



FLEXIBLE TRAINING MODELS: A RESPONSE TO THE CURRENT NEEDS

THE USE OF SOCIAL NETWORKS BY POSTSECONDARY LEARNERS IN A PUBLIC FACE-TO-FACE UNIVERSITY

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1. **ABSTRACT:** This paper reports on research into the use of social networks by university students in a public face-to-face university. An interpretivist methodology was used to guide the research and semi-structured interviews were used to collect the data. Our results show that most students integrate social media applications, especially Facebook and Twitter, into their learning process by sharing with their friends' class-related information.
2. **ABSTRACT:** Este artículo presenta resultados sobre el uso de las redes sociales por estudiantes universitarios en una universidad pública presencial. Se ha utilizado la metodología interpretativa para guiar la investigación y las entrevistas semi-estructuradas para recoger los datos. Nuestros resultados indican que muchos estudiantes han integrado las aplicaciones de los medios sociales, especialmente Facebook y Twitter, dentro de su proceso de aprendizaje para compartir información sobre sus clases.



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3. KEYWORDS: Learners, higher education, social networks / **KEYWORDS:** Estudiantes, educación superior, redes sociales

4. DEVELOPMENT:

a) Introduction

Since their introduction in the past decade, social networking sites (e.g. Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, Pinterest, Instagram and YouTube), have attracted millions of users (Boyd & Ellison, 2008; Peluchette & Karl, 2010); have the potential to facilitate interaction, communication, and collaboration (Veletsianos & Navarrete, 2012); and, are increasingly popular, especially amongst groups of young people (Littlejohn, Margaryan & Vojt, 2010). The use of social network sites (SNS) is increasing daily and they have become powerful communication platforms (Hilton III & Plummer, 2012). While recent reports (Schwartz, 2011; Kanalley, 2013) have shown a slight drop in the number of users, Facebook is one of the most popular social networking sites (Ross, Orr, Sisic, Arseneault, Simmering & Orr, 2009; Bicen & Cavus, 2011), with more than 727 million daily active users on average (Facebook, 2014). Facebook is popular with all Internet users and is the leading site for college students (Peluchette & Karl, 2010; Junco, 2013) but there are still persistent differences along gender, racial, and socioeconomic lines in technology adoption and use (Junco, 2012). Twitter, a microblogging service and social networking platform that allows users to post short statements limited to 140 characters, has more than 40 million users (Twitter, 2014) (Huberman, Romero & Wu, 2009; Bicen & Cavus, 2012). Twitter users follow others or are followed, and the relationship of following and being followed requires no reciprocation: a user can follow any other user, and the user being followed need not follow back (Kwak, Lee, Park & Moon, 2010).



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b) Objectives

Limited research is available about how students interact on social networking sites (SNS) (Pempek, Yermolayeva & Calvert, 2009). Moreover, understanding how much, why and how university students use online SNS is crucial because they already “spend much of their free time on the Internet, learning and exchanging new information - often via their social networks” (Johnson, Adams, Cummins, Estrada, Freeman & Ludgate, 2013, p. 8). More specifically, few studies have examined the effect of using SNS as part of an educational student engagement (Junco, Heiberger & Loken, 2011). For that reason, the purpose of this study was to investigate the use of social networking sites by postsecondary learners in a public face-to-face university.

c) Methodology

This study is part of a larger international research project, “Digital Learners in Higher Education” (<http://digitallearners.ca>) that is investigating how postsecondary learners in different institutional contexts and cultures think about ICTs and how they use them in their social and educational lives. The goal is to gain an understanding of what the growing use of the new ICTs means for teaching and learning in higher education. The research question driving this study is “What impact does students’ social use of ICTs have on postsecondary learning environments?” This study addresses this question as it relates to second-year students in a public university in Catalonia.

An interpretivist methodology was used to guide our research. The interpretive paradigm emphasizes interpretation and suggests a focus on the meanings of the researcher and the meanings of the participant to understand the subjective world of human experience (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007; Daly, 2007). The context of this research study encompassed at the Faculty of Educational Sciences and Psychology of the Rovira and Virgili University (URV).



