

Tomorrow's People: Using Facebook to Advance Civic Engagement
and Global Learning in a First-year Seminar

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Abstract

This research examines the use of Facebook as an instructional tool in two first-year seminar courses during two consecutive years. The convergence of social media and in-class instruction throughout the semesters was examined to identify whether Facebook has positive utility in teaching and learning. The areas of convergence focused on two learning outcomes, global learning and civic awareness and engagement. In order to assess learning effectiveness and participation, student perception of the efficacy of convergence was collected using an automated response and data collection system. Additionally, pre- and post-course surveys, real-time assessment of learning goals, and a questionnaire on Facebook were used to assess Facebook utility. This research found a significant level of viability for Facebook in a first-year seminar course for students in transition. Accordingly this research offers the foundation for the use of Facebook as a pedagogical technique and how to best execute these learning opportunities. While research concerning Facebook utility appears to offer mixed assessment of value, these results are consistent with the ever-increasing evaluation that tends to offer a positive assessment of Facebook's viability and effectiveness.

This research on social media explores how Kennesaw State used Facebook as an instructional tool in a first-year seminar course to advance civic-engagement ideals and global-learning goals of the Department of First-Year Programs over two consecutive fall semesters in 2010 and 2011. The main objective of this pilot approach was to determine if social media offer positive utility for the predetermined learning objectives in a first-year seminar. Considering the course is partly based on the Seven Revolutions Project (7R), much of the content under investigation included a global focus.

The Seven Revolutions Project is a partnership of the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU), the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) and *The New York Times* to help prepare globally competent citizens for the 21st century. At Kennesaw State University, another colleague and I were selected as 7R Faculty Fellows. The University System of Utopia was one of eight participants in the initial pilot phase of the project. During 2007-08, the USA Office of International Education (OIE) sponsored training workshops to introduce USG faculty to 7R materials and resources. In addition to participating in teaching symposiums and training workshops, we designed a curriculum to advance the ideals of the 7R complementary with the strategic plan of the university. Several initiatives were initiated, among them the establishment of a course titled "The Seven Revolutions." After a few pilot courses, a proposal to offer the course as a first-year requirement option was submitted. It was accepted by the Undergraduate Policies and Curriculum Committee (UPCC) at which time the name was changed to "Tomorrow's Promise" and consequently "Tomorrow's World Today." This first-year seminar course, KSU 1111, is one of three options to meet the requirement all first-year students with less than 30 credit hours must satisfy. In addition to advancing the university's charge to "go global," this course offered global learning outcomes and expectations. The first-year seminar has four learning outcomes at its core: 1) life skills, 2) strategies for academic success, 3) campus and community connections, and 4) foundations for global learning. While Facebook may have positive utility in all four areas, strategies for academic success and global learning were the areas selected to be investigated. "Strategies for academic success" is identified as the area where pedagogy and the practice of civic engagement is most likely to occur. We define civic engagement as collective or personal activities designed to discover and address issues of public concern. Civic awareness is essentially defined as increasing knowledge on civic life.

Global learning is defined as enabling students to understand world cultures and events, analyze global systems, appreciate cultural differences, and apply this knowledge and appreciation to their lives as global citizens. More specifically, Kennesaw State University defines global learning as consistent with Olson, Green and Hill's (2006) handbook on global learning published by the American Council on Education (ACE), which states

...we define global learning as the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that students acquire through a variety of experiences that enable them to understand world cultures and events, analyze global systems, appreciate cultural differences, and apply this knowledge and appreciation to their lives as citizens and workers. (p. 5)

Global learning at Kennesaw State University is part of the Quality Enhancement Program (QEP) that encompasses KSU's 2007-2012 strategic plan of "preparing students to be leaders and creating a campus culture that assures an appreciation of diversity" (Whittlesey & Adebayo).

Civic Engagement and Facebook

Service-learning and civic-engagement activities have a strong tradition at Kennesaw State University. For example, Kennesaw State University was named to the President's Higher Education Community Service Honor Roll by the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS) for two consecutive years in 2009 and 2010. CNCS recognized the institution as a leader for its commitment to volunteering, service-learning and civic engagement. One of several selection factors is innovative service projects and engagement embedded in the curriculum. Incorporating civic engagement activities as part of the curriculum is not a new idea to the institution, but using social media is a new way to advance these ideals.

