Social Networking

Facebook, Second Life and Twitter

Facebook

Facebook is the world’s largest social networking site (SNS) and the world’s fourth largest internet site. It claims to have more than 500 million active users with 120 million of those users logging on at least once per day. Developed by Harvard university students in 2004, its company motto describes the purpose of this software as: “Facebook helps you connect and share with the people in your life.” It helps users connect with each other through its ‘Find Friends’ search function which searches Facebook’s database for people’s names, instant messaging aliases or email addresses. Users are then able to share their ‘Profiles’ with other Facebook users by uploading or capturing photographs and video files and sharing their ‘status’ with others in 420 characters or less using the micro blogging tool. This status is then published on friends’ News Feed page which loads upon login; keeping users informed about what their friends are doing.

Aside from these profiling tools, Facebook has Applications (Apps) which allow users to poke, play games, poll each other, take tests, learn, advertise, and more to make their sites interesting. These Apps are easily shared to other users and often come with little or no cost.

So, why has Facebook become so popular? A Google search of the question, “why is Facebook so popular?” yielded a staggering 119 million results, indicating that many have pondered and attempted to answer this question. Upon clicking the first result title, “How Did Facebook Become So Popular?”, Vincent Newton answered this question with, “Aside from having an easy to navigate layout, the ability to keep tabs on friends, great content, and amazing search capabilities, Facebook is utilizing one of the most powerful viral marketing strategies ever conceived.”

More recently, massive media coverage of cyber-bullying and other socially unacceptable behaviour on Facebook have further added to the buzz about it.

Example of a blank Facebook homepage
Strategies for teaching and learning

Higher education institutions world-wide including the University of Sydney, Harvard and La Trobe have Facebook accounts as an extra communication channel with students. Some other pedagogical uses of Facebook include:

- **Collaboration & Communication**: Collaboration and communication channels are plentiful and often creatively delivered within Facebook. Academics (or students) can create ‘Groups’ and invite participants to join them. Once a member of a group, (aside from sending mass emails), group members can post public announcements on that Group’s Wall so that all group members are then notified and can reply to that posting. The Events App could then be used to help students organise online meetings using the chat tool to discuss group work. In addition, Facebook’s Apps such as Links and SlideShare make it possible for users to further collaborate and communicate by constructing and sharing information, knowledge and resources using these interactive and fun Apps.

- **Facebook Groups**: allows you to form a network that is centred on a particular group interest within the Facebook environment. This interest group could be related to coursework topics or classes and would allow students and/or lecturers alike to form their own Facebook Group. eHow (2010) lists simple step-by-step instructions on how to easily establish a Facebook group. It allows Facebook to be used as an informal, non-gradable communication tool allowing students to network with each other. An example of using Facebook as a pedagogical tool such as this is further explained by Golbeck (2008), “I have a group project every semester. Students use Facebook to find partners for the project, to ask other students to join groups, and as a way for contacting other class members whose email addresses they may not have. I create a Facebook group for my courses, and some students also use the message board features of Facebook for a less-formal-than-Blackboard way of doing discussion.”

- **Instant informal commenting and feedback**: The News Feed page is a powerful tool for quick commenting and feedback. Users can add their thoughts using The Publisher tools and other’s are able to ‘Comment’ on these in reply. Users also have the option to ‘Like’ a post which can act as a quick polling tool if used on a Group page. For example, academics could set-up a Group profile for their class then use this group page as an informal means of relaying short snippets of information to gauge students’ thoughts and opinions. Students could be asked to vote on a topic by clicking ‘Like’ if they agreed. The number of ‘Likes’ clicked is automatically compiled thus gives the academic an indication on who agrees with a topic. Also, the Wall can be used as an online discussion which could then be responded to by the academic.

**What should I be aware of?**

- **Unsupported by UWS**: If there are issues associated with this technology, it is not supported by the University.

- **Academic conduct**: If this technology is used for learning and teaching purposes, the UWS Code of Conduct applies.

