Using online social networking for teaching and learning: Facebook use at the University of Cape Town

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Abstract

Web-based learning has made learning content much more freely and instantaneously available to students who can download course notes and readings with a single mouse click. Facebook is one of many Web 2.0 tools – wikis, delicious, YouTube, podcasts – that are listed as having potential applications for teaching and learning. Moreover, it has been argued that the current generation of youth, often described as Net Geners or Digital Natives, may be resistant to traditional methods of teaching and learning. This article explores student use of Facebook at the University of Cape Town, as well as lecturer engagement with students via the new social media. Drawing on a virtual ethnography and qualitative interviews, this article shows that while there are potential positive benefits to using Facebook in teaching and learning, particularly for the development of educational micro-communities, certain challenges, including ICT literacy and uneven access, remain pertinent.

Key words: Facebook, online learning, social networking, virtual ethnography

INTRODUCTION

Social networking sites have become increasingly popular with the rise of Web 2.0, the so-called second generation of web-based communities, with increased collaboration and sharing between users through applications like wikis, blogs and podcasts, RSS feeds, etc. Sites like MySpace.com, Friendster and, most recently, Facebook.com, have experienced surging popularity, particularly among youth who use these new technologies to create instant communities of practice (Castells 2007). Similarly, Second Life is a 3-D virtual world which allows its around ten million 'residents' to buy online property, trade in Linden dollars (convertible to USD), and interact with others in much the same way as one might in 'real' life.

This article focuses on the social networking site, Facebook, within the context of one South African university, with particular reference to possible applications for teaching and learning. Facebook was created in February 2004 by Mark Zuckerberg[1] at Harvard University. While its membership was originally limited to Ivy League college students, membership was later (since 11 September 2006) extended to anyone worldwide with a valid email address, and it is the seventh most accessed website in the United States (US) (Torgeson 2006). There are an estimated 30 million users worldwide, and of those who have publicly shared their location, there are currently

* Dr Tanja E Bosch is a lecturer in the Centre for Film and Media Studies, University of Cape Town, South Africa. E-mail: Tanja.bosch@gmail.com

(as of 9 July 2009) 13 642 Facebook users registered on the South African network. Local usage is fairly widespread, and South African users can add headlines from major South African news sites, and access Facebook mobile using their cell phones – a feature often used to update users' status messages. Facebook also allows local users to text message their status updates, at the cost of sending a regular SMS.

There are 3 609 members in the University of Cape Town network. This is within the broader context of 5 100 000 Internet users in South Africa, out of a total population of 49 660 502 (Internet World Stats 2008). While access to the Internet is still characterised by severe global inequalities, as well as an existing digital divide within the country, more Africans are online than ever before (Wasserman 2003), with user statistics increasing from year to year. While in general Internet penetration is still low in Africa, with only 9.4 per cent of the population online, increasingly South Africans are using their mobile phones to log onto the Internet. The online audience has grown by 121 per cent, with around four million users online, and English the predominant language (*South African Yearbook* 2008).

Like most online social networking sites, Facebook is used to maintain existing and develop new networks; and similar to Castells' (2007: 249) analysis of mobile networks, it 'allows for a rapidly changing network, according to the evolving projects and moods of each individual in the network, so that networks expand, overlap, and are modified following a decentralized multiple entry/exit structure of communication'. Facebook thus allows participation in various micro-communities, some of which might be educational.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

While the University of Cape Town (UCT) currently uses the Vula online course administration software, an initial informal survey showed that student use of Facebook is more extensive; and that especially during vacations, students log onto their Facebook accounts, but not onto Vula. Although Vula has the capacity for synchronous and asynchronous online discussions in chat-rooms and discussion boards, students seldom use these features. This study explored UCT students' use of Facebook qualitatively, to draw preliminary conclusions about possible educational applications. The research questions were:

- How/for what do UCT students use Facebook?
- How do UCT students' networks on Facebook relate to their networks in the classroom?
- Do their profiles reflect the 'digital divide' (with reference to language, class and race; Internet user demographics in South Africa)?
- How are tutors and lecturers attempting to engage with students using Facebook?
- What potential does Facebook hold for building learning communities (at UCT)?

