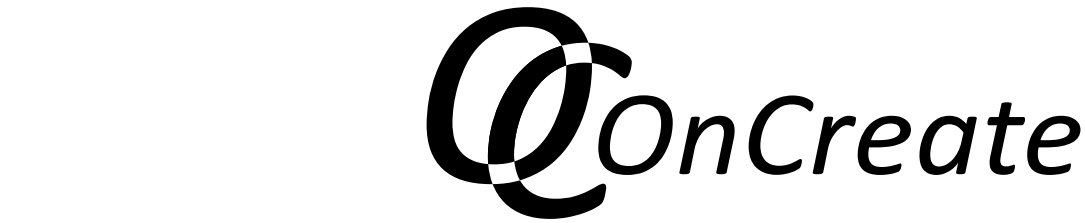

Learning Spaces

Facebook-Centred Courses

Co-funded by the
Erasmus+ Programme
of the European Union

Grant agreement no.: 2014-1-DE01-KA203-000706
Project Consortium: University of Applied Sciences Magdeburg-Stendal (Germany); Aalborg University (Denmark); Lapland University of Applied Sciences (Finland); University of Lincoln (United Kingdom); University of Ljubljana (Slovenia); Potsdam University of Applied Sciences (Germany); Tampere University of Applied Sciences (Finland); University of Tampere (Finland); YMCA University of Applied Sciences (Germany)

Development of Facebook-Centred Design Courses

Martyn Thayne,
University of Lincoln, UK

Abstract

Although Facebook was not originally conceived as a platform for collaborative modes of teaching and learning, in certain cases it may serve as an accessible (and seemingly ubiquitous) alternative to dedicated collaboration platforms. This article describes how Facebook can be used to facilitate online courses involving graphic and interaction design processes. By encouraging group participation through a variety of familiar and convenient communication tools, Facebook can provide a robust platform for 'scaffolding' collaborative learning in a variety of online course provisions and blended classroom teaching.

Facebook as a collaboration platform

Whilst Facebook is not the only social network of its kind, its popularity and pervasiveness amongst Higher Education learners (particularly EU students enrolled on OnCreate courses) makes it an ideal platform to facilitate forms of online collaborative learning. There are of course ethical concerns when choosing to incorporate proprietary services such as Facebook within teaching and learning provisions (particularly issues of privacy and intellectual property); nevertheless, a number of OnCreate courses have demonstrated how Facebook can provide an engaging and flexible environment to support creative and collaborative processes.

Effective online collaboration is best achieved when using an appropriate platform with a familiar interface, whereby communication with other group members and tutors is made as simple and intuitive as possible. Findings from the initial research phase of OnCreate (see Thayne, et al. 2015; Stockleben, et al. 2017) suggests that students and staff are often

'put off' using institutional 'Learning Management Systems' for communication and collaboration (i.e. Blackboard, Moodle). The interface and navigation of these systems are often found to be relatively confusing and unintuitive, and therefore not particularly conducive for encouraging group participation and social interaction. Collaborating via social media, meanwhile, was found to be more in-line with students web-design expectations and online habits (particularly in features like closed groups, push notifications, commenting, sharing, interactive polling, file uploading, live chat, and compatibility across devices).

The modes of synchronous and asynchronous communication made possible by such features can help foster an open, blended learning environment, one which extends the traditional boundaries of the classroom in time and space. The participatory nature of these tools enables staff and students to communicate and strengthen social ties, alongside the production of new knowledge and creative practices. Several OnCreate courses have incorporated Facebook as a collaboration platform, and whilst the teaching methods varied on an individual basis, the central approach of these courses was to create a closed Facebook group where the majority of staff and student interaction takes place, where learning materials and related sources are shared, and where discovery-based discussion, debate and ideation processes may be initiated.

Working within a closed Facebook group has a number of benefits for supporting forms of cooperative and collaborative learning. The term ‚collaborative learning' is often used as a synonym for cooperative learning when, in fact, it is a separate strategy that encompasses a broader range of group interactions, such as developing learning communities, stimulating student/faculty discussions, and encouraging electronic exchanges. Both approaches stress the importance of faculty and student involvement in the learning process. Whilst Facebook may well provide a number of promising opportunities, there could be some initial reservations when using this platform in an educational context. Teachers can often be hesitant to accept 'friend' requests from students (and vice versa), with an individual's Facebook network deemed a private sphere of social

interaction. Crossing personal boundaries can be problematic, especially if students are required to interact with strangers from another country (as was the case with OnCreate courses). By creating a closed group and inviting students to join, interaction can take place without the need for a formal Facebook 'friendship'. As a result, staff and students can maintain the privacy of their individual personal accounts, whilst retaining the participatory and communicational benefits of Facebook. The closed group, then, represents a 'safe space' for social interaction that can help to develop an engaged community of learners.

