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Are student-led Facebook groups open educational practices?

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Abstract

The lure of Facebook for university students has grown in recent years, with many defecting from institution provided formal online tuition spaces to student-led, study-focused groups on the social media platform. Various studies (see Tess, 2013) have evaluated the impact of institution-led use of Facebook within the context of formal education. However, only recently have researchers begun to explore learner-driven Facebook use (e.g. Dron and Anderson, 2014; Gardner, 2014; Kent and Leaver, 2014). Our study contributes to this research and is grounded in two stimuli: (1) our previous research into self-educating, online forum and Facebook-based informal learning communities, conducted when developing the public open scholar role (Coughlan and Perryman, 2012); and (2) our background as academic managers with The Open University (OU) UK. The latter led to our becoming aware that many OU students use Facebook groups to support their formal studies. Observing this phenomenon led us to ask: are student-formed Facebook groups really open educational practices and can they facilitate learning and help achieve educational inclusion?

To answer these questions we closely analysed 10 student-led OU study-related Facebook groups, with a combined membership of approximately 2600. We first looked for a suitable existing framework for evaluating OEPs, but found none were ideally applicable to Facebook. We therefore adopted a hybrid evaluation strategy drawing on several frameworks as a basis for investigating:

- the level of openness in our case study groups;
- the degree to which the groups are educational;
- the practices that take place in the groups.

Our research shows that student-led Facebook groups can be a very valuable form of open educational practice, with university students making a significant contribution to their education through these groups. It is apparent that a combination of peer-provided guidance around academic practices and study skills, extensive emotional support, and discussion of module content in these groups can be a powerful complement to formal tuition. Following Gardner (2014) we suggest such groups feature the student-student interaction component of Anderson's Interaction Equivalency Theorem (Anderson, 2003), sitting alongside top-down teaching and content.

Our research has the potential to shift the focus of the open education movement from researching students as co-producers of objects to exploring the ways in which students co-develop educational processes and are partners in the creation of new knowledge. We recommend that universities should consider the extent to which Facebook groups can complement the formal learning experience and that tutors should learn how to use Facebook proficiently and observe a variety of open groups over time in order to better understand the role of Facebook in students' learning. We are hopeful our research will lead to a refinement of the term 'open educational practice' involving a shift of focus from the creation and top-down, educator-led 'distribution' of OER to the collaborative creation of new knowledge and an open culture of peer support.

1. Introduction

Over the past five years ever more university students have been leaving institution-provided online tuition forums and migrating to Facebook, where thousands of student-led, study focused groups are thriving. This exodus from formal study environments has posed challenges for online tutors, concerned about how to best manage the learning experience of students who have defected to social media spaces, with additional implications for educational standards in that student-led groups with no tutor involvement often have no system for identifying and correcting inaccuracies and misinformation.

There are at least 5 million Facebook groups globally, including completely open, student-led groups related to higher education study. Despite the ubiquitousness of such groups, and their impact on student learning, the

open educational practices that they involve have seen little academic attention. While various studies (see Tess, 2013) have evaluated the impact of institution-led Facebook use within formal education, researchers have only recently begun exploring learner-driven Facebook use (e.g. Dron and Anderson, 2014; Gardner, 2014; Kent and Leaver, 2014). This paper reports research intended to further explore the way learners are using Facebook to support their studies. Our research focuses on 10 student-led public Facebook groups related to courses provided by our employer The Open University (OU) (UK). Our study stems from two stimuli: (1) our research into self-educating, online forum and Facebook-based informal learning communities, conducted when developing the public open scholar role (Coughlan and Perryman, 2012); and (2) our background as academic managers with The OU. Thousands of groups from other universities are listed within Facebook. However we chose OU groups because we are familiar with our own institution's structure and terminology. Our research asks the question: Are student-formed Facebook groups really open educational practices and can they facilitate learning and help achieve educational inclusion?

2. Methods

The case study groups

Our evaluation of the 10 student-led Facebook groups listed in Table 1 takes a 'snapshot' of activity in each group for one identified month, chosen to be typical of activity across the year. At the point of data analysis the groups' combined membership was approximately 2600 students. The groups were selected to be as representative as possible, spanning undergraduate levels 1, 2 and 3 (L1, L2 & L3 in Table 1) and four disciplines: law, education, social science and science.

