

Extending Student' Discussions Beyond Lecture Room Walls via Facebook

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Abstract

When face-to-face lecture sessions and classroom seminars are conducted during hours and days that are not convenient to students, the level of student active engagement and participation is considerably reduced. In this situation, the use of Social Networking Sites can be an alternative to get students much more engaged by taking the course-related discussions beyond the confinements of lecture room walls. During the second semester of academic year 2013-2014, a "secret" Facebook group was created and forty-eight Master's students, from the University of Rwanda-College of Education, were invited to join this group and use it as an after-class discussion venue. Using data collected through a survey questionnaire that was sent to students at the end of a semester, we show that Facebook group may indeed serve as a tool that can promote student engagement, collaboration, and sharing of ideas well after face-to-face seminars and classroom lecture sessions. Nonetheless, the findings also show that getting students to use a Facebook group for academic purposes does not happen immediately as results of mere request or announcement. The process needs to be accompanied by further intrinsic and extrinsic measures to motivate students and get them actively engaged in course-related constructive and accurate discussions held via a Facebook.

Keywords: Computer-managed instruction, Social Networking Sites, Facebook, Teaching and Learning, students' discussions, Web 2.0 environment, Technology

1. Introduction

Society is undergoing drastic changes at a rapid pace. One of the traditional and fundamental functions of education has been and will always continue to be about helping people to find their way in the society by equipping them with enabling and necessary skills, knowledge, and competencies. Many scholars agree that at the dawn of the 21st century, education delivery should not continue to be as 'business as usual'. The traditional three Rs-literacy (Reading, wRiting, and aRithmetic) is challenged by an unprecedented rapid creation and dissemination of knowledge and information hence the move from an Industrial Society to a Knowledge Society. As Kwadwo (2007) puts it, the Knowledge Society is the society that knows how to use information. For the effective use of information, one needs more than traditional reading, writing, and arithmetic skills.

It is not necessary to explain in particular the statement that the society and technology imbues each other, that they are in mutual dependence and that they cannot survive one without the other today at the beginning of the 21st century (Petrović et al, 2012). In education, Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) is becoming a ubiquitous feature. Many educational institutions are striving to integrate different aspects of ICT in their teaching and learning processes. The advent of Internet led some analysts to predict a certain kind of educational revolution that would profoundly alter the way teaching and learning events occur. Current discussions among technology advocates suggest that Web2.0 applications have tremendous potential to transform students' learning (Keisch and Light, 2010).

Web 2.0 environment provides a wide and rich range of Social Networking Sites (SNSs) that can be used for academic purposes. According to Selwyn (2009), one of the main educational uses of social networking sites is seen to lie in their support for interaction between learners facing the common dilemma of negotiating their studies. SNSs may also benefit learners by allowing them to enter new networks of collaborative learning, often based around interests and affinities not catered for in their immediate educational environment. However, Keisch and Light (2010) argue that recent surveys show that although Web 2.0 tools such as Facebook, MySpace, wikis, and blogs are part of nearly every student's home life, these technologies are barely used in school (citing Consortium for School Networking, 2009; Interactive Educational Systems Design, 2009; and National Center for Educational Statistics, 2010).

2. Current uses of Facebook in education

Even if students are using electronic technologies in almost every facet of their lives, researches have not yet established how these technologies can benefit the education community and clearly establish the role these innovations can play in effective teaching and learning events. Traditionally, students come to school "powered-up" and wired with the newest technologies available - but often they must leave them at the door, since faculty do not use them in classrooms and may even regard them with suspicion (Roblyer et al., 2010).

The review of the existing literature reveals that a growing number of researches that have been conducted on the educational use of Social Networking Sites so far leave researchers in this domain quite baffled.

On one hand, a number of researchers have conclusively claimed that the use of SNSs - Facebook included - is actually possible and advanced some related educational benefits but others remain skeptical

In fact, electronic media enhance collaborative learning activities, enabling students to engage in an ongoing communication with one another in the process of learning (Okoro, 2012). Before Okoro, an in-depth qualitative analysis of the Facebook 'wall' activity of 909 undergraduate students in a UK university was carried out by Selwyn in 2009. Her research findings show that much of students' education-related use of Facebook was based around the following themes: the post-hoc critiquing of learning experiences and events, the exchange of logistical or factual information about teaching and assessment requirements, instances of supplication and moral support with regards to assessment or learning, or the promotion of oneself as academically incompetent and/or disengaged. With these themes in mind, Selwyn (2009) concludes that rather than necessarily enhancing or eroding students' 'front-stage' engagement with their formal studies, Facebook use must be seen as being situated within the 'identity politics' of being a student. She further argues, Facebook appears to provide a ready space where the 'role conflict' that students often experience in their relationships with university work, teaching staff, academic conventions and expectations can be worked through in a relatively closed 'backstage' area.

