

# Utilising Facebook: immersing Generation-Y students into first year university

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## Abstract

This case study explores the use of the online social networking site, *Facebook*, in helping immerse first year students into university culture, by furthering the development of academic and social relationships between peers. *Facebook* was chosen as the host site on account of the uniform strength of its features as compared to other popular social networking sites such as *MySpace* and *Friendster*, the image-sharing site *Flickr*, and the open-source software *Moodle*. The site's popularity ensured that many students would be familiar with its layout and operation, while the 'group' and 'event' applications enabled the creation of an accessible, easily-maintained, and highly interactive online forum. Lastly, the 24/7 availability of the site conformed with the 'anytime, anywhere' work attitude of Generation-Y students. 100 first year design students took part in the study, within the course *Imaging Our World* at the University of Adelaide. Every two weeks, students were required to submit images to an online gallery in *Facebook*, and to provide critiques on peers' submissions. The gallery topics were broad in nature, and open to the student's own interpretations, allowing for a wide range of images in each: this produced a concurrently wide range of discussions. The galleries allowed students to connect with each other in a virtual environment, and thus to develop academic relationships freed from the constraints of the classroom and their own inhibitions. Through the use of such collaborative learning, students were able to engage with their peers and develop a sense of belonging within the learning community. Discussions often evolved from formal academic critiques to informal social interactions as the students became more comfortable with each other. In summary, the study was considered to have been a success, due to *Facebook's* engaging and interactive qualities, the students' existing interest and experience with the software, and their eagerness to connect with their peers. The project will be adapted in 2009 based on the initial findings of this study and the design of course-specific *Facebook* applications.

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## Introduction

Web 2.0 technologies, including social network sites (SNSs) such as *Facebook* and *MySpace*, and content-sharing sites such as *YouTube* and *Flickr*, allow individuals to present themselves, articulate their social networks, and establish or maintain connections with others. SNSs are amongst the most visited sites on the Internet today (<http://www.alex.com>), with Generation-Y at the forefront of the popularity surge. *Facebook*, currently the most popular SNS on the internet, has not been widely used in tertiary education beyond basic marketing strategies such as universities presenting themselves to prospective students. The principal aims of this case study were a) to investigate the efficacy of *Facebook* as an academic tool in tertiary education, specifically in design education, b) to immerse first year students into

university culture by initiating academic and social interaction between peers, particularly cross-cultural interaction between local and international students, and c) to improve the general experience of first year by tackling the common social barriers, such as language differences and introversion, students face in the early stages of university life.

## Literature Review

The choice of host site was arrived at via a careful selection process. *Facebook* was chosen on account of the uniform strength of its features as compared to other popular social networking sites such as *MySpace* and *Friendster*, the image-sharing site *Flickr*, and the open-source software *Moodle*. The site's immense popularity ensured that a large number of students would already be familiar with its layout and operation, and would be comfortable utilising it during the semester (Downes 2007). Similarly, it was determined that students would be more inclined to participate in the study if it was hosted on a site they already intended to visit; this criterion told greatly against the use of *Moodle*, which would have resulted in an independent university site. *Facebook's* image-hosting capabilities are far more intuitive and effective than those of comparable sites, and more 'community-minded' than specialist sites such as *Flickr*. Its 'Group' application facilitates the creation of an accessible, easily-maintained, and highly interactive online forum. Lastly, the 24/7 availability of the site was crucial, as the research literature strongly suggests increased frequency of student interaction with their peers has a substantive positive impact on their engagement with their learning (Krause et al. 2005), and it conforms with the 'anytime, anywhere' work attitude of Generation-Y. There are many approaches to ensure such student engagement. Fostering an environment in which students participate actively and develop a sense of belonging in both small and large group settings is highly conducive to effective student interaction. By promoting independence and building layered support networks, students are able to make the transition into university culture more efficiently and successfully, ensuring a more positive first year experience. While opportunities to ask questions, contribute to class discussions and critique peers' work are all conducive to student engagement, the research continues to emphasize the value of peer interaction both in and out of the classroom (Krause 2005). As such, the development of academic connections between peers early in university life can promote social interaction and *Facebook's* immersive social and educational toolset serves as a strong starting point for entry level students.

