

The Global Reach of Social Networking Sites for Both Teachers and Students

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Abstract

Being creative in the classroom is essential to engage students. However, how to be creative when given the task to teach a set curriculum is something many teachers have difficulty with. Using popular social networking tools for homework activities is one way to be creative, engage students, and realize the goals of the curriculum. This paper will show how social networking websites (SNS) can be used in an academic writing class to improve writing ability and motivation levels of 1st year Japanese university students. This paper will also demonstrate how SNS are not just beneficial to students, but also for teachers. Teaching has been described as an isolated profession in terms of colleague interaction. This isolation has in the past meant that teachers have not been able to take advantage of the knowledge of their peers to the detriment of their own teaching. By using social networking websites teachers are able to feed off the knowledge of a global network of like-minded professionals and develop their own lessons.

Keywords : Facebook, social networking, online discussion boards, online collaboration, Japanese universities

要旨

クラスで創造力を働かせる事は生徒の関心を引くのに必要不可欠である。しかしながら、すでに定められたカリキュラムにおいて、与えられた課題に創造力を働かせる事は決して容易ではない。最近よく知られているソーシャルネットワーキングサービスを利用して課題に取り組む事は、創造力を働かせ、生徒の関心を引き、カリキュラムの目標を達成させる一つの手段である。この論文は、日本の大学一回生のライティングスキルとモチベーションを向上させる為に、大学のライティングの授業において、ソーシャルネットワーキングサービス (SNS) をどのように使うかを説明している。この論文はまた、SNSが生徒にだけでなく講師にも、どのように有益であるかを明示している。ソーシャルネットワーキングサービスを利用する事によって、講師は専門家の国際的なネットワークから知識を得て、自らの授業を進展させることができる。

キーワード : フェイスブック, ソーシャルネットワーキング, オンラインディスカッション掲示板, オンラインコラボレーション, 日本の大学

Introduction

Social network site (SNS) members, including teachers and students, form groups of friends to interact through the sharing of personal information. To some, SNS may be seen as a form of procrastination, yet as this paper will demonstrate, SNS can also be used as a language learning tool to improve the writing skills and motivation of students through the use of online discussion groups, providing greater motivation than normal classroom writing activities. Teachers can also benefit from SNS as unlike many other professions, teaching is considered isolated, and collaboration on lesson plans or feedback on lessons, though desired, is often not achievable in the modern educational institution. Through the use of Facebook groups, teachers are able to collaborate to attain feedback on lesson plans as well as get critique on their teaching style and methodology. Such online observations are beneficial in a multi-level format for teachers, students, and educational institutions.

Literature Review

Facebook, created in 2004, is currently the most popular SNS with over 500 million users (Facebook, 2010). Teaching has been classed as a profession of isolation (Bakkenes, De Brabander, & Imants, 1999) where individuals are unable to take advantage of the knowledge of their peers. McDonald (2008) related the isolation theme to the Japanese university environment, suggesting that the use of limited-term contracts may also be a factor in the lack of collaboration.

Research suggests computer-mediated communication (CMC) for students “creates a unique environment that has removed many barriers (anxiety, face saving, aversion to face-to-face communication) for students to participate, because they can access their online classrooms anytime, anywhere” (Wu & Starr, 2003, p. 687), and are only achieved by making participation “student dominated and fun” (Wu & Starr, 2003, p. 688). Online discussion groups, a form of CMC, have been found by Larkin-Hein to “offer a relatively new avenue through which the learner can take an active role in the learning process” (Larkin-Hein, 2001, pp. F2G-6). For teachers, CMC is already well established in the educational system as a means of collaboration, most commonly in the form of online discussions and e-mails. However, Barker (2001) states that e-mail is not a powerful enough medium of CMC as there is an inability to control submissions, a difficulty in reading the history, and an inability to see who has or has not read the e-mail.

The average adult “spends a third of their leisure time online, belongs to two social networking sites and has regular contact with 16 people they have ‘virtually’ met on the Internet” (TNS, 2008). In Japan, greater access to mobile technologies allows individuals to access SNS anytime, thereby increasing this leisure time number to 40% (Prensky, 2001) meaning students and teachers have

ample opportunity to contribute to SNS groups.

Not all characteristics of SNS are positive. Murray (2008) suggests that some 40% of children have placed material about themselves on the Internet, and 30% have a SNS site. This brings about concerns of privacy of information, identity theft, virtual bullying, or even blackmail (Gross & Acquisiti, 2005).

Education is the only professional field that does not improve from generation to generation (Bok, 1992) (Boyer, 1990) (Langenburg, 1992). This need not be the case however as collaboration has been proven to increase effectiveness (Steinert, et al., 2006) (Harasim, 1995). Teachers need to collaborate to provide the most appropriate learning environment. Each educator comes to an institution with a varied amount of experience, knowledge, and expertise. As might be expected, a novice teacher can learn from a more experienced one (Aoki, 2008), in addition observation and collaboration have shown that even the most seasoned educational professional can learn from someone with less experience.

