

Consequences of the Teacher-Student Interaction on Facebook

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Abstract: Facebook has become a prevalent means of interaction between university students and their teachers. In this paper, the author argues that this informal connection, although seemingly unavoidable in today's technological context, may have lasting repercussions on the teachers' role in the classroom and the way their relationship with the students develops.

Key word: Facebook, teacher-student interaction, higher education

1. Introduction

According to the most recent statistics (Noyes, 2015), Facebook is the most widely used social network on the planet, with well over 1 billion active users. The official service of monitoring Facebook in Romania (facebrands.ro) released aprox. eight million users (see Figure 1). Almost 25% of them fall into the 18-24 age group, the average period in which the country's youth go to university.

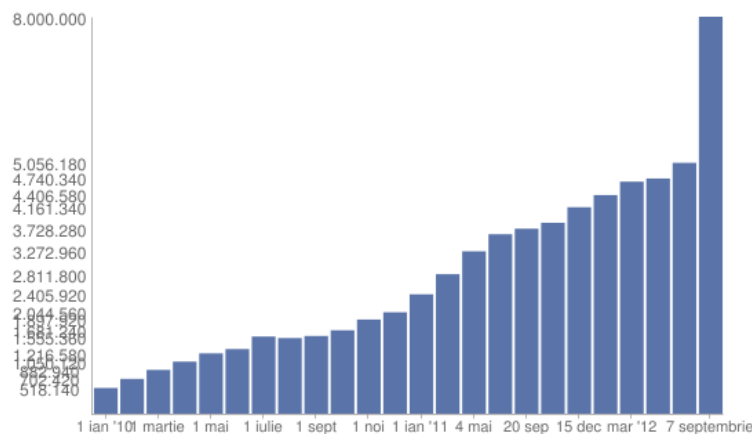


Figure 1 Facebook Romania users' evolution, source: <http://www.facebrands.ro/demografice.html>

As Malita (2011) observed in the Romanian educational area, Facebook has a great potential, both for teaching and for learning. Moreover, a study conducted by Grosseck, Bran and Țîru (2012) reveals that students are by now "virtual natives," at ease with using Facebook for social but also academic purposes.

This paper deals with the communication between university teachers and their students as it unfolds on

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Facebook and its tangential applications, as well as with the repercussions this interaction may have on the teachers' role in the classroom and the way their relationship with the students develops.

2. Communicating on Facebook. Motivations, challenges and consequences

The advent of social technology has transformed the way these two parties communicate and especially how they relate to each other. The author contend that this changes both the teachers' status amongst their students, as well as their role.

More and more students and teachers use Facebook to connect and keep in touch, mostly for didactical purposes. On the one hand, such an association via a social network seems common sense, as many teachers and students already have Facebook accounts at the moment their paths intersect in the classroom. Through its groups and messenger services, Facebook has become an instantly accessible means of communication, in a manner emails, for instance, were not. The spread of smartphones means that most students and teachers who have these applications on their mobiles are constantly logged on, thus theoretically they seem readily available. In fact, as Craig Condella (2010:116) posits, Facebook has become more popular than telephones, cell phones and email as a more natural way of communication.

Moreover, both the groups feature and the messenger let the sender know that their post or their message has been "seen", reassuring him/her that their message has not only reached its destination but it has also been read by its receiver(s). When, or if, the latter chooses to respond is a different discussion.

Communication with one's students can also take place on one's profile, or wall, although this happens rather rarely from my own observation, with both teachers and students preferring to post on Facebook in closed or secret groups when it comes to administrative issues, exams, materials, attendance, re-sits, etc. This may simply stem from the fact that students and teachers represent only one of the publics in one's Friends' list, if we are to follow danah boyd's (2011:40) line of thinking that Facebook encompasses many publics not just one. Usually, a message posted on someone's profile is visible to the entire list, including uninterested, uninvolved parties. Thus, the reason why communication between teachers and students in Facebook groups is so widespread is that such a social network feature links a number of people in one virtual place, gathering them around one focal point, making one-to-many communication easier and more organized.