From an international student perspective, developing a sense of belonging in the academic community is critical in supporting the adjustment to university culture in Australia, more specifically building cross-cultural connections with local students. Peers in the learning community play a critical role in enhancing the first year experience at university for international students (Krause et al. 2003), however interaction, even on a basic level, can often prove difficult due to language barriers and students' inhibitions. The research literature suggests that some forms of computer-mediated communication can lower barriers to interaction and encourage more self-disclosure (Bargh et al. 2002) and as such SNSs such as *Facebook* may enable connections between peers that would not otherwise occur. By providing alternate means of communication students are able to engage with peers who share interests or relational goals, not just the same language.

## Methodology

100 students including 23 international students, enrolled in the course *Imaging Our World* (IOW), took part in a pre-semester survey held in the opening lecture. The survey included three broad types of measures. Firstly, information about demographic and other descriptive variables including gender, age bracket, ethnicity, and student type was collected, as shown in Table 1.

*Table 1: Pre-semester survey, breakdown of student demographics.*

Demographic		No. of students (Local)	No. of students (Int.)	No of students (All)
Gender:	Male	45	10	55
	Female	32	13	45
Age:	17-20	65	16	81
	21-25	9	7	16
	26+	3	0	3
Ethnicity:	Local	77	0	77
	International	0	23	23
Student Type:	Full-time	70	22	92
	Part-time	7	1	8
Employment (hours):	0	24	20	44
	1-10	23	2	25
	11-20	25	1	26
	21-30	4	0	4
	31-40	1	0	1

Secondly, *Facebook* usage measures were included, such as time spent on the site, and items designed to assess the types of connections it was used for, as shown in Tables 2 and 3. Thirdly, the survey included measures to assess the students' attitudes towards 'on-line' and 'in-class' communication with peers. Attitudinal responses were measured using Likert scales from 1-7, and additional, open-ended comments were encouraged.

Table 2: Pre-semester survey, Facebook usage - intensity

Question		No. of students (Local)	No. of students (Int.)	No of students (All)
Member of Facebook:	Yes	57	18	75
	No	20	5	25
No. of friends from IOW:	0	49	13	62
	1-5	26	10	36
	6-10	1	0	1
	11-20	0	0	0
	21-50	1	0	1
	50+	0	0	0
Usage intensity:	Several times a day	9	4	13
	Once a day	16	6	22
	Several times a week	16	5	21
	Once a week	9	1	10
	Monthly	1	0	1
	Rarely	6	2	8
Intensity per visit:	0-10 minutes	26	5	31
	11-30 minutes	24	10	34
	31-60 minutes	5	2	7
	60+ minutes	2	1	3

Table 3: Pre-semester survey, Facebook usage - type

Question	Mean (Local)	% Broad Agreement	Mean (Int.)	% Broad Agreement	Mean (All)	% Broad Agreement
"I use Facebook to learn more about people I meet socially."	4.1	56%	4.9	69%	4.3	60%
"I use Facebook to learn more about people in my classes."	3.9	31%	3.9	43%	3.9	35%
"I use Facebook to learn more about people living in my area."	3.0	25%	4.2	46%	3.3	31%
"I use Facebook to stay in touch with my family."	3.6	44%	3.7	43%	3.6	44%
"I use Facebook to stay in touch with my close friends."	5.5	83%	5.5	88%	5.5	85%
"I use Facebook to find past friends."	5.3	79%	5.4	85%	5.3	81%
"I use Facebook to meet new people."	3.1	21%	3.9	40%	3.3	27%

A two-hour workshop took place in the opening tutorial of the course, allowing inexperienced students to become accustomed with Facebook's layout and operation. Students were shown how to create an account, interact with peers, and take part in the compulsory on-line assessment. Throughout the semester, students were required to submit a series of

images to an online gallery in *Facebook* every two weeks, and to provide critiques on peers' submissions. The gallery topics, six in total, were broad in nature and open to the student's own interpretations, allowing for a wide range of images in each and a concurrently wide range of discussions. The galleries were open for submissions for a period of two weeks, however remained open for viewing for the duration of the entire course. Students had 24/7 access to two computer labs and could also access the site and submit work through private internet connections.

The screenshot shows a Facebook event page for 'IOW Gallery six' with the subtitle 'Favourite Subject'. The event is hosted by 'Imaging Our World 2008 @ The University of Adelaide' and is a 'Music/Arts - Exhibit' type. The event is scheduled for Monday, May 26, 2008, at 9:00am, ending on Wednesday, June 25, 2008, at 12:00pm, in Adelaide, Australia. The description outlines submission rules: students must submit an image by 5pm Friday week 11 and provide a 25+ word description. Comments must be at least 50 words and in English. The gallery remains open for one month. The 'Photos' section shows 5 of 80 submitted images. The 'Your RSVP' section shows options for 'Attending', 'Maybe Attending', and 'Not Attending', with an 'RSVP' button. The 'Other Invites' section lists attendees like 'Den Buck' and 'David Wooley'. The right sidebar contains event management options like 'Invite People to Come', 'Cancel this Event', 'Edit Event', 'Message All Guests', and 'Remove from My Events', along with 'Share' and 'Export' buttons.

