Using Facebook to teach communication and academic literacy skills: Perceptions of university students in Botswana

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Abstract
Social media such as Facebook and twitter are now widely used by students to communicate with friends across the world. These social networking technologies have now infiltrated into education. However, there are different perceptions regarding whether Facebook should be used for teaching and learning purposes. To further explore this issue, this study investigated perceptions of students (n=209) learning communication and academic literacy skills at the University of Botswana. Data was collected using a paper questionnaire adapted from (Roblyer, 2010), and interviews conducted on six of these students. Findings show that 87.1 % (n=182) of these students used Facebook. 96.2 % of these (n=200) used Facebook daily. They mainly used Facebook for socialisation and other purposes such as networking, seeking information, entertainment, communication, and shopping. However, 63.2 % (n=406) of the 642 responses show that students agreed that Facebook should be used in education to teach communication and academic literacy Skills. These findings support previous recommendations that Facebook should be used in education because it facilitates communication, and it is accessible and cheaper to use.

Key words: Facebook, Technology, communication, academic literacy skills, online learning, social networking

1 Introduction
Current global innovations taking place affect our lives in many ways. Technology in particular continues to develop tools such as cellular phones, websites, ipods and cameras. These affect the way we live and learn. In response, institutions such as The University of Botswana have a mission to ensure that its undergraduates match the on-going technological advancements by being talented, creative and confident. The University of Botswana aims to produce independent, self-directed, team-oriented, innovative but socially responsible, nationally and internationally marketable and competitive graduates (University of Botswana Learning and teaching policy, 2008). Its mission is also to extend access to higher education by utilising information and communication technologies, within the framework of life-long and open learning. To that end, the University of Botswana offers compulsory and elective communication and academic literacy skills courses to first year and post year one students to provide key competencies for academic and professional life. In view of the above, this study aims to investigate perceptions of University of Botswana students' on the use of Facebook. The University of Botswana is the oldest and largest institution of Higher learning in Botswana located in Southern Africa between Zimbabwe, Zambia, Namibia and South Africa.

2 Literature Review

It has been argued that theory is important in educational practice and research because it helps us see the bigger picture and to view our practice and research from a broader perspective, and to make connections with the work of others (see Wilson, 1997). On the other hand, some critics feel that theory filters our perceptions and blinds very important lessons of reality from us (McCormick and McCormick, 1992).

Notwithstanding the importance of theory in practice and research, this study explores perceptions on use of Facebook in teaching and learning of communication and academic literacy skills. Facebook is a digital technology or social networking site like Twitter, MySpace, Badoo and Google used by individuals socially and in learning. Beetham, McGill, and Littlejohn (2009) indicate that digital technologies could have a significant potential to support learning in educational domains, and that their effective use will require students to move beyond using them for social purposes and gain understanding on how they can be used to support learning. Some studies conclude that students can acquire a range of literacies when they use digital tools for social purposes (Willet and Sefton-Green, 2003). Under certain circumstances, these literacies appear to be transferred to support

learning in educational contexts (Conole, de Laat, Dillon, and Darby, 2006; Creanor, Trinder, Gowan, and Howells, 2006). However, other studies conclude that learners find it difficult to transfer literacies across boundaries (Carmichael, Miller, and Smith, 2007).

Facebook originated from the United States of America in 2004 where it was initially used for social networking but later for education. Mark Zuckerberg, a student at Harvard University in the United States started Facebook, the fastest, cheaper and most convenient way of communicating with a large group of people. It can be accessed through cell phones anywhere anytime. Generally, It is used for sending messages, cataloguing pictures, installing quizzes, discussing in groups and many more. Facebook has become the most popular social networking site for both young and not so young people. According to Siegle (2011), one out of every 12 people on earth use Facebook. As at December 2012 Facebook had over one billion active users (http:newsroom.fb.com).

