

‘Screw Blackboard... do it on Facebook!’: an investigation of students’ educational use of Facebook

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“I spend most of my waking life on Facebook, sad as it may seem, i admit it proudly! Most of my lecture content is stuck on blackboard... so why not get the university to shut blackboard and move everything to Facebook. A more acceptable reason to waste ur life away on this new age communication tool!!! Hahahhahahahahah”

Introductory statement from the ‘*Screw Blackboard... Do it on Facebook!*’ Facebook group - 70 members from the Coalsville network at the time of research project

“We're all going to fail university. It's not because we're stupid, or because we don't do any work. It's because of an uncontrollable addiction to Facebook and msn. When we're not drinking, or being hungover, or thinking about drinking while being hungover, we're talking about drinking and debauchery on msn or Facebook. This has got to stop. It won't, we all know that, but it should”

Introductory statement from the ‘*Facebook is Sucking Out My Soul and MSN is Feeding on the Remains*’ Facebook group - 248 members from the Coalsville network at the time of research project

INTRODUCTION

The educational role of the worldwide web has been cast in a new light by the emergence of so-called ‘web 2.0’ technologies and, in particular, ‘social software’ where users are connected to and collaborate with each other in a variety of group interactions (Shirky 2003). Enthusiastic commentators are already anticipating the new pedagogical challenges posed by a ‘MySpace generation’ of ‘wiki kids,’ whilst universities are experimenting with the delivery of courses in ‘*Second Life*’ rather than real-life environments. An impassioned minority of educationalists are heralding a ‘web 2.0 transformation of learning’ with ‘potentially groundbreaking implications’ for educational provision and practice (Thomas 2008). Yet such enthusiasm has been tempered by more sceptical reactions from others within the educational community. Mindful of recent history of new media, some commentators have dismissed the recent turn towards social software and web 2.0 as an extension of the hyperbole which surrounded the ‘dot.com’ boom-and-bust of the late 1990s - a ‘bubble 2.0’ for the 2000s as one author termed it (Anderson 2007). From a technological point of view it has been

argued that many of the perceived 'new' features and practices of social software were present in the 'web 1.0' applications of the 1990s and early 2000s. Against this background it could be concluded that web 2.0 is primarily of symbolic rather than practical importance – typifying the techno-enthusiasm which engulfs any new 'new' media.

Yet unlike the feted internet applications of the 1990s, many of the currently celebrated web 2.0 applications are in widespread use amongst populations of 'ordinary' internet users, with social networking communities (SNCs) such as *Facebook* and *MySpace* attracting tens, if not hundreds, of millions of users. Thus we would contend that these applications are worthy of close academic scrutiny - not least in order to gain a clearer understanding of their social and cultural significance in the contemporary digital age. From this background, the remainder of this paper will examine the social significance of the Facebook social networking site in the lives of undergraduate university students in the UK. Indeed, whilst notably less popular than MySpace, the take-up of Facebook amongst university students during the mid 2000s was exceptional, leading one media researcher to warn university authorities that "Facebook owns your campus" (Stutzman 2005). As such Facebook offers perhaps the most appropriate contemporary online setting within which to explore how social software applications 'fit' with higher educational settings and communities of educational users and, therefore, investigate the current assumptions surrounding social software and education.

The educational significance of Facebook

Facebook was developed by a group of students at Harvard University at the beginning of 2004 and designed for college and university students, although its use has migrated quickly into business, domestic and school settings. It is a relatively conventional social-networking online environment, modelled ostensibly on the US school 'year books' where brief written profiles of incoming students are presented alongside a photograph. On Facebook, users present themselves to others within a similar although far more extensive framework. An individual's Facebook page can include a portrait photograph, a 'Status' tag where the user can record their current activity, mood or thoughts, a list of 'Friends' and local 'Networks' with which the user is affiliated, personal contact details including postal address and mobile phone number, as well as a 'Mini-Feed' of recent Facebook activity which is shared with other users (detailing when and how the user has been making alterations or adding content). Elsewhere users can list their favourite music, films, TV shows, activities, interests and quotations, as well as share and tag photographs of each other. A section

dedicated to 'Educational Info' allows users to list their 'grad school' and 'college' details and courses. As if these activities did not suffice, users can also exchange virtual 'gifts' between each other, embed one of 7000 mini web applications in their pages and join user-created 'groups' on particular themes or topics. Perhaps the most revealing and most used feature of many students' Facebook page is the Facebook 'wall' (Pew 2007) - essentially an asynchronous 'chat' facility owned by each user. Here users can exchange short text messages with their nominated 'friends', with 'wall-to-wall' exchanges then visible to other users. The Wall is perhaps the most conventional computer-mediated-communication feature of Facebook, and certainly a central element of Facebook's rapid growth into a social networking website *par excellence*.

Given its broad range of constituent features, Facebook functions in different ways depending on the preference of the user. According to Stutzman (2005), users can use Facebook to 'hang out', to waste time, to learn about each other or simply as a directory. Students often use Facebook in the micro-management of their social lives, as an arena for social exploration and to develop social networks with their peers at university and from previous institutions they have attended. Whilst Facebook may appear to be like many other SNCs, its combination of self-presentation, prurient viewing of others' personal information and situational relevance to campus life has certainly proved attractive to student users. According to Stutzman (2005) Facebook enjoyed between 85 to 95 percent take-up by US freshmen, with these students tending to make high-frequency use of the site. Thus, as Stutzman (2006, p.2) concludes:

"Facebook is truly a killer app for incoming [students] – as they prepare to start a new life in a new place, surrounded by a new social network, the Facebook presents a highly interactive way to explore this new space".