While social networking sites and membership of these sites are often transient, it is important to study their use by youth, because it can provide insights into identity formation, status negotiation

and peer-to-peer sociality (boyd 2007). While studies show that teenagers in the US use other social networking sites like MySpace or Xanga, this study chose to focus on Facebook, as it is the most widespread of such sites (in terms of numbers of users) in South Africa, despite its origins in North America.

Moreover, the research on youth use of the Internet, new technologies and online social networking sites has, until this point, been firmly located in the US and Europe. Very little data exist on the use of the Internet and online social networks (Facebook included) in the global South. This study attempts to provide an exploratory account of Facebook usage on one university campus. While this qualitative study does not attempt to generalise the findings, the research is indicative and provides key markers for future research. Moreover, the present study provides key insights into university students' use of online social networking, which may be transferable to other contexts, at least within South Africa.

METHODOLOGY

The primary methodology for the study comprised a virtual ethnography and qualitative content analysis of 200 UCT student Facebook profiles. In addition, semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted with a purposive sample of 50 undergraduate students and five lecturers currently engaging with their students via Facebook. The focus was on undergraduate students, as they are generally the heaviest users of the site (Stutzman 2008). In addition, many graduate students also work full-time jobs, and as Stutzman (ibid.) suggests, may use Facebook more for networking than social management. Preliminary surveys conducted in four graduate classrooms at UCT indicated that, indeed, most graduate students have signed up to Facebook, but that they do not log in on a daily basis, and that their friend[2] lists are significantly smaller than those of undergraduate students. Most of those surveyed indicated that they signed up to see 'what all the fuss was about', but that they are essentially inactive users as they do not interact with their friends and contacts on Facebook.

However, the virtual ethnography was the major methodology of this study, which identified key markers for further exploration in the interviews and questionnaires. As the term implies, virtual ethnography is the practice of ethnography, but in a virtual or online setting – in other words, on the Internet (versus 'traditional' ethnographies which are conducted in spaces bound by geography and time). A random selection of 150 student profiles was viewed, following links from the UCT group, with particular emphasis being placed on downloaded applications, friend lists, groups and networks, wall posts and other asynchronous communication.

This study was informed by the notion that participation on social network sites leaves online 'traces' (boyd 2007), which reveal users' attitudes, social relationships and affiliations in offline spaces. Text provides the discursive space for the presentation of self to others, and the study was further guided by the notion that Internet media 'are continuous with and embedded in other social

spaces' (Miller & Slater 2000: 5). Of course, the challenge in studying life online is complicated by the blatant interference of the researcher in the frame of the field, and by the power of the researcher in representing the culture (Markham 2006). In this case, those sites where access was not controlled by privacy settings and which were available to the general public were viewed, and participants remained anonymous. Despite potential ethical challenges, the virtual ethnography was essential to define the field and triangulate the findings from the interviews and surveys. Participants' anonymity was guaranteed, as this component of the research was intended to provide an overview of trends, with no specific references to the content on individuals' pages. Rheingold (1993) shows how the Internet can provide a space for community formation, and Hine introduces the methodology of virtual ethnography as a form of online ethnography in which the methods of a traditional ethnography can be meaningfully transferred to the Internet. This study uses the term quite loosely, and more accurately merely draws on the basic principles of ethnography, with the researcher employing a form of 'lurking' or 'completely unobtrusive observation' (Garcia et al. 2009: 58) to gain an understanding of online interaction. In an attempt to counter some of the negatives associated with this methodology, nothing was actually 'harvested' (Sharf 1999) and no posts or messages from pages viewed are cited in this article.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Before outlining the findings of the present study, some context will be provided in the form of a brief review of the major academic literature on this topic. There has been a global surge in media coverage on the Facebook phenomenon, though most academic research on the subject is based on North-American case studies. A search of major library databases and online journals yielded no results for studies on Facebook within the South African context, with the exception of Macklin (2008), who used online social networking sites as part of the process of producing a film with South African artists and teachers. As the literature on Facebook is constantly growing (especially popular articles and online research reports) this is not an exhaustive literature review but merely an overview, to give a sense of the direction the research has taken to this point.