Facebook is popular in education too. Research in USA shows that a vast majority of students at public universities have Facebook accounts Hoover (2008). According to Roblyer et al. (2010), Facebook is a valuable tool in educational communications and collaborations. It is now used for student interactions (West et al., 2009; Kabilan et al., 2010); knowledge transfer (Madge et al., 2009); communication, social, and cognitive and critical thinking development (Christofides et al., 2009; Ross et al., 2009); to increase individual responsibility and autonomy, and to build self-esteem (Bosch, 2009; Orr et al., 2009); and to communicate with the teacher outside the classes (Selwyn, 2009). Facebook also provides immediate responses from the students. Duboff (2007) found in a study at Yale University that faculty members felt that Facebook made students part of the same academic community and it helped break down barriers between themselves and students. Matthews (2006) similarly found that Facebook helped them to reach over 75 % of his target audience.

However, some students and lecturers are not comfortable with using Facebook for educational purposes. Connell (2009) found that some 12 % students felt that Facebook had a potential to infringe on their sense of personal privacy. Also highlighted are risks involved when people express inappropriate behaviour, abuse and bully others on social network sites (Butler, 2010; Catanzaro, 2011). Some lecturers too are still apprehensive about the use of Facebook in education. Roblyer et al. (2010) compared perceptions of 62 higher education staff with 120 students of a mid-sized university on their use of Facebook. They found that students were more likely to use Facebook and similar technology than staff. According to Kleiner, Thomas, Lewis, and Greene (2007), lecturers are generally reluctant to use technology innovations. In a recent study on educational technology use in teacher education programmes, Kleiner, Thomas, Lewis, and Greene (2007) report that the National Centre for Education Statistics concluded that the reluctance of 73 % of faculty members remains a major barrier to effective integration of technologies in teacher preparation.

3Justification
We chose to explore the use of Facebook to teach communication and academic literacy skills at the University of Botswana looking at its potential use in education. We also wanted to investigate the possibility of using Facebook in the communication and academic literacy classroom. This study does not attempt to generalise its findings but to inform future studies and discussions on the use of Facebook, especially in the communication and academic literacy classroom. According to Bosch (2009) there is little research on the possible uses of Facebook with existing literature focusing more on its social uses; and that most of the research that exists is based in the US. Therefore, this research will increase the number of studies on Facebook, especially in Africa. In our knowledge, nobody has explored the use of Facebook to teach communication and academic literacy skills in Botswana. Despite that, it is essential to carry out this research to respond to the University of Botswana's emphasis on producing students with developed communication skills, organisational and team work skills, interpersonal skills and social responsibility (University of Botswana Teaching and Learning Policy, 2008). This study asks the following questions:

1.   Do the University of Botswana students use Facebook?
2.   How often do they use Facebook?
3.   For what purpose do they use Facebook?
4.   Do they think Facebook should be used to teach communication and academic literacy skills?

4. Methodology
4.1 Sample
A sample of 209 students was used in this study. 50.2 % (n=105) of the students came from the Social Science Faculty; and 49.8 % (n=104) came from Humanities. 91.9 % (n=192) were first years, 5.7 % (n=12) second years, 1.9 % (n=4), and only 0.5 % (n=1) was a fourth year. The students above first year were probably retaking the Communication and Academic Literacy Course. 65.8 % (n=127) were female and 34.2 % (n=32) were male. 85 % (n=175) were aged between 16 and 20 years, while 8.3 % (n=17) were aged between 21 and 25 years, and 6.8 % (n=14) were more than 26 years old. Convenience sampling technique was used to select the students because of their proximity to the researchers who teach them communication and academic literacy Skills. The main focus of this study is to explore perceptions of these students but not to generalise the findings across all first years.

4. 2 Survey
A paper-based questionnaire, adapted from (Roblyer, 2010), was used for the students comprising 11 closed-ended and open-ended questions to solicit perceptions on use of Facebook. Very minor changes were made to the questionnaire because the authors thought it was relevant for Botswana and easy to understand. For example, questions 10 and 11 were asked in the context of the communication and academic literacy (COM 151 and COM152) courses offered at the University of Botswana. The first four questions solicited demographic information such as level of education, gender, age and faculty. Other questions asked students to tick either 'yes' or 'no' on whether they had used Facebook before and/or whether they are still using it; how often they used it; for what purpose they used; and whether Facebook should be used in class. Open-ended questions were asked mainly for the students to provide reasons for the choices they made to some of the questions, such as why they thought Facebook should or should not be used in class.