The major personal and social role that Facebook plays in the everyday lives of current cohorts of university students has prompted some educators to position it a prominent site for student learning. It has been argued, for example, that Facebook is imbued with many of the desired qualities of an effective education technology in its reflective element to use, mechanisms for peer feedback and goodness-of-fit with the social context of university learning (Mason 2006). In particular the conversational and communal qualities of Facebook are seen to "mirror much of what we know to be good models of learning, in that they are collaborative and encourage active participatory role for users" (Maloney 2007, p.26). These qualities feed into the wider recognition over the past two decades or so that students learn from informal communication and interactions with fellow students

(Johnson and Johnson 1993). As Smith and Peterson (2007, p.278) reason, “knowledge is not constructed in an individual vacuum, but in the communication and exchanges embedded in social networks”. As such one of the primary educational attractions of Facebook is seen to lie in the ease of education-related interactions and exchanges between students facing the common dilemma of negotiating their degree courses. As Smith and Peterson (2007, p.279) continue:

“by telling another classmate what the professor covered in class, the student has an opportunity to further process the information, even restructuring it within their thoughts. Repetition and restructuring both improve learning ... Social support may include and supporting emotions as much as providing task-related information. In fact research shows that more task and emotionally related conversations within groups are linked to higher final grades”.

Of course, some of these qualities may well clash with the dominant pedagogical paradigms of the conventional higher education setting. Whilst educationalists may well hope that Facebook promotes interactions which are related to formal educational objectives, students are also likely to use these communicative channels for the informal aspects of their education - not least negotiating the academic and social challenges, dilemmas and disappointments of pursuing a university education (Cassidy 2006). Yet whether informal or not, it has been suggested that Facebook offers the opportunity to re-engage students with their university education and learning – promoting a ‘critical thinking in learners’ about their learning which is one of ‘the traditional objectives of higher education’ (Bugeja 2006). In this sense Facebook has been heralded by some commentators to offer “the capacity to radically change the educational system ... to better motivate students as engaged learners rather than learners who are primarily passive observers of the educational process” (Ziegler 2007, p.69).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Against this background, there are a number of questions which need to be asked of the current prominence of Facebook within the contemporary higher education environment. In particular there is a need to investigate the *realities* of students’ Facebook activity – not least how any instances of education-related engagement are being played out. Moreover, a number of questions remain with regards to the role that Facebook is playing in the wider ‘student experience’ of twenty-first century university education. To what extent is the

student body demanding a shift to 'doing' their studies via Facebook as the introductory quotation to this paper would have us believe? Conversely, to what extent is Facebook 'sucking out the soul' of the university experience and further distancing students from their studies as was also suggested? With these issues in mind the remainder of the paper will now go on to consider the following research questions:

- When and for what purposes is Facebook being used by students? What aspects of students' interactions via Facebook can be considered to be related to their university education - either in terms of the formal educational concerns of the university and/or the informal needs of students relating to negotiating their university studies?
- What evidence is there for Facebook use contributing to the increased (dis)engagement of students with their university studies?
- What can be said to be 'new' about the nature and outcomes of students' use of Facebook?

RESEARCH METHODS

With these research questions in mind, the present paper reports on a systematic study of the content of the Facebook pages of all undergraduate students who were studying at the Coalsville University School of Social Sciences during the 2006/7 academic year. Coalsville University is a large 'Russell group' university in the UK with 25000 students and around thirty academic schools. The School of Social Sciences is one of the largest and busiest of these schools, as well as being one of the largest departments of social sciences in the UK. The study covered all undergraduate students in the school (n=909), who were studying for a variety of undergraduate (BA and BSc) degrees in subject disciplines such as Sociology, Social Policy, Criminology, Education, Psychology and Anthropology. The period of active data collection took place between Monday 6th November 2006 and Monday 12th March 2007 (the mid point of the autumn semester to the mid-point of the spring semester). The rationale for this timing was that it covered six teaching weeks before and six teaching weeks after the students' Autumn term assessment period, as well as a three week Christmas vacation period. In terms of the ebb and flow of the academic calendar the period of data collection therefore encompassed the main phases of undergraduate life - i.e. attending lectures and seminars, preparing for and submitting assignments, revising for and sitting examinations, receiving assessment results, breaking up for and returning from vacation periods and recommencing lecture and seminar studies.

The research design can be best described as a non-participant ethnographic study, with the researcher positioned half-way between research-as-insider and researcher-as-analyst (Davies & Merchant 2007). During the five months of data collection (as well as a three previous months of familiarisation where no data was collected) the researcher adopted an quasi-overt role within the 'limited public setting' of the Facebook Coalsville network. During this period the author 'inhabited' the Facebook alongside the students - setting-up a Facebook account under his real-name within the Coalsville network. Whilst the presence of the researcher was publically discernable via his personal webpage, the role of the researcher was a limited inhabitation of Facebook. The researchers' voice was not heard online and not participating or interacting directly with any of the students. In this non-participant role he logged onto Facebook on a daily basis and observed the development of the student pages and groups associated with the Coalsville Social Science students, systematically archiving exchanges between students from their various Facebook 'walls' and observing and noting the characteristics and qualities of other content as it was developed. In particular this paper reports on the reciprocal exchanges via the students' Facebook walls where each partner in the exchange had both sent and received messages.