Generally, research into Facebook falls into one of the following four categories (with occasional overlapping): social networking and social capital, identity construction, concerns with privacy, and the potential use of Facebook for academic purposes (including use by librarians). Each of these will be dealt with in greater detail below.

Some research (Ellison et al. 2006; Kosik 2007) explores the use of Facebook for the formation and maintenance of social capital, while others (Hamatake et al. 2005) analyse its network structure. A study by Ellison et al. (2007) explores a dimension of social capital called 'maintained social capital', which assesses one's ability to stay connected to members of a community of which one was previously a member. Ellison et al. contend that Facebook usage is linked to measures of psychological wellbeing, suggesting that it might provide greater benefits for users with low self-esteem and low life satisfaction.

Through a qualitative ethnographic methodology, boyd (2007) contrasts the profiles of teenage American Facebook and MySpace users, arguing that users of the former tend to be members of a hegemonic society, primarily white and middle-class; while MySpace users, she argues, are generally members of a minority group. Boyd (2006) investigates social sites as networks that allow users to negotiate presentations of self and connect with others as a way of validating identity formation. Similarly, drawing on Goffman's theories of performance and symbolic interactionism, Kelley (2007) explores the way Facebook users construct their online identities, by managing the impressions others might have of them through their profiles, group membership and photos. Other studies explore the way in which race, ethnicity, religion and sexuality are affected by and enacted in social sites (boyd & Ellison 2007). For example, Fragoso (2006) explores the role of national identity in social sites in the US, with reference to Brazilian interaction with Americans on one site.

Facebook (and other online social networks) allows high levels of surveillance, as users can view and track one another's posts, profile data and other personal information. Several North-American universities (as well as employers) have begun to use the website to recruit or dismiss candidates (Torgeson 2006). Oxford University, for example, perused photos posted on Facebook to find evidence of student involvement in unruly behaviour which is contrary to university regulations. Similarly, students at an American university were charged when a keg was seen in a dorm room in an online photograph, while at another, a student was made to write an essay after creating a Facebook group considered homophobic (Bugeja 2006). In South Africa, a recruitment company offers users a work personality quiz via Facebook, and a human resource company has started a Facebook group to provide work-related information to HR managers and directors (Erasmus 2008). The Metropolitan Health Group invites prospective graduates to sign up for its graduate development programme on Facebook, in line with the latest international trend in workplace development (Pather 2007).

Interestingly, the Facebook privacy statement clearly states that personal information is used for marketing purposes.

> When you use Facebook, you may form relationships, send messages, perform searches and que-ries, form groups, set up events, and transmit information through various channels. We collect this information so that we can provide you the service and offer personalized features. (http://www.facebook.com/policy.php)

An original attempt at privacy controls limited Facebook access to university students, though even within these academic networks privacy problems – such as death threats, and explicit pictures and descriptions of student relationships – emerged (Kift 2007). The site was redesigned in September 2006 after some users described it as being 'stalkerish' (Heing 2006). But tagging features still track users' movements, which are made visible to others. More specifically, it was the addition of the mini-feed that caused a huge outcry, resulting in the formation of student groups against the website, concerning the release of their personal information (Torgeson 2006). The mini-feed

comprises a list of actions completed by a users' contacts, allowing one to see a record of their activities on Facebook, e.g. who they have 'friended', which groups they have joined, etc.

Kosik's (2007) study of Facebook users at Pennsylvania State University found that students showed few reservations regarding what they posted online, at times expressing a desire for less privacy. One might assume that students use Facebook to broaden their existing social networks and meet new people, e.g. for dating, whereas others may use Facebook to consolidate existing social networks. In fact, only a minimal number of students change their privacy settings, even when they know they can restrict who views their private information (Govani & Pashley 2006). Indeed, an exploratory look at UCT student profiles revealed that most of them have limited privacy settings, allowing the casual surfer to view their profile pages, wall postings, photographs and other quite personal information, which sometimes even includes cell phone numbers or home addresses. Dwyer et al. (2007) found that in online interaction, trust is not as necessary in the building of new relationships as it is in face-to-face encounters; and that in general, Facebook members tend to reveal a lot of information about themselves, without being aware of privacy options or knowing who can actually view their profile (Acquisti & Gross 2006).