- **Double-up**: The usage of this online technology can replicate tools and services already available in vUWS which could become problematic as it would mean that students will spend more time checking and retrieving course-related information from different sources.
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• Social space vs academic space: Students want and prefer to have social spaces away from university. Recent reports into Web 2.0 technologies (Salaway et al, 2007 & Kennedy et al, 2009) discussed students' reservations about their educational institutions using these technologies for learning and teaching. Salaway et al, originally found over 80% of students interviewed preferred to use traditional email methods for communications with their educational institution and didn’t want universities to encroach on their personal spaces through Web 2.0 & mobiles. Comments they received from students included “It would be crossing the line for my advisor or instructors to find me on Facebook.” (p.14, 2007). This is further supported by findings from the Student Experience with Technology (SET) survey conducted by the Teaching Development Unit at UWS in 2010. As stated in the TDU Annual Report (2010):

Despite the private use of Social Network technologies such as Facebook, Twitter, wikis and blogs, students do not overwhelmingly want these technologies to be a part of their university experience. Students would prefer that more use, and better use, is made of core learning technologies, such as greater access to online lecture recordings, discussion boards in vUWS, and tracking academic progress and grades online (p. 6).

• Students don’t see its usefulness: Kennedy et al, contextualised students’ perceptions of the value of Web 2.0 technologies further for Australian universities when their report revealed that only 27.8% of students surveyed thought that social networking sites may be useful for online communication and collaboration (p.21, 2009).

• Blurring the boundaries: Using Facebook to deliver learning and teaching blurs social and academic boundaries as both teacher and students are in the same personal, private space. Traditionally, a student’s personal life is not on display to teaching staff. But in Facebook, this is not the case because students are able to upload personal items, comments, photos and videos to their profile. Similarly, if an academic doesn’t set up the privacy settings appropriately in their own Facebook profile, they could also be opening up their own private and personal life to all the students in their class.

• Time consuming: Facebook can be extremely time-consuming, especially if you have lots of Friends as all their actions on Facebook are relayed to your News Feed. If you belong to multiple groups which are actively contributing to Facebook, you will receive an even longer list of news and notifications each time you login. Replying to Wall postings, discussions and comments will take time. Loading information on a Facebook page will take time, especially when there are millions of users using Facebook at the same time. If you share documents, images or videos, these will take time to upload too. Apps are fun and can become addictive as well, especially because many of these Apps are games played online with other Friends.

• Cyber Bullying: As with all online social technologies, students are susceptible to online harassment, especially if their Facebook accounts are not made private. There is also an increasing trend by users to screen-shot Wall posts and post those screen-shots onto websites in order to ridicule others.
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Want to know more?


Second Life

Second Life is a three-dimensional, online virtual reality environment (VRE) in which users, known as ‘residents’, are represented through a virtual embodiment (avatar). Residents can create and modify all aspects of their environment and can interact with others through synchronous voice and text chats.

Second Life is a popular VRE because of its detailed 3D animations, capacity to simulate events and bridge distances between residents without the need for conferencing technologies, and its creative modes of transportation, i.e. teleporting and flying throughout the environment.

A number of higher educational institutions around the world, such as Harvard, Stanford, University of Southern Queensland, Murdoch and RMIT have purchased land within Second Life so that learning and teaching can be delivered through virtual classrooms and to research the impact of this technology on learning and teaching.

![An example of a Second Life virtual reality environment.](image)

Strategies for teaching and learning

The Berkman Center for Internet & Society at Harvard University, ([http://slurl.com/secondlife/Berkman/123/219/24](http://slurl.com/secondlife/Berkman/123/219/24)) is an example of how Second Life has been used by an educational institution to deliver online learning and conduct research into the impact of technology. It was established to “…explore and understand cyberspace; to study its development, dynamics, norms, and standards; and to assess the need or lack thereof for laws and sanctions.” ([http://cyber.law.harvard.edu/about](http://cyber.law.harvard.edu/about)) In trying to achieve this mission, this virtual educational institution is used to “…investigate the real and possible
boundaries in cyberspace between open and closed systems of code, of commerce, of governance, and of education, and the relationship of law to each. We do this through active rather than passive research, believing that the best way to understand cyberspace is to actually build out into it.”

Some other pedagogical uses and examples within Second Life include:

- Role-plays: Play2Train (http://www.socialtext.net/play2train/index.cgi) Hospital Crisis Drill.
- Simulations: Jack’s Hair Creations (http://slurl.com/secondlife/jokaydia/138/53/30) created for Tafe NSW Hairdressing program, used to simulate a hair salon and the hair cutting process.
- Visualisation: 3D visualisations of genes created on Genome Island (http://slurl.com/secondlife/Genome/174/4/23) to teach genetics. The virtual replication of the Sistine Chapel at Vassar Island (http://slurl.com/secondlife/vassar/165/91/24)
- Virtual Classrooms: RMIT used virtual classrooms with their Pre-service Teacher Education program (http://slurl.com/secondlife/RMIT/193/68/38/)
- Collaboration: Problem solving activities as conducted on Terra Incognita (http://slurl.com/secondlife/Terra%20incognita/157/108/33) by the University of Southern Queensland.
- Information and resource sharing: Consumer health information and health training resources available on HealthInfo Island (http://infoisland.org/health_info)

(You will need to have a Second Life account and Viewer installed to view these Second Life locations.)