Of the 909 students, 694 (76 percent) maintained active Facebook profiles - all but 82 of which were chosen by the students to be accessible publicly. The 612 students with publicly accessible (and therefore researchable) profiles produced 68169 wall postings over the five month period of analysis. Of these interactions, 4 percent (n=2496) were related to their studies and/or academic aspects of the university experience. There were no significant differences in terms of general or education-related Facebook activity by students' gender, year of study or assessment marks. In other words, use of Facebook was consistent across the overall group of students regardless of age, stage, gender or academic performance.

In terms of data analysis, it was our contention that the textual data collected from the Wall postings were best analysed in a relatively straightforward manner. Thus the constant comparison technique was used as the means of analysis for the qualitative data generated from the students' wall postings (Glaser & Strauss 1967). This initially involved reading all the Wall postings to gain an overall sense of the data. All the data were then read again and 'open-coded' to produce an initial code list until, in the opinion of the researcher, analysis had reached theoretical saturation. Although some *in vivo* codes were adapted (i.e. directly using the language of the students) the majority were researcher-led and analytic (Strauss 1987). From this basis the data were then selectively coded in terms

of categories identified with the initial code list directly related to the research questions outlined above.

RESULTS

When the education-related postings were analysed, five main themes emerged from the data, i.e. i) recounting and reflecting on the university experience; ii) exchange of practical information; iii) exchange of academic information; iv) displays of supplication and/or disengagement; and v) exchanges of humour and nonsense. These themes are now discussed in further detail:

i) Recounting and reflecting on the university experience

When their attention did turn towards university-related matters, students would often use the Facebook walls to describe and sometimes deliberate on their most recent instances of the university experience - be it lectures, seminars or, on occasion, library visits and individual encounters with teaching staff. For example, students would use Facebook to 'go over' their experiences of recently finished lectures. As these second year criminology students discussed:

Sinead Keates wrote
at 4:11pm on January 30th, 2007
what did you make of today's lecture?! I thought it was amazing: "crime is going down, but some is going up, but generally its going down-not all of it though...some if going up." maybe he had a bet with himself, how many times he could repeat the same thing in one lecture?! I do love him though, I just want to hug him and scratch his head :) xxx

Chris Hedley wrote
at 4:36pm on January 30th, 2007
that guy was so funny... yada yada yada BOLLOCKS! ah good times! didnt understand a thing mind you! x

Around half of these reflections related to events which one of the students had been absent from, with the absentee seeking *post-hoc* justifications to rationalise the legitimacy of missing the class or not understanding the lecture material (Scott and Lyman 1968), whilst also allowing their peers space to express conciliatory 'techniques of neutralisation' (Sykes and Matza 1957):

Grace Furlong wrote
at 1:35pm on February 2nd, 2007
hey hun!! just to let you know i have come home for a bit as i am ill so wont be in education seminar tomoz!! but will be back next week so see u then!! have fun!! love!! xxxx

Jessica Smyth wrote
at 5:09pm on February 2nd, 2007
got no plans for weekend....sleeping i think!! how bout u?? u did not miss much in social research today....it was dog!! xxxxxx

As can be implied from some of these comments above (“it was dog”, “yada yada yada bollocks”) these were often not wholly positive reflections on the learning experience. The social science students’ postings most often conveyed a sense of bewilderment, disappointment and/or anger about perceived shortcomings of the teaching and learning provision in the department. These judgements ranged from benign comments such as “dull as dishwater” to more hostile responses such as “gash” and “IT WAS SHIT!!!!”. These more negative responses often involved quite specific and detailed critiques of the nature and/or organisation of the learning experience and, more often than not, the member of staff deemed responsible. As these social theory students reflected on that morning’s seminar:

Ruby Edwards wrote
at 12:44pm on February 20th, 2007
Oh my fucking gawd! how much did i want to DIE in todays seminar? i dont think ive EVER gone so red lol. I DIDNT KNOW THE BLOODY ANSWER FRANK [name of tutor]!!!! lol. my mind was just BLANK.com. argh! oh wellllll lol. x

Emily Evans wrote
at 8:47am on February 21st, 2007
haaaaaaaaaaaaaa yeah i no OMG how harsh was that seminar. im going to DRILL into ur soul until i find ur social theory centre!!! thing is at leastm u wernt the only one, he seemed to go for the three of us, me u and the girl who kept laughing! haaa goodtimes, roll on 2 wks!! x

Ruby Edwards wrote
at 2:13pm on February 21st, 2007
HAHA i like your analogy! i think Frank just gets nervous, so he intimidates ppl to make them feel thick so that he looks amazing... but he loves another group! apparently bout them chocolate. WELLL.....!!!! lol. i think we should just STARE at him next time :) but atleast you always say something right! im just *blank* LOL. xXx

Emily Evans wrote
at 6:01pm on February 22nd, 2007
today was like torture. god awful torture. i felt sooo stupid. balls!