There is not much research on the possible academic uses of Facebook, with existing literature focusing more on its social uses. Increasingly, though, educators are recognising the possibilities of tapping into the already popular social networking site to reach students with learning material. As such, the literature is slowly but steadily increasing, although once again, most of it is based in the US. Some research, for example, has explored how students feel about having lecturers on Facebook (Hewitt & Forte 2006) and how faculty participation affects student–professor relations (Mazer, Murphy & Simonds 2007). Bugeja (2006) warns of the dangers of Facebook, arguing that it can be both a tool and a distraction in the classroom, and that the solution is not to block content, but to foster in students the ability to discern when and where technology may be appropriate or inappropriate.

However, if one considers the large numbers of students on Facebook often actively participating in discussions and groups, it cannot be ignored as a potential educational tool. Compared to university course sites, e.g. Vula at UCT, students are more engaged with Facebook, and perhaps educators need to explore ways to tap into an already popular network. After all, these methods of community building (online social networks) are the ways in which students today are meeting, communicating, and building community (Shier 2005). Indeed, Facebook may be just the tool we need to stimulate collaborative student-led learning.

While her sample is limited, Kosik (2007) found that some students use Facebook for academic purposes, more specifically to contact people in their classes to get information about assignments, with some stating that they preferred it to the university education software programme because it provided more immediate responses. During a qualitative study at Yale (Duboff 2007), faculty members reflected that their posts on Facebook indicated to students that they were part of the same academic community, and that it helped break down barriers between themselves and students.

In a similar study (Matthews 2006), a faculty member highlighted Facebook as an opportunity to directly reach over 75 per cent of his target audience. In 2007 a Facebook version of the online learning environment Blackboard (similar to Vula in South Africa) was launched, allowing for 95 per cent of Blackboard's functionality to be moved into Facebook, with a new CourseFeed application providing users with a newsfeed of anything happening in their courses (O'Neill 2007). This was phased out in 2008, and Facebook has called on developers to build other educational platforms, i.e. 'even more robust ways to create, connect, and collaborate around teaching and learning in the classroom' (Morin 2007). Facebook also allows the creation of groups for particular academic courses, with wall posting used to discuss elements of the course.

At the University of North Carolina, students said they preferred conducting discussions in Facebook versus the standard course management system, listing pre-existing familiarity and user experience as key factors (Stutzman 2008). A critical finding of this study was that whereas the original motivation for using Facebook in teaching was to 'meet' students in their spaces, they did not fully integrate the academic content into their social spaces, instead treating it as separate from their social interactions, and thus undercutting the logic of moving academic course content into popular online spaces (ibid.).

The company Lookabee has also launched a platform for teachers to create their own Facebook applications to keep in touch with students. Each Facebook application will be custom made for each teacher, and will allow them to distribute documents such as homework assignments or course notes for later downloading by students (Nicole 2007). Some lecturers have gone so far as to integrate Facebook into their university courses. At the University of Pennsylvania, a professor uses Facebook to teach concepts of social networking and to foster critical thinking, having students investigate the connections among their peers (Barnes 2007).

Several other studies consider librarians' potential use of Facebook to promote library services and events, and one in particular concludes that awareness of students' cultural and social interests, and how they interact online, may help older generations of academic librarians to better connect with students. Nearly a hundred librarians at North-American universities have created library groups on Facebook (Charnigo & Barnett-Ellis 2007). In South Africa, there are several library-related Facebook groups, but membership is still relatively low.

Quite a few articles, written from students' perspectives, give librarians advice on how to maximise Facebook. Koerwer (2007) and Miller and Jensen (2007) offer a few practical tips to help librarians' groups move beyond just a few students requesting books or asking reference questions. These include 'friending' student library assistants; showing profiles at library instructional sessions; using the news feed to update the library's status or blog, or photograph new books; or creating events for book groups or exhibit openings.

