SUCCEEDING AT MASTER’S LEVEL: USING FACEBOOK LIVE TO AID INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS’ ACADEMIC SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

If international students (IS) are to succeed on their master’s degree (MA), they must develop their academic skills quickly. Academic skills development for IS is vitally important as it has been suggested that they can be particularly apprehensive about their academic performance (Fischbacker–Smith, MacVicar; McEwan, Cheng, Dendrinos, J. Adekola, Pringle-Barnes, Kerr and Miller 2015). This paper considers the use of Facebook (FB) as one specific strategy to aid the academic skills development of a group of IS undertaking education based MA. Whilst Hope (2016) suggests that using FB to develop and nurture learning communities can be far from certain, it has been suggested that FB offers a number of advantages as an educational tool. Using FB within a number of different educational contexts has been shown to aid both learning and performance (Wichadee 2013, Bahati, 2015; Balcikanli, 2015). Communication and the exchange of information can also be fostered through FB, with the potential for more fruitful engagement between students and teachers being evidenced (Magro, Sharp, Ryan and Ryan, 2013, Nalbone, Kovach, Fish, McCoy, Jones and Wright, 2016). Specifically, this paper documents and analyses the use of FB Live which offers live video streaming capabilities. Within this paper, academic skills development is viewed as an ongoing process, not something that takes place once, or at the beginning of a course. Throughout their course, ten FB Live sessions were offered to the IS (approximately one each month). The topic areas covered a number of different areas (writing, reading, critical analysis etc.) to aid IS academic skills development. To analyse FB and FB Live as an educational tool, four focus groups were undertaken, each consisting of seven participants. During each of the focus groups, IS were asked to think about the FB Live sessions they attended and whether they had enabled them to develop their academic skills. Feedback suggests that FB Live could be an important tool to aid the development of academic skills, with participants’ recommending a more structured approach to the use of FB Live, more interaction throughout the sessions, as well as additional sessions throughout the academic year.

Keywords: Facebook, Facebook Live, academic skills development, international students.

1 INTRODUCTION

If international students (IS) are to succeed at master’s level, they must develop their academic skills quickly. Academic skills development for IS is vitally important as it has been suggested that they can be particularly apprehensive about their academic performance [1]. This paper considers the use of Facebook (FB) as one specific strategy to aid the academic skills development of a group of IS undertaking education based master’s degrees. Specifically, this paper considers the use of FB Live which offers live video streaming capabilities. The paper begins by explaining the rationale behind this research and pays attention to the use of FB in Higher Education (HE) and how it has been used, as one strategy, to aid the academic development of a group of master’s level students. The paper describes the methodological approach that was utilised and offers some conclusions and recommendations.

2 RATIONALE AND BACKGROUND

The MA Education is a full time master’s degree, aimed at both home and international students (IS). Over an academic year, MA students undertake five MA (M) level models and a dissertation. The provision aims to enable students to develop their professional competence and critical reflective awareness. Students on the MA course very quickly need to be able to develop their practical and theoretical understanding of some complex concepts. M level study requires IS to enhance their intellectual competence, and in doing so, engage in analysis and critical reflection, whilst developing
and employing independent learning strategies. Mastering the skills outlined is no mean feat, it can be particularly difficult for IS. When IS join the MA Education each September, they are given a comprehensive course, School of Education and Professional Development (SEPD) and University of Huddersfield induction. Whilst the development of academic skills can be problematic for all students, the fact that the participants in this study are international students, adds a further dimension to their academic development. As many IS are concerned about their academic performance [2] and struggle to develop academic skills as quickly as they would like, the MA team, as part of a wider informal strategy to aid transition and integration, decided to use some of the affordances of FB to aid IS academic development.

2.1 Using FB to in education

A basic definition of social media is that it is web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system [3] (p. 211). It has been noted by a number of researchers that if an appropriate pedagogy has been adopted, social networks can be transformational sites for learning provided they are used by academics in productive ways ([4]; [5]; [6]; [7]; [8]).