This critical reportage did not always focus on academic matters, as illustrated by this discussion of a replacement post-grad tutor:

Sophie Irwin wrote
at 12:13am on March 9th, 2007
take it you had the same thoughts as i did about the seminar tutor today!!! Your face was a picture!!! bit of a knob though - despite his good looks compared to the rest of the shit bags we have!!! xxx

Amy Younger wrote
at 12:17am on March 9th, 2007
There was something kind of hot about the way he told u lot to shut up. I was like "o, u give the orders!!" His profile view was hot but he was a bit too much from the front. Good shirt though and he seemed pretty smart. Felt he was a little serious for a man of his young age. But yeah it did make a change. xxxxx

A minority of these discussions involved starkly negative appraisals of teaching staff. Postings referred to ‘the shitty ppl we hav teaching us’, ‘stupid bloody seminar women’ and, in one instance, ‘that seminar tutor, shes fucking pants!!’. As the following exchange between a second and a final year student illustrates, teaching staff were sometimes discussed in unforgiving terms:

Lucy Lewis wrote
at 1:36pm on January 11th, 2007
first time Ive had clive and he's rubbish. its called social concepts and debates and its a compulsory module

Megan Wilde wrote
at 1:40pm on January 11th, 2007
oh i had clive last year for like a first year education module, well i chose it, stupidly... I dont have him this year but wud kill myself if i ever had him again!!! I have some other rubbish lecturers but he is the damn SOUR cherry on the top!!!!!!!

ii) Exchange of practical information

Aside from such critical 'reflection', a second theme emerging from our analysis was the exchange of information related to what can be termed as the 'job' of being an undergraduate. In many instances, this information concerned the practical logistics of attending courses - most commonly the scheduling and location of lectures and seminars. For some students a degree of uncertainty surrounded this information, leaving Facebook as a useful means of last minute information seeking. This is illustrated in these two students' apparent ignorance of impending assessment deadlines for a module:

Amelia Simmonds wrote
at 5:39pm on February 25th, 2007
Hey! had a great weekend at home thanx , our results are out 2moz arent they?? are u guna go down? i think me and kelly av a seminar 2moz so will prob go then. hope uv had a gr8 weekend. loves ya xxx

Hannah Morris wrote
at 5:43pm on February 25th, 2007
omg rach i hope u get this i havent got ur number we've got a psych essay due on fri!!!
xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx

Amelia Simmonds wrote
at 9:54pm on February 25th, 2007
my god!! when was it set and what is it about?→→→→ help!!

Hannah Morris wrote
at 10:00pm on February 25th, 2007
I know tell me about it! i have no idea when it was set but i looked in tht green module handout and saw psych essay due in week beginning 26th feb so i texted paula off our course and she said its due in on fri... im pretty sure the essay titles are the ones in the green module handbook.. bottom of pg 9!!! Also we have a cognitive and biological psych essay due 30th march... essay titles i think at bottom of pg 11 xxxxx

As this exchange illustrates, students' acquisition of logistical information was often partial and relayed from unofficial sources. Of course, from the academic department's point of view this information had already been presented to students in various accessible forms (handouts, wall notices, class announcements, group emails and via the official 'Blackboard' virtual learning environment). Yet from the students' perspective, these methods

were not always contiguous with their own modes of communication and information gathering:

Mia Butcher wrote
at 11:50am on January 31st, 2007
it's already gone horribly wrong!! where the hell are our psych lectures this term??!! (printed out the lecture handout tho, points for effort!) sigh, got a week to recover from that trauma. are the seminars in the same rooms as last term? tho come to think of it, thats a bit hazy too.... ;)

Sophie Irwin wrote
at 2:18pm on January 31st, 2007
I HAVE NO IDEA!!! got so naffed off earlier with not knowing where they were i just stormed off and said "I'm going back to bed"!!!! not the right attitude - but what idiot sends an email at stupid 8 o'clock to STUDENTS saying the venues changed - like hell i'll have enough time to look at my emails before leaving the house!!!! he's lucky if i even get there!!!! really need to be organised!!! i could never actually find my seminar rooms either - education i once ran in there thinkin i was hours late and i actually was early - oopsies!!!! xxx

As well as information relating to attendance, many of these practical information exchanges took place around the periods of assessment and concerned the requirements of examinations and coursework assignments. For students across all three year groups, issues such as the required word counts for essays or the speculated format of examinations were of utmost concern. Here students would turn to Facebook to seek clarification from their peers and then settle on a shared course of action and a collective (ir)responsibility:

Sophie Irwin wrote
at 1:59pm on January 11th, 2007
HELP!!!! Can't be arsed to walk all the way downstairs so thought seeing as facebook = life, you'd probs look at this soon!!! You know on the cover sheets we have to submit at the beginning of the essay, it asks for a word count. Are you including the words on that cover sheet or are you putting your word count as just the essay wordage????!!!! EEK!!! SOOOOOO confused and bored!!!! Please please help - would be completely freaking out if i could be arsed to be bothered. x

Katie Collins wrote
at 2:49pm on January 11th, 2007
o im not using the cover sheets cz apparebly u dnt have to so im jst putting word count student number, module code n module title on the top of the essay, then student number and module code on every page as a header/footer! so confusing i hate it!!! hope this helps!
xxx

Whilst these two housemates were relying on their own interpretations, Facebook was also used as a conduit for students to inform others of their personal contact with university staff. This 'cascading' of information can be seen in the following discussion of the same word count issue:

Lucy Lewis wrote
at 4:46pm on January 9th, 2007
Prof Wilkings told me to email Clive about the word limit cos he couldnt help me. Have jst done that so will let u kno xx

Lucy Lewis wrote
at 12:52pm on January 10th, 2007

no email from clive as yet. have also just emailed sheila smith in the undergrad office to say this isn't the first time it has happened-same thing happened with sociology of culture essays this time last yr.am waiting for a response.will keep u posted xx

Lily Sargent wrote
at 2:42pm on January 10th, 2007
cool, ok well thanks for letting me know. speak to you soon x x

Lucy Lewis wrote
at 3:03pm on January 10th, 2007
jst about to go down with my friend lizzie to complain cos clive hasn't replied but stupid undergrad woman is saying 3000 words xx

Lily Sargent wrote
at 3:05pm on January 10th, 2007
oh my god! 3000 words, no way. i don't know what to do now! well...keep me informed then pls! x x

