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Faceworking: exploring students' education-related use of *Facebook*

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Social networking sites such as *Facebook* and *MySpace* have been subject to much recent debate within the educational community. Whilst growing numbers of educators celebrate the potential of social networking to (re)engage learners with their studies, others fear that such applications compromise and disrupt young people's engagement with 'traditional' education provision. With these ongoing debates in mind, the current paper presents an in-depth qualitative analysis of the *Facebook* 'wall' activity of 909 undergraduate students in a UK university. Analysis of these data shows how much of students' education-related use of this social networking application was based around either the *post-hoc* critiquing of learning experiences and events, the exchange of logistical or factual information about teaching and assessment requirements, instances of supplication and moral support with regards to assessment or learning, or the promotion of oneself as academically incompetent and/or disengaged. With these themes in mind, the paper concludes that rather than necessarily enhancing or eroding students' 'front-stage' engagement with their formal studies, *Facebook* use must be seen as being situated within the 'identity politics' of being a student. In particular, *Facebook* appears to provide a ready space where the 'role conflict' that students often experience in their relationships with university work, teaching staff, academic conventions and expectations can be worked through in a relatively closed 'backstage' area.

Keywords: *Facebook*; university; student; social networking; identity

Introduction

Over the past five years social networking sites (SNSs) have become one of the most prominent genres of social software, popularised by the *MySpace* and *Facebook* applications that now each boast hundreds of millions of users. SNSs are personal and personalisable spaces for online conversations and sharing of content based typically on the maintenance and sharing of 'profiles' where individual users can represent themselves to other users through the display of personal information, interests, photographs, social networks and so on. Users of an SNS can maintain their own profile and access the profiles of others on the network with a view to establishing connections with preferred 'friends'. Given their broad range of features, SNSs function in different ways depending on the preference of the user. Individuals can use SNSs to 'hang out', to waste time, learn about each other or simply as a directory (Stutzman 2006). Younger users often use social networking in the micro-management

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of their social lives, as an arena for social exploration and to develop networking skills (Ito et al. 2008; Livingstone 2009). The orientation of SNSs towards self-presentation, the viewing of others' personal information and multiple means of communication and exchange has certainly proved attractive to students in high school, college and university settings.

The prominence of SNSs in the lives of learners of all ages has prompted great enthusiasm amongst some educators. It has been claimed, for example, that social networking applications share many of the desirable qualities of good 'official' education technologies – permitting peer feedback and matching the social contexts of learning such as the school, university or local community (Mason 2006). The conversational, collaborative and communal qualities of social networking services are felt to 'mirror much of what we know to be good models of learning, in that they are collaborative and encourage active participatory role for users' (Maloney 2007, 26). One of the main educational uses of social networking is seen to lie in their support for interaction between learners facing the common dilemma of negotiating their studies. SNSs may also benefit learners by allowing them to enter new networks of collaborative learning, often based around interests and affinities not catered for in their immediate educational environment. As Maloney (2007, 26) continues, 'social networking sites such as *MySpace* and *Facebook* have shown, among other things, that students will invest time and energy in building relationships around shared interests and knowledge communities'. This has prompted some educationalists to explore the potential of social networking to augment 'conventional' interactions and dialogue between students and teachers. Some have welcomed the capacity of social networking services to offer educators a forum for 'easy networking and positive networking with students' (Lemeul 2006, 1).

It is recognised that some of the qualities of social networking may clash with current pedagogical paradigms. Whilst educationalists hope that social networking promotes exchanges between learners that are related to formal educational objectives, SNSs are also celebrated for providing channels for informal and unstructured learning. For example, it has been suggested that social networking offers the opportunity to re-engage individuals with learning and education, promoting a 'critical thinking in learners' about their learning, which is one of 'the traditional objectives' of education' (Bugeja 2006, 1). Some commentators contend that SNSs offer 'the capacity to radically change the educational system… to better motivate students as engaged learners rather than learners who are primarily passive observers of the educational process' (Ziegler 2007, 69). Of course these qualities are seen as detrimental by other commentators. Concerns that have been raised include the heightened disengagement, alienation and disconnection of learners from education and to the detrimental effect that social networking tools may have on 'traditional' skills and literacies (Brabazon 2007). Fears abound within some sections of the education community that SNSs could contribute to the intellectual and scholarly de-powering of a 'Google generation' of learners incapable of independent critical thought, and generally hasten the onset of what Ziegler (2007, 69) has termed 'the mis-education of Generation M'. Despite the popular positioning of social networking as exciting educational tools, some critics think they may distract learners from their studies (Cassidy 2006). The use of social networking therefore continues to be a controversial element of the digital education landscape.

Research questions

With these issues in mind, this paper will now go on to examine the social significance of the *Facebook* SNS in the lives of undergraduate university students in the UK. The take-up of *Facebook* amongst university students during the mid-2000s was rapid, leading one media researcher to warn university authorities that '*Facebook* owns your campus' (Stutzman 2006). As such *Facebook* offers perhaps the most appropriate contemporary online setting within which to explore how social software sites 'fit' with higher educational settings and communities of educational users and, therefore, investigate the current assumptions of (un)enthusiastic practitioners and education technologists surrounding social software and education. In particular the paper will investigate the *realities* of students' *Facebook* activity and consider the role that *Facebook* is playing in the wider 'student experience' of twenty-first century university education. With these issues in mind the remainder of the paper will now go on to consider the following research questions:

- When and for what purposes were students using *Facebook*? What aspects of students' interactions via *Facebook* can be considered to be related to their university education – either in terms of the formal educational concerns of the university and/or the informal needs of students relating to negotiating their university studies?
- What evidence was there for *Facebook* use contributing to the increased (dis)engagement of students with their university studies?
- What can be said to be 'new' about the nature and outcomes of students' use of *Facebook*?

