

# Facebook Groups and Pages Integration in the Higher Ed Classroom

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## **Abstract**

Social media use has grown in the past five years, with most users engaging several times per week. In this paper, the potential impact of Facebook Pages and Groups on learner retention, sense of community, and relationship building is analyzed. Best practices for professors and administrators to use Facebook for the purposes of building a sense of community, sharing information and networking, and maintaining a positive relationship between students, administrators, and instructors in the online classroom are examined.

## Facebook Groups and Pages Integration in the Higher Ed Classroom

Students are using social media frequently in their day-to-day lives, creating their own communities and identifying with groups online. Yet, most university efforts on social media sites are based on marketing goals rather than building a sense of community and networking. This is evident as indicated through social media standards policies, university enforcement against professors creating groups or pages that may reflect on the university, and a general lack of support for professors offering support online in more innovative ways.

In this chapter, opportunities for increased retention and a sense of community through social media are identified, data about building a sense of community online and the perceived and *real learner* benefit is examined, and tips are provided on how to integrate social media into the classroom.

### Using Social Media in the Classroom May Increase Engagement and Retention

According to Pew Research and the Pew Internet Project's research on social networking, as of January 2014, 74% of online adults use social networking sites (Duggan, Ellison, Lampe, Lenhart, & Madden, 2014). While the data on use is relatively similar for men and women (72% and 76%, respectively), there is even higher use among the traditional higher education online student demographic, at 89% and 82% for individuals ages 18 to 29 and 30 to 49, respectively. The growing popularity of mobile devices and smartphones has made social media networking even easier and more adaptable to a location-independent model. Additionally, research suggested that users of social networking sites have closer social ties and are half as likely to be socially isolated as an average American. Users are more likely to be open to opposing viewpoints, which is vital for critical thinking in education (Duggan et al., 2014).

A common theme in online education is the need for connectedness and a sense of community and belonging to help retain learners and maintain interest in continuing education. Studies have been conducted on cognitive presence and engagement (Akyol & Garrison, 2011), relationship

building in online learning (Boston et al., 2014), and sense of community in education after using social media sites (Gashim & Shepherd, 2014).

Educators and administrators struggle to create a sense of community using blogs, forums, newsletters, and social networking pages designed to push content out to users who like a particular page or engage in a group. Often driven by marketing or public relations teams, schools continue to try to use traditional marketing methods to engage a nontraditional student. Relying only on Facebook Pages can create issues if students perceive a page to be a marketing tool, rather than an active engagement tool. Facebook Pages feels less like a community and more like a unidirectional outreach channel. Facebook's own documentation on Groups versus Pages suggests Groups are better for creating a sense of community (What are the privacy options, 2015). A study conducted by McCorkindale, DiStaso, and Sisco (2013) noted that when studying Millennials and how they prefer to interact with organizations on Facebook, they were very specific about who they wanted to engage with, for what purpose, and how. Namsu, Kee, and Valenzuela (2009) noted that the following were reasons why students joined Facebook Groups:

- to obtain information about activities,
- to socialize,
- to seek self-status, and
- for entertainment.

A study by McCorkindale et al. (2013) noted that 91% did not associate or accept friend requests from organizations they did not know, and 86% checked their account daily (p. 78). Among the most *liked* groups or organizations on social media were college organizations (McCorkindale et al., 2013). Ninety-one percent of respondents were members of Facebook Groups, which implied that there is significant benefit for schools to reach a greater percentage of their student population through the use of Groups.

No studies have been published on the use of Facebook Groups as engagement and retention tools in higher education, instead focusing on student-led discussion and classroom material distribution. A study conducted in 2012 asking students to use Facebook Pages in the classroom, as a method of receiving learning material for their course in their newsfeeds, resulted in data indicating that 93.1% of students had an active Facebook account (Irwin, Ball, Desbrow, & Leveritt, 2012). Eighty percent

noted that Facebook use increased their participation in general discussion about course topics, 80.8% of the students indicated the Facebook engagement increased their interaction with fellow students, 75.6% indicated they used it to receive notifications for lecture note availability and assessment items, and 56% indicated it gave them exposure to relevant media and learning materials (Irwin et al., 2012, pp. 1221-1232).