The social network that is the focus of this paper is FB and whilst Hope (2016) [9]; [10] suggests that using FB to develop and nurture learning communities can be far from certain, it has been suggested that FB offers a number of advantages as an educational tool. Cuesta, Ekland, Rydin and Witt (2018) [11] suggest that FB can be used to support students, when used in conjunction with teaching in a regular context at university. In an educational context, FB has been shown to aid both learning and performance ([12]; [13]; [14]). Communication and the exchange of information can also be fostered through FB, with the potential for more fruitful engagement between students and teachers being evidenced ([15]; [16]). The social communication elements can be of use with both students and educators as its affordances allows for increased interactions between students and between students and teachers ([14]; [17]). A number of advantages to the use of FB within education have been proposed. Wichadee (2013) [12] outlines the benefit of using FB for writing development activities and suggests that it can help students to improve and add to their enjoyment of their course. Similarly, Alm (2015) [18] proposes that social networks such as FB encourage out-of-class language engagement, this is particularly useful for IS. FB has also been shown to encourage students who are reluctant to speak up in class to engage when online [19]. It can also help students to reflect individually, as well as encouraging students to share experiences with other students and with their teachers [10]; [20].

As a strategy to promote openness, FB has been used to navigate interactions with students and teachers virtually, as this is sometimes easier. It allows students to be themselves and offers the potential to develop a ‘co-learning community’ ([11]; [21]), where a collaborative participatory learning environment can be facilitated [22]. In fact, community building through FB has been shown to be a strength of this particular social networking site [23], because positive interactions through FB can lead to the development of learning communities. Specifically, it has been useful because it allows students to process knowledge; participate; to help them to develop their own self-esteem; feel secure; personally reflect, to encourage one another and peer tutor. Using FB, peer tutoring has been shown to nurture a co-learning community because it helps to facilitate understanding of academic contexts such as academic systems [11]. In this capacity, FB has been used to enable students to understand the requirements of their course and manage their own learning [24]; to encourage communication, collaboration and the exchange of information [15]. FB allows for immediate responses [24] and helps students to build emotional connections with other students [23]. It has also been used to help students to develop critical thinking skills ([26]; [27]) and develop metacognitive awareness, particularly through the use of reflective practice [10]; [14]. Cuesta, et al., 2018) [11] suggest that FB can be used to enable students to better understand what it means to study at university. It has been used to facilitate a positive and encouraging cultural arena. It can be used as a:

...forum for intercultural knowledge production where students with diverse backgrounds make various interpretations of everyday concepts. It can lead to deeper negotiations and discussions among students leading to intercultural understanding (p.69).

It is worth noting that there has been some criticism of the use of social networks for educational purposes and of FB specifically. Several researchers have expressed anxiety over the potentially disruptive nature of social media sites. It has been suggested that they can be characterised as lawless frontier-lands, where groups vie for supremacy ([28]; [29]). Prescott, Wilson and Beckett,
2013) [30] discuss how some students can be less willing to engage with FB, particularly if it is seen as being a formalised part of their course, but there are also some suggestions that FB can be distracting [31]. Cultural influences can also impact engagement with FB. For example, some students have been shown to be passive when using FB, they avoid interaction and choose not to actively engage because they do not want to be seen to show a lack of respect to their teachers [32]. There is also some suggestion that older students can be reluctant to form close friendships through FB [16], with some not being au-fait with the social network [25]. There is also evidence to suggest that teachers can be too domineering when using FB [10]; [33].

2.1.1 Facebook Live

A significant number of people use the internet to watch video content that has been shared and posted by others online [34]. FB Live is a feature on the FB platform that offers the opportunity to live stream video content. It is a powerful way to connect with people who are your followers on FB and it helps people to create new ones. When streaming live, the broadcaster can engage in conversations with those following the broadcast ([35]). Offering both public and private broadcasting opportunities, once a live broadcast has finished the video remains available - unless deleted by the author – and can be viewed later [36]. Engagement is real time and allows the broadcaster to field questions and gauge the reactions of those following the broadcast [35]. Generally, those watching live receive a notification that a friend, or someone they are following is broadcasting live. Those viewing the live broadcast can provide real time, live feedback using a messaging/chat facility and/or emoticons [36]. The videos can also be discovered in news feeds [38]. In order to make the most of FB Live, broadcasters need to build anticipation through written posts, make sure that WIFI connections are strong, write catchy descriptions before going live to capture the attention of those you want to watch the broadcast, ask viewers to subscribe to live notifications, say hello to commenters by name when live, broadcast for the ‘right’ amount of time, use closing lines to signal the end of a broadcast, be creative and go live often [39].