Research methods

These research questions are explored through a systematic study of the content of the *Facebook* pages of undergraduate students who were studying at the Coalsville University School of Social Sciences during the 2006/7 academic year. Coalsville University is a large 'Russell group' university in the UK with 25,000 students and around 30 academic schools. The School of Social Sciences is one of the largest and busiest of these schools, as well as being one of the largest departments of social sciences in the UK. The study covered all undergraduate students in the school ($n = 909$), who were studying for a variety of undergraduate (BA and BSc) degrees in subject disciplines such as Sociology, Social Policy, Criminology, Education, Psychology and Anthropology. The majority of students studying social sciences at Coalsville were aged between 18 and 25 years and, just over three-quarters were female. The period of active data collection took place between Monday 6th November 2006 and Monday 12th March 2007 (the mid-point of the autumn semester to the mid-point of the spring semester). The rationale for this timing was that it covered six teaching weeks before and six teaching weeks after the students' autumn term three-week assessment period, as well as a three-week Christmas vacation period. In terms of the ebb and flow of the academic calendar the period of data collection therefore encompassed the main phases of undergraduate life – i.e., attending lectures and seminars, preparing for and submitting assignments, revising for and sitting examinations, receiving assessment results, breaking up for and returning from vacation periods and recommencing lecture and seminar studies.

The study can be best described as non-participant ethnographic research, with the researcher positioned halfway between researcher-as-insider and researcher-as-analyst (Davies and Merchant 2007). During the 18 weeks of data collection (as well as a previous three-month period of familiarisation where no data were collected) the researcher adopted a quasi-overt role within the 'limited public setting' of the *Facebook* Coalsville network. During this period the author 'inhabited' the *Facebook* application alongside the students – establishing a *Facebook* account under his real name within the Coalsville network. Whilst the presence of the researcher was publicly discernable via his personal webpage, the role of the researcher was a limited inhabitation of *Facebook*. The researchers' voice was not heard online and the researcher did not participate or interact directly with any of the students. In this non-participant role he logged onto *Facebook* on a daily basis and observed the development of the student pages and groups associated with the Coalsville social science students. In particular, the study focused on students' use of the *Facebook* 'wall' feature. Whilst *Facebook* is based around a range of constituent features based around the sharing of content, the most used feature of many students' *Facebook* page is the wall (Pew Internet and American Life Project 2007) – essentially an asynchronous 'chat' facility owned by each user. Here users can exchange short text messages with their nominated 'friends', with 'wall-to-wall' exchanges then visible to other users. The wall is perhaps the most conventional computer-mediated-communication feature of *Facebook* and, in terms of the configuration of *Facebook* at the time of the study, constituted the main space where users could interact and communicate with each other. The researcher systematically archived exchanges between students from their various *Facebook* walls and observed and noted the characteristics and qualities of other content as it was developed.

Of the 909 students in Coalsville School of Social Sciences, 694 (76%) maintained *Facebook* profiles – all but 82 of which were chosen by the students to be accessible publicly. The 612 students with publicly accessible (and therefore researchable) profiles produced 68,169 wall postings over the 18-week period of analysis. Of these interactions, 4% ($n = 2496$) were related to their studies and/or academic aspects of the university experience. There were no significant differences in terms of general *or* education-related *Facebook* activity by students' gender, year of study or assessment marks. In other words, use of *Facebook* was consistent across the student sample regardless of age, stage, gender or academic performance. In terms of data analysis, the textual data collected from the wall postings were analysed in a relatively straight-forward manner. The constant comparison technique was used as the means of analysis for the qualitative data generated from the students' wall postings (Glaser and Strauss 1967). This initially involved reading all the wall postings to gain an overall sense of the data. All the data were then read again and 'open-coded' to produce an initial code list until, in the opinion of the researcher, analysis had reached theoretical saturation. Although some *in vivo* codes were adapted (i.e., directly using the language of the students) the majority were researcher-led and analytic (Strauss 1987). From this basis the data were then selectively coded in terms of categories identified with the initial code list directly related to the research questions outlined above.

Whilst justifiable in terms of the analytic insight it afforded, this insider perspective on the Coalsville students' use of *Facebook* does raise a number of ethical issues which require attention before our analysis can proceed – not least issues of privacy, informed consent and confidentiality (see Association of Internet Researchers 2002; Moreno, Fost, and Christakis 2008). Issues of privacy when conducting qualitative

empirical work in online spaces are complex. The Coalsville students' content on *Facebook* could be said to constitute what Davies and Merchant (2007, 177) term 'private lives in public spaces', therefore blurring the boundaries of what data can be legitimately 'observed' by detached observers. In terms of protecting their privacy, Coalsville students had a range of features at their disposal when using *Facebook* that allowed them to block users or set viewings to a limited set of approved users. Within these restrictions, the researcher focused only on data from student profiles that had been set to 'public viewing'. Thus in respect to issues of access the present study was guided by the (albeit contested) ethical guidelines set out by the Association of Internet Researchers (2002), which identifies the difficulties of obtaining informed consent from study participants. Given the nature of the research questions it was felt that pre-research informed consent from the whole cohort of students would be too disruptive – concurring with Whiteman's (2006) argument that 'from this perspective, looking might be considered less intrusive than interfering'. In this sense the primary ethical issues relating to using students' online *Facebook* data could be argued to be less those of access than how the data are used and presented by the social researcher. In this respect the use of pseudonyms for all the students featured in our study means that their interactions remain confidential and anonymous, given that their *Facebook* wall postings were not searchable from either the worldwide web or within the *Facebook* community.