4. 3 Procedure
The students' questionnaire took roughly 20 minutes to complete. The questionnaires were administered in class by the researchers or lecturers of these classes. They were immediately collected after completion. Students' anonymity was guaranteed, as this study was not interested in divulging identities. They were asked to feel free to ask questions where they did not understand.

4. 4 Interviews
Semi-structured oral interviews were conducted on 6 undergraduate students. The interviewees were all first year students aged between 16 and 20. The interviews allowed for full capture of non-verbal aspects of communication, feelings and attitudes. Through this method, a number of issues that had not been captured in the questionnaires emerged (Creswell, 2007) hence providing additional data and triangulation of evidence. The interviewees were asked whether they used Facebook and /or other social media and how often they did. They were also asked why they used Facebook and whether it should be used to teach communication and academic literacy Skills. Also, they were asked to suggest specifically how Facebook can be used to teach these skills.

4.5 Analysis
Questionnaire data was analysed by counting frequency of responses to the questions. The study did not establish relationships between variables but explored perceptions and reasons for those perceptions. Open-ended questions and interview data were analysed for emerging themes and patterns by both authors to satisfy inter-rater reliability. Where necessary, students were followed up so that they could clarify their submissions.

5 Results and Discussion
The first research question of this study sought to find out if University of Botswana communication and academic literacy students used Facebook. The results show that out of the 207 responses, 87.1 % (n=182) show that students used Facebook; and only 4.3 (n=9) % used Twitter; 2.9 % (n=6) used Facebook, Twitter and Skype; and 4.8 % (n=10) did not use social media at all. Only one out of the six interviewees indicated that they did not use social media. Four of them said they used Facebook; two both Facebook and Twitter; one Twitter only; and only one did not use Facebook. All of them, except one, used Facebook daily. The second research question sought to find out about the frequency of use of Facebook, and 96.2 % (n=200) of the students indicated that they used Facebook every day for at least one hour.

The above findings suggest that majority of the students spend ample time using Facebook, thus corroborating international trends of using Facebook by students (Grosseck et. al, 2011). It could be argued that Facebook has become part of the students' daily life. It seems that the students willingly use Facebook, and if adopted into the Communication and Academic Literacy classroom, lecturers would possibly spend less energy and time compelling students to do work requiring interaction and communication. Anecdotally, lectures teaching the communication and literacy skills at the University of Botswana courses feel that students have developed a culture of silence that should be broken. Huang et al., 2010) sees Facebook as an online knowledge-sharing network forged by interpersonal interactions and communication skills.

The third question sought to find out for what purpose the students used Facebook. Out of the 453 responses to this question, 39.7 % (n=180) indicated that the students used Facebook to keep in touch with friends; 25.4 % (n=115) to connect with other people; 21 % (n=95) to communicate with other students on school work; and only 3.1 % (n=14) did not use Facebook at all. The findings of a follow up open-ended question show that the students used Facebook mainly for socialising with friends and family, interacting with people from different cultures, networking for business and religious purposes, sport and entertainment, shopping and finally for research and school work (See Table 1).

Table 1: Purpose of using Facebook

Purpose of use	N	%
1. To know what is happening in other people's lives; to stalk boyfriend and tease other people; receive messages from friends and family; Learning more about different cultures and people	18	37.5
2. To unwind or for entertainment; Usually when I am bored I log onto read jokes and see; to see where parties are in Gaborone	6	12.5
3. To spread the gospel and also for religious purposes, keep in touch with pastors around the world; to network with business people; I get updates from different organizations. I am a member of Eduvolunteers.	9	18.8
4. To ask for help on life issues; to get information on sports, job opportunities and different events; Keep up with current affairs.	7	14.6
5. To show people how extraordinary my mind works; to voice my thoughts	2	4.2
6. For reading and posting motivational quotes in some groups I have created; Group discussions.	2	4.2
7. To do my shopping for clothes and shoes.	1	2.1
8. Looking for information especially situations in life which need hope and comfort; For research on school work.	2	4.2
9. For saving money that I use for airtime	1	2.1
Total	48	

