

The FaceUOC Project

An Open Social Learning experience by the Open University of Catalonia

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Abstract

The possibilities and expansion of the use of Web 2.0 has opened up a world of possibilities in online learning. In spite of the integration of these tools in education major changes are required in the educational design of instructional processes.

This paper presents an educational experience conducted by the Open University of Catalonia using the social network Facebook for the purpose of testing a learning model that uses a participation and collaboration methodology among users based on the use of open educational resources.

- The aim of the experience is to test an Open Social Learning (OSL) model, understood to be a virtual learning environment open to the Internet community, based on the use of open resources and on a methodology focused on the participation and collaboration of users in the construction of knowledge.

- The topic chosen for this experience in Facebook was 2.0 Journeys: online tools and resources. The objective of this 5 weeks course was to provide students with resources for managing the various textual, photographic, audiovisual and multimedia materials resulting from a journey.

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- The most important changes in the design and development of a course based on OSL are the role of the teacher, the role of the student, the type of content and the methodology:
- The teacher mixes with the participants, guiding them and offering the benefit of his/her experience and knowledge.
- Students learn through their participation and collaboration with a mixed group of users.
- The content is open and editable under different types of license that specify the level of accessibility.
- The methodology of the course was based on the creation of a learning community able to self-manage its learning process. For this a facilitator was needed and also a central activity was established for people to participate and contribute in the community.
- We used an ethnographic methodology and also questionnaires to students in order to acquire results regarding the quality of this type of learning experience.
- Some of the data obtained raised questions to consider for future designs of educational situations based on OSL:
 - Difficulties in breaking the facilitator-centred structure
 - Change in the time required to adapt to the system and to achieve the objectives
 - Lack of commitment with free courses
 - The trend to return to traditional ways of learning
 - Accreditation
- This experience has taught all of us that education can happen any time and in any place but not in any way.

Keywords

e-learning, higher education, Open Social Learning, social networks, Facebook action

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1. Introduction

This paper presents the results from the analysis of an Open Social Learning experience carried out by the Open University of Catalonia (UOC) on a social network. Based on the formulation of our study approach, focusing on discovering how to use Facebook as an educational platform that favours the development of subjects for university studies, our educational offer was based on a flexible, unguided and collaborative instructional design aimed at promoting an expanded knowledge.

To analyse the experience, qualitative and quantitative information has been gathered, on one hand using an ethnographic methodology, from contributions carried out during the development of the learning action on the social network forum and on another, using an on-line questionnaire regarding the perceptions of participants once the experience had concluded.

The conclusions and prospective provide a series of recommendations to be considered when developing future educational experiences for these types of virtual-social-informal contexts.

2. Open Social Learning

Since the proliferation of 2.0 tools there has been a significant increase in the number of learning actions aimed at the social construction of knowledge (Siemens, 2004), through the participation, interaction and use of the collective intelligence (Surowiecki, 2004) of internet users, particularly on social networks, leading to the appearance of the “Open Social Learning (OSL)” concept. Its progressive exaltation has caused a great stir in the foundations of learning theories, creating a debate as to the suitability of open social applications for teaching and learning.

Facebook is a “third place” for learning (Oldenburg, 1989), in other words, a space that favours social relations and is therefore not a regulated or controlled environment. Taking into account that between 70% and 90% (Cross, 2009) of learning by people occurs in informal environments, Facebook could be considered a potential link for distributed production of knowledge on the network, proving that humans are becoming more and more capable of learning autonomously, outside the institutions traditionally related to formal learning (Arina, 2008). In this sense, e-learning 2.0 is social, it promotes dynamic, personal and self-managed learning. Downes (2008) has identified three aspects of this approach: the reaction to the commercialisation of learning, the DIY (do-it-yourself) attitude and thinking and learning for oneself. Other theories close to the OSL concept are edupunk (Lamb, 2009) and edupop (Quintana and Vidal, 2008).

Learning can occur at any time and in any place, but not in any way. It must be subject to criteria that assure its quality. This maxim is the essence of expanded education and is also consolidated as the basis on which the experience described below has been built.