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For the purpose of the study, “Homogeneous” and “Convenience” samples were used; settings, groups and/or individuals are choosing based on similar or specific characteristics (Homogeneous) (Collins, Onwuegbuzie & Jiao, 2006) and are available and willing to participate in the study (Convenience) (Collins, et al., 2006; Creswell, 2008). The sample consisted of 20 second-year university students who agreed to take part in the study.

Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data. The interview guide used was an adapted and translated version of one used by Bullen, Morgan, Belfer and Qayyum (2008); and the terminology was adapted to the URV’s educational model, by some researchers of the Applied Research Group in Education and Technology (ARGET). Detailed information on content criteria validation can be found at Romero, Guitert, Sangrà and Bullen, (2013). The research question and the interview guides have guided the analysis of the twenty interviews in order to elicit important concepts, themes and categories from the learner’s perceptions, experiences and reflections. The interview guide contained 13 questions about their use of ICT at the university and their overall perception about technology (Bullen, Morgan & Qayyum, 2011; Bullen, Morgan, Romero, Sangrà & Guitert, 2011; Romero, Guitert, Sangrà & Bullen, 2013). The semi-structured interviews took place over a period of three months at the convenience of the interviewees.

To provide knowledge and understanding of the phenomenon under study, thematic analysis was employed to analyse the semi-structured interviews as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). All analysis process was enhanced by the use of Atlas.ti software. The transcriptions were analysed using open and axial coding strategy (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Cohen et al., 2007). Analysis was a highly iterative process involving successively reading, coding, reviewing, and re-coding into categories or “families” because they share some characteristic (Creswell, 2003; Saldaña, 2009). This process uses inductive reasoning, by which categories and codes, supported by quotations, emerge from the data through the researcher’s careful examination and constant comparison. Figure 1 shows the phases of the thematic analysis.



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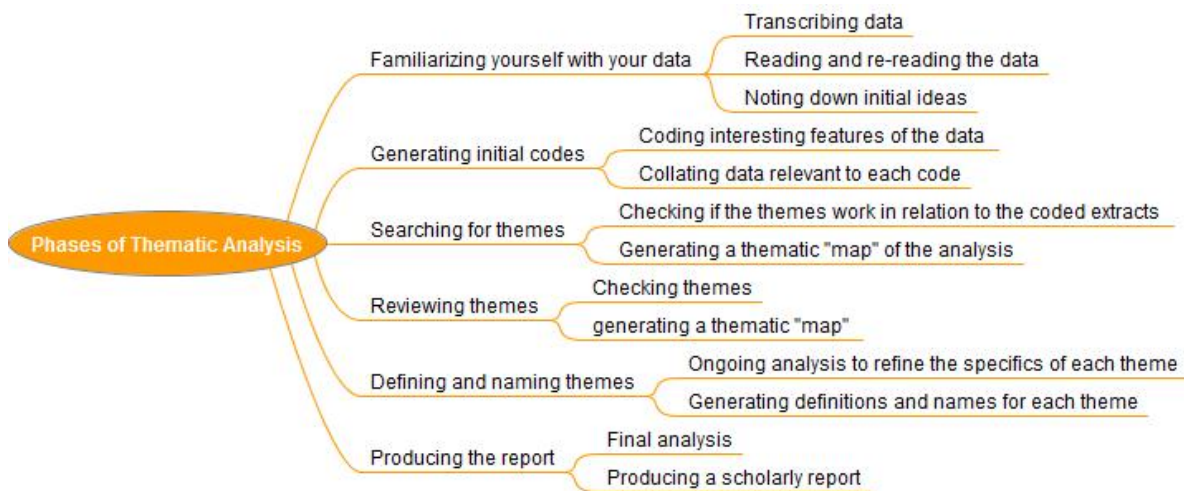


Figure 1. Phases of Thematic Analysis. Adapted from “Using thematic analysis in psychology”, by V. Braun & V. Clarke, 2006, *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), p 87.