Lucy Lewis wrote
at 4:41pm on January 10th, 2007
It's 2500.read my note that I've jst written and keep checking blackboard for details xx

iii) Exchange of academic information

Alongside these logistical issues more academically-orientated information was also sought via the Facebook walls, albeit on a less frequent basis. In these instances students would exchange information about academic and intellectual requirements of their courses, usually concerning the nature of required reading for seminars, the speculated content of examinations or the required content of essays and other assessment tasks. In some instances, potentially privileged information and advice given to one student by a lecturer or tutor was relayed dutifully to a wider audience. However, in most cases this information was based upon students' own interpretations in the absence of any official guidance. This then led to what could be termed as rather limited instances of 'peer guidance':

Evie Mustoe wrote
at 8:32pm on November 28th, 2006
hey. u know 4 this vygotsky stuff, when ur taking notes on the text r u writing down wot it says in text or putting it in ur own words? xxx

Abigail Foyle wrote
at 8:53pm on November 28th, 2006
I am simply reiterating the points, i.e copying down wat it says, I am so done with this vygotsky shizzle, it's driving me insane!!!!!! just think after 10 o'clock we are free agents, oh yes xxxxxx

On occasion, these (re)interpretations resulted in a form of academic Chinese whispers, where assessment questions, rubrics and expectations were reconstituted in ways which were inaccurate

and sometimes simply incorrect. This is not to say that students were unaware of the uncertain provenance of their Facebook-assisted courses of action. As one first year student concluded, "my essay is TERRIBLE but i really dont care anymore. so at least if we're wrong, we'll be wrong together!!". In this sense such postings were indicative of students' attempts to negotiate the university experience as best they can, echoing Haggis's (2006, p.527) observation of undergraduates' distinct "lack of understanding of what 'work' might consist of in relation to study".

Such misinformation and misinterpretation aside, there were sporadic instances of students using Facebook to assist each other's educational endeavours in more inventive ways. For instance, students would recommend on occasion journal articles and books to each other - copying and pasting results from bibliographic database searches into the walls of other students. Two final year students were even using Facebook as a means of recruiting an opportunity sample of respondents for their dissertation research projects, with apparent success:

Tim Young wrote
at 5:03pm on December 1st, 2006
Sophie . . . you're a star!! Thanks ever so much! I'm astounded by how many people are helping me out- it's awesome, and much better than annoying people in coffee shops! plus i've finally found a use for facebook that isn't detrimental to my degree!!

Instances of more substantive peer-assisted learning were also evident on occasion - usually amongst second and final year students offering guidance on the required arguments for essays:

Katy Elliott wrote
at 12:12pm on January 14th, 2007
Ummmm-what the hell does the Sokal hoax say about social science as an intellectual field??HELP!??

Scott Thomas wrote
at 12:50pm on January 14th, 2007
coincidence- was just attempting to write that bit myself!! not really too sure what to put.
in my opinion it doesnt say that much about social science in general, just a particular philosophical perspective used within it- that postmodernism is pretty much meaningless! beyond that i don't think there's too much more to say- except about getting someone who works in the field to check any topics you're not sure about! but i reckon that's an implication to the whole of academia- not just social science! i just can't believe he didn't do a lecture on this- it definately needed one!

Only in three instances during the five month data collection period did this assistance appear to transgress into collusion. This can be seen in the case of this third year student whose dissertation topic matched the topic of an already written essay by another student:

Huw Jones wrote
at 1:11am on January 19th, 2007
Right at this moment im staring straight at an essay on rave culture. Now Ive realised you live a matter of yards away from this beatifully crafted masterpiece you should come and have a look at it. Bring yourself a floppy disk (old skool) or a usb pen. My Cd drive is screwed. Muchos loveos.

Sophie Covey wrote
at 8:29pm on January 28th, 2007
Heya hun , thats much appreciated, thanks i will prob pop over sometime if thats ok, wot time u going to be bout at? love sofxxxxxx

Yet aside from isolated instances such as this, it was noticeable that students were generally unwilling to offer extensive assistance to each other. As one final year student responded to a similar request for help: “need any tips just ask your mum!”.

iv) Displays of supplication and/or disengagement

Another category of Facebook exchange centred around supplication and the seeking of moral (rather than intellectual) support with regards to the demands of the students’ studies. In these postings students would often present themselves as rendered helpless in the face of their university work in the expectation that their peers would then offer support and comfort. Sometimes these accounts were constructed in a self-deprecating and humorous fashion (Jones 1990), albeit with the intention of soliciting succour from others:

Alison Owens wrote
at 2:03pm on November 21st, 2006
Essay not going well. Arghhhhh! xxxxxx

Alison Owens wrote
at 2:04pm on November 21st, 2006
PS. I'm not on facebook either, working v. hard :S

Sinead Keates wrote
at 4:23pm on November 21st, 2006
not that i'm evil and wish bad things on you or anything but...please tell me you're as screwed as i am for the essay???mine is shit, not writing itself up and i have no idea where im going in my argumentation, probably because i havent even started it. haha report back tomorrow.lets die.