Downes (2007) argues that Facebook is distinctive from other social networking sites because it has stronger roots in the academic community, and further proposes that the site's varied and

distinctive functions allow it to provide a very different model of how online tools can be used in educational contexts. In the UK, most schools and universities block access to Facebook websites, but a government-funded guide argues that they are consequently missing out on their potential for education (Lipsett 2008). The report[3] lists several potential uses of social networking sites for educators, including developing literacy and communication skills, e-portfolios and communities of practice, and also learning about e-safety, among others.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Students mention Facebook often, with many of them using the term 'addicted'. In many of the small group seminars I taught during 2007 and 2008, students would immediately share Facebook information with each other and become online 'friends', often using the site to replicate classroom networks and to informally exchange course-related questions and discussions. It also appeared that many UCT students did not change their privacy settings, allowing all members of the network to view their profile pages.

Logistical issues

The main issue surrounding the use of Facebook on campus is related to bandwidth availability, with the impression that having more students on Facebook at any one time, dramatically slows down the entire network. At the moment, bandwidth restrictions are such that Internet audio and video streaming is not possible in most locations on campus. Although the site is not blocked on campus (as it is on some other South African university campuses), access in university labs or the library is discouraged, with clear signage indicating to students that access to social networking (and other recreational) sites is not allowed. In 2009, users are presented with a window informing them that access may slow down the network before they are allowed to proceed to the site. Despite this, nearly all the students surveyed indicated that they accessed Facebook on campus, with a smaller percentage of these indicating that they would then only update their status off campus using their mobile phones.

Despite bandwidth and network limitations, some educators also listed the potentially distracting nature of Facebook, arguing that students spend more unproductive time online, instead of focusing on their studies. One possibility in the argument for the use of Facebook in teaching would be to develop the infrastructure on campus, as currently even podcasting or video blogging for educational purposes is limited. But of course there are also clear disadvantages, such as the possibility that investing in technology comes at the expense of hiring more qualified faculty members, that technology in the classroom is potentially distracting and does not promote critical thinking, and that the youth view technology primarily as entertainment (Bugeja 2006).

Another logistical issue relates to language, with the predominance of English being a disadvantage, limiting the spread of Facebook in Europe. While the application has translated pages into several

languages, including Afrikaans, isiXhosa and isiZulu, this may be a limiting factor in the South African context. Despite the multilingual nature of South African society (11 official languages), there was very little use of languages other than English on students' walls, regardless of race or home language. All communication was found to be in English, with students (including non-native speakers) considering this the obvious choice of language for the medium.

Facebook users

Student use of Facebook is quite varied, and one cannot assume that students use online social networking tools in homogenous ways. Generally, several categories of users were noted: some signed up to Facebook but are not daily active users; some signed up but do not actively participate, even though they often observe on the site, reading information posted by their friends; and some are active users, uploading and downloading information and using a variety of applications on the site, predominantly for social purposes. Within the latter category, there is a further divide between those who use Facebook for social purposes only, and those who also use Facebook for some kind of academic conversations, though these were usually linked to classes in which this type of participation was a course requirement. Another category of user was defined by those who did not use the site for much other than keeping friends abreast of their activities by frequently updating their status message. Students updated their status frequently, particularly before and after a weekend.

Similar to research conducted in the US, UCT students perceived Facebook as a rite of passage, and first-year students without Facebook profiles immediately signed up when they arrived on campus. Not surprisingly, then, the main ways in which UCT students use Facebook is for social networking and seeking support from peers, community building on campus, and student activism.

Using Facebook for social connectivity

Facebook is widely used on the UCT campus for connecting members of student societies, and to a range of student groups, residence halls and sporting societies. Many of these groups appear to serve the purpose of community building, keeping members of specific academic programmes in touch with one another via the website, or for information sharing among people who meet in 'real world' environments. One example of student community building on Facebook was an online group set up to provide emotional support to the friends of a student who had been killed in a car crash. Many others appear to be centred on academic concerns, and are often phrased along the lines of 'I survived ... Stats 101', etc. Clearly, Facebook fosters micro-communities of people who share interests or partake in similar activities, and the question is whether this kind of effective social networking might be similarly extended from the personal, into the realm of the academic.