Results

When the education-related interactions from the Coalsville students' *Facebook* walls were analysed, five main themes emerged from the data, i.e.: (1) recounting and reflecting on the university experience; (2) exchange of practical information; (3) exchange of academic information; (4) displays of supplication and/or disengagement; and (5) 'banter' (i.e. exchanges of humour and nonsense). These themes are now discussed in further detail.[1]

Recounting and reflecting on the university experience

When their attention did turn towards university-related matters, students would often use the *Facebook* walls to describe and sometimes deliberate on their most recent instances of the university experience – be it lectures, seminars or, on occasion, library visits and individual encounters with teaching staff. For example, students would use *Facebook* to 'go over' their experiences of recently finished lectures. As these second-year criminology students discussed:

> Sinead Keates wrote
> at 4:11pm on January 30th, 2007
> what did you make of today's lecture?! I thought it was amazing: 'crime is going down, but some is going up, but generally its going down-not all of it though…some if going up'. maybe he had a bet with himself, how many times he could repeat the same thing in one lecture?!I do love him though, I just want to hug him and scratch his head :) xxx

> Chris Hedley wrote
> at 4:36pm on January 30th, 2007
> that guy was so funny … yada yada yada BOLLOCKS! ah good times! didnt understand a thing mind you! x

Around half of these reflections related to events which one of the students had been absent from, with the absentee seeking *post-hoc* justifications to rationalise the legitimacy of missing the class or not understanding the lecture material, whilst also allowing their peers space to express conciliatory 'techniques of neutralisation':

> Grace Furlong wrote
> at 1:35pm on February 2nd, 2007
> hey hun!! just to let you know i have come home for a bit as i am ill so wont be in education seminar tomoz!! but will be back next week so see u then!! have fun!! love!! xxxx

> Jessica Smyth wrote
> at 5:09pm on February 2nd, 2007
> got no plans for weekend…..sleeping i think!! how bout u?? u did not miss much in social research today….it was dog!! xxxxxx

As can be implied from some of these comments above ('it was dog', 'yada yada yada bollocks') these were often not wholly positive reflections on the learning experience. The social science students' postings most often conveyed a sense of bewilderment, disappointment and/or anger about perceived shortcomings of the teaching and learning provision in the department. These judgements ranged from benign comments such as 'dull as dishwater' to more hostile responses such as 'gash' and 'IT WAS SHIT!!!'. These more negative responses often involved quite specific and detailed critiques of the nature and/or organisation of the learning experience and, more often than not, the member of staff deemed responsible. As these social theory students reflected on that morning's seminar:

> Ruby Edwards wrote
> at 12:44pm on February 20th, 2007
> Oh my fucking gawd! how much did i want to DIE in todays seminar? i dont think ive EVER gone so red lol. I DIDNT KNOW THE BLOODY ANSWER FRANK [name of tutor]!!!! lol. my mind was just BLANK.com. argh! oh wellllll lol. x

> Emily Evans wrote
> at 8:47am on February 21st, 2007
> haaaaaaaaaaaa yeah i no OMG how harsh was that seminar. im going to DRILL into ur soul until i find ur social theory centre!!! thing is at leastm u wernt the only one, he seemed to go for the three of us, me u and the girl who kept laughing! haaa goodtimes, roll on 2 wks!! x

> Ruby Edwards wrote
> at 2:13pm on February 21st, 2007
> HAHA i like your analogy! i think Frank just gets nervous, so he intimidates ppl to make them feel thick so that he looks amazing… but he loves another group! apparently bout them chocolate. WELLL….!!!!! lol. i think we should just STARE at him next time :) but atleast you always say something right! im just *blank* LOL. xXx

> Emily Evans wrote
> at 6:01pm on February 22nd, 2007
> today was like torture. god awful torture. i felt sooo stupid. balls!

This critical reportage did not always focus on academic matters, as illustrated by this discussion of a replacement post-grad tutor:

Sophie Irwin wrote
at 12:13am on March 9th, 2007
take it you had the same thoughts as i did about the seminar tutor today!!! Your face was a picture!!! bit of a knob though - despite his good looks compared to the rest of the shit bags we have!!! xxx

Amy Younger wrote
at 12:17am on March 9th, 2007
There was something kind of hot about the way he told u lot to shut up. I was like 'o, u give the orders!!' His profile view was hot but he was a bit too much from the front. Good shirt though and he seemed pretty smart. Felt he was a little serious for a man of his young age. But yeah it did make a change. xxxxx

A minority of these discussions involved starkly negative appraisals of teaching staff. Postings referred to 'the shitty ppl we hav teaching us', 'stupid bloody seminar women' and, in one instance, 'that seminar tutor, shes fucking pants!!'. As the following exchange between a second- and a final-year student illustrates, teaching staff were sometimes discussed in unforgiving terms:

Lucy Lewis wrote
at 1:36pm on January 11th, 2007
first time Ive had clive and he's rubbish. its called social concepts and debates and its a compulsory module

Megan Wilde wrote
at 1:40pm on January 11th, 2007
oh i had clive last year for like a first year education module, well i chose it, stupidly… I dont have him this year but wud kill myself if i ever had him again!!! I have some other rubbish lecturers but he is the damn SOUR cherry on the top!!!!!!!!