Literature on Facebook and Learning

There is a host of new literature about Facebook's efficacy in the academy. The literature generally relates to user demographic comparisons, privacy, self-esteem, relationship building and more recently academic performance. Privacy studies on the social media phenomena are vast, and since privacy is not our primary focus, it will be examined in the section titled "Countering Facebook nihilism."

We have witnessed an increase of research on Facebook's utility in the classroom as a pedagogical technique. Considering this is a relatively new phenomenon, the research tends to be less longitudinal in nature and more situational. That is, they tend to focus on the impact of using Facebook in a cohort, one semester special course and/or nontraditional student populations for a specified period of inquiry. Consequently, our literature review focused on a sample of the scholarship of teaching and learning in these areas.

Pilgrim and Bledsoe (2011) conducted a study they described as "quasiexperimental" at a small college by asking whether popular social networks are effective venues for introducing preservice teachers to resources and issues in education. The researchers concluded that preservice teachers who followed professional organizations were classified as more knowledgeable about the educational organizations than those who did not use Facebook. Another study suggested that medical students are open to using Facebook as an instructional tool, but found that using the social media platform was challenging for both teacher and student (Gray, Annabell & Kennedy, 2010). Roblyer (2010), in comparing student and faculty Facebook use, found that students were much more likely than faculty to view Facebook and similar social media technologies as viable tools to support classroom work.

Contributors to a study measuring anticipated college student motivation, affective learning, and classroom climate found a negative association between teacher use of Facebook and teacher credibility. Mazer, Murphy & Simonds (2007) found that teachers with high self-disclosure on Facebook anticipated higher levels of motivation and affective learning and a more positive classroom climate. Junco (2012) measured student engagement by comparing the results of a 19-item scale based on the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), class preparation time, co-curricular activities, and Facebook use. The results indicated that Facebook use was negatively predictive of student engagement. Research on Grade Point Average (GPA) by Junco (2012) found that time spent on Facebook was negatively related to overall GPA. Thus in two separate instances, Facebook had a negative impact on engagement and GPA.

Other research on social media and the classroom tends to focus on gender differences. Teclehaimanot & Hickman (2011) found that men more than women believed that student-teacher interactions on Facebook were appropriate. Aragon's (2007) study concluded that her students in women's studies courses viewed social

media favorably because of the ease in access and use. Aragon also suggested that Facebook in-class use served a glorious purpose in that it highlighted how easy misinformation (in this case) regarding feminism circulated and create “vitriolic misunderstandings about feminists and feminisms” (p. 45). Thompson & Lougheed (2012) also reached the conclusion that gender difference affects the Facebook experience and thus may impact learning. They found female students experienced more stressors than their male counterparts. They concluded that female students were more likely to spend more time on Facebook than male students and experience more stress, more dissatisfaction with body image, and more “closeness” with Facebook friends compared to those they see daily in person. How these finding impact learning is not clear to me but is useful to begin to assess how gender may impact the convergence of social media with teaching and learning.

Cain & Policastri (2011) reasoned that “informal” learning can be achieved via Facebook. They reasoned that current-events topics posted in social media lead to “real world” learning for students. In essence, using a social-media platform provides knowledge accumulation on current topics and concurrently provides a space for informal critical thinking that can then be transferred to the formal classroom space. Kalpidou, Costin, & Morris (2011) attempted to examine whether the number of Facebook friends and time spent on Facebook had any impact on first-year students. They found that a higher number of Facebook friends was negatively associated with emotional and academic adjustments among first-year students. Pasek, [more], & Hargittai’s (2009) research titled “Facebook and academic performance: Reconciling a media sensation with data” examined the relationship between Facebook use and academic achievement. They found the claim that Facebook lowers academic performance to be unsubstantiated.

Researchers at institutions beyond the United States such as Canada, London, China, and Malaysia have conducted similar research in the area of teaching, learning and Facebook. One study from Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), suggested that Facebook has utility only when learning objectives and outcomes are clearly (pre)defined prior to the class activity (Kabilan, Ahmad & Abidin, 2010). This tends to be a central conclusion in other studies including Friesen and Lowe (2012). Madge, Meek, Wellens & Hooley (2009) suggest that Facebook has a significant role as a socializing agent for new students in transition to university life.