3 METHODOLOGY

This paper followed a case study approach and was qualitative in nature. The main research question was; 'Does Facebook and Facebook Live have a positive impact on IS academic development? A case study was conducted because it allowed key themes and subjects to be explored in a focused manner [40]. Undertaking a single case study helped to shed light on whether the use of FB and FB Live as an educational tool aided academic development.

We communicated with students on our FB page using five different strategies. Three of these five strategies included posting videos – Facebook live videos, pre-recorded videos by staff, and videos from other video sharing services e.g. YouTube. The other two means of communication were materials aiding language and academic skills development; and quick and short answers to student inquiries. Using videos seemed like an obvious choice as the percentage of people watching videos online is very high, in regions where many of our international students come from, it is generally over 90 percent [34].

We decided that our primary means would be FB Live because it is quite straightforward and user-friendly and it also saved us time, as no additional work was needed to edit the videos or have multiple takes until we were happy with the outcome. A further upside of FB live was that FB announced that because the number of live videos on FB doubled between 2015 and 2016, they have given priority of live videos in their news feed ([41]; [42]), increasing the likelihood that our videos would reach our students. The content of these videos were concerned with academic skills development, improving language proficiency, advice by former students and early-career advice after graduation.

We conducted four focus groups with IS. In total 29 students participated from seven countries. (China, Vietnam, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Nigeria, India and Indonesia). The focus group participants were asked about whether the use of FB and FB Live helped them develop master’s level skills. To analyse the data, we used thematic analysis because we felt that an inductive approach to this study would provide us with the most reliable insight into what IS think.

Ethical issues were also considered; participants were treated fairly, sensitively, with dignity and within an ethic of respect and freedom from prejudice. Anonymity, confidentiality and privacy were assured. They could withdraw at any time, for any reason [43].
4 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Whilst we were not looking for a predetermined list of specific codes and themes, we did take account of the literature discussed (see above) pertaining to FB, FB live and academic development. We looked for evidence of FB and FB Live supporting learning and whether it helped our IS to develop academically.

We also want to make clear that the findings presented are not generalisable as the research is local in nature. We do not want to make sweeping claims for widespread adoption of our recommendations, these are tentative findings based on a small scale study of twenty-nine IS from seven countries. However, we have found some interesting things that make for interesting reading.

After the coding process, we identified four broad themes as follows:

- The familiar faces incentive
- Advice from ‘authority’
- Community building and awareness raising
- A useful social element

4.1 The familiar faces incentive

One of the problems we faced with the FB Live broadcasts, and the page in general, was the result of our own inexperience using FB for educational purposes. At the beginning, we were unaware of the different roles such as administrator, editor, moderator, etc., one can have in the page. This, however, did not turn out to be a real issue because as staff members noted, they preferred not to have to be involved in managing the account themselves. Therefore, one Page Administrator was responsible for the videos, and when time could not be arranged between the Page Administrator and a staff member for a live broadcast event, we asked the staff member to record a video which was then uploaded onto the page. Prior to the broadcasts, we considered what we viewed to be the correct subject area, we thought about timings etc. During the live broadcasts we encouraged those delivering the sessions to engage with students who asked questions using their name and to try to be engaging.

We also posted a number of videos from different video sharing sites such as YouTube, Vimeo and websites focusing on academic skills development. FB was not the first forum we shared videos from other sites with similar content, we did the same in an earlier project when we were using Yammer (a different social media platform) to provide academic support [44]. Interestingly, although these videos were most often of a higher quality in terms of their production, based on the number of views and shares, they were not received as well as the live broadcasts and the pre-recorded resources uploaded by staff. Although this information would not allow for generalisation, in the focus groups students said that one of the reasons they watched the videos and live broadcasts was because they knew the people in the videos.