However, this instant connection, this constant availability, as well as the lack of hierarchies in a Friends' list have certain consequences on the teacher-student relationship, both inside and outside the classroom. The author has witnessed an increasing degree of friendliness between students and teachers, which is understandable considering that they are "Friends", but also a marked degree of student-insertion in the teachers' out-of-classroom life.

This is due to several reasons.

The first is connected to the way Facebook is built, relying on four main features as identified by danah boyd (2011:43): a user's profile, his/her Friends' list, public commenting tools and streambased updates. Everybody

benefits from the same standardized tools. Everybody seems equal. What is of interest here is the Friends' list, the term itself but also the implications it has for how relationships develop in this virtual social network.

For the rare noninitiate in all things Facebook, the Friends' list represents those users, those real-life people, that one can connect to on Facebook. The Friends are in fact the great attraction of Facebook. Of course, this list does not consist only of one's closest friends. Because of Facebook, the term of Friends has come to mean both less and more. It means more because Friends may include family, co-workers, bosses, mere acquaintances, teachers, students and some times even total strangers. Tamara Wandel and Anthony Beavers (2010:93) go as far as arguing that Facebook users can sometimes end up being Friends with their enemies.

The reason they are all called Friends is to avoid potentially controversial and socially awkward moments, such as being asked to visibly label or categorize the people around us as having a strong or weak connection to us. This may be why the creators of Facebook settled on the more generic and generous term of Friends, when in reality most of the names on the list are more likely to be simply temporary acquaintances. Blogger and author, Kate Dailey is convinced in fact that Facebook does not make users better friends, but rather better acquaintances (quoted in Hamington 2010:142).

Friends have come to mean less because, evidently, the more specific meaning of the word has been diluted, stretched to include so many other categories of social ties. We would also add that this dilution and inclusion of weaker ties within the more intimate umbrella of the term "Friends" has also resulted in increased approachability.

In the case of the teacher-student relationship that we're analyzing in this paper, we contend that the Facebook-Friend teachers are undergoing a transformation of their position in relation to their students, which could chip away at the traditional stance of authority but also at the workable distance necessary for a teacher to objectively do their job. The closeness is understandable, as teachers, too, are animated by the desire to be liked. Teachers who are close to their students, keeping up with the times may be seen as the "cool". But on the other hand, it is difficult to be the teacher to your Friends, as being a teacher implies more than just being a Friend.

The reason this happens is that Facebook, as many other virtual environments, collapses contexts within others (boyd 2011:50), students and teachers become partially, at least, part of one another's lives, viewing pictures, reading posts, witnessing likes and dislikes, rants and private moments. Even though, Facebook now offers users the possibility of restricting the audience that has access to their content, Facebook also collapses physical distance, as all of one's Friends are there, visible on the right side of the computer screen, although they might be abroad, unavailable, or they might not wish to be disturbed. Facebook also collapses time barriers as there is no night and day in the virtual environment. A user might contact another at all hours, even if, or especially if, the recipient is not online, confident that the latter will eventually see the message. Facebook users live in what Fredric Jameson (quoted in Storey 2006:138) calls perpetual present, all messages and posts are constantly there stored among the bits and bytes, searchable. Craig Condella (2010:116) argues that Facebook allows you to communicate with Friends in a way that does not intrude on their time and space, allowing them to discover your message for themselves at

their leisure.

At the same time, researchers studying online campaigning have come to the conclusion that, on Facebook, top-down strategies in political campaigning has been replaced by what Johnson et al call (2011:185) grassroots-style dynamics. What this might tell us about the teacher-student relation in this social network is that traditional hierarchies break down in the equality soup that is Facebook, inhibitions are diluted, shed. In this environment where all barriers are lifted (Meyrowitz 1986:43), it is conceivable that social barriers are also felled. Users are on a more even keel, although perhaps not at the same level. The tone used in discussions is more informal, sometimes quite friendly.

In a previous study on exactly this topic, one about the perceived friendliness between students and teachers, we approached the topic of my students' emails to us and the overly familiar language that they used in our communication. We argued then that the facelessness of email communication, as well as the distance and the closeness of the viral world, made our students treat their teacher as one of them, lowering their inhibitions, drastically so in some cases. As a result, the emails themselves did not respect any letter-writing rules, which we still consider to be a sign of a certain formal distance that needs to exist between teacher and students. These emails lacked any introductory part, which was even more confusing in those cases where students preferred nicknames instead of their actual names in their email addresses. Some used abbreviations, or little, or no punctuation at all. Not to mention that these emails came at all hours of the day and night, brimming with urgency.