Similar to our conclusions, the majority of research does in fact find some positive utility using this social-media platform. It is important, however, to add that many of these studies are careful to make the point that correlation is not necessarily causation; I accept that point.

Countering Facebook Nihilism

An informal poll of students in my KSU 1111 seminar in the fall semester of 2010 revealed a high Facebook presence. One student of (n=) 78 polled did not have a Facebook page. College students composed 8% of all Facebook users in 2009 (Corbett, 2009). While 8% may appear meager, it represents almost 12 million students. Additionally, it is no secret that Facebook is being used as a tool to assess employability. Thus at the beginning of the course, we examined several readings on Facebook privacy and employment. Most of the articles offered the cautionary tale that companies are using Facebook to make hiring decisions. Accordingly, we suggested that our learners may want to use discretion regarding posts. Articles such as “Is your online identity spoiling your chances?”(Korkki, 2010), “Employers dig up online dirt” (Tandukar, 2007), “Guess who else is reading those “Facebook” entries?” (Cole, 2006), “Who’s reading your Facebook?” (Epstein 2006), “Employers using Facebook for background checking: Is it legal?” (Lenard, 2006), and “Company settles case in firing tied to Facebook” (Bloomberg, 2011) aided my position that social media’s impact is far reaching. These issues considered, we reasoned that it may be in the best interest of first-year students to substitute the less desirable activities with a more civically engaged and globally focused set of activities. Consequently, unanimous student buy-in using Facebook as a means to promote these desirable activities as well as actualizing course global and civic learning was not difficult to achieve.

Pedagogical Techniques

The methods for collecting data on student perceptions included a 20-question survey instrument. The methods for collecting data on student perceptions included a 20-question survey and a separate open-ended question asking about the benefits and pitfalls of using Facebook in the classroom. The survey was executed at the end of fall semester in both 2010 and 2011. Next, we used data gathered in class to assess an understanding of 7R global content. Data from fall 2010 was compared with that from fall 2011 to view where significant changes may have occurred. Additionally, we compared pre- and post-course survey questionnaires to

assess areas for improvement and areas of success. The data-accumulation techniques activities and pedagogical considerations are described below.

Structural Considerations

In order to implement these exercises effectively, there were several items to consider. Since we cannot assume that all students have laptops, some specific class time in a computer lab was established; we used a computer lab every third meeting. The Facebook logo next to the date on the syllabi indicated the dates we would meet in the computer lab.

Students were taught part of Brigadier General Henry Martyn Robert's "Robert's Rules of Order" as a means to voting on the name of the page. This yielded several positive outcomes. This simple activity set the tone for the course to spread the civic ideal of democratic self-rule. Student ownership of the page mimicked citizens' ownership of democracy; at least that was the intention. Next the rules regarding posting and privacy were clearly transmitted via the syllabus and the Facebook page. They included the following:

- Set your privacy settings high. This page is for our class only; you cannot add friends without permission.
- You may create a new page if you elect to do so. Your privacy is your right and responsibility. If you have questionable friends or material visible to the group on your current page, create a new one for this course.
- On the days we will review articles and use Facebook, we will meet in the lab. The days we will meet in the lab are marked on your calendar with the Facebook logo.
- If any offensive material is listed, you will be booted from the account and a goose egg will be your reward (not an actual goose egg, people!). A really pretty zero will appear where 25% of your course grade should be.
- By clicking the like button on the KSU 1111 social contract, you agree to rules and regulations previously discussed and listed herein. The social contract is the first entry listed on the Facebook page.

Engagement Activities

Engagement activities were a requirement for this course. Facebook served as a grand platform to encourage civic participation. Figure 1 outlines the approach to civic engagement using Facebook.

PSA

The Audience Response System (ARS) commonly known as “remote clickers” is a product of Turning Point Technologies. This technology allowed for real-time data collection and delivery via immediate questionnaire and anonymous feedback. Students created a Public Service Announcement (PSA) video addressing a global concern and uploaded their completed project on Facebook for review. Once reviewed in class for a second time, the ARS was used to accumulate student peer-review results, which constituted 20% of the project’s grade (see Appendix A).

