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Facebook as learning platform: Argumentation superhighway or dead-end street?

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A B S T R A C T

Facebook® and other Social Network Sites are often seen by educators as multifunctional platforms that can be used for teaching, learning and/or the facilitation of both. One such strand is making use of them as tools/platforms for using and learning through argumentation and discussion. Research on whether this 'promise' is actually achieved – also the research reported on in this Special Issue – does not unequivocally answer the question of whether this is a good idea. This article as one of the two closing articles of this Special Issue discusses Social Networking Sites in general and Facebook specifically with respect to how they are 'normally' used by their members as well as with respect to their social and technical features. Then, in light of this, it discusses the learning results of the four studies. It concludes with a short discussion of whether they are capable of meeting the promise that many think they can.

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1. Introduction

A screwdriver can at times do the work of a chisel, though the cut made will not be really clean. There is also a the saying that if the only tool you have is a hammer, you treat everything as if it were a nail. Kaplan (1964) called this the law of the instrument; using one instrument for all purposes. The question as to whether it is possible that this law is now being applied to using social networking sites (SNSs) in general and Facebook® in particular as tools/environments for learning, knowledge construction, argumentation, discussion and so further is particularly salient in this Special Issue. This does not mean that Facebook cannot function as a platform for debate. In a small-scale study Kushin and Kitchener (2009) found that with respect to a politically oriented Facebook group, primary usage of the Facebook group was for expressing support for a stated position of the Facebook group, a minority of posters (17%) did express opposition. They, however, did note that of the top ten participants, seven supported the premise of the group and did this in a "civil" way and three did not and their opposition was characterized as "uncivil". They also place the caveat that because of the focused nature of their study on one Facebook group, the "results cannot be generalized to other

Facebook groups or to political discussion on Social Network Sites in general" (n.p.).

The article will first discuss whether SNSs in general and Facebook in particular – with their specific functionalities – are really suitable for use as tools or platforms for argumentation, discussion and knowledge construction; called Argument Knowledge Construction in a number of articles in this issue. Regardless of the answer, the article then proceeds to briefly discuss whether adolescents and young adults are actually able to effectively use SNSs for knowledge construction and/or creation. Having done this, it continues with a discussion of the results of the four studies in this Special Issue with respect to learning and possible future directions of research based on the results. It ends with some conclusions about the results of the four studies and a discussion of learning with SNSs in general.

2. Is Facebook a good platform for argumentation and discussion?

Let us begin with an experiment. If you have a Facebook account or local variant thereof, go to it and take a look at your last ten or twenty posts/'status updates' and those of a few of your Facebook-friends. Whom have you/they written about? What/how have your and their 'friends' responded to those updates? Chances are that most, if not all, of your posts were either about you, where you were, what you were doing and so forth or they were links to things that interest you or that you hold an opinion about (this includes links to kitten videos and the like, though I

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hope that you really do not have strong feelings about them). The same is probably true for your friends. And if we look at how your Facebook-friends reacted to your posts, their reactions were most probably either simple 'likes' or were comments expressing agreement in some way. The chance that you got into a good argument or discussion about the status update is not very likely. That is not really strange if one takes a good look at Facebook.

First, Facebook – though called a social networking tool – is more often than not used by its members primarily as a broadcast medium for spreading what they think and feel either to the world at large or to their friends, depending on the chosen privacy settings. Research by Panek, Nardis, and Konrath (2013) on *narcissism* and SNSs found that narcissism – the tendency to see yourself as important coupled with the drive to see this acknowledged by others – significantly predicted the number of Facebook status-updates as well as the amount of daily use. They noted that SNSs function as a "kind of technologically augmented megaphone" (p. 2010) since "various attributes of SNS make them seem like an ideal tool for achieving [these] narcissistic goals" (p. 2005). It is important to note here that the researchers are not saying that narcissism leads to increased use of social media or that social media use promotes narcissism, only that a definite relationship between the two exists. Köbler, Riedl, Vetter, Leimeister, and Krcmar (2010) found that among Facebook-users individuals use their status message function to actively reveal information about themselves, which helps/allows them to create a feeling of connectedness to their Facebook-friends. *Connectedness* is the feeling of belonging to a social group, implying creation of bonding relationships. IJsselsteijn, Van Baren, Markopoulos, Romero, and de Ruyter (2009) defined connectedness as "a positive emotional appraisal of the quality (level of intimacy) and quantity (network size) of interactions within ongoing social relationships" (p. 476). "[T]he more individuals use their status message function to actively reveal information about themselves, the more connected they feel" (Köbler et al., 2010, p. 1). Thus, a first reason why Facebook might not be the right tool for discussion and argumentation for knowledge construction is that a majority of the posts (Ryan & Xenos, 2011) is simply about "me, me, me", not the best attitude if the goal is knowledge construction with others. Nadkarni and Hofman (2012) refer to this as a need for self-presentation, citing research showing a "positive association between narcissism and FB use, especially through FB profiles and photos, the features that allow excessive self-promotion (Buffardi & Campbell, 2010)" (p. 245).

