

Social media interaction tools might make MOOCs stickier

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Developers of massive open online courses—or MOOCs—may want to take a page from Facebook to keep more students engaged and enrolled, according to researchers.

In a study that compared MOOC student use of the course's Facebook groups to use of the built-in course message boards and forums, [researchers](#) said students were more engaged on the Facebook groups and also admitted to the researchers that they preferred interacting more on the [social media](#) site than through the course tools.

"In previous studies we found that the real challenge for MOOC developers and instructors is trying to keep students engaged and enrolled in the course," said Saijing Zheng, a former doctoral student at Penn State and currently a research scientist at Microsoft. "In this study, we are finding that social media tools may be one way to keep students engaged in a MOOC."

She added that typically 90 percent of the thousands of MOOC students who enroll in a course leave it after only two weeks.

The researchers, who report their findings at the annual ACM conference on Learning at Scale today (April 26), suggest that Facebook's interface has several features that most MOOC [courses](#), as yet, cannot match.

"Current MOOC platforms do not include collaborative features for

students to work together, or good conversation channels between students and between students and teachers," Zheng said. "Social media may provide another communication channel for the students."

According to the researchers, one of the advantages of Facebook groups is that users tend to sign up with their real names while students can create fake personas on course message boards and forums.

"Real names give other students the idea that they are talking to a real person and that, perhaps, helps build a sense of community and they trust that type of environment more," said Zheng.

Students appreciate that Facebook offers several ways to contact the professor, she said. They can reply to a post, like a post, and even send a private message.

While MOOC courses only last a few weeks, students on Facebook groups can meet and chat weeks before the course starts and, in some cases, long after it ends.

"The course can be relatively short—usually four to eight weeks—and after it's done many students think the material is gone," said Zheng. "On Facebook, it's different. It's a longer lasting community with people making friends and continuing to make connections."

Facebook replies and posts also tend to be better organized than message board conversations, which can easily become buried among other posts, according to the researchers.

"Students often have information overload and they become confused in the MOOC platform message forum," said Zheng. "For example, the same topic might be posted several times, but people won't be able to see it."

For the study, the researchers collected data from three different courses on Coursera, a platform that hosts MOOCs, and from Facebook groups.

The researchers used a Facebook application that allowed them to collect data on student activities on the site. They were then able to analyze various activities, such as likes, replies and comments, for students on both sites.

Although Facebook groups, which are treated as a second [communication channel](#) for the students, had fewer members than the actual course site, they had more engaged users. Fewer than 10 percent of Coursera users posted content, while 28 percent of Facebook users, on average, were active in the three course groups.

The researchers then conducted interviews with four instructors and 12 [students](#) of the courses for their opinions on the courses and communication tools.

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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