Their activities within Facebook included participation in discussions, posting and responding to classmates’ posts, requests for help, interactions with faculty (such as quizzes), and use of the Chat function. Open comments were encouraged and were mostly positive, although a few students felt uncomfortable using social media for coursework. The course manager felt that Facebook empowered the students, increasing communication between students, and between students and faculty. Students seemed to have a greater degree of ownership in the course through the use of Facebook. Esteves concluded that Facebook was an effective educational tool that enhanced active learning and student participation and communication.

Conclusion and implications for future research

In spite of some limitations, the four studies discussed in this paper have shown that Facebook can be a valuable addition to both blended learning and distance courses, facilitating and enhancing student engagement and interaction. Per the principle of social constructivism, active participation and interaction among learners and educators is a key component of knowledge development (Kurtz, p. 254). Further research is needed to clarify best practices in which to use social media such as Facebook in distance education to not only demonstrate increased interaction and satisfaction, but increases in knowledge as well.

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