Polling

Another useful tool Facebook provides is a built-in polling function. Bi-monthly, students developed polls on content connected to the course, and we frequently adjusted the lesson based on poll results. For example, one student poll asked “Do you know the definition of egalitarianism?” Approximately 40% answered yes; thus it created a learning opportunity for us to have a deeper discussion of egalitarianism, civic duty, and engagement using our common reader *Justice* by Michael Sandel.

Create events calendar

Students were required to complete a minimum of three hours of community service. Each semester, Volunteer Kennesaw State University (VKSU) offers a list of institutions in need of volunteers. Once the service is completed, VKSU confirms student participation. We extended this activity to include social media. Students uploaded a diverse set of events. As we discussed the posts, they voluntarily began to connect with each other and ultimately attended future events in small groups formed in class. I believe the pre-event discussion led to greater group participation and attendance at these events (see appendix B).

Chronicling engagement

Here, students were encouraged to post pictures and narratives of their activities throughout the semester in a folder. At the end of the semester, the class

viewed and reflected on these activities with the students who participated and posted the events. Taking ownership of their civic engagement activities and describing the experience remains the most popular Facebook activity connected to civic engagement (see Figure 2).

Global Learning

Facebook offered us several avenues to execute global learning (see Figure 3). Here, we transferred global learning activities generally occurring in the classroom to Facebook. These included collecting data on 7R topics to determine variation between pre-course survey and post-course survey. Pedagogical tools and their structural implementations are listed below.

Student Data and ARS

The Automated Response System allowed us to gather immediate feedback data using pre and post surveys (Table 1). More specifically, it aided in adjusting the lesson based on the immediate survey results. For instance, students were given a pre-test including a series of questions regarding the 7R. One survey question asked, “Which of these (Revolutions) interests you the least?” The result was “government.” Thus, it clearly indicated a need to focus more time on that particular learning module. Facebook aided us in several ways here. Students were asked to post articles on government activities, summarize and converse with “conversation partners,” and discuss in class. Conversation partners are predetermined groups of 3 to 5. Students charged to read the same article and post comments. Furthermore, this system allowed us to compare their pre-course results with the post-course results. Table 1, Q3, for example, clearly demonstrates a positive outcome: a decrease of students’ perception of government as their least interesting subject.

International news

Facebook was used to link international news websites, connect current in-class discussions to global issues, and make the case that much of what is global is local. Facebook allowed us to integrate large databases from data collection institutions such as UNICEF, PEW, and Bureau of Labor Statistics to name a few. Furthermore, such activities allowed us to integrate the data into the course content. For instance, we were able to use global demographics to examine immigration in the United States—an important exercise considering the current debates on immigration and reform.

Links to campus events

Students were required to attend and write about three global events. Facebook allowed us to post campus events in the events section, but more importantly students uploaded pictures of the events they attended and were eager to talk about the ways the event impacted the experience of learning (see Appendix C).

Identify global learning resources

We were able to link on-campus and off-campus global resources for students. Considering that students tend to have low awareness of resources available to them, we focused overwhelmingly on available resources on campus such as Study Abroad, The Confucius Institute, The Center for African and African Diaspora Studies, The Center for Latin American and Iberian Studies, and The Institute for Global Initiatives (IGI). We migrated to these sites and discussed global learning opportunities and involvement in theory and practice which is in harmony with the university's QEP global initiatives.

Student Evaluations of Facebook Utility

The use of Facebook did not substitute online activities for in-class activities. It did, however, present a platform where the specific modules outlined in the syllabus would be executed using social media. Consistent with the literature, student responses to using Facebook in the classroom were overwhelmingly positive. In fall of 2010 (N₁), 76% believed that using current events and Facebook greatly improved their understanding of current issues. In 2011 (N₂), 67% believed it had a high positive effect. There was 100 % agreement that it had at least some effect.

When asked about the best use for Facebook in the classroom, an overwhelming 85% believed that Facebook's most important utility was that it became a usable database connected to the course—in essence, a one-stop-shop resource. That number reflects a significant increase from the previous year where only 45% believed that the establishment of a database was its best feature. When asked whether the Facebook page was an effective way to discuss global issues, 86% believed it to be so, while 14 % disagreed with that statement, (See Figure 4).