Exchange of practical information

Aside from such critical 'reflection', a second theme emerging from our analysis was the exchange of information related to what can be termed as the 'job' of being an undergraduate. In many instances, this information concerned the practical logistics of attending courses – most commonly the scheduling and location of lectures and seminars. For some students a degree of uncertainty surrounded this information, leaving *Facebook* as a useful means of last minute information-seeking. This is illustrated in these two students' apparent ignorance of impending assessment deadlines for a module:

Amelia Simmonds wrote
at 5:39pm on February 25th, 2007
Hey! had a great weekend at home thanx , our results are out 2moz arent they?? are u guna go down? i think me and kelly av a seminar 2moz so will prob go then. hope uv had a gr8 weekend. loves ya xxx

Hannah Morris wrote
at 5:43pm on February 25th, 2007
omg rach i hope u get this i havent got ur number we've got a psych essay due on fri!!! xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx

Amelia Simmonds wrote
at 9:54pm on February 25th, 2007
my god!! when was it set and what is it about???? help!!

Hannah Morris wrote
at 10:00pm on February 25th, 2007
I know tell me about it! i have no idea when it was set but i looked in tht green module handout and saw psych essay due in week beginning 26th feb so i texted paula off our course and she said its due in on fri… im pretty sure the essay titles are the ones in the green module handbook.. bottom of pg 9!!! Also we have a cognitive and biological psych essay due 30th march… essay titles i think at bottom of pg 11 xxxxx

As this exchange illustrates, students' acquisition of logistical information was often partial and relayed from unofficial sources. Of course, from the academic department's point of view this information had already been presented to students in various accessible forms (handouts, wall notices, class announcements, group emails and via the official 'Blackboard' virtual learning environment). Yet from the students' perspective, these methods were not always contiguous with their own modes of communication and information gathering:

Mia Butcher wrote
at 11:50am on January 31st, 2007
it's already gone horribly wrong!! where the hell are our psych lectures this term??!! (printed out the lecture handout tho, points for effort!) sigh, got a week to recover from that trauma. are the seminars in the same rooms as last term? tho come to think of it, thats a bit hazy too…. ;)

Sophie Irwin wrote
at 2:18pm on January 31st, 2007
I HAVE NO IDEA!!! got so naffed off earlier with not knowing where they were i just stormed off and said 'I'm going back to bed'!!!! not the right attitude - but what idiot sends and email at stupid 8 o'clock to STUDENTS saying the venues changed - like hell i'll have enough time to look at my emails before leaving hte housee!!!! He's lucky if i even get there!!!!! really need to be organised!!! i could never actually find my seminar rooms either - education i once ran in there thinkin i was hours late and i actually was early - oopsies!!!! xxx

As well as information relating to attendance, many of these practical information exchanges took place around the periods of assessment and concerned the require-ments of examinations and coursework assignments. For students across all three-year groups, issues such as the required word counts for essays or the speculated format of examinations were of utmost concern. Here students would turn to *Facebook* to seek clarification from their peers and then settle on a shared course of action and a collective (ir)responsibility:

Sophie Irwin wrote
at 1:59pm on January 11th, 2007
HELP!!!!! Can't be arsed to walk all the way downstairs so thought seeing as facebook = life, you'd probs look at this soon!!! You know on the cover sheets we have to submit at the beginning of the essay, it asks for a word count. Are you including the words on that cover sheet or are you putting your word count as just the essay wordage????!!!!! EEK!!! SOOOOOO confused and bored!!!! Please please please help - would be completely freaking out if i could be arsed to be bothered. x

Katie Collins wrote
at 2:49pm on January 11th, 2007
o im not using the cover sheets cz apparebtly u dnt have to so im jst putting word count student number, module code n module title on the top of the essay, then student number and module code on every page as a header/footer! so confusing i hate it!!! hope this helps! xxx

Whilst these two housemates were relying on their own interpretations, *Facebook* was also used as a conduit for students to inform others of their personal contact with university staff. This 'cascading' of information can be seen in the following discussion of the same word count issue:

Lucy Lewis wrote
at 4:46pm on January 9th, 2007
Prof Wilkings told me to email Clive about the word limit cos he couldnt help me.Have jst done that so will let u kno xx

Lucy Lewis wrote
at 12:52pm on January 10th, 2007
no email from clive as yet. have also just emailed sheila smith in the undergrad office to say ths isnt the first time it has happened-same thing happened with sociology of culture essays ths time last yr.am waiting for a response.will keep u posted x

Lily Sargentt wrote
at 2:42pm on January 10th, 2007
cool, ok well thanks for letting me know. speak to you soon x x