Method

Two separate Facebook groups were set up, one for student discussions and the other for teaching observations. To ensure only invited members could gain access to the group and view the postings both groups were made as closed, secret groups. For the student online writing group, nineteen intermediate level first grade Japanese university students, were invited to participate in this research. Students were told they would not receive extra credit for participating, but could improve their writing skills. Nine students, three from Japan, five from China and one from Sri Lanka joined the group. Simultaneously, a second teaching observation group was formed with eleven teachers from the founder's Facebook 'friend' list joined the group. Individuals were working in a variety of educational institutions in Japan, Korea, Australia, New Zealand, and had teaching experience ranging from three to ten years. Nine possessed a master's degree in either education, English literature, TESOL, or applied linguistics.

For the student online discussion group, TOEFL style questions were posted every week for five weeks (Appendix 3). From student replies, individual feedback on spelling and grammar was given via email to each student with the goal of improving writing skills. When these problems continued or were common to all students, feedback was posted to all group members via the group wall. After the five weeks were completed, an informal interview with students was conducted to find out about the online discussion group.

For the teaching observation group, the founder added content from his own lessons to begin the

process of collaboration. Instructions on what individuals should do on the teaching and observation page were posted in the group information section, along with the goals of the group. One month after the start of the group, members were asked to fill out a survey (Appendix 1) about the group, the need for such a group, and whether they believed they, their students, or their institution would benefit from an online collaborative group such as Facebook teaching and observation.

The groups were closed and made secret to protect the privacy and private information of teachers and students. However, in addition to this the groups were discontinued and removed from Facebook after the completion of the research period.

Results and Discussion

Why use Facebook?

Facebook was chosen as all group members were also members of Facebook and contributed regularly, thus there was no need to share private information with another unknown website. In addition, the process of setting up a group in Facebook is simple and can be completed in less than five minutes. Finally, Facebook also allows for videos of up to 20 minutes in length, or 1028MB, to be uploaded enabling large portions of uninterrupted classroom activities to be uploaded.

Student group

For the student online discussion group four elements were measured: spelling mistakes, grammar mistakes, words written and motivation (Appendix 2). Week one had the highest participation rate in terms of words written, 759. In this week there were 87 grammar mistakes, many due to the use of informal English, inappropriate in a formal discussion. Feedback was given in this area and grammar mistakes were reduced by almost two thirds in week two. In week two 430 words were written by six students with 30 grammar mistakes and only four spelling mistakes. Facebook does not include a spell checker, thus students had to use a dictionary when unsure of spelling, a physical task that would benefit kinesthetic learners (Turville, 2008). Student one was responsible for the majority of the spelling mistakes recorded, and even though it was suggested the student use a dictionary it was obvious this was an area that needs more attention than the limits of the Facebook discussion group can provide. In week three there were 461 words written by six students including 33 grammar mistakes and seven spelling mistakes. Two students were responsible for the high number of grammar mistakes; these students received feedback and then disregarded it before the next weekly posting, thus more in-depth feedback was administered. Week four saw 478 words written by five students. Students made 22 grammar mistakes and eight spelling mistakes. Week five had the lowest level of participation, due to external examination factors, with 489 words written, 11 grammar mistakes and no spelling mistakes.

Posting common mistakes on the discussion board was effective in reducing mistakes. For example, posting general advice on the discussion board solved the incorrect use of 'much', 'many', 'a lot of' and 'plenty' in the first two weeks. It is hoped that this feedback contributed to a reduction in grammar mistakes in subsequent weeks, although it is impossible to disregard external factors. Feedback from students indicated they used the teacher's postings as a grammar guide when writing further posts. Students could post a response to the question and receive feedback promptly. Students stated that they enjoyed this instant feedback aspect of the group, as with written homework they first have to wait until the next class to submit their response and then wait at least a further week to receive feedback.

Students were involved in checking their feedback by the teacher providing students with questions about their own work, for example by asking them to find a grammar or spelling mistake in a certain line or asking them to rewrite their response correcting the mistakes previously made. Students became motivated to learn from their mistakes rather than just observing. An unexpected spinoff occurred in the making of the discussion group. Students began their own group e-mail to each other, and although not discussion related, it was a chance for students to use English to communicate with each other.

