

Stakeholder Summary

Engaging students academically on social networks: the Facebook dilemma

Social networks have tremendous potential to connect students in large programs, who might otherwise go through a four-year program without getting to know others who share their academic interests. But to engage these students, institutions face a dilemma between being present on public platforms like Facebook, where students already are, or constructing a new and separate site, focused solely on academic interests. A new report from the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO) examines a pilot project from the University of Toronto Department of History and the Department for the Study of Religion for a new site specifically for their students, which ultimately failed to become sustainable. The authors argue that for such a site to succeed, it needs to be a part of a larger community-building initiative, such as a club, student association or other academically oriented social event.

Project Description

If You Build It, Will They Come? An Evaluation of Whiteboard, a Networked Academic Profiles Project examines the lessons learned from the Whiteboard project, a social networking site that allowed students to build a profile page, identify other students with similar interests, connect with faculty, share course content and track their academic progress. An anonymous survey of three large-enrolment first- and second-year undergraduate courses and focus groups were conducted before the site was developed to determine how students use social media and their attitudes around collaborative learning and online communities. The study also uses website usage data over a period of three years.

Findings

While most students are avid Facebook users, they were unaware of the rich discipline-specific resources and communities that exist online. The authors were surprised to find a large number of students who did not believe the internet was a fruitful venue for research or deep engagement on ideas. Students in the focus groups preferred accessing books in the library and meaningful in-person discussions and expressed deep skepticism of the value of online communities like Facebook, which were seen as a frivolous way to connect with friends and gossip. The authors speculate that this feeling might reflect the programs examined and students in the sciences or technology-related subjects might respond differently.

While some already used Facebook to connect with other students in a course and share information, others found it exclusionary, feeling they were not “invited” to participate in independently set up study groups. The designers of the Whiteboard site felt that many students would be more comfortable posting on a platform only open to University of Toronto students, instead of a public social network. The advantage of Facebook communities is that students will remember to visit the site without being compelled, which was a concern when setting up the Whiteboard site.

The Whiteboard project turned out to be far more technically demanding than expected and required a great deal of focus on functionality and design. Despite the increased investment in time and resources, the project was still technically far inferior to Facebook and other popular platforms in both design and ease of use. Students come to social media with very high expectations for the technical sophistication of the platforms, which the Whiteboard site was unable to meet. In total, only 237 users signed up and 113 actively posted content to the site, with a large proportion of the content generated by students directly involved with the project. The authors note that other academically run social networks have been successful, but participation is often a requirement of the courses.

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