

# Exploring the Use of Facebook in Education: Promising, Yet More Work is Needed



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Social networks are being used by a wide range of demographics. Youth in particular are obsessed with using Facebook, Twitter, and MySpace. An estimate of above 90% of undergraduate university students (aged 18-23) use Facebook on a daily basis. The popularity of Facebook—the most visited social network

website—makes it interesting to explore its usefulness not only for socializing in terms of sharing sorority events and keeping in touch with friends, but also for other more profitable purposes such as education.

Research has shown that students—through Facebook connections—share several aspects of knowledge by getting questions answered, receiving advice (similar to web forums), and coordinating on certain tasks that involve more than one person. Future research on the benefits of Facebook in particular and Social Networking Sites (SNSs) in general with regard to education will involve exploring several directions in which the social aspect of human life can be exploited to help us accomplish several learning and teaching goals. In other words, the rapid burst in Web genres and the increasing use of Web 2.0 has a promising future in the learning and teaching process.

This article reports the results of using Facebook as a tool in teaching an information retrieval computer science course to Dalhousie undergraduate and graduate students. The course was intended to teach students concepts related to language modeling, text analysis, classification of documents for retrieval, and several aspects related to Web search and search interface design. The class had 21 students (9 undergraduates and 12 graduates) and it was offered in the summer term of 2011. The Facebook page for the course was created on May 2nd, 2011. Of the 21 students, 19 students joined the page immediately while the remaining two students never did. The main goal of this article is to show the possible benefits and highlight some related difficulties of using Facebook in improving some aspects of teaching and learning. The data summarized here were derived from the actual activities on the Facebook page (Figure 1) and

also from an online questionnaire students were asked to answer after the end of the course.

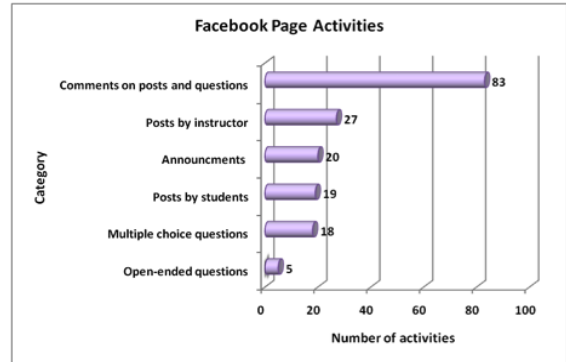


Figure 1

The idea was to create an environment in which students could review course material by encouraging them to answer questions posted on the page. The goal was also for them see each other's answers and think about the material in creative ways. This was done by asking students to read the text book chapters and post their questions on the page. They were also encouraged to answer each other's questions. The issue of sharing understanding of the material was further emphasized when the questions were discussed during each class that followed posting questions. The intent of posting reading material was also to enable students to see the comments they provide to each other as a form of feedback after reading the material. To further understand how Facebook encouraged students to comment and answer the questions posted on the page, Figure 2 shows the student answering activities. Note that open-ended questions (5 questions out of 23) had the least number of responses (3.6 responses) and are not included in the chart in Figure 2 because of their insignificance.

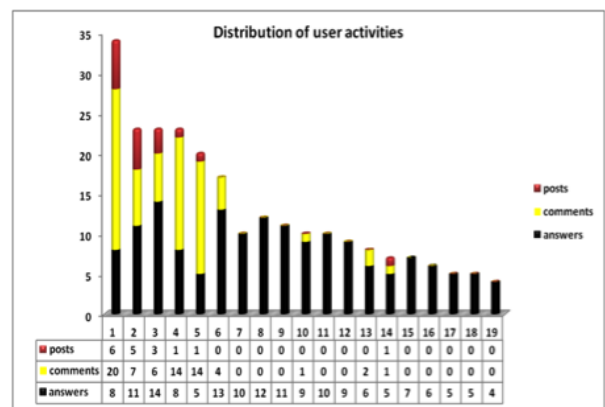


Figure 2

From the data derived in the study, the students tended to focus more on answering questions related to the class material than on commenting on informational posts. According to the ANOVA statistical test, the difference between the comments provided by students to informational posts and the answers they provided for questions was significant ( $F=9.2, p<0.004$ ). This finding shows that students were more concerned with the old-fashioned questions than the social aspect of sharing knowledge through providing feedback on informational posts. It is worth noting that there was no significant difference between graduate and undergraduate students with regard to all kinds of activities on the page (ANOVA,  $F=0.04, p<0.95$ ).

To further understand the user behaviour on the page, a survey was created and 17 of the 19 students who joined the Facebook page responded to the survey. Of those, 94.1% indicated that they use Facebook on a daily basis. When asked for what purposes they use Facebook, students provided answers that are shown in Figure 3. They indicated that—mostly—they have been using Facebook for socializing activities and for discussions with friends. Of the sample in the study, very few students indicated that they use Facebook for knowledge acquisition or question answering. With regard to following the course's Facebook page, students stated that they followed the page because of the helpfulness perceived in the instructor's posts, announcements, and questions. In addition, posts and comments by students achieved a reasonable number of responses (Figure 4).

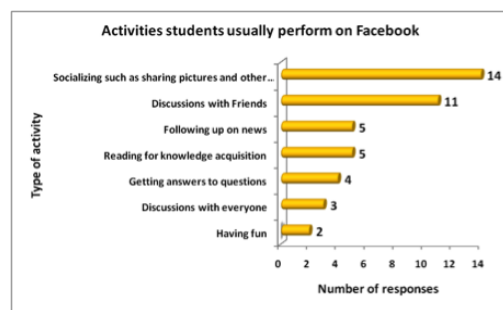


Figure 3

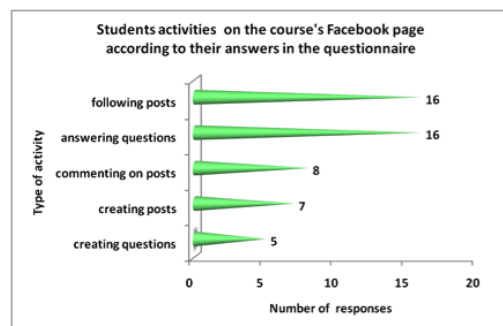


Figure 4

As shown in Figure 4, students seemed to have followed posts, and answered questions more often than they created posts and questions. This is also demonstrated in the actual page-derived data depicted in Figure 2. The results indicate that even though the instructor encouraged students in many ways (e.g., by explicitly asking them to post questions about chapters of the text book they read or articles they review as out-of-class exercises) to share their knowledge and ask questions, they remained attached to the idea of following the instructor's posts and answering his questions. On average, students had 13 activities on the page during the first eight weeks of the course (ranging 4-34 activities). The results indicate that the Facebook idea motivated the participation of some students more than others.

To summarize, although students use Facebook on a daily basis (sometimes even in the classroom when the instructor is speaking), they tend not to do so when asked to monitor a specific page to improve their knowledge acquisition in a course. Students in this course are still far more interested in social aspects of Facebook such as sharing photos and following events than they are concerned with knowledge acquisition on Facebook. If we assume that there should be a feature of Facebook (or any other SNS) particularly designed for educational purposes to encourage students to discuss class exercises, questions, and the like, we may lose the social aspect of Facebook that—in essence—seems to create interest in Facebook activities; i.e., it is a tradeoff between entertaining and educating. Using the social network Facebook as an educational tool requires modifying its purposes of socializing, keeping connected with friends and family, and entertaining. Therefore, it becomes as interesting as any other online teaching tool that degrades its social power with respect to group communications.

## References

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