

Using Facebook as course management software: a case study¹

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Abstract This article presents a case study reporting the methodology and experiences of using Web 2.0 social media tools through Facebook to facilitate a graduate-level course in nursing informatics. Using Facebook as the sole classroom management software program permitted the class to become a synergetic learning team. The reader will benefit by learning how the instructor became the facilitator and a participant in the course while students became the producers of information—not just consumers.

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1. Introduction

Developing and using existing Web technologies in the classroom have become an expectation in higher academia to enhance student learning and extend learning opportunities outside the classroom (Beebe, Vonderwell, & Boboc, 2010; Kyei-Blankson, Keengwe, & Blankson, 2009). To meet the demands for becoming a “wired” school, software companies developed course management software (CMS) programs to extend and convert the classroom into an electronic learning environment (Naveh, Tubin, & Pliskin, 2010; Parry, 2009; Sanchez-Franco, 2010). Navigating these different CMS programs, which have a look and feel of a Web site, has a fairly high learning curve for both students and instructors. Although the use of a CMS enables an instructor to move a course from a conventional instructional method of passive learning to a setting with active and cooperative learning, the processes and steps for using the existing CMSs can be quite arduous (Rubin, Fernandes, Avgerinou, & Moore, 2010). For instance, the preparation of class materials for electronic viewing and sharing through CMS programs can be very

time-consuming (Beebe et al., 2010). More detailed content is required, as well as attention to aesthetics on the distributed documents. For the students, they have to visit a site-specific secure URL (universal resource locator), log in, and then navigate through numerous pages to see if there are any class updates. They also have to foot the bill of printing hard copies of any documentation they desire. Both the instructor and the students waste valuable time when using a CMS to log in and navigate to the proper section of the software to find if there are new postings to be read for and from the class.

By using social network utilities, there can be easy, instant, interaction with others. These utilities offer an array of tools in which to contact someone individually or to share information openly with everyone. The popularity of such software is in part because of its ease of use. When used for a class, Web 2.0 utilities, such as Twitter or RSS (Really Simple Syndication), offer a simple mechanism for class members to post messages to the entire class at one time without requiring the participants to access a software program and go through many steps to see if there is a posting. This global sharing of information reduces the inconvenience of checking for information that is commonly experienced in using CMS. Using Web 2.0 utilities into a

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course can also enable a blended learning environment by promoting student learning in remote and face-to-face settings. In actuality, when a course uses Web 2.0 utilities and they are used by the students, these students are accepting, and perhaps unknowingly welcoming, a mechanism that keeps them constantly learning.

Although there are enhanced versions of CMS that incorporate Web 2.0 utilities, a decision was made to use the leading social networking utility, Facebook (Facebook, 2010a), as CMS for a graduate-level course titled "Internet and Health Informatics." Reviewing the literature prior to the 2010 spring term found only a handful of articles discussing the use of FB in the classroom. There were no reports of using FB as the sole CMS for a course blending online, remote, and face-to-face learning. The results of this endeavor are presented here as a case study. After a brief review of Internet utilities, the following sections will describe (a) the instructor's methodology for using FB as the course medium, (b) the student's use of FB for class, and (c) the outcomes of the course experience, evaluation comments, and recommendations for the future.

1.1. Social networking utilities

In 2006, Web 2.0 technologies came to the forefront of interest in the U.S. society (Grossman, 2006). Leading Internet utilities of curiosity included blogs, wikis, and social networking Web sites. The origins of these utilities began in 2002 with the social networking utility Friendster.com. This Web site, which still functions, markets a free domain to create a personal profile of one's interests to safely meet new people with similar interests. Ultimately, the idea was that these "new people" introduced through Friendster.com would become friends (Friendster Inc., 2010). MySpace.com was the next social networking utility to grab major attention as the teens and tweens became the largest user audience of the service. The purpose of MySpace is to share information about one's self with a mass audience (MySpace Inc., 2010). As the way of many Internet services, MySpace soon became passé after the entry of Facebook.com in 2004.

FB's social market initially began with U.S. college students so they could maintain existing friends and connect to other individuals, who might become "new friends" (Ritzenthaler, Stanton, & Rickard, 2009). After 2005, FB quickly expanded their user base to include people employed by academia. In 2006, FB opened its services to include everyone else in the world. At the time of this writing, the social networking utility FB has more than 400 million users (Facebook, 2010b). The United States, UK, Indonesia, and Turkey are the countries with the largest proportion of users (Su, 2010). On average, users spend more than 55 minutes a day on the FB Web site (Hepburn, 2010).

The decision by this instructor to use FB as the CMS program was based upon the following: FB offered many of the same features provided in the university's CMS, it was likely that every student taking the class was already a

member of FB, the checking or reviewing the course activity would not inconvenience the student or professor because they probably checked FB multiple times during the week, the course itself was based upon the Internet and its use in society, there were only seven students in the class, and FB offered a private "family room" feature in the software that would assure course privacy and security (meaning, only people [registered students] invited by the instructor [the FB family room administrator] could access the course content). With respect to all these reasons, FB seemed an ideal platform for the course content and structure.

2. Methodology for using FB as the CMS

Literature searches in the ERIC, CINAHL, and Medline databases along with a Google search were conducted to see if there were any published experiences of using FB for CMS. Although some articles reported partial use of FB in courses, no article described the use of FB as the sole course medium. Search terms consisted of *Facebook*, *college*, *class*, *course*, and *instruction*. The Help Center from the FB Web site was also consulted, without success, for evidence of using FB to facilitate an academic class. Information was gleaned from the Help Center with some guidance in creating the private "family room" (FB, 2010a).

2.1. The course

The Internet and Health Informatics class was a graduate-level course required for nursing informatics students and open to all other university graduate students. Of the seven students, three were nursing informatics students, one was a nurse working on her MBA, and three were biomedical informatics students (two having library science backgrounds and one medical doctor). Five classes were held electronically, with the remaining classes held face-to-face in the classroom. Every class session consisted of a question-and-answer review of the previous week's course content, an introduction of the day's topics, an activity, a review session, a break, a new topic, another activity, and then a student reflection using the family room's discussion board. Topics covered in this class included health literacy, photo novellas, avatars, a variety of information theories, history of computer hardware, telehealth, education for health care workers, how to file transfer protocol, putty, and other software utilities.

The online classes used the SurveyMonkey software to ask students questions for the weekly review and then "springboard questions" for their structured independent learning during the week. The next classroom session started with a review of the previous SurveyMonkey's results.

This class also required students to create a blog site and then post a weekly commentary about some aspect of health care and technology that they encountered from their work environments or from the media. Once they completed their weekly blog posting, the students had to share the updated

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