

Social learning: Can Facebook and related tools improve educational outcomes?

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Online social networking sites, such as Facebook, can help students become academically and socially integrated as well as improving learning outcomes, according to a study by researchers in China and Hong Kong. Writing in the *International Journal of Networking and Virtual Organisations*, explain that Facebook usage is around 90% across campuses and many educational institutions offer new students orientation on how to capitalize on social networking to improve their experience of their course and their final results.

Many previous studies of social networking have focused on identity presentation, privacy, and how social networks form. Much of the popular response to the advent of web 2.0 tools is that they can have a detrimental effect on [students](#) by being nothing more than trivial distractions from serious study. However, Stella Wen Tian of the University of Science & Technology of China (Suzhou Campus) and Angela Yan Yu, Douglas Vogel and Ron Chi-Wai Kwok of City University of Hong Kong, suggest that students' online social networking directly influences social learning and can positively influence academic learning.

The team carried out discussions with college students to understand current online social networking experience and attitude towards using Facebook for education. They hoped to understand the influence of online [social networking](#) and how educational institutions might improve pedagogical orientation and practices, especially given that peer pressure has been recognized in various studies as one of the most important

influences on student life.

"The typical social network pattern on Facebook is often in a core-periphery mode: an individual has close relationships with core friends and weak relationships with many others," the team says. "Online [social networking](#) applications such as Facebook offer an efficient platform for college students' socialization by expanding their network scope and maintaining close relationships."

There were two main aspects of student Facebook use, the team found: one social and one educational. Students reported that it could enhance and maintain friendships, build social networks/establish virtual relationships, diminish barriers to making friends, follow peer trends, share photos, for fun and leisure and to keep in touch with family. In terms of learning, students reported that Facebook allowed them to connect with the faculty and other students in terms of friendship/social relationship, provide comments to peers/share knowledge, share feelings with peers, join Groups established for subjects, collaboration: notification, discussion, course schedule, project management calendar and to use educational applications for organizing learning activities.

The team says that, "Facebook greatly influences college students' social life and shows good potential in coping with the challenges that students face." They conclude that, "Educational institutions may need to adopt active (but somewhat restrained) actions to utilize existing social network applications such as Facebook for education. Teaching activities will need to be appropriately designed for different target populations. The breakthrough point may start from students' social learning."

More information: "The impact of online social networking on learning: a social integration perspective" in Int. J. Networking and Virtual Organisations, 2011, 8, 264-280.

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