Although faculty staff may have access to some increased 'admin rights', the familiarity and uniformity of a Facebook group can help alleviate the traditional divisions and hierarchies that exist between students and teachers within a classroom or MOOC setting. Although teachers might use the Facebook group to disseminate formal learning materials and tasks, this is situated against a backdrop of less formal social interaction. Each member is able to contribute to the group, initiate and direct discussions, share and comment on learning materials, alongside more informal modes of communication. As such, students are encouraged to work collaboratively alongside faculty staff to negotiate their learning. This approach can help teaching staff to facilitate student research, encourage peer feedback, support critical and digital literacies, whilst students are also able to take shared 'ownership' of the group. This is particularly important for team composition, as it can help to strengthen social ties within a group and cultivate the 'soft skills' necessary for effective collaboration in creative processes.

OnCreate courses that utilised a closed Facebook group have found this approach to be highly effective for producing a repository of collaborative research, and in supporting the close relationships needed for the mutual sharing of creative ideas and constructive feedback. Engagement by students was generally very good, whilst the accessible nature of Facebook (with its push notifications and mobile compatibility) seemed to mitigate barriers to active student participation. Facebook has proved to be a flexible platform from which to post various forms of information - whether it be text, video based or audio content. That said, Facebook does not

support all formats natively and often relies on other repositories and third-party platforms to make this learning platform fully functional as a collaboration platform.

Complementary tools and platforms

Google Docs & Drive

Google Docs (https://www.google.co.uk/docs/about/) is a fantastic provision for working collaboratively with text, presentations, numerical data, drawings and gathering research. Google Drive (https://www.google.com/drive/) is the cloud-based service where Google Docs (and other files) are stored. Google Docs in particular was used as a core tool for producing collaborative documents in research and ideation tasks, whilst teams often create shared documents between sub-teams in Google Drive. These are posted on the Facebook page.

Microsoft Teams

In the interest of objectivity, Microsoft also have an online collaborative version of their famous Office suite called Office 365 (https://products.office.com/en-gb/business/office). Office 365 offers an even more comprehensive selection of online tools, most of which support real-time editing and collaboration. However, Google Drive/Docs is totally free and features a simpler interface which seems to suggest a more focused approach on content as opposed to form. The issue with Office 365 not being free means that unless all participants (or their institutions) are paid subscribers, then they will not have access.

Padlet

When gathering/sorting visual research and ideas iteration, Padlet (https://padlet.com) offers a near synchronous way of contributing, editing and commenting on ideas/research collaboratively. It lacks the effective sync speed of Google Docs and Microsoft Office 366 but is free and relatively intuitive thanks to its very visual interface and approach to interaction. Padlet has been extensively utilised in OnCreate projects where collaboration on creative briefs was a requirement. It was especially effective in supporting the iterative research and design processes of

teams of people working remotely.

Pinterest

Similar to Padlet, Pinterest (https://www.pinterest.de) allows individuals to 'pin' interesting web content to an online 'board'. These can be shared and created collaboratively, and can be an engaging way to produce mood boards and gather research during the ideation phases of creative projects.

Useful methods

Introductory 'icebreakers'

In order to initiate and encourage social interaction, it is important for each group member (both staff and students) to introduce themselves. This can help to support informal and communal bonds from the outset of the course, thus reframing traditional student/teacher relations. Introductory activities can also help to support team composition, as students can highlight their specific skills and experience. The idea here is to get the students familiar with posting to the group page as soon as possible, and to generate momentum in terms of engagement with the course.

Social interaction

- Post a selfie or short video with basic personal information (getting students to post pictures of their pets works very well!)
- Highlight key skills and aims/expectations for taking part in the course. This could generate a group discussion about learning objectives and potential direction of the course.