*Figure 1. Screen capture from Gallery Six: "Favourite Subject". This image depicts the standard Facebook interface a student encountered when submitting an image to one of the six galleries. Students are presented with a description of the gallery, outlining the assessment criteria, thumbnail images of the various submissions, a list of gallery attendees, and a 'wall' allowing students to post comments to the gallery. Students are also able to view each image at a higher resolution and post critiques and comments.*

The *Facebook* tasks were worth 15% of the final grade for the course, and students were assessed on three key components: the relevance and quality of the submitted images, the provided descriptions that accompanied the submitted images, and the quality and consistency of their critiques and subsequent discussions. Students were encouraged to submit original imagery and draw on their own experiences and cultural backgrounds for inspiration, but were permitted to submit non-original material provided it was referenced and not copyrighted.

## Photos from IOW Gallery one

Photo 40 of 49 | [Back to Event](#) | [See All Photos](#)[Previous](#) [Next](#)

I took a slightly different perspective on this task; a "portrait" being something that visually depicts someone. These objects are as depictive of "Me" as a photo would be, to anyone who knows me well. My interests in music and communication are shown respectively by the headphones and laptop; my diary/sketch book, pencil and wide-angle lens suggesting my interest in design and photography. If you look inside the lens you might see a compass - this refers to my recent travels and my desire to see more of the world. Taken more figuratively, it might also be taken to mean that I have finally found some direction in a life that has so far been on a winding and scattered path.

Added by Troy Mason  
to the event "IOW Gallery one"

Added March 4

*Figure 2. Screen capture of a student submission (Troy Mason) in Gallery One: "Portrait". Once a student had joined an image gallery they were capable of submitting as many images as they liked. Students were asked to provide a brief description of each submission including an outline of the image and its relevance to the gallery heading. The image shown in Figure 2 generated the most discussion within the first gallery, 57 posts from 23 students. The discussion transformed from formal critiques and responses in regards to the submission, to social interaction between students including topics such as personal computers, digital cameras and overseas travel.*

In the final week of the semester, students were required to complete a second survey. The questionnaire contained consistent content from the pre-semester survey and included additional questions regarding the perceived effectiveness of the *Facebook* image galleries, and the students' experiences throughout the course.

## Findings

The pre-semester survey outlined the student demographic involved in the course and supported some assumptions regarding SNSs and peer communication. There was a close split between male and female students, 81% of which were aged between 17 and 20. 75% of students were already members of *Facebook*, easily the most popular SNS amongst the cohort (*MySpace* polled 41%, *Friendster* 11%, and *Xanga* 9%). While the majority of students were already familiar with *Facebook* only 2% of current members had more than 5 'friends' from *Imaging Our World*, indicating there was minimal social interaction taking place within the group prior to the commencement of the course. The survey also indicated that *Facebook* was utilised predominantly to stay in touch with close friends and find past friends, and not used regularly to meet new people, learn about people from the same area or stay in touch with family. Perhaps surprisingly, the tool was not yet widely used to learn more about academic peers, obtaining a mean response of just 3.9 in the Likert-scale question. Lastly the majority of students indicated they were more comfortable asking questions and critiquing peers in an online environment rather than in class. In the early weeks of the semester this was made evident through the high level of student engagement within the *Facebook* group and a lack of interaction during lectures and tutorials. Despite this lack of in-class participation during the initial weeks of the course, the students indicated they were very enthusiastic to develop strong bonds with their peers and were particularly looking forward to the opportunity to develop cross-cultural relationships.

The post-semester survey outlined the importance of the online environment during the initial stages of the course for peer engagement and integration into new academic networks, as well as a significant shift in *Facebook* usage. There was a considerable increase in the number of *Facebook* 'friends' within the majority of students, which often translated into face-to-face interaction:

The best thing about the *Facebook* galleries was that they got everyone talking from day one—all of a sudden I had all these new friends on *Facebook* and from there friends in class. (local student)

*Facebook* was widely used by students to learn more about their academic peers, the mean response increasing from 3.9 in the pre-semester survey to 5.8 in the post-semester survey:

The *Facebook* galleries were a great part of the course as I use *Facebook* almost everyday and it gave me the opportunity to learn more about other students. (international student)

The *Facebook* group and image galleries also had positive effects on developing cross-cultural relationships from both an academic and social perspective as outlined in Table 4.