That discussion, we realized, is still relevant to our communication with our students on Facebook; the perceived approachability is still there, so is the informality and what we have called the student-insertion in the teacher's out-of-classroom life. The previous theoretical part of the paper may provide some answers as to why this happens. The theory is compounded by the fact that most students have had quite a long history of using Facebook to communicate with teachers, so to them the barriers we mentioned may not even be a factor. They certainly are no impediment.

Email-based communication seems to follow John Suler's (2004, online) description of what he calls "the online disinhibition effect": it is anonymous, the communicators are invisible, the communication is out of synch, it is in some ways not real, while status and authority are minimized. However, as Mimi Marinucci (2010:67) points out, on Facebook, all these factors mentioned by Suler are, if not absent then at least diluted: users are not anonymous, teachers and students are represented by their icons, thus they are virtually at least, visible, communication can be quite synchronous when both parties are present on Messenger.

Yet, because this communication is mediated, rather than face to face, repeated interaction can still lead to a mitigation of authority and status in the teachers' situation. This type of interaction is slowly but surely beginning to alter the traditional teacher-student relationship, and the teachers status, their authority in class, if you will. After all, along with other social networking platforms, Facebook diffuses power from center to the margins (Doyle and Fraser 2010: 216).

On the one hand, it is hard not to resort to Facebook when communication with a large number of students is made so easy. On the other hand, the more open the teachers are, the more students tend to disregard any barriers and insert themselves not only in their teachers' social network but also in their free time.

Teachers also tend to attract a great number of connections. In the "Introduction" to *A Networked Self*, Albert-László Barabási (2011:14) explains the underlying architecture of social networks in general and Facebook in particular. In the network, individuals are considered nodes, while the relationships between them are links. A social network, Barabási (2011:9) says, is not built randomly; the network, the drive to create one exists from the very beginning, from the very first connections. Moreover, some nodes possess certain qualities, a degree of fitness that simply attracts more links, as new nodes prefer to highly connected nodes (Barabási 2011:8). Such robust, highly-connected nodes tend to become quite large, turning into hubs, transforming into pivotal points for the entire social network. Teachers display such fitness on Facebook, as generations of new students link with them. Going back to Barabási (2011:10), the more links a node has, the more it tends to attract, the number of links almost serving as a guarantee.

Nevertheless, once they open their Friends' list to a few students, a few members of a group that they interact with more often, teachers may see themselves obliged to add even more links to their network as a way of perhaps avoiding social awkwardness.

3. Final considerations

So there it is, one way or another, students become part of a teacher's personal life, in a way they could not before the advent of social networks. Some consequences are straightforward: students are witnesses to what the teachers post and the teachers' posts create an image for the students of what the teachers are like in their out-of-school life. Other consequences for the teacher are more subtle and problematic, deriving from the one above and influenced by this new audience: as a teacher, you either post whatever you want even if it might not be suitable for one's students, you may censor yourself, or you might limit your public's access to what you post. Myself and a colleague opted for something more radical, namely we created different Facebook identities for interaction with our students in an attempt to avoid some of the problems we have mentioned in this paper.

Another reason why teachers open their profiles to their students has to do with the new age of student recruitment, by any means digital. The current involvement of information technologies in people's daily lives and the abundance of choices available to potential students result in the universities and teachers having to employ some savvy marketing to attract clients, a type of marketing called narrowcasting, the opposite of broadcasting, which means targeting a specific audience. The strategy is that connecting with a new node, may expose a certain education institution, or teacher, to that particular node's social network.

So we have seen the reasons and visited some of the consequences of the teacher-student relationship on Facebook, which bring us back to our initial hunch that the insertion of students in the teachers' out-of-classroom life has lessened the teachers' traditional hold of the classroom, bringing them off their pedestal, making them just

“one of us.” Some of the teachers' authority has eroded, and their role of educator has expanded to include more than just teaching and mentoring. We have become guides, psychologists, big sisters, babysitters.

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