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Introduction

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Introduction

The revolutionary zeal with which Massively Open Online Courses, or MOOCs, were embraced in 2012 ostensibly situated online education as completely new, unprecedented, and entirely disruptive for the status quo of higher education (Pappano, 2012). Yet only a year later revelations of incredibly low completion rates (Pretz, 2014) and poor learning outcomes (Perez-Harnandez 2014) led to questions about whether the appeal and lifespan of MOOCs as a concept was already terminal (Strauss, 2013; Yang, 2013). While the rise and fall of MOOCs have both been radically overdetermined – they are an emerging if largely unpolished form of mass education, but certainly one that is here to stay in some form for the conceivable future – it is equally if not more important to recognise that teaching and learning utilising and via networked digital communication tools has a history as long as the World Wide Web itself (Kent & Leaver, 2014). Moreover, as the largest online social network in the world, Facebook has been part of the education landscape since its inception in a Harvard dormitory a decade ago. This special issue of *Digital Culture & Education* takes the tenth anniversary of Facebook as an opportunity to critically reflect on role of that platform in higher education, whilst simultaneously engaging with some of the larger questions about the place of education online, questions which pre-date the emergence of MOOCs by a significant number of years.

Situating Facebook and Informal Student Learning

At the time of writing, Facebook has over 1.28 billion monthly users, with over 800 million of those users logging onto Facebook each day, and over a billion people regularly accessing the social network using mobile devices (Facebook, 2014). Facebook fulfils and indeed normalises the widely cited basic features of an online social network in that it allows users to "(1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system" (boyd & Ellison, 2007). While there are a plethora of social networking sites, Facebook's size and longevity single the platform out and make it a particularly appealing tool for educators given the extremely high use and penetration rates, especially amongst students. While Facebook may have lost some of its youthful appeal, talk of Facebook's decline is really just about a slowing down in growth, not even an actual reduction in the number of users (Marks, 2013). Moreover, the huge increase in the use of mobile

devices to access Facebook, and the company's insistence on the use of real names and ostensibly a singular identity (Zoonen, 2013), has situated Facebook as a space where any distinction between online and offline activities is increasingly meaningless. As Matthew Allen has argued in a previous issue of *Digital Culture & Education*, "Facebook is no longer one of several competing but similar online services: it is unique" (Allen, 2012, p. 214).

As Facebook emerged from a tertiary context, and given its huge popularity with students, it is no surprise that the impact of Facebook on student learning has been investigated. Ellison, Steinfield and Lampe's (2007) early study, for example, found that using the platform could significantly increase a student's social capital, reinforcing existing face to face relationships, but also forming new ones. Research by Selwyn (2007, 2009) analysing public posts by students on Facebook found that the platform was particularly useful in reinforcing and expanding informal learning, from the sharing of resources and materials, to bonding socially around education activities, to mutual support in stressful situations such as exam preparation. Work by Madge, Meek, Wellens and Hooley (2009) found that the platform was important both as a tool for increasing social interaction between students during their studies but also, significantly, for students to find and form networks with fellow students before they had physically arrived to begin their studies, thus forming networks in advance, and developing informal learning ties before formal education commenced.

The idea that Facebook use and social media in general would drain time students should actually be using to study persisted for some time, but work by Pasek, More and Hargittai (2009) largely dispelled with myth. Highlighting a more nuanced picture of Facebook use, Junco (2012) discovered that it was not Facebook use *per se* but specific types of uses which might influence the success or otherwise of students. Time spent on social games facilitated by Facebook as a platform correlated with less academic success, while time spent commenting and interacting with fellow students was shown to have a positive impact on a student's studies. These various studies serve as a reminder that Facebook is not a singular tool, but a wide-ranging set of tools and practices tied together in an online platform. Different uses of this platform will inevitably lead to different outcomes, including different outcomes in terms of informal and formal education.

Formalising Facebook Use

Increasingly, Facebook is being integrated into educational design, including as part of formal assessment. Facebook groups are especially popular as supplements to existing interaction spaces in many units and courses, not least of all because the affordances of groups mean that students and educators do not have to technically become 'friends' on Facebook in order to interact with one another (Kent, 2014). In Facebook groups, students may be asked to share resources, annotate material online, critique or review related material, or simply comment on material raised during a unit. Indeed, students may be required to create their own Facebook groups or pages as part of engaging with a particular topic, or presenting material to an audience beyond that of their peers, tutor or marker. Moreover, for students who only interact online, Facebook can provide an extremely important space to interact with fellow students and with teachers, often compensating in some respects for the lack of informal and face to face discussion opportunities enjoyed by their campus-based counterparts (Leaver, 2014).

