Use of Facebook for the Community Services Practices course: Community of inquiry as a theoretical framework

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ABSTRACT

This study examines an online learning community created on Facebook (FB) for the Community Services Practices (CSP) course at the Faculty of Education, Karadeniz Technical University. The study aims to analyze FB group shares and prospective teachers' views in order to investigate the reflections of the teaching process that took place within the Community Services Practices course. The study was carried out with prospective teachers enrolled in the Computer Education Instructional Technology (CEIT) Teacher Training program. Its implementation entailed a case study with 92 prospective teachers, and the FB group was used as one of the main elements of the course in which students shared weekly discussion topics, social activities, and community service projects for 12 weeks. In this context, data were gathered via an analysis of the learning environment screenshots from the FB group. Furthermore, quantitative data gathered through multiple-choice, as well as open-ended questions, were presented with reference to frequencies and percentages, whereas qualitative data were presented in the form of themes, codes, and quotations. The study attempted to interpret the findings through the 'Community of Inquiry' (CoI) framework. In this vein, FB's social network supported a teaching presence for both the instructors and the students and enabled them to share responsibility for the teaching process. Moreover, the communication and socialization characteristics of FB directly contributed to the social presence of the learning groups created through this media. While the practices implemented over FB contributed to increased social sensitivity and awareness among prospective teachers, low-quality shares and irrelevant discussions in the FB group had negative effects on the learning environment.

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1. Introduction

The last decade saw rising scientific interest in the way university students use FB and other social media platforms (Ranieri, Manca, & Fini, 2012). It has been suggested that FB has affected significant change, particularly on university students' social behaviors and practices in virtual environments (Kalpidou, Costin, & Morris, 2011). An extensive review of literature on this subject focused primarily on general uses of FB (Pempek, Yermolayeva, & Calvert, 2009); teacher—student interaction on FB (Teclehaimanot & Hickman, 2011); the relationship between social adjustment and FB use (Kalpidou et al., 2011; Manago, Taylor, & Greenfield, 2012); the impact of FB use on students' academic performance (Ainin, Naqshbandi,

Moghavvemi, & Jaafar, 2015; Kirschner & Karpinski, 2010; Michikyan, Subrahmanyam, & Dennis, 2015); reflections of intercultural cooperative educational practices on FB (Wang, 2012); and university students thoughts on the use of FB for educational purposes (Roblyer, McDaniel, Webb, Herman, & Witty, 2010; Soomro, Kale, & Zai, 2014). More often than not, researchers conduct studies on FB through a systematic review method (Hew, 2011; Manca & Ranieri, 2013, 2016). The present study was conducted with university students enrolled at the Faculty of Education. A study on the use of social network sites (SNSs) by prospective teachers would help facilitate integration of technology and eliminate obstacles to the employment thereof (Greenhow & Askari, 2015).

Whether or not social network sites—FB in particular, the primary purpose of which is to provide social interaction and which is used widely among university students—can be used to support educational activities is in question (Donlan, 2014; Roblyer et al., 2010; Tinmaz, 2013). Recent studies indicate that two distinct views regarding the use of FB and similar SNSs for educational purposes have arisen. The first of these views argues that the media is actually designed to provide a 'private space' to students and instructors and hence should not be used for educational purposes. The results of some research explicitly note participants' views to that effect (Donlan, 2014; Hew, 2011; O'Bannon, Beard, & Britt, 2013; Prescott, Wilson, & Becket, 2013; Wang, Woo, Querk, Yang, & Liu, 2012). The second view claims that FB and similar SNSs used widely by students would definitely serve them well if they were used for educational purposes (Aghili, Palaniappan, Kamali, Aghabozorgi, & Sardareh, 2014; Arabacioglu & Akar-Vural, 2014; Celik, Yurt, & Sahin, 2015; Cerda & Planas, 2011; Miron & Ravid, 2015; Teclehaimanot & Hickman, 2011; Wang, 2012). According to this perspective, FB has great potential to facilitate learning experiences, and that potential should be utilized even though the site was not built for that purpose. This study, in line with the second view, investigates the potential benefits of the use of FB within the framework of a Community Services Practices (CSP) course.