Lucy Lewis wrote
at 3:03pm on January 10th, 2007
jst about to go down with my friend lizzie to complain cos clive hasnt replied bt stupid undergrad woman is saying 3000 words xx

Lily Sargent wrote
at 3:05pm on January 10th, 2007
oh my god! 3000 words, no way. i dont know what to do now! well…keep me informed then pls! x x

Lucy Lewis wrote
at 4:41pm on January 10th, 2007
Its 2500.read my note that Ive jst written and keep checking blackboard for details xx

Exchange of academic information

Alongside these logistical issues more academically orientated information was also sought via the *Facebook* walls, albeit on a less frequent basis. In these instances students would exchange information about academic and intellectual requirements of their courses, usually concerning the nature of required reading for seminars, the speculated content of examinations or the required content of essays and other assessment tasks. In some instances, potentially privileged information and advice given to one student by a lecturer or tutor was relayed dutifully to a wider audience. However, in most cases this information was based upon students' own interpretations in the absence of any official guidance. This then led to what could be termed as rather limited instances of 'peer guidance':

Evie Mustoe wrote
at 8:32pm on November 28th, 2006
hey. u know 4 this vygotsky stuff, when ur taking notes on the text r u writing down wot it says in text or putting it in ur own words? xxx

> Abigail Foyle wrote
> at 8:53pm on November 28th, 2006
> I am simply reiterating the points, i.e copying down wat it says, I am so done with this
> vygotsky shizzle, it's driving me insane!!!!!! just think after 10 o clock we are free
> agents, oh yes xxxxxx

On occasion, these (re)interpretations resulted in a form of academic Chinese whispers, where assessment questions, rubrics and expectations were reconstituted in ways which were inaccurate and sometimes simply incorrect. This is not to say that students were unaware of the uncertain provenance of their *Facebook*-assisted courses of action. As one first-year student concluded, 'my essay is TERRIBLE but i really dont care anymore. so at least if we're wrong, we'll be wrong together!!'. In this sense such postings were indicative of students' attempts to negotiate the university experience as best they can, echoing Haggis's (2006, 527) observation of undergraduates' distinct 'lack of understanding of what "work" might consist of in relation to study'.

Such misinformation and misinterpretation aside, there were sporadic instances of students using *Facebook* to assist each other's educational endeavours in more inventive ways. For instance, students would recommend on occasion journal articles and books to each other – copying and pasting results from bibliographic database searches into the walls of other students. Two final-year students were even using *Facebook* as a means of recruiting an opportunity sample of respondents for their dissertation research projects, with apparent success:

> Tim Young wrote
> at 5:03pm on December 1st, 2006
> Sophie … you're a star!! Thanks ever so much! I'm astounded by how many people are
> helping me out- it's awesome, and much better than annoying people in coffee shops!
> plus i've finally found a use for facebook that isn't detrimental to my degree!!

Instances of more substantive peer-assisted learning were also evident on occasion – usually amongst second and final-year students offering guidance on the required arguments for essays:

> Katy Elliott wrote
> at 12:12pm on January 14th, 2007
> Ummmm-what the hell does the Sokal hoax say about social science as an intellectual
> field??HELP!!?

> Scott Thomas wrote
> at 12:50pm on January 14th, 2007
> coincidence- was just attempting to write that bit myself!! not really too sure what to put.
> in my opinion it doesnt say that much about social science in general. just a particular
> philosophical perspective used within it- that postmodernism is pretty much meaning-
> less! beyond that i don't think there's too much more to say- except about getting some-
> one who works in the field to check any topics you're not sure about! but i reckon that's
> an implication to the whole of academia- not just social science! i just can't believe he
> didn't do a lecture on this- it definately needed one!

Only in three instances during the five-month data collection period did this assistance appear to transgress into collusion. This can be seen in the case of this third-year student whose dissertation topic matched the topic of an already written essay by another student:

Huw Jones wrote
at 1:11am on January 19th, 2007
Right at this moment im staring straight at an essay on rave culture. Now Ive realised
you live a matter of yards away from this beatifully crafted masterpiece you should come
and have a look at it. Bring yourself a floppy disk (old skool) or a usb pen. My Cd drive
is screwed. Muchos loveos.

Sophie Scott wrote
at 8:29pm on January 28th, 2007
Heya hun , thats much appreciated, thanks i will prob pop over sometime if thats ok, wot
time u going to be bout at? love sofxxxxxx

Yet aside from isolated instances such as this, it was noticeable that students were generally unwilling to offer extensive assistance to each other. As one final-year student responded to a similar request for help: 'need any tips just ask your mum!'.

Displays of supplication and/or disengagement

Another category of *Facebook* exchange centred around supplication and the seeking of moral (rather than intellectual) support with regards to the demands of the students' studies. In these postings students would often present themselves as rendered helpless in the face of their university work in the expectation that their peers would then offer support and comfort. Sometimes these accounts were constructed in a self-deprecating and humorous fashion, albeit with the intention of soliciting succour from others:

Alison Owens wrote
at 2:03pm on November 21st, 2006
Essay not going well. Arghhhhh! xxxxxx

Alison Owens wrote
at 2:04pm on November 21st, 2006
PS. I'm not on facebook either, working v. hard :S

Sinead Keates wrote
at 4:23pm on November 21st, 2006
not that i'm evil and wish bad things on you or anything but … please tell me you're as
screwed as i am for the essay???mine is shit, not writing itself up and i have no idea
where im going in my argumentation, probably because i havent even started it. haha
report back tomorrow.lets die.