The Selwyn's claims can be substantiated by several others research findings. Dunn (2013) conducted two separate studies on how the students were using Facebook at the University of Glasgow. The first was an online survey on the students from across the College of Social Sciences and the second was carried out with a smaller, experimental group - exposed to social networking as a means of communicating collaboratively with peers and academic staff.

The results from the college - wide survey indicate that 92% of students use some kind of social media but Facebook remains the most popular social network (86%), followed by Twitter (41%) and Google+ (24%). 87% use at least one of these networks for personal use. However, 33% indicated that they also use their accounts to network specifically with other professionals and 24% use it to aide their research and studies.

The experimental group (n=28) used a closed Facebook group to share ideas, thoughts and resources for a period of 6 weeks. 16 of them who provided feedback for this study, they all posted a status update or engaged with peer comments. 81% also engaged with a member of staff, to ask questions or to raise issues connected to the course. 75% indicated that they found the social network very helpful, 18% indicated that it was helpful and 7% indicated that it was a little helpful. None of the participants described the experience as not helpful or unsure. They all thought that student to teacher interaction had increased.

Kayri and Çakır (2010) carried out an applied study on educational use of Facebook as a web 2.0 tool and found out that Facebook is a possible education tool (see also Petrović et al, 2012). Facebook and education can indeed be connected (Towner and Munoz, 2011). For Kayri and Çakır, it is natural that those who frequently use Facebook could easily use it in education, as well. These researchers also analysed the teacher talking time and found out that in traditional classrooms, teacher-talking time might be longer than student talking time while this case is not experienced on Facebook. To them, the lesson delivered via Facebook was a student centered one: as lesson materials are saved on Facebook lesson page, students' access to information and answers to the previous questions by classmates do not prevent them from re-asking questions. In this respect, Facebook brings many educational advantages.

Miller (2013) compared the students' discussion via Facebook and other online discussion channels and concluded that students using Facebook for their online discussions participated more frequently and responded more quickly than students using a traditional online discussion forum. In the same vein and well before Miller, the benefit of using Facebook as a community learning tool as opposed to using communication tools in a Course Management System was investigated by Liu (2010) who stressed, among other benefits, the continuity

after the academic semester/school is over. Actually, students will be able to keep in touch with classmates and even become connected with friend's friends. They are building their learning community together with social networking, and expanding this relationship with the progression of school years and life span. For Meishar-Tal et al (2012), Facebook [group] is not just an alternative to Learning Management System (Wang et al., 2011) but have some major advantages over traditional LMSs in promoting collaborative and active learning: Students felt that Facebook encouraged them to express themselves. Even passive students had the ability to express their presence on the Facebook group by indicating "like" on chosen posts.

Facebook was also proven to serve both formal and informal learning. Towner and Munoz (op.cit. p.41) assessed the students' perceptions of Facebook as an informal and formal learning tool. In general, their study shows that students use Facebook primarily for informal learning purposes such as for student-to-student interactions about nonrequired course-related matters. Facebook puts the individual and the social interactions in focus without the constraints of time, objectives, or curricula and young adults are daily exposed to various kind of information on Facebook, while maintaining control over their own Facebook activities (Tedre et al., 2013). Students also use Facebook for formal learning purposes such as student-to-student interactions about required course components.

The existing literature highlighted above fall under the same commonality: Facebook can actually be used for social and academic purposes and yield tangible social and educational benefits. Nonetheless, there is another growing body of researchers who see things from another perspective: skepticism.

Tiryakioglu and Erzurum (2011) carried out a study on the use of social networks as an education tool at Anadolu University, Turkey. These authors found out that even if a substantial body of participants (i.e. 40 out of 67 instructors: 80%), agreed that Facebook makes contribution to communication between classmates by realizing and maintaining an efficient and somewhat limitless intra-class dialogue, only one of 284 courses lectured in the Faculty of Communication Sciences at this University was completely offered over Facebook. In general, Instructors were still having some negative attitudes on completely lecturing courses over Facebook and neutral about efficiency of this environment on intra-class discussions.

Irwin et al. (2012) studied the students' perceptions of using Facebook as an interactive learning resource at Griffith University. They developed individual 'Facebook pages' for four university courses and used these pages to provide information relevant to the courses and allow opportunities for student interaction. From an initial questionnaire they administered in the first lecture of semester, most students (n=135, 78.0%) anticipated that a Facebook page would facilitate their learning. However, from a second questionnaire that was completed in the final lecture, perceptions of the effectiveness of the Facebook page as a learning tool were variable. Only 51% of students stated that it was effective.