Table 1: The case study Facebook groups

Group	Posts & comments per month	Average viewers per post	No. of students posting	Evaluation period	Group type and undergraduate level
Law 1	202	No view-counter	61	November 2014	Umbrella
Law 2	156	127	22	April 2012	L2 Module
Law 3	564	100	58	February 2015	L2 Module
Education 1	157	120	41	June 2013	Umbrella
Education 2	1620	100	95	April 2014	L1 Module
Social Science 1	175	32	21	August 2012	L2 Module
Science 1	38	100	16	September 2014	Umbrella
Science 2	133	97	30	February 2014	L3 Module
Science 3	51	55	17	February 2015	L3 Module
Science 4	40	65	16	January 2010	L3 Module

Our evaluation strategies

In the absence of any suitably comprehensive and up-to-date framework for evaluating open educational practices we adopted a hybrid strategy as a basis for investigating:

- the level of openness in the case study groups;
- the groups' educational function;
- the practices taking place in the groups.

Openness

Facebook offers three group categories - public, closed and secret - the first being one indicator of openness. Other indicators include whether a group:

- Is well-titled and easy to find;
- Applies any entry criteria (e.g. OU email addresses);

- Features members using their real names rather than pseudonyms.

Educational effectiveness

When assessing the extent to which groups are educational we have considered:

- Whether module material is discussed;
- The proportion of on-topic exchanges;
- Whether new knowledge is created;
- How differences of opinion are handled;
- The overall impact of factors that can have a positive or negative effect on adults' learning, for example misinformation, inaccuracies, bad behaviour, peer motivation and emotional support.

Apparent practices

When analysing the practices apparent in the groups we explored:

- The participation level (the number of posters, posts, comments and likes);
- Whether a core group dominates participation and, if so, its size;
- Whether there is evidence of group cohesion;
- The type and quantity of file- and link-sharing;
- Whether tutors are involved in a group;
- Whether a group appears to be object-led or relationship-led (see Coughlan and Perryman, 2013).

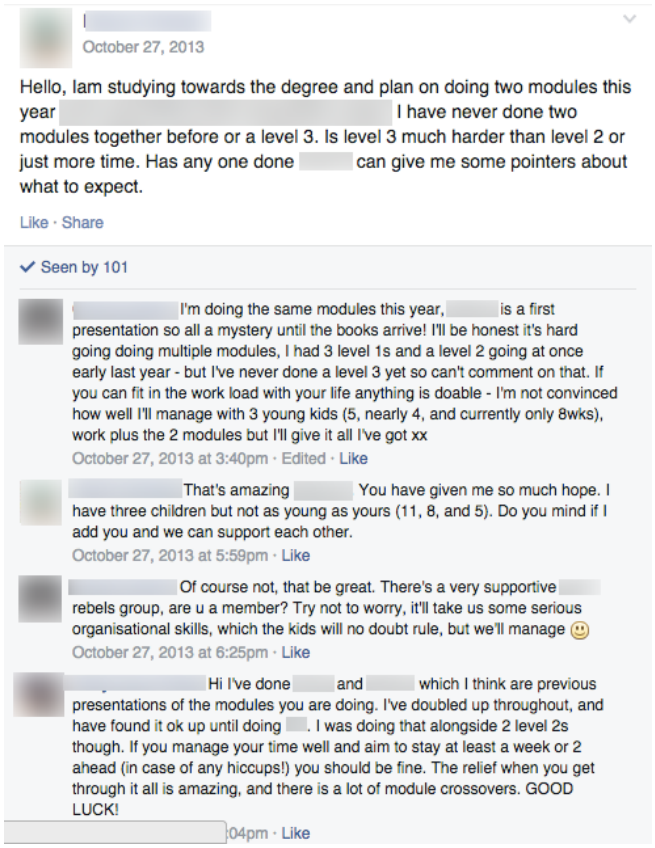
Ethics-related considerations

Researching in social media spaces requires a reconsideration of traditional ethics guidelines for educational research (e.g. BERA, 2011; AERA, 2011). Coughlan and Perryman (2015, in press) propose that ‘a variety of ethical dilemmas confront the researcher who is prepared to...consider the true nature of openness and privacy’. We have followed their guidelines regarding informed consent, navigating online disinhibition, ensuring confidentiality and data protection.