Alison Owens wrote
at 4:29pm on November 21st, 2006
I wish there was as much crimlove and psychlove as last year, i.e. none, I would be much happier if that was the case. Second year is mean. We've got those two essays for crim in january along with examiuses and now i have to do tutorial work on my own as Emma is bailing on me :(Tell me it'll be ok Keates! On 950 words exactly on essay, not actually making any relevant points and am essentially copying the textbook. Plagiarism and ethics tribunal here I come! xxxxxx

Often allied to this were strategies of supplication, i.e. nurturance or presenting oneself as helpless in order to elicit the sympathy of help of others. Yet whilst many of these exchanges contained an element of self-pity (as above), some students were also using their walls for defiant presentation of themselves as unable, incompetent but defiantly disengaged from their studies. As one typical posting put it, “the multiple choice exam is tomorrow i dont really give a shit about it though”. Indeed, a wilful anti-intellectualism pervaded

many of these exchanges, with students brazenly highlighting their inabilities and, by implication, the inadequacies of the university department. These active displays of academic disengagement and intellectual incompetence were often presented in an ironic and often humorous manner, with students taking care to indicate their awareness of the tragic-comedic nature of their predicament. These observations included the unreasonable nature of the university assessment deadlines, as well as the difficulty of balancing the demands of paid employment and leisure with the demands of their university course:

Freya Nicolaidis wrote
at 9:08pm on November 15th, 2006
hahahahahaha. laughing to stop from crying. iv done fuck all. have spent the afternoon and evening watching scrubs and now im going to Vibes [nightclub]! am gonna look at literature tomorrow but screw the essay plan. ill just make something up and change it later. ugh.

Molly Hobbs wrote
at 9:18am on January 10th, 2007
im not bothered bout criminal its only formative and jane timmings [tutor] thinks im stupid anyway... "molly wud like to add anything to the discussion?" "emmm NO! except that it is damn early on a friday morning and i am seriously hung over jane!!" thats usually how my tutorials go!!i no retail therapy is the way forward, im ragin ive only been into the sales once!! its an outrage!

v) 'Banter'

A final theme prominent throughout the data was referred to by the students as 'banter'. These exchanges were humorous in nature and often heavily interlaced with irony and sarcasm. Whilst this type of exchange was common throughout students' non university-related use of Facebook, in the case of their university-related banter three main foci for their humour emerged. Firstly was the admonishment of other students in relation to their studies, often replicating the tendency for students to present themselves in a self-deprecating manner (see above). Thus students who were seen by others to be overly engaged with their studies were assigned identifying labels such as 'spods', 'geeks', 'keenos' and so on. A more sophisticated source of work-related humour derived from banter about assessment tasks - such as misunderstanding questions for comic effect. As these two students (who appear to be working side-by-side on library computers at the time of the Facebook exchange) state:

Daisy Connor wrote
at 7:36pm on January 17th, 2007
Genetic epistemology piaget vygotsky empiricism rationalism childhood assimilation accomodation.....AAAAGGG
GGGHHHHHHHH I DONT CARE ANYMORE! You do realise we've been in the library for 9 SOLID hours??!!!! We have no life..... especially as you're sitting next to me as i write this.
love u xxxxxxxx

Alice Darley wrote
at 7:43pm on January 17th, 2007

DID U KNOW - that piaget had two willies and a fanny???? Nope.....its coz the textbooks dont mention this. The authors consume themselves in terms such as genetic epistemology, assimilation, accommodation, equilibrium, rationalisation, schemata ETC IN order to gloss over this very important fact.
So when tomorrow u are asked What is genetic epistemology according to piagets theory of human development - u respond with, no idea...but ill tell u something - he had two willies and a fanny. NOW THATS A FACT. 1st class degree honours with tht one. 100% pass - bloody haemaphrodites xxxxxxxxxxxx

According to some commentators such 'nonsense' written by students on discussion boards can be seen as marking a transitory period whilst they acclimatise themselves with the online environment (e.g. Williams 2002). Yet this was not the case with our Facebook data, where 'nonsense' was a recurring discourse through the duration of our analysis, not least the recurring theme of banter related to teaching staff. Here students exchanged humorous (and occasionally fantastical) stories about their tutors and lectures, often in an explicitly personal manner.

Emma Dixon wrote
at 1:30pm on March 12th, 2007
i will be attending social theory this week: fact, as i have now developed a love for the artist formerly known as Frank Richards [lecturer], he is now my secret celebrity crush, i must now come to all lectures to monitor his movements in my filofax. If i dont come to the lecture of thursday you have my permission to tell him this information X

Steve Saunders wrote
at 8:51am on January 2nd, 2007
oh my god . . . just had a dream about clivey!! he took us on a field trip on the orient express and was pointing out where he used to "make passionate love to women when he was younger!!" very random (and quite worrying)!!

Erin Hooper-Guy wrote
at 5:57pm on January 2nd, 2007
oh good god what a scary dream Steve- are you ok that is one horrific thought??? worst thing is i bet clivey is a beast with the ladies... what a stud muffin, lol.

Some of these instances of banter certainly revealed a fascination for details about the 'non-university' lives of university staff, with some students taking great pride in providing reports on staff sightings outside of the confines of the department:

Isabelle Lane wrote
at 10:38pm on February 26th, 2007
OH MY GOD the funniest thing just happened i was in the postgrad centre in the union with cat and there was an open-mic night-like just anyone could sing and ul never guess who was there... the one and only gareth schott howwww funny!!!! he was actually quite good. back to the essays tomoz fun fun xxx

Poppy Nicholas wrote
at 8:33pm on February 29th, 2007
That's brilliant about the singing - maybe that's his hidden talent and that's why he's got a fanclub?? I always find it a bit freaky tho if u see lecturers out where u r - what they're outside the university buildings? WHAT??! Hope cwk isn't suffocating u. C u in research maybe tmw. x

Isabelle Lane wrote
at 1:58am on February 30th, 2007

I may have got paid to see Gareth Schott.....but on several occasions I've had to serve 'total Payne' the criminology guy. SHOCKING. He drinks Stella.