Rather than taking the more traditional approach of asking students to go to a page, blog, or newsletter to comment on an article, learn information, or follow up on a topic that may feel like a marketing effort rather than an educational one, many educators have begun posting articles and pieces of interest on professor pages and in informal groups run by professors. Facebook Groups and Pages have little oversight by administration or marketing. While this has created discomfort among some in leadership positions, many facilitators are finding it useful to create a sense of community and purpose, find common bonds, learn about one another's interests, and help students network for jobs during their education or post-graduation.

## Examples

Many professors are beginning to create Professor Pages, where they share information about the area in which they are a subject matter expert (SME). While this may also benefit the professor due to increased visibility (particularly when search engine optimized), learners benefit from having information about a topic they can access during and after class and staying connected to professors who may help them network for jobs post-class session. In a graduate business strategy course, the researcher used Facebook Pages to share information for assignments, 86% of students (n=22) indicated they found the page helpful, 77% checked it at least once a day, and 90.9% indicated they connected with classmates they believe they would not have been able to identify or locate without the Facebook Page.

In a graduate program in Information Technology over a two-year span, 57% of the researcher's students (n=225) maintained connectedness to the Facebook Group even after the researcher was no longer actively posting material. During active participation, 77.7% of students were frequenting (one time or more per week) the Group for help with homework.

Nineteen resources were posted by students in files related to labs to help students get through difficult problems; 90% of the posts were job information, job sharing, and helping one another with resources to secure employment. One other professor from the department was in the Group, and while the university was aware of the Group and other professors told their students about it, the university allowed the Group to be run by professors only. When an administrative assistant joined the Group and told the Dean about post content, students became aware of the intrusion and participation dropped by 85%. Prior to this, the Group was an excellent source of content, additional assistance, networking, and job help, while creating a strong sense of community between students and professors.

## Tips for Success

When using Facebook Pages, it is clear from research data and student feedback that universities need to create a sense of community and bi-directional relationships, and not use the platform for marketing only. Users will tend to tune out marketing messages or *Unlike* the Page. Professors should post relevant and timely material and post often enough to keep students frequenting the Page. Professors should make it clear to students what the privacy risks are—that the participants who like the Page are not kept private and should be instructed to secure their own privacy settings as they wish. Professors sharing information freely should use hash tags to help others in the community join the conversation and enrich the learning opportunities.

When using Facebook Groups, professors should limit the number of administrators and be sure to moderate daily (or several times per day). Facebook Groups marked *Secret* are not searchable and, therefore, do not offer students the benefit of having others from the institution or other areas of study join the Group. However, open Groups do provide limited privacy; therefore, it is recommended that Groups be marked *Closed*, which requires approval before one can join. This helps limit spammers and keeps tighter control over the Group while still allowing the sharing of information and the Group to be searchable and indexed. It is recommended that all participants be allowed and encouraged to post first without administrator approval, but that administrators turn on email notifications so they are aware when a new post is created to ensure the privacy and integrity

of the Group (What are the privacy options, 2015). Professors and administrators should share relevant information often and encourage other classmates or alumni to join the Group. Administrators can add the link to newsletters, communications with students, and in signature blocks to increase Group awareness.

## Conclusion

Facebook Groups and Pages are powerful tools for professors to reach students where they already are—online in social media platforms—rather than requiring them to engage in sources that require an additional step (e.g., blogs, forums). This improves connectedness, a sense of community, sharing of information, and possibly retention. Professors and administrators who are more liberal with their policies of social sharing may improve the peer-to-peer and student-to-institution relationships.

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