3. Findings

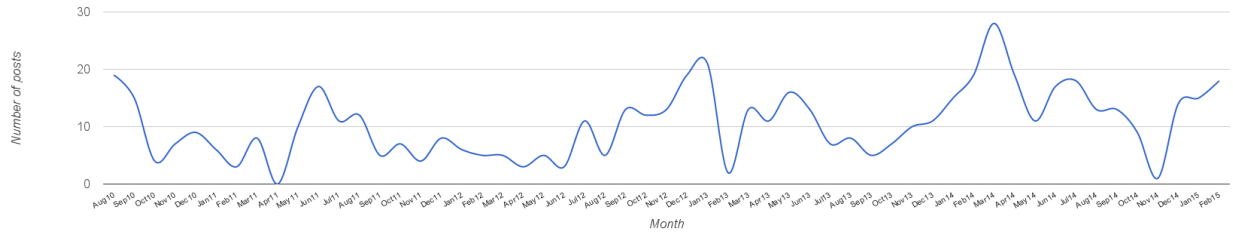
The 10 case study groups differ greatly in terms of their quality, their practices and the ways in which they support learning. Two main group categories are apparent: ‘module groups’ populated by students of individual named modules and ‘umbrella groups’ - module-independent, discipline-wide groups which students appear to join to discuss study routes. Figure 1 shows umbrella group Education1 functioning as a place for individuals to sustain overarching long-term relationships with each other while studying different modules in the same discipline: Table 1 lists the group type for each case study.

Figure 1: Umbrella group-style discussion from Education1



The participation pattern for umbrella groups also appears distinctive. Figure 2 charts participation in Science1 over 4 years, indicating a repeating pattern where the group becomes busy when modules begin and end, with members using it to help them choose their next module.

Figure 2: 4 year participation pattern in Science1



The level of openness

All the studied groups are ‘public’ and very open, with no entry requirements. Groups are typically well-titled and therefore are easy to find. Real names are used almost universally.

The degree to which the groups are educational

The groups vary greatly in the degree to which each appears educational. To allow comparison of the groups we gave each a score for educational function. Table 2 lists the scores, together with a brief summary for each group. On the whole, the extent to which new knowledge is created appears to increase with the educational level. Science1 (see Figure 3) and Law1 showed an extended educational function in the discussion of career pathways.

Figure 3: Discussion of career options in Science 1

Table 2: Comparing educational practices and participation in the case study groups

Group	Proportion of educational activity	Educational activities	Relational activities
Law 1	90%	Mostly discussion of modules, study skills, relevant books and law profession activity. Appears to create new perspectives e.g. on accessibility legislation. People seek out members with expertise in a particular topic. 15 documents in the group filestore including previous exam papers, course materials and advice notes. A little sharing of topical news items.	A high level of participation, interaction and turn-taking. Frequent use of 'Liking'. A little humour and joking, plus regular swapping/selling of textbooks.
Law 2	25%	Mostly emotional support, although one topical news item was discussed at length. Just one item in the group filestore. Members are largely discussing how well or poorly their studies are going.	A core group of six are doing much of the talking, although another eleven contributed more than once. This is a small proportion given the average 'seen by' figure of 127 for this group.
Law 3	95%	Deep discussion of legal and ethical issues arising from case studies used within the module materials and relevant news items that members post. Detailed exploration of assignment questions. The group filestore contains a previous exam paper and guidance notes.	Some robust exchanges, consistent with lawyers-in-training, and clear identification of themselves as part of the legal profession. Group members initiated a debating group on WhatsApp, a more conducive platform for debates than Facebook. A little humour and joking.
Education 1	40%	Modules are not discussed in detail but this umbrella group seems good for helping students with module choice and with assembling a coherent study pathway. 4 module-related documents stored in the group filestore.	Mostly discursive and relationship-based. Members discuss their feelings about, and experiences of modules. Good turn-taking and reciprocity. Not dominated by any particular members.
Education 2	80%	Group rules explicitly require members to 'always follow the OU guidelines when posting'. Many exchanges about	Membership appears to be almost entirely female. Very high level of emotional exchange and support, including frequent use of