Alison Owens wrote
at 4:29pm on November 21st, 2006
I wish there was as much crimlove and psychlove as last year, i.e. none, I would be much
happier if that was the case. Second year is mean. We've got those two essays for crim
in january along with examiuses and now i have to do tutorial work on my own as Emma
is bailing on me :(Tell me it'll be ok Keates! On 950 words exactly on essay, not actually
making any relevant points and am essentially copying the textbook. Plagiarism and
ethics tribunal here I come! xxxxxx

Often allied to this were strategies of supplication, i.e. nurturance or presenting oneself as helpless in order to elicit the sympathy or help of others. Yet whilst many of these exchanges contained an element of self-pity (as above), some students were also using their walls for defiant presentation of themselves as

unable, incompetent but defiantly disengaged from their studies. As one typical posting put it, 'the multiple choice exam is tomorrow i dont really give a shit about it though'. Indeed, a wilful anti-intellectualism pervaded many of these exchanges, with students brazenly highlighting their inabilities and, by implication, the inadequacies of the university department. These active displays of academic disengagement and intellectual incompetence were often presented in an ironic and often humorous manner, with students taking care to indicate their awareness of the tragic-comedic nature of their predicament. These observations included the unreasonable nature of the university assessment deadlines, as well as the difficulty of balancing the demands of paid employment and leisure with the demands of their university course:

> Freya Nicolaides wrote
> at 9:08pm on November 15th, 2006
> hahahahahaha. laughing to stop from crying. iv done fuck all. have spent the afternoon and evening watching scrubs and now im going to Vibes [nightclub]! am gonna look at literature tomorrow but screw the essay plan. ill just make something up and change it later. ugh.

> Molly Hobbs wrote
> at 9:18am on January 10th, 2007
> im not bothered bout criminal its only formative and jane timmings [tutor] thinks im stupid anyway… 'molly wud like to add anything to the discussion?' 'emmm NO! except that it is damn early on a friday morning and i am seriously hung over jane!!' thats usually how my tutorials go!!i no retail therapy is the way forward, im ragin ive only been into the sales once!! its an outrage!

'Banter'

A final theme prominent throughout the data was referred to by the students as 'banter'. These exchanges were humorous in nature and often heavily interlaced with irony and sarcasm. Whilst this type of exchange was common throughout students' non university-related use of *Facebook*, in the case of their university-related banter three main foci for their humour emerged. Firstly was the admonishment of other students in relation to their studies, often replicating the tendency for students to present themselves in a self-deprecating manner (see above). Thus students who were seen by others to be overly engaged with their studies were assigned identifying labels such as 'spods', 'geeks', 'keenos' and so on. A more sophisticated source of work-related humour derived from banter about assessment tasks – such as misunderstanding questions for comic effect. As these two students (who appear to be working side-by-side on library computers at the time of the Facebook exchange) state:

> Daisy Connor wrote
> at 7:36pm on January 17th, 2007
> Genetic epistemology piaget vygotsky empiricism rationalism childhood assimilation accomodation…….AAAAGGG
> GGGHHHHHHHHHH I DONT CARE ANYMORE! You do realise we've been in the library for 9 SOLID hours??!!!! We have no life….. especially as you're sitting next to me as i write this. love u xxxxxxxx

> Alice Darley wrote
> at 7:43pm on January 17th, 2007
> DID U KNOW - that piaget had two willies and a fanny???? Nope…….its coz the textbooks dont mention this. The authors consume themselves in terms such as genetic epistomology, assimilation, accomidation. equalibrium, rationalisation, schemata ETC IN order to gloss over this very important fact.
> So when tommorow u are asked What is genetic epistomolgy according to piagets theory of human development - u respond with, no idea…but il tell u something - he had two willies and a fanny. NOW THATS A FACT. 1st class degree honours with tht one. 100% pass - bloody haemaphrodites xxxxxxxxxxx

According to some commentators such 'nonsense' written by students on discussion boards can be seen as marking a transitory period whilst they acclimatise themselves with the online environment (e.g., Williams 2002). Yet this was not the case with our *Facebook* data, where 'nonsense' was a recurring discourse through the duration of our analysis, not least the recurring theme of banter related to teaching staff. Here students exchanged humorous (and occasionally fantastical) stories about their tutors and lectures. Some of these instances of banter certainly revealed a fascination for details about the 'non-university' lives of university staff, with some students taking great pride in providing reports on staff sightings outside of the confines of the department:

> Isabelle Lane wrote
> at 10:38pm on February 26th, 2007
> OH MY GOD the funniest thing just happened i was in the postgrad centre in the union with cat and there was an open-mic night-like just anyone could sing and ul never guess who was there… the one and only dr. peters howwwww funny!!!! he was actually quite good. back to the essays tomoz fun fun xxx

> Poppy Nicholas wrote
> at 8:33pm on February 29th, 2007
> That's brillant about the singing - maybe that's his hidden talent and that's why he's got a fanclub?? I always find it a bit freaky tho if u see lecturers out where u r - what they're outside the university buildings? WHAT??! Hope cwk isn't suffocating u. C u in research maybe tmw. x

> Isabelle Lane wrote
> at 1:58am on February 30th, 2007
> I may have got paid to see peters …………..but on several occasions I've had to serve 'total Payne' the criminology guy. SHOCKING. He drinks Stella.