Shifting from Facebook as an optional informal learning space to a mandated part of assessment brings new concerns about higher education institutions forcing students to join corporately-owned tools which commercialise user data. As Croeser (2014) argues,

such a mandate should be met with an attempt to increase students' awareness of the data collection practices of Facebook whilst informing them of various software tools and best practices which can limit or obfuscate the platform's profiling activities. It is important, too, to consider the impact of Facebook use on educators. Some may conscientiously object to joining the platform, while others may be wary of engaging with students in a space which they interact socially (Raynes-Goldie & Lloyd, 2014). This is complicated by Facebook's insistence on a single account associated with a user's real name, although this policy may be circumvented, albeit violating the site's Terms of Use and thus risking the deletion of a Facebook account. There are dangers in terms of the wholesale integration and focus on Facebook in tertiary settings. Even if Facebook's userbase is not actually declining, the notion of Facebook fatigue is popularising, with extended breaks from the platform being increasingly normalised. How this is reconciled with Facebook as an official university communication channel will be a significant question in coming years (Gallo & Adler, 2014). It is the ongoing question about the best configuration and, indeed, appropriateness at all of Facebook in formal higher education which the articles herein address.

In this issue

This special issue on Facebook in education opens with Eleanor Sandry's '"Face to Face" Learning from Others in Facebook Groups' in which Sandry utilises a theoretical framework from the work of Emmanuel Levinas to broaden the notion of a face to face encounter. For Levinas, a face has a broader meaning which is not necessarily about physicality or proximity at all, but rather about a much wider range of communicative acts. Inherent here, Sandry argues, is the idea that communication is always imperfect, always about engaging with the other, and recognising, then, that communication either physical or online, has an ethical dimension. Applying this frame to students and educators communicating within a Facebook group, Sandry argues that the less formal space and equal online footing, amongst other factors, has the potential to create a communication space where teachers and students both take responsibility for the way they communicate. Communication becomes a more level exchange, unlike, for example, the spaces created by Blackboard and other Learning Management Systems (LMSes) which attempt to replicate the authority and thus distance of educators from learners.

In Lucinda Rush and D.E. Wittkower's 'Exploiting fluencies: Educational expropriation of social networking site consumer training', after rebuking Marc Prensky's (2001) highly problematic but popular notion of the digital native, the authors identify a number of ways in which Facebook's affordances effectively train users in certain skills necessary for successfully navigating and using the social network. Rush and Wittkower utilise a preliminary phenomenology to reveal six training categories that could potentially be meaningfully redeployed, or expropriated, toward more explicit critical thinking and pedagogical ends. They offer a case study in which students use Facebook to create and share a class-wide annotated bibliography, which in its design harnesses a number of the skills produced from Facebook use, and facilitates a situation in which students' critical thinking is increased not just in the classroom, but well beyond those boundaries. Rush and Wittkower conclude by offering a number of different scenarios where skills learnt from Facebook could be expropriated for teaching and learning purposes, repurposing abilities needed to navigate a commercially-driven platform for critical thinking and reasoning.

In 'Learning or Liking: Educational architecture and the efficacy of attention' Leanne McRae offers a timely and critical look at the way higher education institutions *en masse*

have embraced social networking services and other online tools in an attempt to compete for the eyeballs of students in an attention economy. While digital tools and connectivity have the potential to facilitate new learning spaces and modes of engagement, McRae argues that the erosion of boundaries between formal and informal learning may undermine the specificities and critical perspectives needed to facilitate and foster deep critical thinking. McRae argues that when students are positioned as consumers rather than learners, they tend to respond accordingly and demand an educational experience based on immediacy and the direct provision of resources and attention, when often a slower and more systematic approach to learning may be required to change the way thinking happens, not just the absorption of, or simply access to, information.

In the final article, 'Separating Work and Play: Privacy, Anonymity and the Politics of Interactive Pedagogy in Deploying Facebook in Learning and Teaching', Rob Cover also responds to the way Facebook use in educational settings may collapse particular boundaries. Cover details the use of Facebook in a first-year unit in which students voiced concerns about the way their educational activities on the social network were visible to their other friends and family on the platform. Students' desire for their online work to be private was frequently framed in opposition to publicness, and yet Cover argues that this context collapse highlights the very instability of the public/private distinction. Following Henry Giroux, he argues further that Facebook as part of mass culture can and should be deployed precisely *as* a destabilising space, where not just the notion of private, but also the notions of author, audience and text are all potentially blurred. Cover argues that when framed appropriately, Facebook as a learning tool and space has the potential to make visible the way a range of concepts are destabilised, and that the co-creative identities and interactions fashioned via Facebook can lead to an extremely important mode of self-reflexive critical thinking.

Acknowledgements

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Biographical Statement

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