Poppy Nicholas wrote
at 12:15pm on February 30th, 2007
That would suit him - the wife beater drink! (Maybe I'm being a little harsh there) x

DISCUSSION

These data portray Facebook as being a highly significant but also unremarkable means of social networking and communication in the everyday lives of the young people covered in our study. On the one hand these data capture a sense of how the internet has become enmeshed into “daily lives and the social interactions” of this generation of educated, well resourced, middle-class university students (McMillan and Morrison 2006, p.74). Indeed, from just this brief reading of their static wall postings we can see how Facebook operates as part of a multi-modal, *ad hoc* web of communication for this cohort of university students - one of the many media within an extensive digital information and communications environment. We have seen how students were using Facebook to communicate with friends in the same house, library or computer lab in an asynchronous and sometimes quasi-synchronous manner. Conversations appeared to skip across Facebook walls, text messaging, MSN and face-to-face contact, leaving the wall postings as just one part of a seamless, multimodal exchange (Lankshear and Knobel 2007).

Thus the Walls were certainly functioning as a valuable means of exchange for those students who were making active use of Facebook with their peers on the course. Indeed, in terms of education-related interaction, Facebook was used primarily for *maintaining* strong links between people already in relatively tight-knit, emotionally close offline relationships, rather than creating new points of contact with a ‘glocalised’ community of students from other courses or even institutions (Wellman 2002, McMillan and Morrison 2006). In this sense we would concur with Ellison’s conclusion that Facebook represents an “‘offline to online trend’ in that it serves a geographically-bound campus community, as opposed to the online-offline trend often identified by internet researchers where people meet up with previously unknown online ‘buddies’ in real life (Ellison *et al.* 2007, p.1144).

Yet interesting as these points are, it is worth reiterating that education and university-related exchanges were only a minor constituent of the overall volume of the Coalsville student postings - with discussions of leisure, entertainment, paid employment, interpersonal relationships and home life far more prevalent

throughout our five months of study. Thus the data presented in this paper represent the sporadic and often uncomfortable intrusion of university education into students' private, personal and interpersonal worlds. Indeed, our data show the fluctuating prominence of educational concerns within students' overall use of Facebook, with instances of education-related interactions between students structured by the rhythms of assessment schedules or timetabled teaching provision rather than a desire for forms of continuous learning or *ad hoc* educational exchange. Much of students' 'educational' use of Facebook was therefore based around either the *post-hoc* critiquing of learning experiences and events; the exchange of logistical or factual information about teaching and assessment requirements; instances of supplication and moral support with regards to assessment or learning; and the promotion of oneself as academically incompetent and/or disengaged.

Although it is tempting to bemoan the ostensibly mundane, prosaic and often 'anti-intellectual' uses to which our students were applying Facebook, we would contend that it was undoubtedly an important and valuable element of the university experience for these students. Certainly some commentators would point towards Facebook as a facet of "the mis-education of Generation M" (Ziegler 2007) and an accelerant of the ongoing disjuncture between students and their studies. Yet we would argue that the Facebook postings in this paper are merely continuations of the informal discourses which have long characterised student life within the massified provision of higher education. We would contend that the online exchanges presented in this paper are merely a continuation of how students talk to each other in other contexts - such as the chatter of the back rows of the lecture theatre, coffee shop or after-college telephone conversations. Only now, as Kirkpatrick (2005, p.156) acknowledges, the "playful banter and chit-chat which are always present in the murmuring noise that we are aware of in a class are sanitised and included as on an equal level with the 'official' discourse of the classroom".

Thus we would contend that the students in our study were simply using Facebook in a number of considered, pragmatic and justifiable ways - all of which were embedded firmly in the local offline contexts of undergraduate life. In other words, students' Facebook use both reflected and was part of the "intricate hierarchies, rich organisational traditions and interpersonal ties" of higher education (Hewitt and Forte 2006, p.1) - not least the existing social relations and practices of the 'real community' of the Coalsville School of Social Sciences. In this sense, our data show how Facebook has become an important site for the informal, cultural learning of 'being' a student, with online interactions and experiences allowing roles to be learnt, values understood and identities shaped. Much of our data showed students coming to terms with the roles and the

nuances of the 'undergrad' culture within which they found themselves located. Facebook should therefore be seen as an increasingly important element of students' meaning-making activities, especially where they reconstruct past events and thereby confer meaning onto the overarching university experience.

Rather than signalling any 'new' form of technology-stimulated disengagement, our data perhaps simply reflect the fact that the 'life world' of being a 'student' within the massified higher education landscape often has little to do with issues of intellectual endeavour or collaborative learning *per se* but is predicated upon successful negotiations of the logistical demands of part-time paid employment, university coursework and exams, as well as the attendant coping strategies of socialising and the considerable 'down-time' associated at least with arts and humanities degrees. Given this offline context then it is not surprising that when educational concerns did intrude into our students' online interactions then they took the form of the logistical and procedural elements of university education (i.e. finding out when and where lectures are being held, what essays are due in when and coping with other demands of one's degree course). In this sense our data reflect many of the themes from the general literature on the university student experience - i.e. a distancing and alienation from remote and aloof teachers (Haggis 2006), unease at "the power relations that surround students as they are assessed" (Barrow 2006, p.357), the impact of term-time working on the student experience (Little 2002), the fragmented commitment to an intellectual 'vocation' (Dubet 2004) and a lack of experience and/or interest in learning an academic subject. The vast majority of postings in our data displayed the hurried, distantiated and disjointed realities of undergraduate education. Thus we would conclude that Facebook *is* an important learning technology of twenty-first century higher education - albeit one that contributes to what Kitto and Higgins (2003, p.49) term, "the production of the university as an ambivalent space".