Irwin et al.'s findings are somewhat corroborated by Deborah's (2014) study. In this study, she created a Facebook page for a large enrollment nutrition course, and student engagement with, and attitudes about the page were assessed using Facebook metrics and student surveys. Her findings revealed that even if the majority of the class (69.4%) joined the page, student engagement with the page was lower than expected and declined during the semester. She also found out that only 11.6% of students reported viewing the posts daily, and few "liked", "shared" or commented on posts made by the professor. In the same vein and two years before Deborah's findings, Gafni and Deri (2012) went even further in their claims. Their study on the costs and benefits of Facebook for undergraduate Students revealed that social activities on Facebook consumed a significant amount of the students' time, during the surfing and even after, thus negatively affecting their learning process. They further examined the Facebook pages and discovered that the majority of them were mostly inactive, giving no benefits to students and no incentive to use them.

So, is Facebook a learning tool or distraction? Although Fewkes and McCabe (2012) could not provide a conclusive answer to this question, they found out that of the 63 students surveyed by collecting both qualitative and quantitative data via questionnaires, only 27% said that at least one teacher had found ways to include Facebook in their lessons, and further, 77% of students believed that teachers do not support Facebook being unblocked. This implies that some teachers would prefer blocking Facebook because they see in it a distracting factor. This is exemplified by Wise et al. (2011) whose study, on Facebook usage among a first year psychology student cohort, showed that although the majority of students (94%) had Facebook accounts and spent an average of one hour per day on Facebook, usage was found to be predominantly social. They further argue that, rather than promoting social engagement in a way that might increase academic engagement, it appeared that Facebook was more likely to operate as a distracting influence.

As it was mentioned earlier, the researchers' views about the educational use of SNSs - particularly and for the purpose of this paper, Facebook – are varied and the related merits and problems are widely debated. Nevertheless, a consensus can be drawn from this debate: Facebook has become an inevitable and most favored digital tool when it comes to students' social interactions. Students and Facebook, it is a matter of love. In fact, this is not true for students only. Despite the fact that a seismic shift in the social networking landscape occurred when the giants of the social networking community, MySpace and Facebook, were introduced in 2003 and 2004 respectively; Facebook has a dominant share of the social networking market and is not just the number one ranked social networking service but one of the most popular Websites on the Internet (Cheal et al., 2012). As of January 2014, Facebook had more than 1.1 billion active users (Global Digital Statistics, 2014)

3. Motivation, Background and Context of the study

The aim of this paper was to investigate the students' feedback and reflections about the use of Facebook as a tool that facilitates after-class discussions and thus helping them [students] to become active, creative and content producers.

A close analysis of the different researches conducted in these areas so far (see the literature), focused on the general description and discussion of educational benefits and shortcomings of using social media. Nonetheless, the use of social media as an after-class academic discussion tool was only mentioned as one of the possible uses but was not empirically explored. In fact, we espouse the idea that:

“Not all students are in sync... Blending online social learning opportunities, like asynchronous online discussions, into the traditional face-to-face classes can be beneficial to students. In an asynchronous discussion, people participate at different times over extended periods, instead of all at once, providing an excellent way to extend discussions beyond the traditional class period” (Brunsel and Alderton, 2012).

It is worth to mention that the participants in this study were students who were doing their Master's studies in Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Rwanda-College of Education during the second semester of the academic year 2013-2014. The students who were doing this programme were employees and most of them were civil servants and others were employed in the private sector. The seminars were organized on Fridays during evening hours and Saturdays during both morning and afternoon hours. During the seminars the facilitator was not satisfied by the level of students' participation and the main reason advanced by most of the students was that the seminars were conducted at “hours and days that were not convenient and friendly to them.” The teacher was faced with an obvious challenge in his efforts to ensure effective, participatory and active learning events for the students. To address this challenge and improve his professional practices, it was necessary to look for and implement an alternative strategy that would help the teacher to get students engaged and take the face-to-face course-related discussions beyond the confinements of lecture room walls and thus promoting anywhere anytime learning.

4. Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study was to examine (a) how students used a course Facebook page (b) the students' perceptions about the effectiveness of using a course Facebook group to promote asynchronous after-class course-related discussions, and (c) the students' perspectives of using Facebook as a tool to improve teaching and learning.

5. Methodology

5.1 Participants

Forty-eight students, who were enrolled in a two-year Master of Education programme during the second semester of the academic year 2013-2014, were invited to participate in the study. Of these 48 students, 38 (79%) joined the course Facebook group, 34 (87%) of those who joined the group completed the study. Eight (24%) of the study participants were female, and 26 (76%) were male.