I watched the videos because they appeared in my news. The title grabbed my attention and I thought: hey, I know this guy. (Focus group participant)

Yes, I like to see my professor in the video. I feel like I can ask questions about it in the lesson. (Focus group participant)

This is also in line with what students reported in our earlier study about Yammer when they suggested more use of “bespoke video clips, made by both staff and IS themselves” ([44] p. 7115).

4.2 Advice from ‘authority’

In the focus group discussions students also talked about what they would be interested in seeing, or seeing more of, on the page and within the live broadcasts. During these discussions four themes emerged and they were governed by the different identities the students took on in their interaction with our content [45] – ‘students as learners’, ‘students as social beings’, ‘students in transition’, and ‘students as critical consumers’.

The ‘learner’ identity was particularly evident, participants reported that they would be interested in hearing more about academic and language skills development, live broadcasts by, or live chat with subject lecturers where the lecturers could address some questions from students, and opportunities to practice the language. These findings further support the literature that argues that students seek information exchange with their colleagues as well as opportunities to
improve and practice their language skills in a more relaxed environment, for which FB provides a suitable platform when it is combined with their course ([11]; [18]).

The students were also interested in having more broadcasts with former students talking about their experiences as this could help current students’ motivation and encouragement.

First of all, we find some motivation. We need some motivation, in our education and in our lives, whatever we are dealing with, we need some expert or some others’ experience also help us and when sometimes we feel that we are in trouble. We are in trouble. Whenever we watch a video or listen to someone we know that others also [inaudible] or they were in that situation, how they deal with life. And these things motivate us and they push an option sometime. **Focus group participant**

We are reminded of the work of Chen (2015) [20] who suggest that students find it encouraging to read or hear about other students’ experiences. Similarly, suggestions that peer-tutoring helped students to understand and find their ways around a new academic system was evident in our research. Both our findings and the literature suggest that these students value advice from people they regard as authority such as former students or lecturers [11].

### 4.3 Awareness raising and community building

Posting materials aiding language and academic skills and answering questions during the live broadcasts, were not widely popular with the students initially. The students suggested that this might not be the right forum for such an approach.

*Maybe, practice and study questions can be in the other site, Brightspace (Virtual Learning Environment). **Focus group participant.***

As for posting questions either on the site, or during the live broadcasts, the students had concerns about losing face with their peers and with the teachers too. As highlighted above, Aydin (2014) [32] suggests that when using FB there is a need to be aware of the cultural implications. However, some of the IS did send private messages, both during and after live sessions, asking academic skills and subject study related questions. Instead of simply replying to that particular student, with their consent we anonymised the questions and posted them out to the network with our answers. This proved to be popular with the students. The popularity was not only shown by the number of likes and shares, but they voiced their preference for it in the focus groups as well. The students felt it helped them raise awareness about certain topics as well as to learn to ask questions. These then initiated discussions amongst the students improving their collaborative skills.

*Right, so there’s certain things that they needed to include in the essay. And they didn’t realise that they had to. So, when one of the students asked that question, and then you posted the answer on Facebook, they all found it really helpful. **Focus group participant***

*I don’t know about the academic skills... eeeem, just yeah, I mean, the way they had to sort of organize the lesson... the lesson plan and the rationale itself and things like that. And then discussions between students and helping each other because someone bought that question up, you then discussed it on FB and then... yeah, it creates a conversation within the study groups as well. Amongst the students. **Focus group participant***

Asking questions and being able to discuss them with their peers is a skill many IS find difficult [46], therefore, being able to send in anonymous questions without the fear of losing face, or having to overcome foreign language or social anxiety proved to be particularly helpful. This is in line with the literature which has shown FB’s positive effect on fostering student-student and student-teacher communication ([17]; [19]). These interactions, both during and after live broadcasts, helped to foster learner autonomy as it enables students to reflect and take control of their own learning [22]. The findings also suggest that there is potential regarding this form of communication provided students agree to their anonymised questions to be posted. Although the posting of anonymous questions did seem to lower the anxiety regarding losing face, it did not eradicate it. The students still felt there were questions they could not discuss in a forum that teachers had access to. Therefore, they also created their own closed FB group. This was viewed positively, the work of Whittaker et al. (2014) [23] and McLoughlin and Lee (2007) [22] found that one of the strengths of FB is its potential for community building. The creation of their own closed FB group was viewed as the IS taking their own learning in their hands and evidenced them beginning to develop their own autonomy [24].
4.4 A useful social element

