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Novelties in the use of social networks by leading teachers in their classes



Baruch Schwarz, Galit Caduri*

The School of Education, The Hebrew University, Jerusalem, Israel

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ABSTRACT

We report on a study on the ways leading teachers in secondary schools use social networks while interacting with their students. We undertook in-depth interviews with five leading teachers, and analyzed logs of interactions in order to identify teaching practices combining social networks. One teacher considerably strengthened her traditional teaching practices to control students according to a pedagogical approach of *transmission of knowledge*. We found that four teachers fostered *social learning*, *autonomy* and *active engagement* among their students. They thereby fostered the constitution of a learning community – of inquiry, or a moral community, through the use of social network sites. Additionally, we identified the distinctive role of social networks in contributing to the students' *learning to be* part of their community.

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1. Introduction

Social network sites (SNSs) were created for establishing social links among people who share interests or activities. Such virtual platforms allow users to create profiles, and to establish or maintain connections with 'friends' primarily through text-based communication. Facebook is a well-known social network site that has become part and parcel of our students' everyday life. It involves not only student-student interactions, but also student-teacher communication: A substantial percentage of teenagers report that they are 'friends' with at least one of their teachers in many Western countries (e.g., [Geocartography Knowledge Group, 2011](#)). This new reality has given rise to ethical, pedagogical and social concerns. These concerns, together with media-covered cases of potential sexual misconduct, have led countries such as Australia, Germany, and several states in the USA to issue restrictions on teacher-student communication through any social network site, and to allow student-teacher contact only through separate, professional profiles.

In spite of these restrictions, teacher-student communication through social network sites (SNSs) is now very common, and has led researchers to wonder on its repercussions in pedagogy ([Greenhow, Robelia & Hughes, 2009](#)), psychology ([Madge, Meek, Wellens, & Hooley, 2009](#)) and ethics ([Anderson, Rourke, Garrison, & Archer, 2001](#)). While some argue that the use of social network site technologies fit socio-constructivist views of learning ([Greenhow et al., 2009](#)), some have reported on a negative relation between time spent on SNSs and college grades ([Kirschner & Karpinski, 2010](#)). Correlational studies, such as the latter study, however, are not sensitive to the plethora of activities that can be done with social network sites. Indeed, [Junco \(2012\)](#) found that the frequency of engaging in some Facebook activities was predictive (negatively or positively) of

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: baruch.schwarz@mail.huji.ac.il (B. Schwarz), galit.caduri@gmail.com (G. Caduri).

both final grades earned in courses (GPA), and time spent preparing for class. He found that posting status updates and chatting on Facebook chat were negatively predictive of GPA, while checking to see what friends are up to and sharing links were positively predictive. A number of studies have shown a strong positive correlation between levels of engagement in online discussions and grade results (Palmer, Holt, & Bray, 2008 in the context of an engineering management course, and Bliuc, Ellis, Goodyear, & Piggott, 2010 in the context of a political science subject).

Reviews on the use of SNSs as learning environments leave the reader confused. For example, in a review paper, Aydin (2012) concluded that the use of FB in educational contexts improves classroom practices and students' engagement. Furthermore, Aydin reported that Facebook increases learners' self-efficacy, motivation, self-esteem, positively changes perceptions and attitudes, reduces anxiety, and improves foreign and second language learning skills in reading and writing. In contrast, in another review, Manca and Ranieri (2013) noticed that some studies show that FB supports discussion and community building, while others do not show any particular benefit. Many of the studies cited in the above reviews are correlational. Other studies rely on students' self-reports, rather than on actual interactions (e.g., Roblyer, McDaniel, Webb, Herman, & Witty, 2010; Teclehaimanot & Hickman, 2011). Moreover, so far, empirical investigations have focused on college and university settings (DeSchryver, Mishra, Koehler, & Francis, 2009; Wang, Woo, Choon, Yang, & Liu, 2012). There is then an urgent need for empirical research on *actual* SNSs interactions between secondary school teachers and students.