5.2 Procedure

At the beginning of the course (ECI 606: Integration of ICTs in Teaching and Learning), a “secret” Facebook

group was created and students were invited, via email, to join the group. As a private Facebook group, only group members were allowed to see the group, who is in it, and members' posts. Given the fact that a number of students did not have a Facebook account, they were requested to register for an account and the module facilitator offered to help in this process. The aim of this Facebook group, entitled "KIE/MEd: Curriculum and Instruction/ECI 606" was to serve as a discussion venue for furthering the students' discussion beyond face-to-face classroom seminars. The Facebook group was meant to serve as a space for sharing what the students "had learned" after each and every seminar.

5.3 Data Collection and analysis

In this study, a survey questionnaire that included structured, semi-structured and open-ended question-items was used. The questionnaire was validated through pretesting before it was distributed to the respondents via email. The following three main themes were reflected in this 16-item questionnaire: (a) *how students used a course Facebook page* (b) *the students' perceptions about the effectiveness of using a course Facebook group to promote asynchronous after-class course-related discussions*, and (c) *the students' perspectives of using Facebook as a tool to improve teaching and learning*. The data collected through questionnaire was supplemented by information resulting from the screening of the ECI 606 Facebook group page. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze data by frequency, percentage and mean.

6. Results

6.1 Access and use of Internet

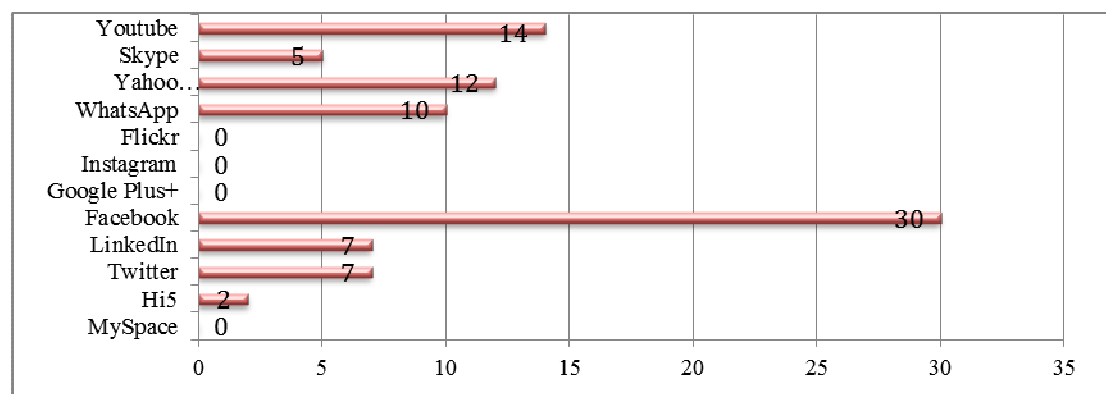
To use the course Facebook group, Internet connection is the key. The students were asked whether they were accessing Internet when ECI 606 module was being taught. All 34 (100%) respondents confirmed they were accessing Internet. 21 (62%) of them were using their own laptops to access Internet while 13 (38%) were using desktop computers. In addition to laptops and desktop computers, 15 (44%) students were also using smart phones to access Internet and 3 (9%) were using usual cell phones. Most of the participants, i.e. 25 (74%), were accessing Internet from their workplaces or offices, 5 (15%) were using Internet Cafés, and only 4 (12%) students were using pre-paid Internet they were accessing from home.

Using a scale (several times a day, once a day, several times a week, at least once a week, once every couple of weeks, once a month, less than once a month), students were asked to indicate how often they were accessing Internet. Twenty-three students (67%) affirmed that they were accessing Internet several times a day. 5 students (15%) reported accessing Internet once a day, while 6 participants (18%) stated that they were accessing Internet several times a week. None of them reported accessing Internet at least once a week, once every couple of weeks, once a month or less than once a month.

6.2 Experience in the use of Social Networking Sites (SNSs)

The participants' previous experiences in using Social Networking Sites were examined as it is shown in the following Figure:

Figure 1: Participants' use of Social Networking Sites



As it is depicted in the Figure 1 above, Facebook was the mostly used SNS. In fact, 30 out of 34 students were using it before they started doing ECI 606 module and 4 students created their Facebook accounts after the module Facilitator announced that Facebook was going to be used as one of the course discussion venues. Fourteen participants reported using YouTube, 12 were using Yahoo Messenger, 10 students were using WhatsApp. Students were also using other SNSs such as LinkedIn, Twitter, Skype and Hi5. Participants were also asked to describe the purpose of using the SNSs and they indicated the purposes to be social interactions, keep in touch with friends, sharing information, exchanging ideas, work related communication, updated news, entertainment, and creating new relationships.