To maintain rigor, strategies for monitoring and improving intercoder agreement, and therefore reliability, were implemented in the analytic process in which one coder independently classifies material in the same way as interviewer (Vaismoradi, Turunen & Bondas, 2013). The interviewer shared the lists of categories with the principal investigator of the project and several senior researchers and experts from Rovira i Virigili University (Spain) and Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich (Germany) who provided feedback on the categories and codes.

d) Findings and discussion

Participants were all second-year students of the Pedagogy (55%), Social Education (35%), Early Education (5%) and Primary Education (5%). The majority of participants were female 14 (70%) and the ages from participants ranged from 19 to 58. All of them answered accessing SNS using a computer and mobile devices. All 20 students had computers (desktop or laptop) and access to mobile phones and were making intensive use of computers and mobiles (smartphones) during their daily activities around campus and between home and work. Most of the students had home Internet access or at their parents'



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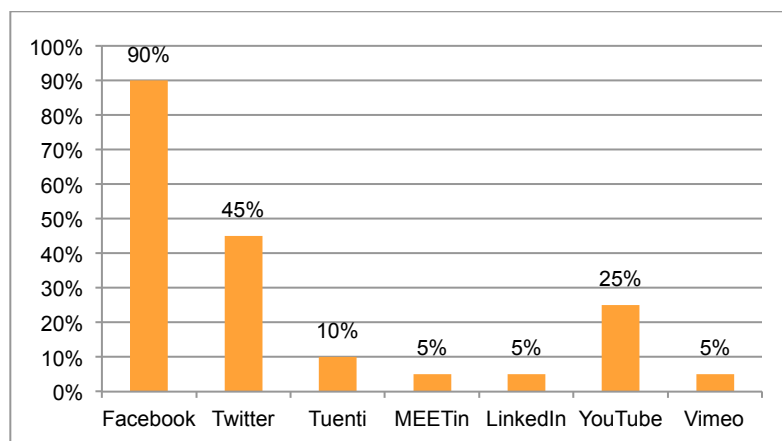
house. All students used their computers and mobile phones to access free Wi-Fi in the university.

All of them answered accessing SNS using a computer and mobile devices. Also, our findings indicate that the students spend the majority of their time with mobile SNS on Facebook, Facebook Chat, Twitter and WhatsApp by chatting. This is primarily due to the fact that many respondents were using software applications that more easily allow for real-time communication and sharing (course information, college notes). With the Facebook and Twitter applications available for their smartphones, it was easy for learners to check updates (Barkhuus & Tashiro, 2010).

El móvil para las redes sociales... bueno para informarme también porque leo el diario a veces a través del móvil. [Male, Social education, 25 years old]

...con los móviles que hay actualmente tienen de todo, Facebook, Twitter, o sea, cualquier cosa que alguien te publique enseguida lo recibes en el móvil... [Female, Pedagogy, 26 years old]

...el Facebook... tenemos un grupo de los grupoClaseTGN y allí colgamos las cosas de clase... El Twitter pues mira algunas veces a mí se me ocurre poner algo... pero lo único que hago es seguir a la gente famosa si es que quieres saber lo que hace. [Male, Pedagogy, 24 years old]





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Figure 2. Social networks used by students.

According to Figure 2, students appear to choose Facebook and Twitter to keep in contact with others or keeping them updated. Facebook is the most popular SNS between the students, with Twitter as a second choice but there was a large variation in terms of frequency of use. Some students only have one SNS that is Facebook. Some students appear to use Facebook for short periods of time a day or is rarely used. One student answered did not have a Facebook account. Only two students mention they have created a Tuenti (a Spanish SNS) account, but they do not use it frequently because they prefer to use Facebook. LinkedIn was not widely used by the students surveyed. Only one mentioned it as being important for career purposes. Younger students tended to have more experience of using SNS than elders. Some students had never used a SNS before attend university until request of professors or classmates.