1.1. Theoretical framework for analyzing SNS-based pedagogies

We sought a suitable framework for the study of the role of teachers committed to progressive pedagogies in courses that integrate the use of SNS tools. A priori, there was a natural ready-for-use choice: It was the framework that arose from Asterhan and Rosenberg's (2015) analysis in an empirical study in which they precisely investigated teachers' perceptions of student-teacher FB interactions and how (if at all) and why secondary teachers try to harness FB for pedagogical purposes. They conducted a survey with 179 teachers, 11 of whom they also interviewed, to find that many teachers use Facebook as a tool for establishing and maintaining contact with their students in a variety of ways and for a variety of purposes. Three main categories emerged from their study: *Academic-instructional*, *psycho-pedagogical* and *social-relational* purposes. We expand briefly on these categories.

The *academic-instructional* purpose consists of attempts to expand existing instructional practices and making them more efficient. Asterhan and Rosenberg (2015) found that secondary school teachers share and distribute learning materials through FB, orchestrate at home study during after school hours, establish private communication channels for one-on-one tutoring and help-seeking, and off-load organizational coordination tasks to FB, thus freeing up face-to-face classroom instruction time. Interestingly, however, most teachers reported that they do not fully exploit FB for designing progressive learning activities, such as collaborative inquiry and academic peer discussion.

The *psychological-pedagogical* motive consists of taking responsibility for securing student well-being. Asterhan and Rosenberg found that for many adolescents, FB has become the new town square (see also Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickuhr, 2010; Valkenburg & Peter, 2007). This status confers to FB a preventive function according to which teachers patrol the digital sphere to prevent unwanted, negative social phenomena, such as bullying or engaging in hate-talk. Moreover, some teachers use FB specifically as a tool for detecting psychosocial distress and to intervene when necessary. Improving social relations between teachers and students is generally not considered as a goal in itself, although it helps improving teaching and learning effectiveness. Asterhan and Rosenberg (2015) found that teachers report that FB turns the improvement of social relations to a purpose and that it helps them developing a *social-relational purpose* as they reported developing more personal relations.

The survey and the interviews revealed a less positive side to the use SNSs, though: teachers used SNS for novel instructional, psychological and social purposes, but these changes did not lead to innovative forms of online learning, in the sense that their pedagogies remained teacher-centered, without capitalizing on the collaborative affordances of FB. These results echo an interesting insight that Manca and Ranieri (2013) reached in a review paper on SNSs: "most of the learning experiences reported in the papers try to reproduce existing educational settings and established tradition of online and distance education". The starting point of the present study was the fact that, in the interviews undertaken in Asterhan and Rosenberg's (2015) study, the teachers reported on the activities of some well-known "champion" teachers that promoted alleged radical changes in their pedagogy. In our use of the term "champions" we refer to the definition given by Eyal and Yosef-Hassidim (2012), as "... committed to innovation and dedicated to fostering and promoting innovation in an organization by going beyond job requirements" (p. 216). Interestingly, the interviewed teachers referred to these champion teachers as models for their teaching, although they did not use these models in their actual teaching yet. We interviewed five such champion teachers and observed actual interactions between them and their students.

The activities of the champion teachers referred to in Asterhan and Rosenberg's (2015) study could not be analyzed according to the framework they developed, because these practices were characterized by detailed actions governed by pedagogies. A different framework was necessary. A priori, a good candidate was a theoretical model elaborated by Anderson et al. (2001) in *online courses* for assessing the teacher's presence or roles. This model classified teacher roles as *design and organization*, *direct instruction*, and *facilitating discourse*. The role of *design and organization* resembles the *academic-instructional purpose* Asterhan and Rosenberg (2015) identified. The role of *direct instruction* consists of communicating content knowledge by "interjecting comments, referring students to information resources, and organizing activities that allow the students to construct the content in their own minds and personal contexts" (Anderson et al., 2001, p. 9). A priori,

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