Asked to rate, using a 4-point scale (rarely, sometimes, often and very often) the frequency of Facebook use, of 30 students who stated that they were using Facebook, 17 (57%) students affirmed using Facebook often, 11 (37%) were using it very often and 2 (6%) students were using Facebook sometimes.

6.3. Students' use of ECI 606 Facebook group page

Participants were asked to indicate when they actually started posting on ECI 606 Facebook group page. The results show that a big number, i.e. 20 (59%), of respondents indicated that they started posting their comments only after the facilitator announced that using Facebook as a one of the discussion venues was mandatory and one of the assessment components of the module ECI 606. Only 8 (23%) students stated that they started posting their comments immediately after the ECI 606 module facilitator announced it and invited them to join the Facebook group. The 6 (18%) remaining students reported that they started posting their comments after the module facilitator sent them the Ministry of Education's Circular Letter in which the Minister was requesting Higher Learning Institutions to adopt the use of social media tools. These findings concur with the analysis of ECI 606 Facebook group activity page as it is depicted in the following Figure:

Figure 2: Analysis of students' posts on ECI 606 Facebook group page

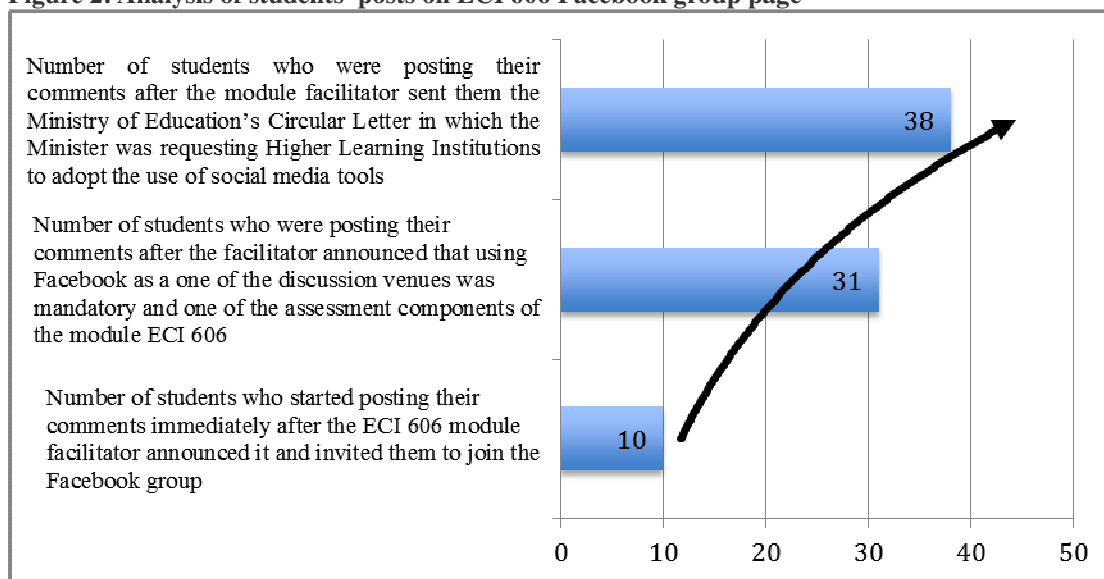


Figure 2 above shows that a small number (10 out of 48 i.e. 21%) of students started posting their comments on the course Facebook group page immediately after the module facilitator invited them to do so. The number of students who were posting their comments increased exponentially to 31 (65%) and 39 (81%) respectively after the facilitator announced that using Facebook as a one of the discussion venues was mandatory and after the module facilitator sent them the Ministry of Education's Circular Letter in which the Minister was requesting Higher Learning Institutions to adopt the use of social media tools in their activities

Participants were also asked to indicate when they were posting their comments and 16 (47%) indicated that they always waited for the facilitator's prompt before posting their comments; 12 (35%) stated that they were posting their comments about "what I have learned" immediately after the seminar, without waiting for the facilitator's or my classmates' prompts/posts; 4 (12%) students reported that they posted their comments and initiated the discussion without waiting for the facilitator's or classmates' prompts/posts. 2 (6%) students did not respond to

this question-item. The researchers examined the extent to which the students were engaged with ECI 606 Facebook group. Using a 5-point scale: never, rarely, sometimes often and very often (Adopted from Blanche et al., 2013), students were asked to indicate whether they participated in the Facebook group by posting, reading, liking, reacting, posting additional information, and asking for further clarifications and details. The results indicated the varying levels of students' participation in ECI 606 Facebook group in almost all areas as it is shown in Table 1.