Teachers group

The teaching observation group was set up with the goal of creating a collaborative platform for observing each other's classes and giving feedback on lesson plans for educational professionals. However, the Facebook teaching and observation group faced some initial challenges. The biggest challenge was getting the first group member to add content to the page. Similar to students, teachers demonstrated reluctance to have their work evaluated by others. One reason being, that even though the group founder knew all of the group members, the group members did not know each other. Thus, members raised concerns about the constructiveness of criticism they would receive. To ensure the groups constructive nature the founder of the group added his own content for observation first, after which group members were more at ease to participate in the group.

A second challenge was Facebook groups not allowing Microsoft Word files to be uploaded. Some members, while not willing or able to post video footage of classes, were willing to post some of their lesson plans or handouts. Frustration was expressed in relations to Facebook's inability to accept Microsoft Word files. Saving MS Word files as JPEG files, and attaching the files as you would a photo solved this problem. Whilst this did not allow users to easily scroll through, download, and edit files, it did provide a means to solve the problem. It should be noted that Facebook in 2011 has upgraded the abilities of the website, and that MS word files can now be uploaded.

One of the goals in creating the Facebook teaching observation group was to begin to alleviate the aforementioned isolation issues through an open discussion. However, participant feedback suggests isolation is not considered a compelling issue. Most members had experienced some form of observation of their lessons, the frequency of which varied widely from institution to institution. One group member stated that his English conversation school had CCTV cameras in every classroom for observations. Another, also working in an English conversation school, replied that his classes were observed when he was hired and then annually by his direct supervisor upon the renewal of his contract. A further member working at the tertiary level was frequently observed. Yet, three members of the group, all of whom worked in the Japanese university system, stated that they were never observed, unless by individuals from outside of their institution who were trying to complete their observation requirements for a university course. All group members were in agreement that observations, if conducted in a constructive manner, provided valuable and practical feedback on lessons, which they desired, and assisted them in improving their teaching methodology.

Issues

Students and teachers did not want to be the first to put their response or content on the group page. Students felt embarrassed to do so in case they did not fully understand the question and made a mistake. They were worried their response would be a polar opposite to their peers. In addition, although the Facebook group was set up as a discussion group with the desire of creating multi-level interaction, most students were reluctant to comment on other students work. Teachers acted in a similar manner to students, it was hoped that some collaboration would materialize. This interaction did not materialize, with group members feeling reluctant to collaborate with unknown members of the group. Some group members felt reluctant to pass comment on a lesson plan, as they had little to no knowledge of the lesson in the context of the curriculum. Group members did however, comment that the idea of collaboration was worthwhile but needed to be managed on an institutional basis rather than just Facebook friends of the group founder.

Privacy

The use of SNS in the educational context brings with it a privacy paradox (Barnes, 2006). Content even though volunteered by teachers may be considered the property of the institution the teacher is working for, which would mean submitting lessons to the Facebook teaching and observation group may be considered a form of passing trade secrets. In-line with this, the members of the Facebook teaching and observation group also expressed concerns relating to gaining permission from superiors to post possibly sensitive material online. Many were unsure how to gain permission for such an activity.

Facebook and other SNS are frequently in the mass media for possible breaches of privacy, copyright, and changes to its privacy policy that individuals believe will impact on their rights. The privacy policy (Facebook, 2009) is some 5,500 words long, thus an absolute understanding of what will become of the content submitted is beyond most students and teachers. Some have raised concerns about Facebook's privacy record or how often Facebook appears in mass media for privacy matters. A valid concern as recently highlighted by Facebook's recommended "settings push" (Ostrow, 2009), which critics believe it is really a cover for Facebook to allow partner search engines to use valuable private data. The two Facebook groups used were made secret; therefore, members could take some comfort that its visibility was restricted to invited individuals only.

Limitations

The first limitation of this research is the low participation rate of both the student and teacher groups. This was expected as initial enthusiasm changed to a reality that they would need to do more work if they did indeed participate. A second limitation is the timeframe. To get more accurate and informative-rich results and to be more beneficial to teachers and students, the groups would need to be active for an indefinite period.

Conclusion

Rather than just a social outlet, SNS sites can be used for online discussion groups for students and to bring like-minded professionals together to collaborate on ideas. In education, there is a need for teaching professionals to collaborate on lesson plans and receive feedback on lessons to ensure students are having the most effective learning experience possible, and educators are always striving to improve teaching methodology. The creation of a Facebook group is one such way to enable students and teachers to gain feedback and increase their motivation. The Facebook group faced some initial challenges, but was somewhat successful in its goal. However, there are some major issues that need to be addressed in relation to the privacy of student, teacher, and institutional information before this type of group could be commonly used and accepted in the educational system. At present the future of further Facebook teaching and observation groups would need to be limited to individual institutions as this may prevent some of the issues and limitations found in this research from occurring again.

