

Facebook as a Personalized Learning Environment

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ABSTRACT

Social media has a ubiquitous presence in our lives, making it imperative to be integrated into education. This paper is part of a larger study where one of the Facebook groups was created comprising thirty higher secondary school students pursuing Commerce for academic purposes. The group was used as a scaffold for 16 weeks, offering characteristics of a PLE. The interactions with the variety of material presented and the group discussions at the end provided an insight to the teachers how leveraging social media as a PLE. The paper presents guidelines to teachers who wish to integrate social media as a scaffold or as a PLE.

INTRODUCTION

21st Century sees a change in the face of Education like never before. This is a century of life-long, diversified and inclusive learning. Education has come to recognize the role of individual in their own learning, establishing the importance of Personalized Learning Environments. Personal Learning Environments (PLE) position themselves on the idea that learning takes place contextually, mixing the formal and the informal learning opportunities; enhanced if gained as per learning style and cannot be provided by a single provider.

The ubiquitous presence of social media in our lives has slowly slipped into the field of Education, unknowingly. It was just out of ease and its presence that students and teachers started using it at first, for important notification, then to sharing academic information to managing collaborative activities while the managements of Educational institutions saw the potential of social media for outreach. This has compelled the researchers to look into the affordances of Social Media. Social Media as a Scaffold in education is essentially a PLE at work. The apt use of Social Media in Education, promises to provide opportunities that can fulfil major demands of a PLE.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Constructivist learning recognizes the value of learning as constructed by the learners' own experiences (Wilson & Lowry, 2000). Siemens (2005) asserts that learning is not an individual activity and that learning takes place through connections and leveraging the connections to construct knowledge. This is defined as Connectivism, a mix of social constructivist theory and affordances of technology. Downes (2007) maintain that learning is manifested in "systems that help learners to take control of and manage their own learning" or PLEs. Educational institutes rely more or less on the traditional platforms that allow learners to establish connections facilitating their learning (Dabbagh & Kitsantas, 2012) instead of the social media platforms. However, Toliver (2011) insists the use of social media for increasing student engagement. An LMS, a preferred tool integrated in education, though 'manages' learning, does not provide the much-needed control to the learners over their learning. A PLE is rooted in the learners' environment offering necessary contextualization to the learning process. Neier and Zayer (2015) assert that social media should be looked at as an educational tool that offers learners a platform to express themselves both- inside and outside the classroom environments. The need is rather the learners' patterns of control and responsibility over their learning than the tools of PLE.

This paper discusses the functioning of the Facebook Group used as a Scaffold to the classroom teaching-learning process as a PLE.

METHODOLOGY

This research explores the way in which the students interact on the Facebook group developed for academic purposes. The qualitative analysis of students' interactions on the group was followed by Focus group discussion in order to answer the overarching research questions:

- How do students interact with the content presented on the Facebook group?
- Do the students have control over their learning on the Facebook group? To what extent?
- Do the students interact with peers and teachers/mentors on the Facebook Group?
- Is there any evidence of informal learning on the Facebook group?

Setting up the PLE

Select topics included in the syllabus of class XII of Maharashtra State Board were discussed on the Facebook Group. The mentor/researcher as well as the students could initiate the posts in the group. This is in line with the ideas advocated by Downes (2006), Atwell (2009) that learners regain control of their learning process wherein they are able to choose and mix a variety of tools and content as per their need to create knowledge.

This qualitative research is a part of the larger mixed method research that studies student engagement with social media for academic purposes and its effect on academic achievement.

Sample

The Facebook group XII Commerce 2017-18 comprising of 30 members of Class XII pursuing Commerce Stream in various junior colleges in Mumbai and Suburban Mumbai was the sample of the present study. The participation to the group was voluntary and with informed consent. The group comprised an equal number of male and equal students. The interactions of participants were tracked for a period of 16 weeks.

The group rules regarding the purpose of the group as well as regarding the behaviour within the group were clearly stated.

Data Collection Tools

The two major sources of qualitative data in the present study are: firstly, the Facebook interactions within the group for 16 weeks are the artefacts that are used for qualitative analysis and secondly, the focus group discussions at the end of the 16-week period. The researcher's diary is included during triangulation of the data obtained from the artefacts and observation.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Facebook Group as a PLE

The Facebook group provides a platform where the student members are the prosumers- producers as well as consumers of the resources thereby that of knowledge. The posts included audio, videos related to the topics as well as discussions and quizzes and polls. The students could post their queries, share important notifications and interact with other peers when necessary. The students were usually asked to take a poll to choose the next topic before the end of topic under discussion. This gave the members the first control over the learning where the learners decided the topic; they wanted to learn in the Facebook group used as a scaffold. This is in sync with the concept of PLE which states it to be "*an information system that supports the learning process of the user.*"

This type of control is usually not found in the traditional learning atmospheres.