The highest level of students' participation was realised in reading the questions, comments, and opinions posted by the module facilitator. Eighteen (53%) and 12 (35%) participating students were respectively very often and often reading the questions, comments, and opinions posted by the module facilitator. Likewise, students participated actively by reading the questions, comments, opinions posted by their classmates where 16 (47%) and 14 (41%) of the participants reported to read the questions, comments, opinions posted by their classmates often and very often respectively.

The lowest level of students' participation was observed in posting additional information and material (video, links, documents, references, etc.) to the ECI 606 Facebook group page. In fact, 29 (85%) out of 34 respondents stated that they never posted any additional information or material. Another area in which students participated moderately is using the Facebook group as a channel for asking for more details and clarifications relating to ECI 606 teaching and learning events. Twenty students (59%) stated that they never or rarely did it while 14 (41%) reported doing it sometimes. Liking the comments posted by the module facilitator was done almost at the same level as liking the comments posted by classmates. Fourteen (41%), 7 (21%), and 7 (21%) students stated that they liked the facilitator's and classmates' comments respectively sometimes, often, and very often.

Table 1: Participation in ECI 606 Facebook group

N= 34

Activity	Never		Rarely		Sometimes		Often		Very Often	
Posting my comment about 'what I have learned' from the previous seminar	0	0%	2	6%	12	35%	18	53%	2	6%
Reading the questions/comments/opinions posted by the Facilitator	0	0%	0	0%	4	12%	12	35%	18	53%
Reading the questions/comments/opinions posted by my classmates	0	0%	2	6%	2	6%	16	47%	14	41%
Reacting to/commenting on, the questions, comments, and opinions posted by the Facilitator	0	0%	0	0%	14	41%	18	53%	2	6%
Reacting to/commenting on the questions, comments, opinions posted by my classmates	0	0%	5	15%	13	38%	14	41%	2	6%
Liking the comments posted by the Facilitator	0	0%	6	18%	14	41%	7	21%	7	21%
Liking the comments posted by my classmates	2	6%	4	12%	14	41%	7	21%	7	21%
Posting additional information/material (video, links, documents, references, etc.)	29	85%	0	0%	5	15%	0	0%	0	0%
Asking for more clarifications, more details, further comments, further explanations about ECI 606 module related issues discussed during the seminars or spotted in the course readings	7	21%	13	38%	14	41%	0	0%	0	0%

Two questions (question number 8 and 14) were asked to investigate the students' feelings and attitudes before and after the use of ECI 606 Facebook group and the results of students' answers are summarized in Table 2 below:

Table 2: the students' feelings and attitudes before and after the use of ECI 606 Facebook group

Before using ECI 606 Facebook group	Upon completion of ECI 606 module
I could not understand the importance of using Facebook in teaching and learning	Previously, I thought that Facebook is only for chatting with friends and increasing social relationship with people especially young ones; but later on with experience I realized that it can serve as effective teaching-learning tool
I believed it was possible and liked the idea but was curious to see how it would work	At the completion of ECI 606 Module I realized that Facebook is a good tool which can be used in learning and I understand that it can serve many different purposes my negative attitude changed into positive one
I was not realizing how Facebook should fit the purpose of being used as discussion venue for students	My negative attitude changed completely
I did not understand it and I had negative attitude because I used to think that Facebook is only used for communicating with friends	I realized that Facebook is not only for entertainment, discovering and exchanging with friends but also a channel of teaching learning.
I was eager to discover the use of Facebook for academic purposes. It was a new idea for me and interesting one	It was good as it can enhance learner-centered approach to teaching and learning. Socially, I realized that it is very important by promoting tolerance and respect of others' ideas, accepting comments from everyone engaged in interaction. The teacher is no longer authoritative but friend of learners in mutual respect
I was very curious	I realized that it is a good ingredient that helps learners to thoroughly penetrate and internalize topics covered in class. I felt I could start using it in my teaching
I could not imagine how Facebook could be used in teaching-learning process and I thought the module was underestimated	At the beginning I could not know how Facebook will help me in ECI 606 module but later on, I realized that it is a very good way of sharing ideas and get chance of strengthening what was taught and discussed during the lecture
It sounded quite interesting. Before, not many people, me included, had used Facebook for academic purpose	I may say that it really helped me increase my awareness and motivation towards ICT tools for improving the quality of teaching and learning
I thought I would not manage because I was not familiar with it before. My first reaction was that I could not understand how Facebook can be used in teaching and learning process rather than discussing with friends	

6.4 Impact, problems and perspectives

The survey questionnaire included three open-ended questions and the participants were asked to voice their opinions on how the use of ECI 606 Facebook group might have impacted their engagement in the discussions related to the teaching and learning of the module, the problems they faced and their recommendations for further improvement. The Results are presented in the following emerging features.