Another use of Facebook at UCT was for student activism, with a range of groups set up during the 2007 SRC elections. Some of these groups merely provided general information around voter

education, but many of them allowed voters to join as an expression of their intent to vote for particular candidates. While this took place on a relatively small scale, in some ways it demonstrates the potential power of Facebook for networked political action. In the US, the group Students Against Facebook News Feeds (SAFNF) bonded hundreds of thousands of users via Facebook, eventually leading to the introduction of privacy controls on the news feeds function (Stutzman 2006); although ironically, the efficacy of such groups is limited as administrators cannot message their groups if there are more than 100 members (and most South African undergraduate classes are usually larger than 100).

Another form of social connectivity is group membership, with groups listed as being very important to students, and all those interviewed stating that they belonged to several groups. While the numbers of groups varied, most students were members of at least five or six groups, with some indicating membership of over 50 groups. As Stutzman (ibid.) argues, groups are clearly a low-involvement way to make statements about one's identity. The groups which students belong to range from those indicating their primary school, their political affiliations, their hobbies or simply their opinions on current topics.

Using Facebook for general communication

The most common uses were listed as general purposes of socialising – sharing information about social events and parties, sharing photographs and other images, music and videos, and keeping in touch during university vacations. Students at UCT were similar to students in other studies, in that friendships in online networks often began offline, and then migrated to the online space (Lampe 2006).

As boyd (2007) found with American teens, UCT students also take personal communication into public spaces for others to witness. Messages left on the public space of The Wall often include the kinds of text one might expect to find in a personal email message. Most students, when asked about this, indicated that they often chose to use this kind of public communication so that their other friends could also see what they were writing. This hyperpublic (ibid.) communication was not perceived as invasive of their privacy – instead, students saw it as an easy and effective way of maintaining group communication.

Using Facebook for teaching and learning

While Facebook appears fairly widespread on the UCT campus – few students knew of university friends who were not registered on the network – this raises several issues within the context of teaching and learning. One lecturer, for example, responded that it was easier and quicker to 'talk' to people whom she saw daily on Facebook than to look for them in class, if she needed to communicate something important to them.

Students who were engaged in academic Facebook groups actively participated in these, and welcomed the use of the online social networking tool for academic purposes in addition to the social. In most cases, students reflected that they were already spending lots of time on Facebook, and that being able to check class-related material while at the same time engaging in personal communication, was useful. In general, students who used Facebook for various academic purposes – from the informal to the more formal mandatory participation – listed a range of benefits. Primarily, students said that their Facebook friends helped them to identify and find learning material on the Internet, and to answer questions about logistics (course venues, times, assignment details, etc). Students also used Facebook during university vacations to connect with others about holiday projects, and share lecture and study notes.

One disadvantage of Vula is that it does not connect junior cohorts of learners to their seniors, even when they are students in the same department, or have common interests. Students interviewed talked about how Facebook allowed them to learn from the older students whom they did not usually meet with in person, allowing them to network with groups who had similar academic interests, even if they were in different classes. The main benefit (listed by all students) was being able to access tutors and lecturers instantly, in an informal and less pressured online environment.

This was also reflected in lecturers' responses. One respondent felt that Facebook allows students to ask questions they might not feel comfortable asking in class, as there is a relative degree of anonymity in the absence of face-to-face interaction. 'If you go to this class, a class of 300 students, and ask who has a problem, they are shy to raise their hand to say they have problems, but on Facebook they say it boldly' (interview, 13 March 2008). In addition, some lecturers indicated that class time is spent more effectively, because student queries had already been dealt with via Facebook. Students use the site to indicate which areas of the material they would like a particular instructor to cover, and the lecturer then comes to class prepared for this.

In many cases this kind of interaction was transferred to real-world settings, as students felt lecturers were more approachable after interacting with them online. In some ways Facebook could be perceived as a shared space – not controlled by either the students or their lecturers – and thus breaking down the traditional power hierarchies between student and instructor. In other ways, this lack of control could be negative, particularly as the software is not locally controlled, and so should the site shut down, all communication would be lost.