		assignments - how to interpret the questions, write within word counts, referencing & similar study skills. Much discussion of students' individual performance in the module so far. 8 module-related documents in the group filestore.	emoticons and kisses (xx). Frequent posts about the challenges of balancing study with work, caring responsibilities and home life.
Social Science 1	95%	Nearly all participation is on-topic - mostly discussion of module content and assignments, plus some external book reviews and a little link-sharing to global economic news items.	A good balance between study and emotional support is maintained, witha very high level of participation, interaction and turn-taking.
Science 1	10%	Environmental news items are posted, but generate little discussion. No file-sharing, although links to individual module groups within this discipline are regularly posted. A little evidence that the group may help students with module choices and career options.	A small core group does most of the talking, although posts are routinely 'seen by' around 100 viewers.
Science 2	100%	Entirely on-topic. Plentiful evidence of knowledge-sharing, question and answer, and discussing module material in detail. Remarkably even spread of activity across all posts.	Discursive and relationship-led. Typical 'seen-by' figure of 97. No core-group of members dominating the activity. A great deal of tolerance, turn-taking and responding to posts.
Science 3	95%	Explicit knowledge sharing, and as the group is based on a project module there is extensive evidence of new knowledge being created. 5 text documents in the file store, plus a range of photos about their subject. Occasional posts from students at an earlier stage of their degree starting to prepare for this module.	Some emotional support takes place, however overall this group is more task-focussed than the others. Balanced participation, with good evidence of turn-taking and responding.
Science 4	20%	Mostly on-topic but reactive, discussing the curriculum quite superficially. Module textbooks and assignment hand-in dates discussed. No group filestore.	A core group of two does most of the talking. Eight members tried posting once but appeared to give up after nobody replied.

The practices that take place in the groups

The practices apparent in the 10 groups are diverse and include:

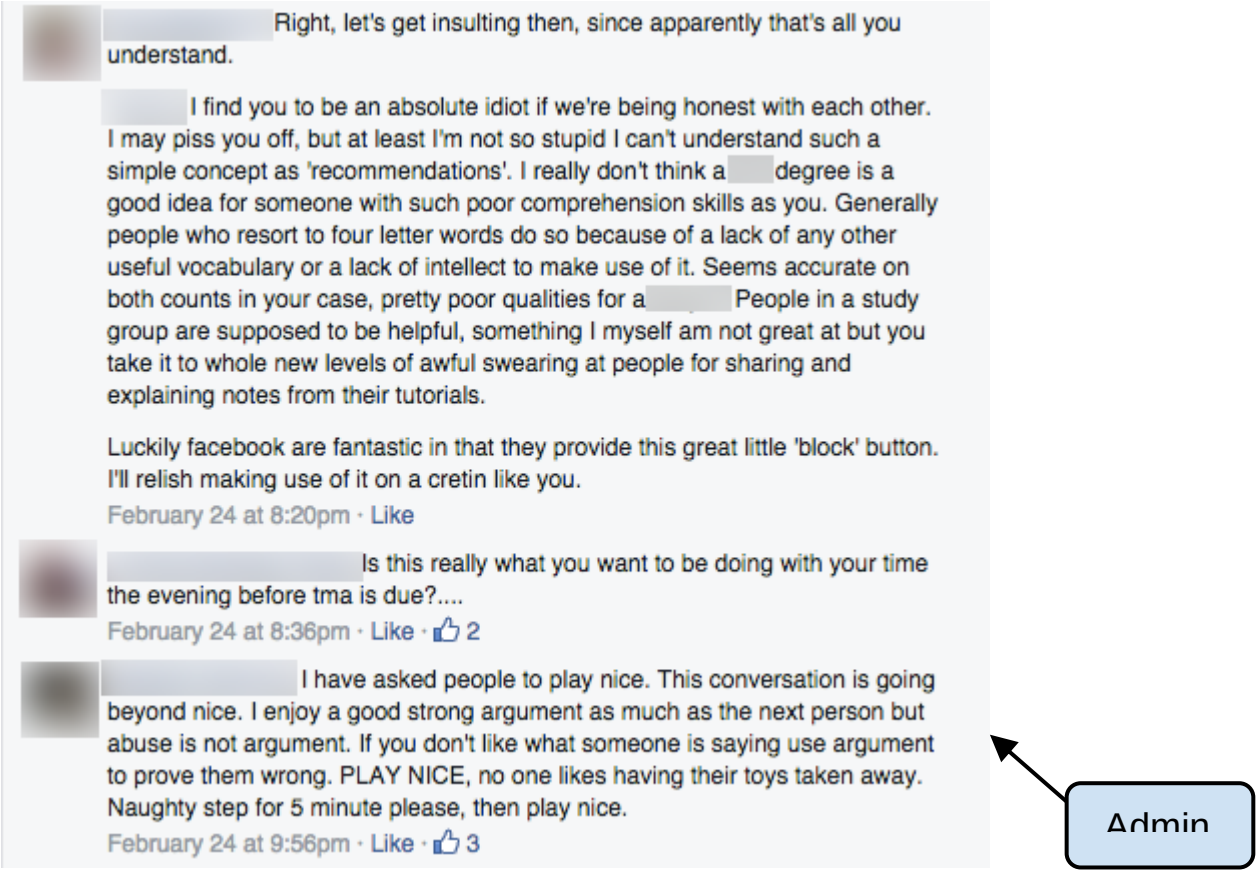
- Peer-support focused on academic practices and study skills;
- Technical help;
- Advice-giving around navigating institutional processes;
- Content-related learning;
- Emotional support.