Above all our data would suggest that Facebook has been fast established as a prominent arena where students can become versed in the 'identity politics' of being a student - a space where the 'role conflict' that students often experience in their relationships with university work, teaching staff, academic conventions and expectations can be worked through. In particular our analysis found Facebook being used by many social science students as a space for contesting the asymmetrical power relationships built into the institutional offline positions of student and university system, therefore affording these students with 'back-stage' opportunities to be disruptive, challenging and resistant 'unruly agents'. Goffman (1959) referred to the self as moving between the 'front stage' arena (where publicly visible social

characters are performed) and the 'backstage' area where actors keep their props or 'identity equipment' and can relax out of role. In this sense, Facebook would certainly appear to be an important arena within which the 'behind the scenes work' of being a student are being performed away from the gaze of the formal university setting. As is the case with other social networking software, it was apparent how much of the online interaction in our paper was "interwoven with identity performance" (Merchant 2006, p.235). Many of the students' wall postings can be seen as acting as public identity performances - complex and often awkward sites of performance where the individual attempts to construct and maintain a public image to their peers (boyd & Heer 2006).

Indeed, it could be argued that Facebook was acting as an ideal site for what Goffman terms as 'role distance' - situations where students sought to distance themselves from roles which had to be enacted but with which they did not necessarily wish to be identified by others. For example, we saw how some students sought to maintain a degree of personal autonomy by engaging in the minimum of overly academic behaviour expected of being an undergraduate scholar and/or were acting in ways that exhibited their lack of commitment to the role. On Facebook students could rehearse and explore resistance to the academic 'role set' of being an undergraduate (Merton 1957) - i.e. the expected and 'appropriate' behaviours towards their subject disciplines, teachers and university authorities. Students who were facing conflicting demands in their roles as socialites, minimum-wage earners *and* scholars could use Facebook as an arena for developing a disruptive, challenging, dismissive and/or unruly academic identities. Thus Facebook was acting as a ready space for resistance and the contestation of the asymmetrical power relationship built into the established offline positions of university, student and lecturer (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977). This was perhaps most clearly evident in the playful and often ironic rejection of dominant university discourses throughout the posts, with the students certainly not confirming to the passive and silenced undergraduate roles of the seminar room or lecture theatre.

Yet we should not view Facebook as affording an entirely open space for the (re)presentation of self - with students able to "express their identity with relative freedom" as some commentators would claim (Thelwall 2007, p.1). Throughout our analysis it was notable how students' postings appeared to conform to a shared understanding of what the role of the undergraduate social scientist was. Students' postings were notably guided by norms of disengagement, disorganisation and mild disgruntlement and associated behaviours of drunkenness, socialising and part-time employment. The dominant roles on Facebook were either as the passive, disengaged student or the angry, critical student, with a strong sense of some

students striving to 'keep a particular narrative going' (Giddens 1991, p.54) about their non-engagement with the educational aspects of their university experience. In comparison, opportunities to present a self-image of being more intellectually engaged or enthused by one's studies were noticeable by their absence. Indeed throughout our data there was a noticeable marginalisation of 'other' educational identities. The department's mature students, for example, were noticeably absent from these discussions. To perform well or appear interested in one's studies was to be a 'geek' or a 'swot'. In this way social science students using Facebook appeared to be (un)consciously replicating and reinforcing roles developed in their previous phases of school education, as well as in the face-to-face student culture of the university. As Norbert Elias (1969) notes, socialisation leads people to present only those parts of their selves that they deem appropriate to the norms of each situated encounter. In this sense, the norms of expressing oneself on Facebook were narrowly defined and adhered to.

CONCLUSION

Whether these findings are generalisable for subject areas other than the female-dominated, low intensity social science disciplines represented in our data remains to be seen. Further research is also required to ascertain the influence of the specific institutional context of Coalsville University as opposed to the many different types of higher education institution in the UK. It could be that our analysis is unique to Coalsville social science undergraduates, although it would be surprising if this were the case. Issues of generalisability aside, these data are useful in highlighting a number of issues relating to student use of social networking sites and, more importantly, how university authorities, practitioners and other concerned stakeholders respond to their increasing prevalence in the everyday lives of students. The rising use of Facebook certainly raises "important questions about how universities will articulate their teaching relationships with internal student cohorts" in the near future (Kitto and Higgins 2003, p.25). Yet we would conclude that whilst social networking sites such as Facebook do not merit any particular laudation from educators, neither do they present any cause for moral panic. Rather than attempting to appropriate Facebook for educationally 'appropriate' or 'valid' uses, or else regulate students' use through coercion or surveillance, university authorities and educators are perhaps best advised to allow these practices to continue unabated and firmly 'backstage'. As Sennett (1977) observed, "civilised relations between selves can only proceed to the extent that nasty little secrets of desire, greed or envy are kept locked up". In this sense, allowing students the freedom to construct a set of disruptive, challenging and

disengaged social identities, roles and personal biographies of 'doing university' in an offline, backstage space such as Facebook could be seen as an vital contribution to the successful provision of offline university education. In this sense, there is certainly no cause to perpetuate either the utopian or dystopian discourses currently surrounding students and Facebook. If anything the data presented in this paper constitute a case of 'business as usual' with students simply being students - albeit in a more visible and noisy manner than is apparent in the formal settings of their university education.

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