3. The experience

A 5-week learning experience was designed, on the subject: “2.0 Journeys: on-line tools and resources”, using two Facebook groups as learning spaces, one in Spanish and one in Catalan. The common objective was to provide the student with a set of useful tools and resources for managing the textual, photographic, audiovisual and multimedia materials resulting from the journey.

The courses were provided for free, could be freely accessed and had a subject matter related to the experiences of 2.0 internet users, using educational content with a Creative Commons B (CC BY) attribution licence and were open to all Facebook users.

The teaching methodology was completely open, developed based on opening and facilitating forums, opened either by the lecturer or by the students, on different subjects, relating to the content of the course that arose during discussion. Therefore, participants were encourage to take the role of “information managers”, “reporters” and “journalists”, becoming chroniclers of their own journey and generating messages and products of a huge variety and wealth.

Certification for the course was carried out in two ways. On one hand, a gift was sent on Facebook to all of the course participants, created based on one of the platform’s applications and on the other, through a personal email informing of the person's participation in the pilot educational programme developed by the UOC on Facebook.

4. Analysis

In order to assess the experience, 3 types of data were used. First of all the quantitative data obtained from the participation on the course. Secondly the evaluative data obtained from the ethnographic study and thirdly that obtained from the end evaluation questionnaire completed by the participants. Following are the results obtained from the different data gathered.

4.1. Quantitative participation data

A total of 89 pre-enrolments were received, all of which were accepted, with 52 participants on the Spanish course and 37 on the Catalan course, figures which were considered more than reasonable for a pilot experience.

With regard to the participation on the forums, the average participation by students on forums created by the lecturer was 8.9, whilst the average on all of the forums was 7.7. It is worth mentioning that the forums created by the lecturer received, on average, more comments and participants than the forums created by the students. Generally there were more comments and participants on the first forums, given that they were open for longer.

4.2. Ethnographic study

The first step in the ethnographic analysis of the experience consisted in the preparation of observation categories for exhaustively gathering the events relevant to the course. The categories created were the content of the different forums, the motive for contributing and the social learning or peer-to-peer.

In the case of content, this included aspects such as the emotional tone of the contribution, whether personal information was given or information relating to the forum subject, questions asked, etc. With regard to the reason for participating, this included questions such as the suitability of the contribution to the forums' subject, contributions due to a prior contribution by the lecturer or a student, discussions, contributions to express an emotion, etc. Finally, the social learning or peer-to-peer included categories such as the posing of queries or questions, the resolution of queries by other students, exchange of opinions, critical comments and opinions, etc.

In general, the content provided on the forums was informative. Despite being an open space, contributions unrelated to the course subject were not made. With regard to the emotional tone of the content, overall this was neutral, as what was communicated on the forums was information regarding the course's actual objectives.

In light of the analysis made, it is clear that the main reason for contributions from students was to respond to the subject opened by the lecturer. Even on a forum created by a student, half way through the lecturer intervened and subsequent contributions by students were in response to the lecturer.

In the contributions by students, explicit and implicit elements that denote peer-to-peer (P2P) learning were observed, either: to achieve objectives proposed based on queries resolved between various students, to provide links to help explain something or to inform about something relating to the forum subject, to contribute new information relating to the subject under discussion, or to display critical opinions of some webs 2.0.

5. Results of the end questionnaire

Following are some of the data obtained from the end questionnaire completed by participants on the Facebook course.

45% of participants on the course felt that the semi-direct methodology adopted for the experience, where the lecturer acts as guide/advisor during the teaching-learning process based on contributions to the different discussion forums, facilitated the acquisition and understanding of the actual course content.

This relatively open methodology is positively valued by 73% of those interviewed, who also point out the opportunity that it gives to favouring participation (90%). 48% of participants on the Spanish course who completed the questionnaire confirmed that the dynamics are optimal for developing educational experiences online on social networks.

91% of participants on the Spanish course stated that on one hand the activities promoted on the forums were relevant to achieving the end objectives of the course and on the other, that these activities were entertaining. Only 55% of those on the Catalan course however, mentioned the

relevancy of the activities to the established objectives and 56% qualified the proposed tasks as entertaining.