The use of FB and FB Live was viewed positively by the majority of IS, however many of them wanted the site to have wider application and wanted it to be used to help them become part of university in a wider social sense and they suggested that FB and FB Live could be used to this effect. As one of the participants put it:

I wanna know what’s going on in the uni. **Focus group participant**

This interest in social life included getting advice about student life both from the university as well as former and current students; hearing from different student societies introducing themselves and regularly updating students about what they do; and about how to meet more people. Meeting new people from cultures other than their own, is generally a goal for IS, not only in the UK, but from around the world. The lack of opportunities of making cross cultural friends is very often a source of disappointment for them ([47]; [48]). Although cross-cultural socialising is a complex issue and home students often “…shy away from initiating interaction” and leave it to the international students to take the first steps ([49] p. 506), creating, and perhaps facilitating, these opportunities for cross-cultural communication could be the nudge some of them need. FB and FB Live can accommodate these opportunities as they add a new element to the traditional communication model. This new element enables participants to re-post the live broadcasts and add their own interpretations, reactions and questions to them, which can further facilitate communication between participants [50].

The transition period for IS is the time when they, to some extent at least, adopt the norms of the host culture [51]. Students seem to be aware of the importance of this and suggested they would like to see contents preparing students for culture shock and advice preparing students for life here in advance. Regarding such content, participants showed a preference to hear from former and current students. This could be explained by students seeking practical information about how to navigate in the new culture from ‘insiders’, but also by the fact that in collectivist societies, where the majority of our students come from, people tend to avoid seeking formal help, they prefer to rely on informal help [52]. Furthermore, students were also interested in the other end of transitioning - transitioning out of university. They were interested in learning more about their options and possibilities after graduation as well as career paths and how to set out on these paths. Although the university offers career advice to students, they felt they were too general and would have liked to hear from graduates of the school. This also links back to the literature and our findings about how the learners appreciate and value peer-feedback [11].

5 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

When developing master’s level skills, there are a number of challenges that international students have to face. This paper has considered some of the obstacles that IS experience and outlined how FB and FB Live was used, as one strategy, to aid the academic development of a group of IS. The findings suggest that the page could become transformational, not only in supporting learning, but also in helping to form an international community where students could ask questions and voice their opinions. A meaningful finding was that the students found seeing familiar faces important when engaging with FB. This prompted IS to engage with the FB Live sessions and watch the videos we uploaded, which helped to foster student-student and student-teacher interaction on and off our FB site. This, in turn, helped the learners to begin to develop their academic and critical thinking skills. The students did have some concerns regarding losing face if they asked questions that other students, or teachers thought might evidence a lack of understanding, but this was solved by anonymising their questions when posting them to the page. The students also expressed that they would like to see more content that would help their social integration into university life.

An important recommendation is that students need to be made aware of the page and be clear about its purpose at the beginning of their course as we want to make sure that misunderstandings can be avoided. Another issue we came across was that some students and staff were not familiar with using FB, but particularly FB Live. Although this might seem trivial to most FB users, there are a number of staff and students who – either because of their age, lack of accessibility or lack of interest – have never have been on FB. This could be overcome by providing training to both staff and students. Involving home students is also something that we want to instigate. The inclusion of home students further extends the cross-cultural nature of the page providing opportunities for both international and home student communication and understanding. Home students can equally benefit from academic and study skills advice, which could be a further incentive for them to be a part of this community. A
final recommendation would be to include content about integration more broadly. Such content would be especially welcomed if it came from present and former students as the ‘newcomers’ want an “insider” perspective.

REFERENCES