> Poppy Nicholas wrote
> at 12:15pm on February 30th, 2007
> That would suit him - the wife beater drink! (Maybe I'm being a little harsh there) x

Discussion

These findings must be set against the limitations of the study – not least its reliance on one interpretive perspective of analysing online data, as opposed to also asking students to self-report and/or self-interpret their *Facebook* use. Similarly, we should remain mindful that the *Facebook* wall is also just one of many communication mechanisms available to the students to explore the issues highlighted in this study. Our data highlighted the concurrent use of other communication technologies within the sample, with students referring to instant messaging, mobile telephony and other

SNSs. All of these modes of technology-mediated communication accompany face-to-face modes of interaction to form wider spheres of student communication. As such, the data presented in this paper should be seen as only partial accounts of larger conversations taking place between students about their university studies. We should also remain mindful of the study's generalisability – especially for subject areas other than the female-dominated, low intensity social science disciplines. Further research is also required to ascertain the influence of the specific institutional context of Coalsville University as opposed to the many different types of higher education institution in the UK. It could be that our analysis is unique to Coalsville social science undergraduates, although it would be surprising if this were the case.

These limitations notwithstanding, it could be argued that these data highlight a number of issues relating to student use of SNSs. In particular, these data portray *Facebook* as being a highly significant but also unremarkable means of social networking and communication in the everyday lives of the young people covered in our study. In particular the data show how the *Facebook* walls were certainly functioning as a valuable means of exchange for those students who were making active use of *Facebook* with their peers on the course. Indeed, in terms of education-related interaction, *Facebook* was used primarily for *maintaining* strong links between people already in relatively tight-knit, emotionally close offline relationships, rather than creating new points of contact with a 'glocalised' community of students from other courses or even institutions. In this sense we would concur with Ellison's conclusion that *Facebook* represents an 'offline to online trend' in that it serves a geographically bound campus community, as opposed to the 'online to offline trend' often identified by internet researchers where people meet up with previously unknown online 'buddies' in real life (Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe 2007, 1144).

However, it is worth reiterating that education- and university-related exchanges were only a minor constituent of the overall volume of the Coalsville student postings – with discussions of leisure, entertainment, paid employment, interpersonal relationships and home life far more prevalent throughout the 18 weeks of study. Thus the data presented in this paper represent the sporadic and often uncomfortable intrusion of university education into students' private, personal and interpersonal worlds. Indeed, the data show the fluctuating prominence of educational concerns within students' overall use of *Facebook*, with instances of education-related interactions between students structured by the rhythms of assessment schedules or timetabled teaching provision rather than a desire for forms of continuous learning or *ad hoc* educational exchange. Much of students' 'educational' use of *Facebook* was therefore based around either the *post-hoc* critiquing of learning experiences and events, the exchange of logistical or factual information about teaching and assessment requirements, instances of supplication and moral support with regards to assessment or learning, or the promotion of oneself as academically incompetent and/or disengaged.

Although it is tempting to bemoan the ostensibly mundane, prosaic and often 'anti-intellectual' uses to which students were applying *Facebook*, it would appear to be an important and valuable element of the university experience for these students. In this sense the *Facebook* postings in this paper are merely continuations of the informal discourses that have long characterised student life within the massified provision of higher education. It could be argued that the online exchanges presented in this paper are merely a continuation of how students talk to each other in other contexts – such as the chatter of the back rows of the lecture theatre, coffee shop or after-college

telephone conversations. Only now, as Kirkpatrick (2005, 156) acknowledges, the 'playful banter and chit-chat which are always present in the murmuring noise that we are aware of in a class are sanitised and included as on an equal level with the "official" discourse of the classroom'.

Thus the students in this study could be seen as simply using *Facebook* in a number of considered, pragmatic and justifiable ways – all of which were embedded firmly in the local offline contexts of undergraduate life. In this sense, the data show how *Facebook* has become an important site for the informal, cultural learning of 'being' a student, with online interactions and experiences allowing roles to be learnt, values understood and identities shaped. Much of the data showed students coming to terms with the roles and the nuances of the 'undergrad' culture within which they found themselves located. *Facebook* should therefore be seen as an increasingly important element of students' meaning-making activities, especially where they reconstruct past events and thereby confer meaning onto the overarching university experience. Perhaps simply reflecting the hurried, distantiated and disjointed realities of massified undergraduate education, the data reflect many of the themes from the general literature on the university student experience – for instance, a distancing and alienation from remote teachers, unease at the power relations that surround students as they are assessed, the impact of term-time working on the student experience and the fragmented commitment to an intellectual 'vocation' (see Barrow 2006; Dubet 2004; Haggis 2006). As such it could be concluded that *Facebook is* an important learning technology of twenty-first century higher education – albeit one that contributes to what Kitto and Higgins (2003, 49) term, 'the production of the university as an ambivalent space'.