When asked how often during our class they checked their personal Facebook page, each student appears to have done so at least once during class

time. The majority (N_1+N_2), 51%, stated they did it once or twice, but 16% and 27%, respectively, said they checked every class meeting. When asked in open-question format to outline how Facebook use impacted learning, the responses were consistent with the high positive the numbers revealed. The following are some of the students' comments:

The use of Facebook in Dr. Usher's KSU 1111 increased my learning and first-year experience at KSU. Facebook strengthened the relationship between student and professor because communication through Facebook is much quicker than email so it is easier to transmit information and resources (assignment sheets, study guides, etc.), continue class discussions (website links, YouTube videos), ask questions about assignments or homework, and display information about upcoming events. Also, students are encouraged not to be shy around each other after constant conversation via social media, therefore, Facebook helped establish relationships among students. - Rebecca P

Students in my class asked questions about assignments, formed study groups, and worked on group projects together. Facebook allows for group conversations with multiple members between students and students or students and professor. Facebook is convenient, useful, and modern. - John S

Using Facebook to aid in my studies was an interesting twist to adjusting to the college lifestyle. With the threading system Facebook uses for posts and comments, it was easy to follow discussion topics and respond to each other individually. I believe as a result of Facebook use in the classroom, I was able to stay more informed and respond to global assignments more efficiently.- Brodie S

I believe it advances learning because it also allowed for easier access and connection to materials used in class. It made me more aware of global issues and civic awareness because every time I would log on Facebook I would see a link to some news article about an issue or event that I otherwise wouldn't have known about. -Trevor G

Using Facebook, we weren't just learning from you but from each other too. But I think that Facebook was part of a bigger picture. The prolific amount of technology used in class definitely offered new learning possibilities. I acquired some habits that I am really proud of in this class; I started putting

everything on my online planner to keep track of what I need to do and also started reading the news every morning on my phone. As a whole our class would've been less enjoyable and we most likely wouldn't have learned as much without it. - Mamadou T

While a high majority of respondents mirror the comments above, three students identified the same distraction: their conversation partners tended to go off task and “post information loosely relative to the course.” As one student put it, “Alabama over Auburn is hardly a current events post especially since I hate Alabama.”

Summary and Recommendations

The survey results, responses to open-ended question data, and data collected in class clearly demonstrate that a high level of civic awareness, peer connection, and global learning occurred using the Facebook page. Peer connections led to an increase in all of the other learning activities. For instance, students attended civic-engagement activities featured on the page with much more enthusiasm and in higher numbers than in previous semesters when social media was not used. They also tended to approach these engagement activities in small groups without being prompted, as opposed to “bowling alone.” Additionally, Madge, Meek, Wellens & Hooley’s (2009) position that social media has a great positive effect on students in transition is confirmed. Many of the comments regarding impact pointed to Facebook as a positive factor in the transition from high school to college.

While anecdotal, there is also evidence here that students performed better academically. There are many other variables to consider here, so we cannot with certainty say that Facebook was the most important catalyst. Nevertheless, Facebook use designed as pedagogy requires students to spend more time on the learning objectives; more time spent in discovery coupled with in-class activities identified as “fun” generally translates to better performance.

If you are not prepared to spend approximately 20% more time planning and executing global learning and engagement via Facebook, then it may not be the activity for you. Conversely, it is time well spent according to student feedback. As the literature suggests and this exercise confirms, it is recommended that clear learning objectives are provided as well as parameters of engagement. As Facebook provides more security, upload capability, and communication options, opportunities for civic participation and global learning in a secured social media

environment will be more possible. For example, in the fall of 2010, privacy was only as good as the parameters set by the medium. The following year, it was more expedient and effective to create closed pages where the instructor would not have to add students as friends as I did the previous year in order to communicate course activities via social media. Overall, the success of Facebook use is predicated on the teacher's commitment to use pedagogic innovations and the learners' ability and willingness to contribute to such. I would especially recommend Facebook use in first-year seminars and courses where high-level teacher-student and peer-peer interactions occur.

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