The topic was chosen by majority voting and discussed for 3 weeks on an average. The students and the teachers could post multi-media posts, quizzes or start some discussion on the related topic. The students could also post their doubts if they had, related to the concerned topic. The students could get into touch with

the mentor on the group. There were instances of students debating on the Facebook Group over a particular academic topic.

The posts on the Facebook group included edutainment posts as well as memes and other humour based posts. The Facebook group had instances of a few games, one of which was where students would begin a train of terms used in economics starting from the last alphabet of the previous word stated. The member had to give the meaning or definition of the term. Other members were to add information and examples in the comment section.

Situational posts were the characteristic of the Facebook group used as scaffold.

Ownership in Facebook Group Scaffold (PLE)

The students reported that this ownership of learning was something that was novel to them. It was contrary to the practice of teaching and learning where the teachers decide what to teach without asking the students what they wanted to learn. In the Facebook group as a scaffold, the choice of the topic is shared with the students. Students responded positively to this ownership.

“Nobody had asked me what I wanted to study, before this.”

“I needed to know exactly what I did not know to be able to choose a topic to be discussed.”

“The discussions many times forced me to look up the books and the internet since I was missing some points during study.”

The students reported to have recognized that since the control was with them, they had more responsibility which they recognized and arranged their schedule accordingly.

Interactions within the Facebook Group Scaffold (PLE)

The interactions showed a differentiation in the pattern. Not all reacted in the same manner. Not all responded to all posts. Lurking was observed to a great extent. Nevertheless, the students did not hesitate to respond to student members though they were not familiar to all of them in the physical world. The students were also not hesitant to interact with the mentor. The students responded by adding additional information, correcting the member post regarding a certain point being under discussion. The students reacted with expressing their opinions freely, especially regarding the current situations - social, political and economic.

The students recognize the interaction etiquettes. There was no instance of trolling or any indecent behaviour. The students were careful about how their reactions would be seen by the members in the group. Though this was a reason for the presence of ‘lurking’, the members insisted that they preferred to be careful in responses and would rather not respond if they felt that they would be misinterpreted. The students were aware of netiquettes in general.

The students reported that they enjoyed discussions the most of all activities.

“The discussions would usually center around current topics which we could relate very well to.”

“We once had a discussion on whether currency notes could be insured. This made us think because the experience of demonetization was fresh in our memory.”

“Sometimes I could vent out my frustration too. Especially when people in my physical world commented about me being a teacher was all I could do in the field of Economics. I often found support in this group.”

“Topics of daily life related to economics terms were fun discussions. This helped me to remember the concepts and have a clear concept about them.”

Leveraging Connections in the Facebook group Scaffold (PLE)

Students reported that they benefited from the connections that could have in the Facebook Group. The students uploaded queries and notices related to exams, paper pattern etc. The doubts raised by the students were answered by some student members who were not necessarily acquainted in the physical world.

“I was so glad when a member posted about the form filling dates of the C.A foundation exam. I was unaware of the details till then”

“A group member posted the exam schedule as soon as it was declared.”

“A video from The Khan Academy was uploaded on the group. Because of this, I became aware of any other topics covered on that platform related to my subjects.”

“I had missed out on an important topic in class because I was ill. But I found a person who had notes to share with me.”

Content Creation in Facebook group Scaffold (PLE)

There have been instances when students have created content- images, memes, quizzes etc. to support the learning happening in the group. The students reported to have enjoyed creating content in Facebook group Scaffold. The ease of content creation and sharing enables the students to be prosumers, which is a characteristic of working in a PLE.

“Creation of meme was the fun part of the group. I wish school assignments were like this.”

“Sometimes, in the flow of discussion., so much of content related to that particular topic gets collected, it is amazing!”

“After the discussion, sometimes somebody makes a quiz or a flowchart. It is helpful.”

CONCLUSION

The 21st century teacher needs to integrate technology to create relevant learning environments. These tools can offer the much-needed social context to learning (Boholano, 2017) and seen as a tool for open discussions (Neier & Zayer, 2015). The positives of social media and the connections that it offers could be effectively used while integrating it into education. The control granted by social media to the user should be leveraged into ownership of learning that would help building a strong PLE. The following are the recommendations to the teachers who wish to integrate social media as a PLE or as a scaffold in their teaching- learning practices:

- Choose the social media to be used as a PLE depending upon its familiarity with students
- Make conscious effort and plan the activities to be included in the PLE
- Ensure open discussions and equal control to the students
- Include variety of resources
- Ensure prompt reply from the mentors in the group
- Be firm about netiquettes.
- Observe the interactions in the social media group as a scaffold or a PLE and modify your further plans and content accordingly.

Though this paper is limited in terms of geographical base and the section to which the sample belongs, it hopes to provide an insight to the integration of social media by teachers as a PLE or as a scaffold. Social media tools offer a user- platform to combine all possible Web 2.0 tools and leverage connections making it an attractive proposition to be used in education, if used appropriately.

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