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E-learning and social media: Using Facebook to create an online community among applied social practice postgraduate students during a COVID-19 lockdown

Introduction

This paper will discuss the use of Facebook as a means for creating an online community to support e-learning among applied social practice postgraduate students in the School of Healthcare and Social Practice at Unitec Institute of Technology during a lockdown in Auckland which began on 17 August 2021 and ended on 3 December 2021 (with the implementation of the COVID-19 Protection Framework see: https://covid19.govt.nz/traffic-lights/covid-19-protection-framework/).

COVID-19 is a significant challenge to education and learning (Crawford, et al., 2020; Daniel, 2020; Händel et al., 2020; Naciri et al., 2020; Toquero, 2020; Usak et al., 2020). COVID-19 caused face-to-face learning to become a threat to health (Murphy, 2020) which has meant that learning around the world moved online very rapidly (Alawamleh, 2020;

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Daniel, 2020; Händel et al., 2020; Sandars et al., 2020) on an untried and unparalleled scale (Burgess & Sievertsen, 2020). During the lockdown in Auckland (17 August – 3 December, 2021), e-learning has allowed teaching and learning in higher education to continue despite the implications of COVID-19.

I currently teach two postgraduate papers which would normally be taught in-person and on-campus. Moodle is the learning management system (LMS) used to support the e-learning components of the courses. Due to the lockdown in Auckland, however, both courses, in Semester 2, were taught entirely online using a combination of Zoom, Moodle, and Facebook. While Facebook is not an LMS and certainly was not designed for e-learning, this paper argues that the use of Facebook offered my students and I the opportunity to create an online community through which to learn and support one another through the lockdown.

E-learning in higher education

E-learning is learning using computer technology and the internet (Gowda & Suma, 2021; Ikawati et al., 2020). E-learning may improve academic outcomes for students (Maphalala & Adigun, 2021). However, both students and teachers require continued training, development and support regarding e-learning (Turnbull et al., 2021). Also, the use of technology for teaching and learning may

even improve and enrich connections and communication between students, teachers, and learning content (Mthethwa-Kunene & Maphosa, 2020).

Teacher support for learners is not only critical to e-learning success (Rajabalee & Santally, 2021) but has been found to be one of the most important factors concerning student satisfaction (Daultani et al., 2021). Therefore, instructors in higher education require some knowledge of how to design e-learning activities to make learning effective; of course, this means that higher education institutions must invest in training and support for teachers (Maphalala & Adigun, 2021) and students (Turnbull et al., 2021).

Effective e-learning should allow students to drive their own learning (Jaya et al., 2021). Student feedback, and incorporation of suggestions to improve, is essential to the effectiveness of e-learning; indeed, it is important that students' preferences are accommodated to make their engagement with the course more meaningful (Jaya et al., 2021). It is also important for e-learning platforms to be user-friendly to generate positive e-learning experiences (Maphalala & Adigun, 2021). Furthermore, content quality is a significant factor in levels of student satisfaction (Kumar et al., 2021).

Some important considerations for e-learning design

For effective e-learning, it is important for information to be broken down into smaller chunks (Swangla, et al., 2021; Welker et al., 2021). Presenting information in small chunks has been shown to increase student satisfaction, improve student attention levels and time management, boost overall engagement (Humphries & Clark, 2021), and is a valuable e-e-learning design aspect for life-long learning (Redondo et al., 2021). The chunking of information, in the context of cognition and human information processing, is a well-known and effective method for retaining information (Gowda & Suma, 2021; Krivec et al., 2021). Certainly, presenting information in smaller chunks and arranging these chunks into a sequence facilitates the encoding of information in the memory, and enables learners to better understand course content (Ananga, 2020; Gowda & Suma, 2021; Ibanga et al., 2020; Suppawittaya & Yasri, 2020).

In e-learning, sequencing is about ensuring that chunks of content are arranged in a way that makes sense (Swangla et al., 2021). The effective sequencing of information helps learners to avoid cognitive overexertion and disorientation (Martins et al., 2021). Furthermore, successful sequencing is characterised by complementarity between the needs and preferences of the learner on the one

hand and learning content properties and pedagogical considerations on the other (Benmesbah et al., 2021). It is important that information is presented clearly and effectively—that is, in a way that makes logical sense (Trakru & Jha, 2019). Quality of information—such as consistent and accurate spelling and grammar—is also of concern in e-learning (Gowda & Suma, 2021). Navigation, too, is important in e-learning design. Navigational features that enable learners to avoid disorientation and unnecessary cognitive strain are important concerning all web applications and, particularly, in the context of higher education (Arshad et al., 2016). User-friendly navigational features are critical to learner success in e-learning, meaning that effective and easy-to-use navigational features should be prioritised (Arshad et al., 2016; Gowda & Suma, 2021). Indeed, user-friendly navigational features may increase learner productivity (Arshad et al., 2016).

Moodle

A LMS is an application of software that is used to assist in the facilitation of e-learning (Pinho et al., 2020; Simanullang & Rajagukguk, 2020). A LMS holds content and programmed instructions which direct learning activities (Mpungose & Khoza, 2020) and is used to "deliver, track and manage" e-learning (Gowda & Suma, 2021, p. 724). A well-designed and well-organised LMS allows students to

focus on learning rather than getting distracted by the LMS itself (Arshad et al., 2016).