**What should I be aware of?**

- Unsupported by UWS: If there are issues associated with this technology, it is not supported by the University.
- Academic conduct: If this technology is used for learning and teaching purposes, the UWS Code of Conduct applies.
- Double-up: The usage of this online technology can replicate tools (such as discussions, chats and document libraries) and services already available in vUWS which could become problematic as it would mean that students will spend more time checking and retrieving course-related information from different sources.
- Cost: In order to be able to develop your own environment and use Second Life for learning and teaching, users must pay an ongoing cost. Standard costs range from $19.95 USD and upwards, depending on the size of the island. Users must also consider costs related to ‘building’ upon the island. This may require the employment of developers and animators. However, many educational institutions (UWS, USQ, RMIT, et al.) have overcome this cost by using student developers to design and build animations and their environment within Second Life.
- For example, at UWS, the School of Communications Arts has purchased and developed an island in Second Life called “conVerge”. It has been set-up as a closed community so only residents with
permission to enter the island are allowed to teleport to it. Users need to be able to download and install Second Life Viewer and run it through a live internet connection. Download speeds affect the quality of the Second Life experience, thus users need to have broadband to experience Second Life without waiting for the content to download. As Second Life uses 3D animations, it requires large download allowances and this could prove costly for students.

- **Accessibility:** Consideration must be made in relation to accessibility as not all students will have access to computer hardware equipped to support the running of Second Life. Some students may not have access to internet connections and students with audio or visual impairments are less likely to be able to engage with this technology to its full potential.

- **Reliability:** How do you know that a student in your Second Life class is a real student in your class? You don’t! The reliability of the information in Second Life pertaining to who a user actually is cannot be trusted. Even if students tell you their avatar’s name, how would you know that they have logged in to complete a task and not someone else? Unless you conduct a virtual learning activity in a student computer lab and walk around the room to check students’ identities, there is no reliable way to determine if your students have participated in a virtual learning activity in Second Life. However, designing a learning activity in which students recall and reflect upon their participation in a virtual learning activity may help to minimise this concern.

- **Psychological & socio-cultural Risks:** Considerations must be made relating to the risk of users inflicting psychological and socio-cultural harm upon each other. Often referred to as ‘cyber bullying’, it has become a term to encompass verbal, psychological, sexual, social and racial harassment in VREs and other online social networking technologies. Educators must develop safeguards and procedures to protect users from psychological and socio-cultural harm.

**Want to know more?**


Twitter

Twitter began as an online short messaging service (also known as a micro-blogging tool) based around a community of users called ‘followers’. Its catch phrase, “What are you doing?” is the essence of this technology as it allows users to quickly update their ‘status’ by sharing their news, actions and thoughts with other followers within their social network in 140 characters or less. Known as ‘tweets’, these messages can be distributed to a user’s followers either online, to mobile phones or as an instant message through an instant messaging service.

Currently considered the fastest growing web technology, the simplicity in setting up and using Twitter seems to be the strongest foundation for its success and popularity. Also, its usage and increasing popularity can be attributed to its list of high profile users, such as Kevin Rudd (http://twitter.com/KRuddMP), Ellen DeGeneres (http://twitter.com/TheEllenShow) and Barack Obama (http://twitter.com/BarackObama) who have brought constant media attention to this technology.

Additionally, its capacity to deliver short snippets of news, photos, audio, video and links has led to its uptake by universities across Australia including UWS (http://twitter.com/UWSNews) and vUWS (http://twitter.com/vUWS_Info); using it as news feed service to inform students about current events/issues, important dates, tips for using vUWS and to quickly share and deliver other vital information which may affect students.