Researchers who support the use of SNSs in an educational framework take into account the fact that students, as well as instructors, widely use SNSs; and they have studied how the networks could be incorporated into the learning processes of teachers, students, and social environments (Greenhow & Askari, 2015; Soomro et al., 2014). Facebook is considered an affordable teaching environment, as it is actually free of charge and offers highly usable tools (Hou, Wang, Lin, & Chang, 2015; Malita, 2011). Moreover, as a tool to facilitate communication among students and between the teacher and student, FB is an attractive media for educational activities (Demirel, 2012; Malita, 2011; Rap & Blonder, 2016; Teclehaimanot & Hickman, 2011). Facebook is also used for instructional purposes because it is easy to use, has interactive services, and is a user-based environment (Demirel, 2012; Soomro et al., 2014). Indeed, today's social networks in general—and FB in particular—are beginning to be compared and used as alternatives to Learning Management Systems (LMS) (Arabacioglu & Akar-Vural, 2014; Manca & Ranieri, 2016; Manca & Ranieri, 2013; Miron & Ravid, 2015; Wang, 2012; Wang et al., 2012).

'Learning' occurs not only in but also outside the school (Tinmaz, 2013). In this context, SNSs are able to offer teachers and students supplementary learning capabilities to enhance face-to-face participation occurring in the classroom. Social media's function in higher education is particularly prominent due to its ease of use as a technology and its ability to help create a positive learning community (Hung & Yuen, 2010). There remains, however, a degree of uncertainty regarding how FB and other SNSs can be best utilized in education (Greenhow & Lewin, 2016; Teclehaimanot & Hickman, 2011). Since SNSs are already—and will continue to be—used by students even after graduation, educators should adopt these technologies into education with a pedagogical basis (Fewkes & McCabe, 2012). The results of this study will offer educators useful information regarding the use of FB for educational purposes.

Using SNSs as a means of teaching would not necessarily lead to a positive result in the learning process (Hung & Yuen, 2010). To achieve effective results in educational processes that include SNSs, interaction among all elements (educators, students, and content) should be structured effectively (Garrison & Cleveland-Innes, 2005), and a structured mechanism should be implemented (Hung & Yuen, 2010). Therefore, an applicable theoretical framework should be implemented for the achievement of creative and critical thought through online platforms (Aghili et al., 2014). The need for a solid theoretical framework for studies on education through FB is often noted (Manca & Ranieri, 2016). The theoretical background employed in this study is based on the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework. The aim of the CoI framework is to develop an effective learning community to ensure and support actual learning (Akyol, Garrison, & Özden, 2009). The framework developed for higher education in general, and asynchronous and text-based group discussions in particular (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2010), can be used for face-to-face and mixed-learning environments, as well as online education with the intent to develop and support learning communities (Hosler & Arend, 2012). According to the CoI framework, learning is essentially about the interaction of three interconnected and dynamic elements within the community. These elements are social, cognitive, and teaching presence (Akyol et al., 2009; Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007; Garrison & Cleveland-Innes, 2005; Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000). Furthermore, the categories and certain indicators pertaining to the CoI framework are also specified (Table 1). Such categories and indicators include tips for application and describe how each presence-related element should be realized in the learning environment.

'Social presence' refers to the projection of participants' personal characteristics into the community, among other individuals in parallel to real life cases (Garrison et al., 2000). Building on the components 'open communication,' 'group cohesion' and 'affective expression,' social presence (Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007), when provided in online learning environments, enables the participants establish relationships based on mutual trust, with a view to questioning knowledge (Lin, Kang, Liu, & Lin, 2016). Setting an appropriate learning climate is expected to enable higher orders of learning (Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007; Garrison et al., 2000). In other words, the execution of collaborative activities for a shared goal and inquiry, as well as open communication, contribute to high-quality learning outcomes by increasing feelings of