LMSs are important tools (Pinho et al., 2020) that have been employed widely in higher education (Méndez-Becerra et al., 2021). In an academic context, LMSs may offer quick access to learning content as well as flexibility (Phutela & Dwivedi, 2020; Puška et al., 2020). The use of LMSs can improve learning for students (Yusuf & Widyaningsih, 2020). For a LMS to be effective, it must offer advantages to learners by making the learning process clear and straightforward (Pinho et al., 2020). Certainly, a LMS needs to utilise a user-friendly design that provides "easy, natural, and engaging interaction" (Méndez-Becerra et al., 2021, p. 218).

Moodle is a very popular and well-known LMS (Simanullang & Rajagukguk, 2020) used as a platform for e-learning (Ikawati et al., 2020). The word Moodle stands for Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment (Antonenko et al., 2004). Moodle can be used to enhance the teaching and learning process by providing a platform with which to present educational content for students to engage with (Zelinskiy, 2020). Moodle uses a range of functions to support online learning including video, chat, discussion forums, materials, and quiz (Simanullang & Rajagukguk, 2020). While many studies describe Moodle in positive terms, in a study by Mpungose and Khoza (2020) it was found that

students used Moodle (and Canvas) mostly for downloading materials and engaging in group discussion forums. Concerning the two postgraduate courses I teach it is certainly the case that Moodle is used primarily as a space for accessing and downloading course materials and uploading assessments.

Facebook as a learning tool

Concerning effective e-learning, it is important to create a sense of community online (Turnbull et al., 2021). Facebook is a tool that can be used to create an online community and can be used effectively as a tool for informal online teaching and learning (Rangiwai, 2020).

Figure 1. Posting a Tik Tok on Facebook group page

While social media platforms were not overtly designed as educational tools, they are yet being adopted and used as such (Manca, 2020). Facebook may be considered a useful and helpful educational tool (Giannikas, 2020; Manickam et al., 2020; Voivonta & Avraamidou, 2018) especially when used along with learning management systems (Giannikas, 2020). In comparison with Moodle, Kazanidis et al. (2018) argue that Facebook users have greater levels of social presence—engagement between users. Also, Facebook groups, expressly, embolden communication between students and generate a positive social environment where students interrelate and share ideas and materials (Kazinidis et al., 2018). Notably, in a two-year study, Nalbone et al. (2016) learned that Facebook promotes better-quality dialogue between teachers and students, helps students adapt to an academic learning context, and encourages increased retention levels.

Figure 2. Using a GIF to celebrate the completion of an academic task shared to Facebook group page

Facebook provides a space for students to "become autonomous" and to "explore their own potential as learners", "as professionals", and to engage in co-creating knowledge in a digital milieu (Giannikas, 2020, p. 10; Mnkandla & Minnaar, 2018). According to Irwin et al. (2012), incorporating Facebook into the learning experience creates opportunities for more accessibility and flexibility regarding content, which may, potentially, enhance the quality of learning. Facebook can be used quite radically to disturb and disrupt the traditional peripheries of education through the application of digital teaching and learning in more social, open, and interactive

ways (Krutka & Carpenter, 2016; McLoughlin & Lee, 2010). In addition, Facebook may be utilised in higher education as a means of supporting learning, social interaction, and facilitating both formal and informal learning (Junco, 2014; Siemens & Weller, 2011).

Figure 3. Responding a question about APA referencing on Facebook group page

The most efficacious online learning environment, Greenhow and Galvin (2020) assert is one that comprises asynchronous online features; offers students time and space to learn at their own speed; permits students to elect what they would like to learn; and provides regular opportunities to experience deep learning with fellow learners and

teachers. As Facebook permits personal profiling, connections, relationship-building, content creation, and socialising, if thoughtfully included into an online learning plan, it can help students and teachers to stay connected (Greenhow & Galvin, 2020). Facebook, therefore, and social media more broadly, can "enhance students' engagement and make remote learning seem less remote" (Greenhow & Galvin, 2020, p. 513). However, as with any technology, Facebook must be used critically and carefully, and the potential harmful of effects of 24/7 engagement with technology, considered and mitigated where possible (Talaei-Khoei et al., 2020).
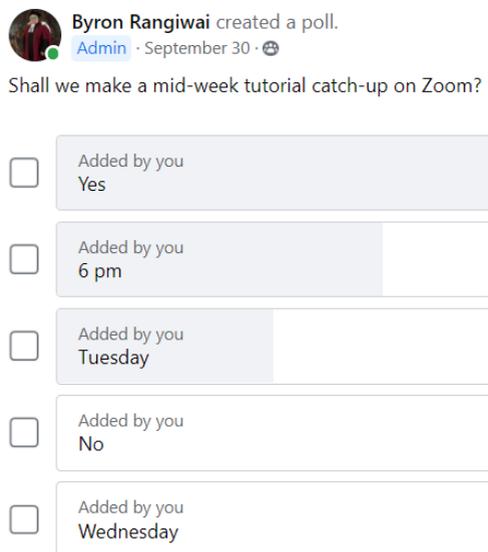
Figure 4. Using a poll on Facebook group page to negotiate with learners

Conclusion

E-learning is here to stay. While I am at the very early stages of learning about effective e-learning, it is apparent that this is an area which all teachers in higher education will need to develop competence in. Facebook is a powerful tool that can be used to support e-learning. During the August-December 2021 lockdown in Auckland, my students and I found Facebook to be platform that not only allowed us to learn and grow together, but to support one another through the longest lockdown in Aotearoa New Zealand's history.

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