On top of this, "Facebook users tend to 'friend' people they know in real life…[creating] a set of norms that influence the size and type of a user's audience (Panek et al., 2013, p. 2010). Their collection of friends is expanded by the Facebook-function of suggesting possible new friends based, among other things, upon either 'friends of friends' or similar 'likes'/following of thematic pages (e.g., The Skeptic's Guide to the Universe, The Daily Show, International Society of the Learning Sciences) using a *recommender system* (Drachsler, Hummel, & Koper, 2008). The system that Facebook uses produces recommendations for the user via what is called *collaborative filtering*; it collects and then analyses information about a user's behaviors, activities or preferences to predict what (s)he will like based on their similarity to other users – and then recommends friends, groups, and other social connections to the user. It does this by examining the network of connections between a specific user and her/his friends. In other words, Facebook connects users with other users who have similar thoughts, ideas, likes/dislikes, and so further (i.e., friends) allowing them to view and share each other's posts, post new things on each other's timelines, and express their opinions either with emoticons, 'thumbs up', and/or comments. Facebook represents "a casual and non-intrusive form of communication to keep contact with friends, to be up-to-date and to share 'routine things'… within a network of friends or peer individuals" (Köbler et al., 2010, p. 7). While these friends may be may not be what one would call physical friends, and may even differ from each other, research (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007) has shown that it is often the case that Facebook friends are "people with whom they share an offline connection—either an existing friend, a classmate, someone living near them, or someone they met socially…than use involving meeting new people" (p. 1153).A network of friends based upon similarities, whether in real-life or virtual via Facebook, is not an entity which exudes the variety of and differences in viewpoints needed for argumentation. As a side note, it can go to the extreme in the opposite direction. Being surrounded by networks of like-minded people has been found to lead to what Sunstein (2009) calls 'group polarisation' where like-minded people discuss, confirm, validate and strengthen the group's position. Thus, as second reason why Facebook is not the best tool for argumentation and discussion, is that to argue and discuss, one needs contrasting opinions and points of view.

More 'technically' speaking, related to the technical functionalities of Facebook, is that comments made by others about a person's status-updates and reactions to these comments and so forth are nothing more than threads in a *flat-structured discussion board* or conversation; that is, they are not hierarchically organized or nested. This is a problem because human thinking:

> may be symbolized as a more networking, weaving format… Branching and replying cause threaded discussions to become off track, and following a thread that has branched can be discombobulating and unnatural, which commonly, forces participants to initiate a new thread if they want to return to the initial topic. Flat-structured discussions require participants to read all postings to promote meta-cognition and self-regulated skills to achieve higher learning
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> [Tu, Blocher, & Gallagher (2010), p. 45]

In other words, the user often thinks "Where is everything; I can't even find my own postings, let alone others?" Furthermore, such discussion boards do not allow users to "project themselves socially and emotionally, as 'real' people" (i.e., offer little *social presence*: Garrison & Anderson, 2003, p. 94). *Cognitive presence* is also hampered since in many discussion boards "it is not possible to know who, if anyone, will be reading an utterance, when this will occur or, unless the user is permanently logged in to the discussion board and regularly hitting the refresh key, the moment at which this occurs" (Farmer, 2004, p. 278). This is the case in Facebook where refreshing is necessary to see new postings though it is possible to receive email notifications of new posts depending on one's settings. The need to refresh inhibits "the ability of a writer to reflect on [other's] thoughts and "construct and confirm" meaning" (ibid. p. 277). Finally, discussion boards actually inhibit those processes needed for argumentation. Argumentation requires making claims and providing justification for them through the supply of evidence which must be connected to claims via warrants (Toulmin, 1958). The linear structure of a discussion board as Facebook does not really allow for this. Thus, here a third reason why Facebook can be seen as a poor environment for fruitful argumentation and discussion.

3. Can students use SNSs for knowledge construction and creation?

Often today's youth – which has never known a world without digital media and who have been immersed in digital technologies all their lives – is described as having distinct and unique characteristics and skills which allow them to make use of these