50% of the survey participants mentioned that whenever they asked for help, either from their colleagues or from the course lecturer, they were given it. Also, 61% say they responded to requests for help posed by other colleagues.

91% of the students on the Spanish course and 66% of the students on the Catalan course say that they learned from reading the messages from other course participants and from their participation on open discussion forums.

With regard to the role of lecturer, 63% of participants state that it was useful or very useful and that he/she motivated them. The help provided by the lecturer was extremely useful according to 89% of the survey. 93% of those interviewed thought that the role of lecturer or expert is essential when approaching these educational initiatives on open learning environments.

The Facebook application completely favoured participation according to 70% of the students. It is worth noting that 10% of participants completely disagreed with this statement. The use of Facebook as a learning platform is considered relevant or very relevant by 64% of those interviewed, with participants on both courses noting the ease of access from the individual profile established on the tool and the motivation towards learning resulting from the intrinsic characteristics of the actual tool.

39% of participants interviewed have completely changed their point of view as to how to use Facebook, noting the emergence of the use of this social network for learning purposes. This percentage contrasts with 15% of participants that have altered their opinion in this regard and who continue to use Facebook with the aim of principally promoting their social relations.

Finally, the participants commented that their expectations were met in 53% of cases and the average grade awarded the course is between 8 and 10 on behalf of 80% of participants. The most notable aspects are: subject matter, materials and colleagues, materials and activities. The least valued aspect mentioned was the Facebook environment for educational purposes and the methodology.

6. Conclusions and prospective

Based on the interpretation of the data obtained from the questionnaire sent to the participants on both courses and of the ethnographic analysis, we have established the following series of conclusions and recommendations to guide the design of future teaching-learning actions making use of the social network, Facebook.

- A minimum technological alphabetisation is required by the agents involved in the teaching-learning proposal. A questionnaire prior to carrying out the “course”, that enables the level of knowledge and command of the social network tools to be used to be verified, would be enormously useful.
- The 2.0 platform must be at the service of the learning action, in other words, its educational value must prevail over its merely technological value. The aim is to educate using 2.0 technology.

- The use of a more open methodology than normal would create a certain sensation in some participants of feeling lost. Therefore, in the instructional design process we should favour the gradual disappearance of a more guiding educational model towards a more participative one.
- The teaching-learning activities will aim to promote the application of the learning acquired in the most entertaining [1] way possible. What's more, the so-called learning based on experience or "learning by doing" will be promoted, giving a special leading role to cooperative work and to the personalisation of the learning products.
- The selection of one or more experts in the subject matter to be developed is a fundamental element for assuring the success of our educational experience. These experts will not act as lecturers but as guides or facilitators of the acquisition of learning.
- The free character of the educational proposal developed on the social networks forces the following in participants: their intrinsic motivation, promotion of their commitment and of their loyalty, their personal involvement, their willingness to learn, their desire to help and share knowledge and their active participation with the aim of obtaining optimum results and educational experience.
- The materials available must be of quality, be up-to-date and available on the network under criteria of a Creative Commons licence that permits its (re)use and re-elaboration freely and for free.
- It is essential that the educational action designed should establish a flexible schedule, taking into consideration the time, personal and professional limitations of the participants.
- An initial period of familiarisation with the course, its methodology, its participants, its operation, the platform and with the proposed objectives must be established.
- The choice of Facebook as a platform for promoting knowledge presents a series of limitations that must also be considered in the instructional design.

It is important to end by pointing out the limiting character of the study described in this paper, whose intention is no more than a qualitative approach to the new modes of informal learning on the new social networks, with no erroneous objective of extracting generalised conclusions. However, some key questions have been noted that enable the design of new experiences and studies that delve more in-depth into the concept of open social learning.

Figures

Spanish course	Catalan course
52 enrolments	37 enrolments
6 forums opened by the lecturer	6 forums opened by the lecturer
3 forums opened by the students	1 forum opened by the students
Total enrolments 89	

Fig 1. Data regarding participants and forums on the UOC's Facebook courses

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