Participants were asked to indicate whether the use of ECI 606 Facebook group helped them to be more engaged in the discussions related to the teaching learning of this module. Thirty-two (94%) students said that Facebook actually helped them to become more engaged in one of the following ways:

- Learning from classmates' posts and comments,
- Sharing opinions and views with others,
- Gaining information and knowledge beyond the ECI 606 module content,
- Asking for further clarifications after classroom group presentations,
- Questions, videos, documents and comments from both classmates and the module facilitator encourage

- to dig deep into the module matters and critically analyse the learning facts
- The ideas and opinions posted on Facebook group helped to understand more some topics covered during class sessions. It was an opportunity for asking for clarifications, arguing, and challenging classmates away from “people’s eyes”: *this is about anxiety reduction*
 - It helped to make a good summary of the key points for the whole course/ module.
 - Facebook group as a discussion venue was very useful for students because it helped in being updated on the module and provided for an opportunity for revising the module content continuously

Saving time was also mentioned as one of the ways the use of ECI 606 Facebook page helped students to be engaged as it is reflected in following students’ views.

“I realized that learning is sharing experience and skills exchange. With Facebook, I managed to get people’s views on subject of interest easily, it served as a channel of discussion and I managed to save my time. It also pushed me to visit Internet very often to get what was up” and

“Meeting one another for discussing was a big challenge to most of us due to our separate working places but through Facebook this challenge was alleviated”

Despite the fact that most of students stated that the use of ECI 606 Facebook group helped them to be more engaged, others remained skeptical such as the one who said:

“It did not help at all. Because, most of comments, opinions and reactions especially those posted by my classmates were not strongly constructive. They were mainly brief comments appreciating previous seminars or lecture sessions”

Some other students’ skepticism was rather related to the problems they stated that they encountered during the use of ECI 606 Facebook group. The mostly mentioned problem was the lack of sufficient time to post comments, read and react on others’ comments (mentioned by all 34 i.e. 100%) respondents. To elaborate, one respondent stated:

“I was delighted to use this social media tool but when the module facilitator said that we were going to be marked basing on the frequency of using it, I felt embarrassed due to the lack of sufficient time to use the network because I was at that time overloaded in my teaching load”

Participants mentioned other problems that include unreliable and slow Internet connection (23 i.e. 68%), some members could just post less thoughtful comments for the sake of grabbing marks; this might discourage fellow group members (2 i.e. 6%) and technical problems (mentioned by 10 i.e. 29% of respondents)

Lastly, participants were asked to voice their views about what they would recommend so as to improve the use of Facebook in teaching and learning events. Thirty (88%) respondents recommended to extent the practice to all Master of Education modules. Fifteen (44%) respondents recommended that students should be trained on how to use Facebook prior to using it in teaching and learning events; 8 (23%) respondents recommended that discussing via a course Facebook group should not be mandatory; 2 (6%) respondents suggested that the discussion should not be confined on “what have I learned” only; and 2 (6%) participants recommended to review the strategies by which the discussion on a course Facebook is assessed. One participant went further and said:

“It is good to discuss via Facebook but next time the module facilitator has to consider also the relevance of comments posted on it by students because some students’ posts were informing about nothing. Awarding discussion marks should be done by taking into account, not only the number of posts, but also the relevance of the posts. It is better to look for other indirect means of encouraging students to discuss on the course Facebook group about lessons learned other than telling them to frequently visit it without really giving constructive views.”

7. Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to examine the students’ perceptions about the use of a course specific Facebook group that was integrated into the teaching and learning events of ECI 606 module and investigate its effectiveness to promote after-class discussions. The study findings indicate that Facebook group may indeed

serve as a tool that can promote student engagement, collaboration, and sharing ideas well after face-to-face seminars and lecture sessions.