Lecturer engagement with students

All lecturers who were informally surveyed indicated that they routinely ignored friend requests from their students, and preferred to keep personal information on their profiles private from students. During the research process I did not receive any friend requests from current students, even though many of them were aware of my presence on Facebook and of my ongoing research project. Stutzman (2008) warns against establishing Facebook relationships with students, arguing

that this may affect the perceptions students and lecturers have of each other. 'Facebook is a nascent space; hard-and-fast rules for educator–student interaction do not exist, and educators must make decisions that respect the privacy preferences of students, while exploring [the] educational opportunities of the tools' (ibid.: 7).

In many ways, privacy is sacrificed in favour of social convergence (boyd 2008), and generally it was found that not only were UCT staff unwilling to 'friend' students, but that students clearly stated that they would not accept friend requests from lecturers. The concept of 'friending' on online social sites (boyd 2006) is more about the performance of online identities and the formation of communities, than about 'friendship' in the traditional sense. But this study revealed that despite this understanding of friendship, UCT students and staff interpreted the display of social connections as revealing information about their own identities (Donath & boyd 2004). Perhaps more important than student engagement with lecturers is the potential Facebook offers for students to engage with one another – they are already in touch via social connections, which may be useful for generating peer review on their written work.

Demographics of UCT student use

Facebook on the UCT campus is used by a wide range of students, in terms of race, class and gender. There was no evidence that Facebook use reflects general Internet usage patterns in South Africa, probably because all students have equal access to the Internet via computer laboratories across the campus. However, what was most interesting is that while many students had friends across racial groups, most tended to have friends who were similar to them in terms of race. Students' friends were mostly family and university acquaintances, but many also had friends from primary and secondary school. As a result, the numbers of friends ranged from around 50 to over 200. The research thus supports international studies which show that participating in online networks tends to follow cultural and linguistic lines (boyd 2007). There were no significant patterns in terms of gender.

CONCLUSION

Web-based learning has made learning content much more freely and instantaneously available to students who can download course notes and readings with a single mouse click. Facebook is one of many Web 2.0 tools – wikis, delicious, YouTube, podcasts – listed as having potential applications for teaching and learning. Moreover, it has been argued that the current generation of youth, often described as Net Geners or Digital Natives, may be resistant to traditional methods of teaching and learning. The act of searching for and retrieving information on the Internet may have led to a shift in learning styles (Tapscott 1998), with a need for more interactive environments and more hands-on inquiry-based approaches to learning (Glenn 2000; Hay 2000).

There are technological and economic advantages to computer-based learning, particularly as Facebook takes off in the South African context. South African university students appear to be using Facebook, while high school teens use their cell phones for mobile networking (see Bosch 2008). Advantages might include answering the same questions, in bulk, for large numbers using a technology with which they are already familiar, and demystifying the divide between student and teacher. 'By incorporating the online habits of Net Generation students within the framework of clearly defined pedagogical goals, educators can tap into the distinctive proficiencies of their students while ensuring focused learning and positive outcomes' (Barnes et al. 2007: 5). Moreover, while it has not been sufficiently explored by students, Facebook allows academic-related networking across campuses, while the courseware Vula is campus (and course) specific.

But potential advantages are met with equally convincing challenges. Compared to other commonly used online tools, Facebook is limited, e.g. for managing groups Facebook does not offer a wiki, it is not possible to send group notifications, and material cannot easily be deleted or archived. Lecturers may find it challenging to use Facebook due to varying ICT literacy levels, and many South African higher education institutions do not have access to the resources that enable widespread computer-based teaching and learning. And finally, whatever the medium, the challenge for higher education remains to create a reading culture, and foster the development of skills related to critical reading and thinking.

ENDNOTES

1   Zuckerberg was later (in 2007) taken to court over allegations that he stole the idea from Harvard classmates who were working on a similar concept for one campus, called ConnectU. The case was settled out of court for US$65 million.
2   'Friends' are contacts added by users. One has to 'accept' a friend request before being added to a user's list of contacts.
3   Available at www.digizen.org/socialnetworking

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