The interview findings show that the students used Facebook because it was cheaper and easy to access it: Student A said, "*although I don't use Facebook, I think it can be used to reach many people. It is also cheaper and everyone has access to it. Given the opportunity I can learn how to use it"*. The above findings suggest that it is socio-economically worthwhile to use Facebook because, as already indicated, it is inexpensive and expedites communication. These findings support previous research that Facebook is predominantly used for social interaction and to connect with friends and family members (Skues and Williams, 2011)

The fourth question sought to find out if students thought Facebook should be used to teach communication and academic literacy skills. The results show that out of the 642 responses to this question 63.2 % (n-406) agreed and 36.8 % (n=236) disagreed. 67.7 % (n=275) think Facebook could be used for classwork and to connect with other students. On the other hand, only 32.4 % (n=131) did not mind or think Facebook should be used for educational purposes for, among other reasons, it could invade their privacy (See Table 2). As one interviewee indicated, "*Yes, however, the disadvantage of using Facebook is that you can write what is on your mind and therefore expose yourself, and thus the danger of privacy"*. Another question asked students to specify areas where Facebook could be used in the Communication and Academic Literacy classroom. Out of the 442

responses, the students thought Facebook should be used for group discussions (38.9%, n=172); posting handouts and/or notes (24.66%, n=109); assignments (21.7%, n=96); and research projects (14.71%, n=65). One of the interviewees indicated that Facebook could be used "*for connecting with old friends; sometimes for school group work, for example at DSW we use Facebook; to post assignments and for asking questions about assignments*". Another one said "*it may be useful to have a group and ask one another questions from home. Maybe for homework or to edit our work or tell us you were not gonna be able to come for class or you tell us you are not coming*".

The above findings generally show that the students were in favour of using Facebook in the communication and academic literacy classroom. The responses in a follow-up open-ended question show that the students suggested that Facebook could be used for learning and revision purposes and for communicating announcements and assessment information. Students also felt that Facebook could increase communication with their lecturers and it could help them to share feelings and problems with others. As one student put it, *I think in my own point of view it has prevented me to commit suicide in the sense that whenever I do not have someone to share or talk to about my problem I post on Facebook and people help me and I feel much better after I have posted about my feelings.* Facebook could break the culture of silence which, according to Akindele and Trennepohl (2007), is the hallmark of students in the Botswana classroom. In our opinion and the opinion of the students, Facebook could take the classroom to everywhere the students are. As one student indicated, *if one is hospitalized or is sick then he or she might be able to get information being taught in class through Facebook.* Facebook can also develop the students' networking and team building skills. The world today in its different forms needs people with interpersonal and intercultural cosmopolitan outlook.

Table 2: Use of Facebook in the classroom

Statement	Yes		NO	
	N	%	N	%
1. It would be useful to use Facebook for class work or educational purposes.	139	34.2	26	6.4
2. I would welcome the opportunity to connect with students on Facebook.	136	33.5	18	4.4
3. Facebook should be used for social purposes and not for education.	42	10.4	73	18.0
4. Using Facebook for educational purposes would invade my privacy.	32	7.9	72	17.7
5. I don't care whether Facebook is used in education or not; it does not matter to me.	57	14.1	47	11.6
Total	406		236	

6 Implications

Facebook has been shown to be vital for communication, and thus it may contribute significantly to improving communication skills of the University of Botswana students. In particular, it may break the silence of the communication and academic literacy students and create a more interactive relationship between the students and the lecturers. It may remove the wall between the lectures, and remove the stigma of lecturers being perceived as superior, inhumane, and inaccessible sources of knowledge as far as the thinking seems to be in this part of the world. Lecturers, particularly those teaching communication and academic literacy skills should get out of their comfort zones and explore the possibility of using technologies, such as Facebook, in their classrooms. Research shows that Facebook can positively affect classroom practices and student involvement (Aydin, 2012)