Team composition

- Students link to online portfolios or showcase previous work
- Students provide a self-assessment in form of a "trump" card or share their online resumes/CV's

Facebook as 'coffee room'

The closed Facebook group can be used as a virtual 'coffee room', functioning as an informal hub for communications and cultural exchange. As suggested above, this helps to encourage social interaction, resulting in more communal responses to learning content, research materials, and student-centred discussion. This method is particularly useful for

blended learning courses or when Facebook is used as a supplementary tool alongside more formal learning environment. This can provide an informal environment that may help 'scaffold' learning (see Majid, Stapa, Keong, 2015) by situating key skills and competencies.

Pooling and archiving research

Although Facebook is a particularly useful platform for networking and social interaction, it has the added value of allowing staff and students to quickly share information (easily accessible across devices). Not only can this yield positive engagement of students in research processes, it can also result in new and unexpected transformations to the course content itself. The Facebook group can become a live repository of information, audio-visual content, academic texts, and a variety of learning materials disseminated during different phases:

· Preparatory research — can be undertaken in the lead up to a course, either in an informal basis, or as an icebreaker task (i.e students create presentation material of their related cases/services/organizations (using powerpoint/GoogleSlides, etc.) and share on Facebook)

· In-Course — students are encouraged to share relevant materials, either on an ad-hoc basis or are tasked with sharing a set amount of content (i.e each student must identify and share x amount of texts/videos/websites relating to the course). Staff can facilitate this process or stimulate further discussion by posting relevant content themselves (if there is a lull in activity or things go off track).

· Post-course research communities — groups can live on after a course has ended, with students and staff able to post links and content relevant to the course topic or shared interests of the community. These groups may also spawn further collaboration, with students of OnCreate courses using these Facebook groups to initiate team meet-ups and further project developments.

Sharing core learning materials

Teaching staff can use Facebook groups to conveniently disseminate core learning materials with the student cohort. A number of methods can be used to support this process further: for example, in order to increase the

visibility of certain course materials, it is recommended that significant content be 'pinned' to the group page. Teachers can also track who has engaged with content by requesting that students press 'like' when they have watched/read, or comment with their responses to the material (a useful way to assess and evaluate student engagement with the course)

Flipping the classroom

Combined with the methods above, a Facebook group can support approaches to 'flipped learning'. Flipped learning has proved to be a highly effective way of preparing students with skills-based knowledge of software. By making learning materials and relevant tutorials available prior to workshops or scheduled online sessions, more time and focus can be given to creative working, problem solving, conceptual development and peer/staff level support. This can involve creating bespoke materials and tasks to support flipped classroom teaching, or simply curating online content then designing learning activities that enable students to fully respond and build on this new knowledge.

'Like' to learn

When encouraging student-directed, discovery-based approaches to learning, it is important for teachers to adapt course materials in line with the learning experiences of the group. In order to prepare workshops that better suit concepts and ideas generated during the course, staff can use Facebook to pitch ideas for course material and areas of potential interest. This material is only included in workshops, or taken further by tutors, if the proposed material receives a minimum of x likes on Facebook. This method can encourage student engagement with the design of the course and help tailor teaching to creative problems at hand, as they emerge.

Polling and iterative feedback

Similar to the 'like to learn' method, Facebook's interactive polling and questionnaire features provide a simple way to gauge interest of a particular topic, to arrange team meetings, come to a group consensus, etc. This can certainly be useful for undertaking audience research, or when soliciting peer feedback. Students can post works-in-progress in order to

receive advice/support/inspiration from fellow students and staff alike. The ability for each member to comment, 'like', or provide a 'reaction', can prove particularly useful in the ideation phase. For example, a team of graphic designers may have developed 6 possible logos for a creative brief - by posting on Facebook and assigning each design with an individual emoji from Facebook's 'reactions' feature, the team can quickly determine the popularity and effectiveness of each logo.

Live Stream

Facebook's live stream feature enables courses instructors to 'live stream' lectures and tutorials, with this footage also being archived to the page for time-shifted viewing. All group members receive a notification when the stream goes live, and are able to interact through the comment and reaction features.

Resources

How To Use Facebook Groups In eLearning:
https://elearningindustry.com/use-facebook-groups-elearning

10 Tips On How To Use Facebook For Effective Social Learning:
https://elearningindustry.com/how-to-use-facebook-for-social-learning

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