Table 2 identifies some of the practices apparent in each group.

Quality

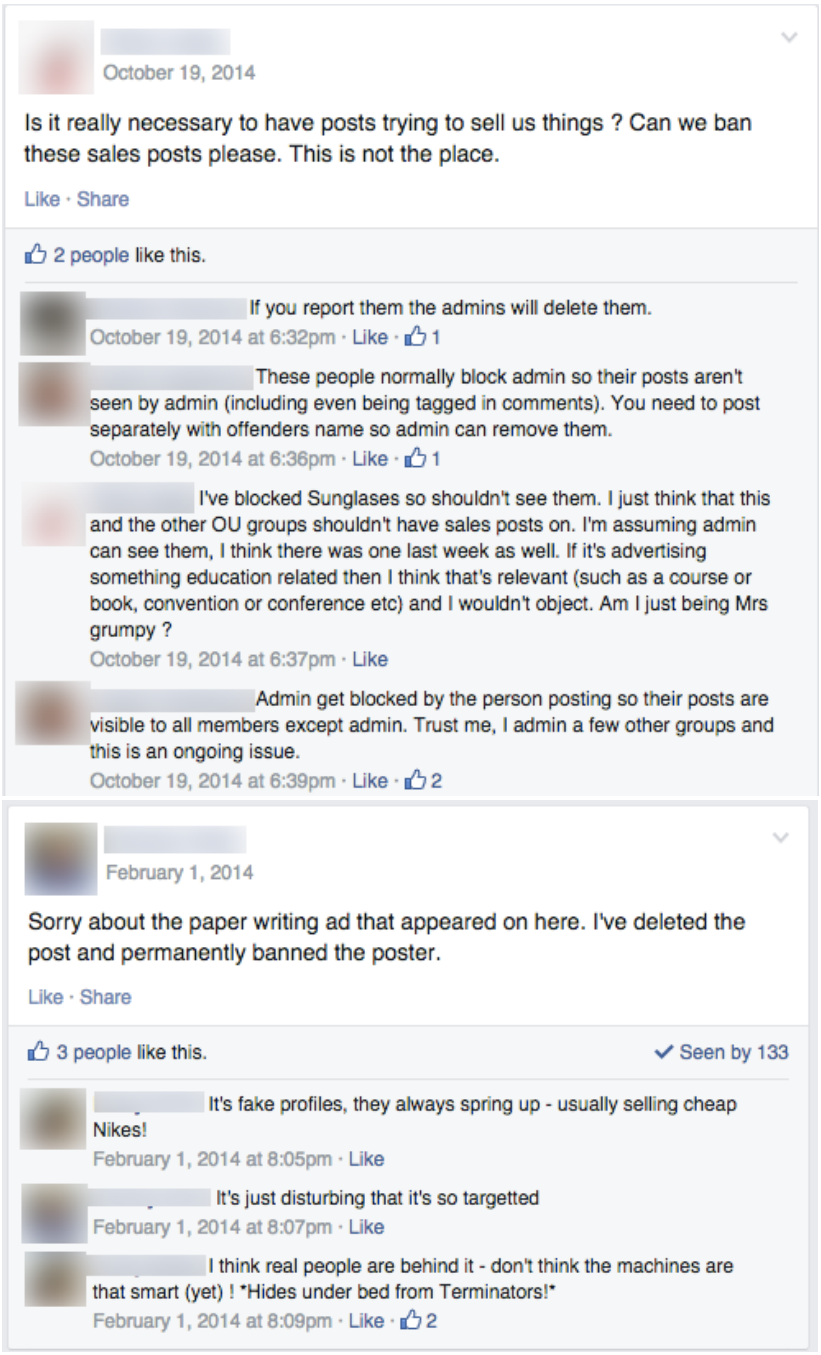
We extended our evaluation of the case study groups by looking at their overall quality which varies widely, due in part to variation in group size and participation levels. On the whole group members are polite and well-behaved with a high level of expertise in using Facebook, although Law3 (a very busy, educationally strong group overall) features some heated discussion, albeit moderated by a charismatic admin (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: Heated discussion and moderation in Law3