An example of a Twitter page.
Strategies for teaching and learning

As Twitter is a relatively new online technology, many of the pedagogical uses of Twitter in higher education are still in their experimental stages and current available research has yielded limited results. But, some common uses include:

- **Collaboration:** As with all social networking technologies, Twitter is conducive to collaboration because users are networked together in a common online space. Projects such as “Manyvoices” (http://twitter.com/manyvoices) allow members to add their thoughts to a collective project. Although, originally designed for school-aged students, this kind of project has potential applications in higher education. For example, Twitter could be used as a problem-solving space whereby all group members contribute to resolving the problem. Depending on group numbers and the complexity of the problem, each member could write at least one tweet in order to collaboratively solve the problem. This online collaboration could then be downloaded and submitted as a group assignment. The benefits of using this over using a Wiki would be that the group members can only contribute a limited number of characters per contribution, making it necessary for each member to carefully reflect upon their contribution prior to submitting it. However, consideration must be given regarding the inability to determine whether or not a user has really made a contribution, and has not asked someone else to contribute under their identity.

- **Polling:** Twitter can be used as a tool to poll students in order to gauge their depth of understanding about key concepts presented in a lecture or tutorial. PollDaddy, twtpoll, are examples of Twitter polling tools that can be used to further enhance student engagement. Dunlap et al. (2009) states that “using Twitter as a polling tool is to engage students in think-pair-share activities during lectures and presentations. Faculty pose a question to students, students think about their responses, and then students tweet their answers. Next, students confer with one to two partners sitting close by, and then retweet answers. This approach fosters student engagement by providing a clear structure for students to reflect, discuss, and self-assess”.

- **Instant informal communication and feedback:** The essence and design of Twitter makes it a communication super-highway, remarkably reliable at fostering communication amongst its users. Academics can utilise Twitter to instantly and informally communicate with their students. This informal communication would then be delivered instantly and succinctly to students following an academic’s tweets. In his article, “Twitter for Academia”, Parry (2008) commented on the immediacy of this in his class and explained that Twitter was also conducive to peer feedback. When one of his students couldn’t understand their classwork and tweeted this, peers responded instantly.
Online resource sharing: Many Twitter users share URLs to other web-based resources on Twitter using tiny URLs (http://tinyurl.com). This is highly popular in Twitter because it allows a user to send a message to all their followers in one short message. These messages can then be re-tweeted (RT) to other followers, hence the spread of online resources reaches many people quickly.

Metacognition: In the Educause article “7 Things you should know about Twitter”, Twitter is described as a ‘…viable platform for metacognition, forcing users to be brief and to the point – an important skill in thinking clearly and communicating effectively.” (July 2009) So, Twitter also has a pedagogical application as a self-analysis tool.

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Academic conduct: If this technology is used for learning and teaching purposes, the UWS Code of Conduct applies.

Social space vs Academic space: Twitter is a social online networking tool, so there is a potential for academic staff to encroach of students’ social spaces by using this tool in learning and teaching.

Relatively new technology: Twitter is still in its juvenile stages for educational purposes. There are many educational institutions using Twitter to relay news and expand their forms of communication with students. However, there is little grounded research in the benefits of using Twitter in higher education and even fewer in the Australian context.

Time: Although the concept behind Twitter is short and sweet, it can be highly time consuming to use and maintain a Twitter account, especially if tweets are sent to your mobile phone and you follow many Twitters. You could literally have a constantly buzzing mobile phone!

Is it all a fad? Nielsen Wire (April 2009) reported that although Twitter is the fastest growing web technology, its user retention rate did not score so well. In their research, they found that “Currently, more than 60 percent of U.S. Twitter users fail to return the following month, or in other words, Twitter’s audience retention rate, or the percentage of a given month’s users who come back the following month, is currently about 40 percent.” (retrieved 18/08/2009) This raises many questions about whether Twitter is truly a viable online technology for tertiary learning and teaching. If it is only a fad, are your students likely to use this tool after their first few tweets? How then, will you sustain their usage of this extra online technology when they have existing forms of communication channels?

Fakes, spam & ridicule: Twitter, like most other online technologies, is often the target of fake accounts, spam and ridicule. Fake accounts are set up to follow and send spam tweets to users offering inappropriate content, products and services. There is also an increasing trend by users to screen-shot tweets and post those screen-shots onto websites in order to ridicule others. This further increases the rise of cyber-bullying.

Rules of Tweeting: As with most new social technologies there is often an associated set of rules and jargon that is customary of its usage. Click on the Twitter Cheat Sheet (PDF, 50Kb) hyperlink to access a useful summary of how to access and use Twitter along with some do's and dont’s.
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All online resources were accessed February, 2011