

Using popular social networking site Facebook as new learning platform

By: Prof. Michael Ka Yiu Fung, Dr. David Lap Kei Chow, Dr. Fred Kei Tat Ku,
Mr. Franko Tik Lun Wong

From: Department of Decision Sciences and Managerial Economics

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Use of Facebook

Nowadays, online learning platforms play important roles in facilitating the communication between students and teachers, especially in the tertiary education level. Moodle, WebCT and CU forum all these are examples that are commonly and widely used in CUHK. On the other hand, Facebook, one of the most famous social networking sites, becomes more and more popular among young people in the recent. Many online communities are thus formed by different groups of young people through frequent communication in Facebook. Following this trend, it is believed that there is high potential for Facebook to become alternative choice of online learning platform for teachers.

In the academic year 2011, teachers from DSME2020, *Statistical Analysis for Business Decision II*, took the lead in using Facebook as one of the students' online learning platforms by creating a Facebook group for this course. Indeed, Facebook is a comprehensive system containing various functions and special features which can be used in the teaching and learning process are summarized as follow:

- Interacted with others by using the "Wall" functions
- Organized online discussion through using "Group Chat" function
- Answered students' questions by using "Note" function
- Informed students the important dates through "Event" function
- Updated students new things through immediate notifications

"Wall" functions provided by Facebook is a communication tool helping to make connection with course members. Similar to other online forums, "Wall" is actually a place allowing students to post their questions and give response to others. Students in this course frequently made good use of such function by discussing their academic problems there. For example, one of them asked how to use Excel to do calculation for an economic phenomenon and other students soon offered help after several seconds. It was obvious that peering learning became possible as a result of this "Wall" function.

Rather than organizing discussions face to face in the class periods, the "Group Chat" function in Facebook provides teachers and students with another choice that is to have online discussions in any suitable time. Like the chat room function offered in MSN, Facebook "Group Chat" allows multi-personal real time communications, meaning that online discussion among whole class could be arranged in the ideal case. In this course, "Group Chat" has always been used between students and teachers. Through using this function to ask questions, immediate replies could be received and effective communication among whole class could thus be resulted.

Another feature that could be served as important teaching tool is the “Note” function. “Note” is actually a tool letting users to share their long articles within group. Teachers in this course used that function in two ways. One was to post the answers for students’ frequently asked questions. Such act could probably help teachers to reduce their time in answering students individually and also clarify the misunderstanding that other students may also have. Another way of using “Note” function was to post weekly recap, a reminder telling students the important parts of the knowledge learnt during the week. All these notes could be saved in Facebook Docs. From this, it can be seen that “Note” can certainly provide teachers with alternative channel in teaching students.

Informing students the important date is also a necessary thing for a successful online learning platform. Towards this, the “Event” function in Facebook could probably help. In fact, “Event” is an effective tool for organizing group activity. People could be invited to the event pages containing the details of the activity, such as the date, time and venue. A reminder will be posted to the users’ personal pages when the date of the event is getting closer. By using that “Event” function, teachers in this course always informed students the schedules of course related activities, such as the arrangement of test and examination. Therefore, it was less easy for students to miss those important events.

One of the features that can be highlighted for Facebook is the function of automatically providing immediate notifications. When there are any updates on Facebook, like new posts or events, there would be instant notifications shown in the personal page. Moreover, except the notices in Facebook, emails would also be sent to the users and Smartphone users could also receive the message notification if they have installed the Facebook function in their phone. Announcements on Facebook given by teachers could thus be read with virtually no delay and this can also ensure that students can know the updates from more than one channel.

Although Facebook contains various advantages as aforementioned, as a social networking site, Facebook also has the negative sides that may not be fully suitable to be used for teaching and learning purposes. For example, since the original nature of Facebook is for entertainment, but not teaching and learning, it may be difficult for students to concentrate on their academic works when they are using Facebook. Moreover, learning materials, such as PowerPoint or notes, cannot be directly uploaded and quiz function is not embedded in Facebook. Other online learning platforms are thus needed to support Facebook in the teaching and learning process. In addition, the protection on students’ privacy was quite weak in Facebook that students’ personal pages can be easily read by others. Consequently, further improvements were still necessary for Facebook to be a successful online learning platform.

Advantages of using Facebook

Taken its numerous advantages, Facebook is one of the famous social networking sites which can be considered to be used for academic purposes. The following examples are the associated benefits brought by using Facebook as an online platform in students’ learning process.

- Improved the communication between teachers and students

- Shorten the sense of distance between teachers and students
- Developed a sense of belonging among the class
- Increased students' frequency of raising questions by creating a less stressful environment
- Motivated students to devote more time on the course through keep updating them the course information

Feedback from students

To know more about the possibility of introducing the Facebook as a new online learning platform, two questionnaires have been distributed to students from this course in the second semester of the academic year 2011. 5-point scale (1: Strongly disagree, 2: Disagree, 3: Neutral, 4: Agree, 5: Strongly agree) was used in these studies. In general, most of the students agreed that Facebook was really useful in this course (Mean=4.10). They also thought that Facebook could improve the communication among students (Mean=4.10) as well as between students and instructors (Mean=4.13). However, in the open ended questions, some of the students complained that it was not convenient to download notes from Facebook. Consequently, Facebook still cannot replace those traditional learning platforms until this moment.