Consistent with other studies (Zanamwe et al., 2013; Roblye et al., 2010; Jadu, 2009; Dunn, 2013; Davis et al., 2012), this study findings show that Facebook is among the topmost preferred social networking sites that students are currently using. In fact, 30 (88%) out of 34 respondents had an active Facebook account. Irwin et al. (2012) study revealed that most of the students (n = 135, 78.0%) anticipated that a course Facebook page would facilitate their learning during the semester by enhancing the quantity of information passed from instructors to students and facilitating interaction between fellow students. The results of this study do not concur with these findings and indicate that students were rather skeptical about the anticipated role Facebook would play to enhance teaching and learning. The following views mirror how, generally, the students anticipated the importance of using Facebook in teaching and learning:

“I did not understand it and I had negative attitude because I used to think that Facebook is only used for communicating with friends” and “I could not imagine how Facebook could be used in teaching-learning process. I thought the module was underestimated”

This study has also revealed that turning Facebook into a tool that serves academic purposes is not a clear-cut business. Despite the fact that a big number of respondents indicated that they were using Facebook often (17 out of 30 i.e. 57%) and very often (11 out of 30 i.e. 37%), they were using it for other purposes and not academic (social interactions, keeping in touch with friends, sharing information, exchanging ideas, work related communication, updated news, entertainment, and creating new relationships). These findings concur with Roblyer et al. (2010) who claimed that Faculty and students do not use Facebook a great deal for instructional purposes; in fact, this was reported as the least-common use of this technology while social uses were far more common.

It was also found that getting students to use Facebook for course related matters does not happen immediately as results of mere request or announcement. Other additional accompanying measures need to be adopted. The findings show that a small number (10 out of 48 i.e. 21%) of students started posting their comments on the course Facebook group page immediately after the module facilitator invited them to do so. The number of students who were posting their comments increased exponentially to 31 (65%) and 39 (81%) respectively after the facilitator announced that using Facebook as a one of the discussion venues was mandatory and after the module facilitator sent them the Ministry of Education’s Circular Letter about the use of social media tools in Higher Learning Institutions.

However, we believe these measures were meant to extrinsically motivating the students to use ECI 606 Facebook group and students might have used it only because they were somewhat required and even forced to do it. We saw this as a limitation because students should be successfully encouraged to use SNSs if they are involving into the tasks of optimal novelty and difficulty, the tasks that are relevant to personal interests, and the tasks that provide for personal choice and control (Schunk, 2012). In addition, despite the fact that these additional measures were adopted, 10 (20%) out of 48 students who were enrolled in this course did not join the ECI 606 Facebook group.

Instructors need to be careful and well informed when they decide to integrate the use of Facebook in their teaching. Joining the course Facebook group does not necessary lead the students to actively engage themselves and fruitfully participate in the teaching and learning events run via Facebook. The analysis of students’ uses of ECI 606 Facebook group revealed that the highest level of students’ participation was realised in merely reading the questions, comments, and opinions posted by the module facilitator and classmates: 18 (53%) and 12 (35%) participating students were respectively very often and often reading the questions, comments, and opinions posted by the module facilitator. Likewise, students participated actively by reading the questions, comments, opinions posted by their classmates where 16 (47%) and 14 (41%) participants reported to do this often and very often respectively. The lowest level of participation was observed in some tasks that required students to deploy more efforts and critical thinking such as posting additional information material related to the course (video, links, documents, references, etc.) or using the Facebook group as a channel for asking for more details and clarifications related to ECI 606 teaching and learning events. Therefore, instructors should lead the process by setting accurate and significant Facebook-based tasks that will compel students to exercise their higher order thinking skills otherwise the participation will be limited to lurking and reading comments or “liking” comments posted by classmates (Blanche et al, 2013). This was also suggested by one of the participants who said: *“It is better to look for other indirect means of encouraging students to discuss on the course Facebook about lessons*

learned other than telling them to frequently visit it without really giving constructive views”

Although almost all (32 i.e. 94%) participants reported that using ECI 606 Facebook group helped them to become more engaged in various ways (such as learning from classmates’ posts and comments, sharing opinions and views with others, gaining knowledge beyond the module content, etc.), the lack of sufficient time to visit the Facebook group page and unreliable and slow internet connection were reported as the main problems the students were facing.

Finally, participants were asked to voice their views about what they would recommend so as to improve the use of Facebook in teaching and learning events and they suggested that the use of Facebook should be extended to all Master of Education modules; that students should be trained on how to use Facebook prior to using it in teaching and learning events; that discussing via a course Facebook group should not be mandatory; that the discussion should be multifaceted and not be confined on “what have I learned” only; and that the assessment strategies of the student discussion on a course Facebook group should be reviewed and take into account both quantitative and qualitative aspects of the students’ posts.

All in all, we hope that this study showed the question of whether Facebook should be used in teaching and learning is not the right one. The real issue is “how” teachers and students can take advantage of the undisputable Facebook potential powers of networking, linking, and sharing and use them for the realization of learning outcomes.

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