The quality of participation also varies, ranging from the largely social interaction in Science1 and the superficial discussion of curriculum content found in Law2, to the in-depth academic discussion in very high quality groups Social Sciences1 and Science2. Some groups suffer a little for being small, for example, the otherwise educationally strong Science 3, indicating that overall group quality may increase with group size. No plagiarism was apparent from the analysed posts, though it should be remembered that these span just a month in each group's life. However, the very busy Law1 and the quieter Science1 show evidence of spamming from advertisers being an annoyance (Figure 5).

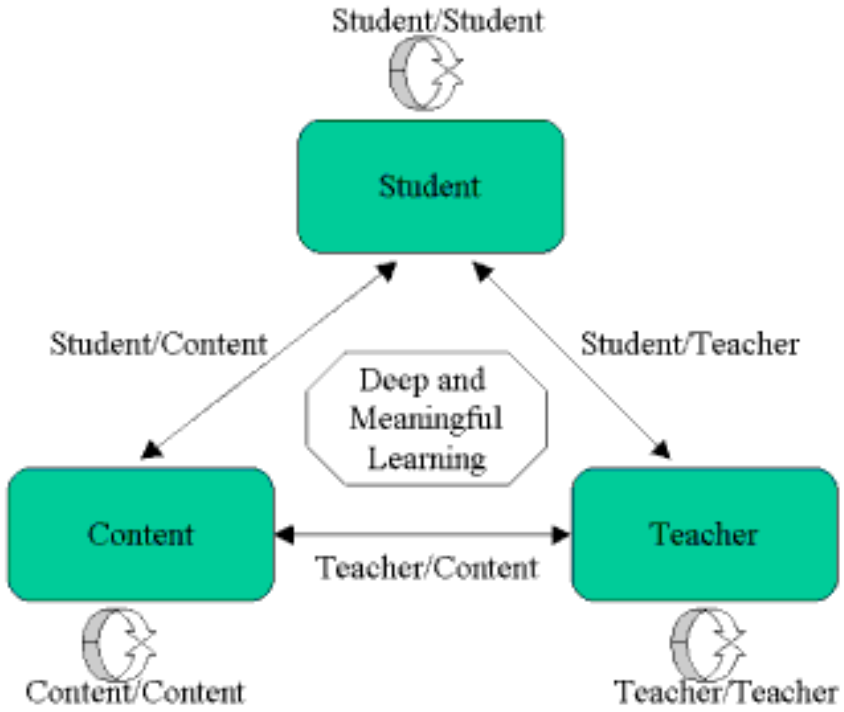
Figure 5: Discussion of spammers in Law1 and Science1