Facebook could also be used to support learning and teaching of General Education Courses (GEC) offered by the Communication and Study Skills Unit of the University of Botswana. GEC 213 (Advanced Communication Skills Course) offered to post year one students offers human and organisational communication skills such as the communication process, interpersonal and intercultural communication. Facebook has been found to positively relate to culture. For example, Birky and Collins (2011) found that social networks narrow the gap between cultures. On the other

hand, GEC 212 (Advanced Oral Presentation Skills Course) trains practical oral and public speaking skills. So, Facebook could provide a platform for students to freely share their feelings and ideas on how to improve their oral communication skills. Students generally find it challenging to present in front of the audience for various reasons such lack of confidence. According to Aydin (2012), Facebook has been found to provide great benefits for users experiencing low self-esteem. So, lecturers teaching the above courses could use Facebook to improve the students' intercultural communication and to boost their confidence because most students enjoy using Facebook.

7 Limitations
The findings of this study cannot be generalised to the entire university, but to a large extent they shed light into what the students think about the use of Facebook in education.

8 Conclusion
The findings of this study shed light into the students' use of Facebook and how they perceive it as a possible tool for communication in education. Like students in other parts of the world, University of Botswana students in this study used Facebook frequently for socialising with friends and family members. For instance, more than 80 % of them indicated that they used Facebook every day for at least one hour. Arguably, Facebook is part of these students' life. It is therefore incumbent upon lecturers and stakeholders to devise means of helping students to utilise Facebook in a more educational and productive way to take advantage of the ample amount of time they spend using this tool.

Facebook is a possible avenue that can be used to easily reach the students geographically. To start with, more than 60 % of the students in this study agreed that Facebook should be used to teach communication and academic literacy skills. Facebook is also a comparatively cheap means of communicating with the students as testified by one of the interviewees. Lecturers could therefore use it to quickly reach as many students as possible with one dial wherever they are whenever they wish. It does not confine the lecturer and student meetings to the school premises. As mentioned earlier, one student indicated that Facebook can take academic information matters to a student's hospital bed. Mack, Behler, Roberts and Rimland (2007:4) indicate that Facebook is "… an excellent mechanism for communicating with our students because it allows us to go where they already are; it is an environment that students are already comfortable with".

Facebook is also available to narrow or even fill the cultural gap between the students themselves and their lecturers. University of Botswana students come from different cultural, socio-economic and political backgrounds. In addition, the structure and policy of the University of Botswana determine employment of foreign lecturers to complement local expertise. As a result, foreign lecturers bring with them cultures and practices foreign to most students. Therefore, Facebook becomes a convenient cultural mediator between the students and lecturers. First, it creates a common culturally uniform technological platform for both students and lecturers. Second, it reduces the cultural differences inherent in face-to-face verbal and non-verbal communication.

Communication and academic skills lecturers use group work substantially to encourage team work, interaction, communication and responsibility among students. Sometimes group work becomes daunting to some students because they are far apart and their schedules clash. Facebook therefore becomes handy because it allows them to meet in cyberspace where they do not need to travel physically. It also allows introverted students to share their views and to gradually build their self-efficacy and confidence. Ellison et al. (2007) indicate Facebook may improve the psychological wellbeing of the students and can help the students with low esteem to develop into more confident people.

Finally, Facebook is now a necessity in public and private organisations for networking and official communication. Besides, it is convenient for personal interaction and communication in entertainment, shopping and other purposes. In short, Facebook is indispensable for networking and communication in the 21st century. Therefore, students should be encouraged to extend its use beyond socialisation to network and find economic opportunities in the global village. Rather than discourage them or block its content from them, lecturers should guide them to use it wisely and responsibly. Lastly, using Facebook to teach communication and academic literacy skills is in line with the University of Botswana's mission to produce technologically versatile students.

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