...el año pasado, eh digamos la 01TGN profesora nos sugirió darnos alta en el Facebook y el Twitter. [Female, Pedagogy, 58 years old]

*Facebook no uso, ehhh (...) ni ninguna cosa, ninguna red social de este tipo (...)
[Female, Early Education, 29 years old]*

Y el Facebook pues durante el día no le hago mucho caso también o mucho por la noche si veo que está interesante o no pues escribo una frase la verdad... Yo es que personalmente me considero un poco Face[book], muy dejado. [Male, Social Education, 24 years old]

También tengo Tuenti pero no lo uso para nada. Me lo puse por familiares que tienen pero no lo acabo usando, acabo usando otras. [Female, Pedagogy, 29 years old]

Pero yo tengo el LinkedIn, vale que esto es más profesional ¿no?... y allí es un sitio que sé perfectamente que si a alguien le intereso o si a mí me interesa alguna oferta



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allí puedo acceder a diferencia del Facebook que lo veo como más personal....
[Female, Pedagogy, 26 years old]

The participants were using SNS for many reasons: maintain existing relationships, classwork, passing time, information-seeking, entertainment and others. The most important reason given was to communicate with others (classmates, friends and family). Some respondents have mentioned that they have relatives and friends abroad and it seemed that Facebook have made it much easier for students to communicate with family, friends or acquaintances. Students were using Facebook to contact their classmates concerning course assignments, group projects, or team work; but they are not contacting their teachers by SNS. Learners also found their interactions with classmates via SNS were important in helping them make sense of the subject matter, providing some homework help and support during classes and they also reported that these interactions extended their learning. In contrast, interviewers expressed a preference for the social networking platform over other the institutional course management systems (URV Moodle).

Y Facebook lo utilizo más... para comunicarme con mis amigos, pa[ra] decirles cualquier cosa, hablar en el grupo de clase, por ejemplo. [Male, Pedagogy, 22 years old]

Twitter es únicamente información de la sociedad, de los famosos o de los futbolistas y pilotos de motos, es lo único para lo que utilizo el Twitter. [Male, Social education, 24 years old]

...utilizo el Facebook para hacer trabajos en grupo, bastante... Todos los miembros que tenemos alguna novedad o alguna cosa pues lo ponemos allí y lo colgamos, lo rectificamos, lo hablamos, hasta las citas que a veces tenemos, “¡ah, miércoles a tal hora!”. Todo por allí.... [Female, Pedagogy, 26 years old]

El Moodle lo utilizo para coger información o sea lo que cuelgan los profesores y un poco más. Es que entre los compañeros ya como usamos el Facebook y el



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WhatsApp, pues ya tenemos el Moodle un poco apartado... [Female, Pedagogy, 26 years old]

e) Conclusions

Most of the students see social networks as more about connecting and interacting with friends. To maintain existing relationships with friends and family was a significant reason for many learners to be on SNS. Learners depend on digital technology, specifically mobile technology, to help fulfill their communication and academic, social, and emotional needs. The results show that students use SNS (Facebook and Twitter) for not only social purposes but also educational purposes. Most of students' communication is done in groups (Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp groups). Most of them integrate SNS into their lives, especially Facebook and Twitter, as part of the learning process where the students were sharing with their friends' class-related information. The integration and use of social networking technology as an e-learning tool seems promising for education (Brady, Holcomb & Smith, 2010).

Faculty might assume that students are spending too much time communicating with friends via SNS. The authors suggest institutions investigate further to determine if SNS can add value to educational programs. Also, we suggest that universities need not rush into implementing digital technologies in teaching and learning contexts to satisfy a perceived demand by students, or technology advocates. To be successfully implemented in an educational institution it is not just about adding the new tools or platforms but also about acquiring a new mindset and new skill set for both learning faculty and students (Toliver, 2011). Although there is much to learn about social media in general, and Facebook in particular, it is a technology that cannot be overlooked in terms of its potential; there are still some questions to ask to further understand these media technologies.



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Finally, the results of this study are consistent with findings of other researchers (Ellison, Steinfield & Lampe, 2007; Coyle & Vaughn, 2008; Schaefer, 2008; Johnson & Yang, 2009; Pempek, et al. 2009; Barkhuus & Tashiro, 2010; Quan-Haase & Young, 2010; Hew, 2011; Agosto, Abbas & Naughton, 2012; Hilton III & Plummer, 2012; Junco, 2012).

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