Bio data

Jeremy White is teaching Business Administration and Economics at Ritsumeikan University BKC campus, Shiga, Japan. His research area is related to CALL and he is currently a Doctor of Education student at Griffith University, Brisbane, Australia. His field of research is the use of

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Appendix 1

Teaching Observation Questionnaire

| |
|---|
| 1. How long have you been teaching? |
| |
| 2. What are your qualifications? (Please include current study) |
| |
| 3. What level do you currently teach? (Elementary, Junior/Senior HS, University, e.t.c) |
| |
| 4. In which countries have you taught and how long in each country? |
| |
| 5. Do you consider teaching an isolated profession? Why/Why not? |
| |
| 6. Have your classes or lessons ever been observed by another teacher? Please give some details. |
| |
| 7. Did the observation provide you with some feedback you found useful to you teaching? |
| |
| 8. What do you think of the idea of a lesson observation/collaboration website? |
| |
| 9. Would you be willing to post your own lesson plans/handouts/videos on such a website? Why/why not? |
| |
| 10. What problems could you see from using Facebook groups as a means of lesson observation/collaboration |
| |

The information provided today will be used by Jeremy White in his research. By completing the questionnaire you are granting permission for your responses to be used. No personal information will ever be published.

Appendix 2

Results from the student online discussion group

| Student 1 | | | | | |
|-------------------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| | Week 1 | Week 2 | Week 3 | Week 4 | Week 5 |
| Spelling Mistakes | 5 | 2 | 4 | 6 | 0 |
| Grammar Mistakes | 20 | 10 | 10 | 6 | 0 |
| Words Written | 87 | 69 | 86 | 73 | 0 |

| Student 2 | | | | | |
|-------------------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| | Week 1 | Week 2 | Week 3 | Week 4 | Week 5 |
| Spelling Mistakes | 1 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 0 |
| Grammar Mistakes | 11 | 03 | 12 | 0 | 3 |
| Words Written | 55 | 71 | 84 | 146 | 168 |

| Student 3 | | | | | |
|-------------------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| | Week 1 | Week 2 | Week 3 | Week 4 | Week 5 |
| Spelling Mistakes | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Grammar Mistakes | 10 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Words Written | 73 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |

| Student 4 | | | | | |
|-------------------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| | Week 1 | Week 2 | Week 3 | Week 4 | Week 5 |
| Spelling Mistakes | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Grammar Mistakes | 8 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Words Written | 67 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |

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| Student 5 | | | | | |
|--------------------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|
| | Week 1 | Week 2 | Week 3 | Week 4 | Week 5 |
| Spelling Mistakes | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 |
| Grammar Mistakes | 10 | 3 | 4 | 3 | 4 |
| Words Written | 125 | 67 | 73 | 83 | 140 |

| Student 6 | | | | | |
|--------------------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|
| | Week 1 | Week 2 | Week 3 | Week 4 | Week 5 |
| Spelling Mistakes | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 |
| Grammar Mistakes | 20 | 3 | 0 | 7 | 4 |
| Words Written | 228 | 71 | 80 | 76 | 181 |

| Student 7 | | | | | |
|--------------------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|
| | Week 1 | Week 2 | Week 3 | Week 4 | Week 5 |
| Spelling Mistakes | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Grammar Mistakes | 8 | 6 | 3 | 6 | 0 |
| Words Written | 124 | 70 | 71 | 100 | 0 |

| Student 8 | | | | | |
|--------------------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|
| | Week 1 | Week 2 | Week 3 | Week 4 | Week 5 |
| Spelling Mistakes | 0 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Grammar Mistakes | 0 | 5 | 4 | 0 | 0 |
| Words Written | 0 | 82 | 67 | 0 | 0 |

| Student 9 | | | | | |
|--------------------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|
| | Week 1 | Week 2 | Week 3 | Week 4 | Week 5 |
| Spelling Mistakes | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Grammar Mistakes | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Words Written | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |

Appendix 3

Extract from Week 1

Teacher

Do you agree or disagree with the following statement? With the help of technology students nowadays can learn more information and learn it more quickly. Use specific reasons and examples to support your answer.

Student 1

yes i agree with this.with technological development students can learn more informations.through the internet we can knew what we want.that help students for there studies.

In the past if we want to get some informations about something we should go to library.but now we don't need to go any ware we can know anything any time in any ware because of the technology.

Student 2

yes, I think so .

Before ,for searching something wo should buy a lot dictionary .And the dictionary is very heavy so we can't take it any time ,anywhere.But today we have the electronic dictionary ,it is very light so we can take it every day every time .It is very convenient for us .

Student 3

Yes . I agree with this. Today is a economic development society.When economic development technological also development. We must learn as much as possible and you can learn it more quickly.So we have to use internet to find what we need.It can save us a lot of time and find it very easy and quickly.In internet we can learn wider and wider. So I think technological is very useful with us life.