Above all these data would suggest that *Facebook* has been fast established as a prominent arena where students can become versed in the 'identity politics' (and in Erving Goffman's term 'facework') of being a student. *Facebook* therefore represented a space where the 'role conflict' that students often experience in their relationships with university work, teaching staff, academic conventions and expectations can be worked through. In particular this study found *Facebook* being used by many social science students as a space for contesting and resisting the asymmetrical power relationships built into the institutional offline positions of student and university system, therefore affording these students with 'backstage' opportunities to be disruptive, challenging and resistant 'unruly agents'. Goffman (1959) referred to the self as moving between the 'front-stage' arena (where publicly visible social characters are performed) and the 'backstage' area where actors keep their props or 'identity equipment' and can relax out of role. In this sense, *Facebook* would certainly appear to be an important arena within which the 'behind the scenes work' of being a student are being performed away from the gaze of the formal university setting. As is the case with other social networking software, it was apparent how much of the online interaction in our paper was 'interwoven with identity performance' (Merchant 2006, 235). Many of the students' wall postings can be seen as acting as public identity performances – complex and often awkward sites of performance where the individual attempts to construct and maintain a public image to their peers (see Boyd and Heer 2006).

Indeed, it could be argued that *Facebook* was acting as an ideal site for what Goffman terms as 'role distance' – situations where students sought to distance themselves from roles which had to be enacted but with which they did not necessarily wish to be identified by others. For example, we saw how some students sought to

maintain a degree of personal autonomy by engaging in the minimum of overly academic behaviour expected of being an undergraduate scholar and/or were acting in ways that exhibited their lack of commitment to the role. On *Facebook*, students could rehearse and explore resistance to the academic 'role set' of being an undergraduate (Merton 1957) – i.e., the expected and 'appropriate' behaviours towards their subject disciplines, teachers and university authorities. Students who were facing conflicting demands in their roles as socialites, minimum-wage earners *and* scholars could use *Facebook* as an arena for developing disruptive, challenging, dismissive and/or unruly academic identities. Thus *Facebook* was acting as a ready space for resistance and the contestation of the asymmetrical power relationship built into the established offline positions of university, student and lecturer (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977). This was perhaps most clearly evident in the playful and often ironic rejection of dominant university discourses throughout the posts, with the students certainly not confirming to the passive and silenced undergraduate roles of the seminar room or lecture theatre.

Yet we should not view *Facebook* as affording an entirely open space for the (re)presentation of self – with students able to 'express their identity with relative freedom' as some commentators would claim (Thelwall 2007, 1). Throughout our analysis it was notable how students' postings appeared to conform to a shared understanding of what the role of the undergraduate social scientist was. students' postings were notably guided by norms of disengagement, disorganisation and mild disgruntlement and associated behaviours of drunkenness, socialising and part-time employment. The dominant roles on *Facebook* were either as the passive, disengaged student or the angry, critical student, with a strong sense of some students striving to 'keep a particular narrative going' (Giddens 1991, 54) about their non-engagement with the educational aspects of their university experience. In comparison, opportunities to present a self-image of being more intellectually engaged or enthused by one's studies were noticeable by their absence. Indeed throughout our data there was a noticeable marginalisation of 'other' educational identities. The mature students within the Coalsville School of Social Sciences, for example, were noticeably absent from these discussions. To perform well or appear interested in one's studies was to be a 'geek' or a 'swot'. In this way social science students using *Facebook* appeared to be (un)consciously replicating and reinforcing roles developed in their previous phases of school education, as well as in the face-to-face student culture of the university. As Norbert Elias (1969) notes, socialisation leads people to present only those parts of their selves that they deem appropriate to the norms of each situated encounter. In this sense, the norms of expressing oneself on *Facebook* were narrowly defined and adhered to.

With all these thoughts in mind, these data would appear useful in highlighting a number of issues relating to student use of SNSs and, more importantly, how university authorities, practitioners and other concerned stakeholders respond to their increasing prevalence in the everyday lives of students. The rising use of *Facebook* certainly raises 'important questions about how universities will articulate their teaching relationships with internal student cohorts' in the near future (Kitto and Higgins 2003, 25). Yet whilst SNSs such as *Facebook* do not merit any particular laudation from educators, neither do they present any cause for moral panic. Rather than attempting to appropriate *Facebook* for educationally 'appropriate' or 'valid' uses, or else regulate students' use through coercion or surveillance, university authorities and educators are perhaps best advised to allow these practices to continue

unabated and firmly 'backstage'. As Richard Sennett (1974, 4) observed, 'civilised relations between selves can only proceed to the extent that nasty little secrets of desire, greed or envy are kept locked up'. In this sense, allowing students the freedom to construct a set of disruptive, challenging and disengaged social identities, roles and personal biographies of 'doing university' in an offline, backstage space such as *Facebook* could be seen as a vital contribution to the successful provision of offline university education. In this sense, there is certainly no cause to perpetuate either the utopian or dystopian discourses currently surrounding students and *Facebook*. If anything, the data presented in this paper constitute a case of 'business as usual' with students simply being students – albeit in a more visible and noisy manner than is apparent in the formal settings of their university education.

Acknowledgements

Note

1. All data presented in the results section are anonymised in terms of students' names, and any other references within the wall posting that may identify an individual. These include the names of other people referred in posts, and the specific titles of courses and modules. Where necessary these have been altered to convey the sense of the course, without giving its specific title (e.g., 'Social Concepts and Debates'). All excerpts of data presented in the paper were selected to be illustrative of each category.

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