4. Discussion

Returning to our research question - 'are student-formed Facebook groups really open educational practices and can they facilitate learning and help achieve educational inclusion?' - we can say with certainty that such groups *are* open educational practices. In addition, it is clear that the value of these groups in supporting learning is immense and that their proliferation makes them an important part of the educational landscape. As such, these findings add weight to Gardner's (2014) view that Facebook groups can exemplify the student-student interaction component of Anderson's Interaction Equivalency Theorem (Figure 6; Anderson, 2003), sitting alongside top-down teaching and content.

Figure 6: Modes of Interaction in Distance Education from Anderson and Garrison, (1998)

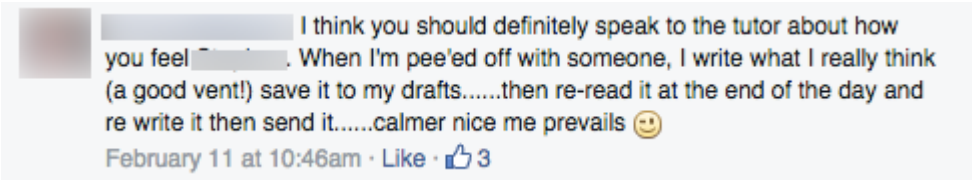


The relationship between Facebook groups and institution-provided learning environments

Assessing the educational function of student-led Facebook groups necessarily involves considering their relationship with institution-provided learning environments (for example VLE) and with the formal tuition process. We found frequent evidence of a two-way dynamic between Facebook groups and formal tuition/the VLE, for example group members directing others to tutorial notes and sections of the module materials, and sharing with their peers news of systems outages and tips about OU processes.

Anecdotal evidence suggests tutor uneasiness about student-led Facebook is sometimes connected with a perception that tutors are openly criticised in that environment, away from the attentions of an 'official' moderator. While tutors appear to be held in high regard for the most part we have found some evidence of tutors being criticised, for example for perceived late return of marked assignments (Law2; Law3). However, it is common for criticisms to be met with constructive guidance from group members (Figure 7). On the whole though, group participation in student-led Facebook groups appears rule-abiding and respectful.

Figure 7: Constructive comments from Law3



Impact on educational inclusion

Our study shows student-led Facebook groups can be highly effective in helping to achieve educational inclusion. Extensive emotional support is evident across the studied groups and appears to be helping group members in learning to manage emotional reactions, anxieties and stress levels. It follows that students who are part of a thriving Facebook community might feel particularly well-supported and consequently less likely to withdraw from their studies when struggling. Facebook groups are also providing 'just-in-time' academic guidance for less experienced students on a community of practice basis (Lave and Wenger, 1996), for example around workload and time-management.

Recommendations for tutors

Our research findings have led us to consider how distance learning tutors might best manage the departure of students from formal, tutor-led online forums within the VLE. Institutions must formulate their own strategies, but we suggest that tutors could usefully:

- Learn how to use Facebook proficiently and develop a profile that can safely be completely open/public.
- Observe a variety of open groups over time. We found that each of our case study groups had a unique culture and characteristics that needed to be understood and respected.
- Work on curating resources and links that are relevant to the module(s) that they teach in order to offer a helpful relationship to students in the social media space.

5. Conclusion

Our findings highlight student-led Facebook groups' value as a powerful form of study support. However, it appears that a lack of understanding of the ways in which students are using Facebook is informing perceptions of an incompatibility between Facebook groups and formal tuition, where in fact the two have the potential to exist side-by-side. We argue that Facebook groups should not be ignored, or indeed condemned, but instead should be acknowledged and supported by institutions in the same way that they might acknowledge student societies.

Our findings could usefully be expanded by future research covering a wider range of groups and discipline areas, and other institutions, to allow for broader comparisons to be made. It would also be useful to delve deeper into students' learning experiences in Facebook through interviews and surveys. For now, though, we are hopeful our research will lead to a refinement of the term 'open educational practice' to include student-led collaborative creation of new knowledge and an open culture of peer support in social media spaces such as Facebook.

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