Table 4: Post-semester survey, peer interaction (academic and social)

Question	Mean (Local)	% Broad Agreement	Mean (Int.)	% Broad Agreement	Mean (All)	% Broad Agreement
"The <i>Facebook</i> group and image galleries in IOW helped me to develop academic relationships with same-culture students."	5.6	88%	5.9	91%	5.7	89%
"The <i>Facebook</i> group and image galleries in IOW helped me to develop social relationships with same-culture students."	5.2	82%	5.2	81%	5.2	82%
"The <i>Facebook</i> group and image galleries in IOW helped me to develop academic relationships with different-culture students."	5.0	80%	5.7	87%	5.2	82%
"The <i>Facebook</i> group and image galleries in IOW helped me to develop social relationships with different-culture students."	4.8	73%	5.1	83%	4.9	76%
"The <i>Facebook</i> group and image galleries in IOW increased my interaction with peers."	5.7	84%	5.5	88%	5.7	85%
"The <i>Facebook</i> group and image galleries in IOW generated rewarding academic discussions that benefited my studies this semester."	5.9	90%	6.1	97%	5.9	92%

## Discussion

The study was largely successful due to *Facebook's* engaging and interactive qualities, the students' existing interest and experience with the software, and their eagerness to connect with their peers. Through the use of this collaborative learning tool students were able to engage with their peers and develop a sense of belonging within the learning community. Students were able to develop academic relationships freed from the constraints of the classroom and their own inhibitions, and over the semester discussions evolved from formal academic critiques to informal social interactions. The *Facebook* group facilitated peer interaction in the early weeks of the course when it was evident that such interaction would not take place in the classroom. As the students become more comfortable within their new academic networks, in-class participation increased dramatically, as one international student noted:

It was great being able to communicate with the other students – due to my language skills I couldn't do this at first in class, but the galleries helped everyone get to know each other, and by the end of the course I was much more confident.

The online interaction also provided a strong platform for the development of cross-cultural relationships. Such relationships are particularly important for commencing international students, who often struggle to develop meaningful connections with local students, often due to language barriers. The addition of a virtual environment enabled international students to formulate meaningful comments and critiques, as opposed to rushing immediate responses under pressure in the classroom. The opportunity to communicate in such a way proved to



be extremely popular with the international students and was reflected in the assessment breakdown. For the *Facebook* tasks the average mark for international students was 78%, compared to 64% for local students. A more intensive examination of the international student experience will follow in future research publications. In a recent national study it was found that 65% of international students experience periods of loneliness when studying in Australia (Sawir, 2007), a figure corroborated by the data produced during this study. It was identified that the key triggers of such loneliness are personal isolation due to lack of academic and social networks, and language barriers, two elements the *Facebook* assessment tasks aimed to tackle.

The success of this tool relied heavily on a proactive attitude from the course lecturer. It was important not only to monitor the discussions that took place between students, but to get involved and participate by providing comments and critiques, prompting dialogue between students and in some cases driving the discussion. It was also important to act on the eagerness of students, highlighted in the early weeks of the course. Additional, non-graded galleries were set up to accommodate students who wanted to submit images that didn't fit under the six pre-designed headings. An unexpected outcome from the study was an accessible and effective marketing tool for the school. The *Facebook* group provided an excellent platform to display course information, student discussion and outstanding work as one collective online resource. Prospective students can log on to *Facebook* and access the group, thus gaining a stronger impression of the course prior to enrolling, while other staff members from the school can gain immediate and updated information regarding course content and student work.

Throughout the semester several ways in which to improve the experience and effectiveness of the course were identified. Firstly there needs to be a much stronger link between in-class and on-line environments in order to strengthen the face-to-face engagements between peers. In 2009 on-line critiques and discussions will be brought into the classroom to promote face-to-face engagement. It is crucial to remember that an on-line connection is only one factor in forming a meaningful relationship, and that physical interaction with peers is essential for developing the student experience. Secondly, it became evident that the on-line tasks were most beneficial during the early weeks of semester with participation waning during the latter weeks, possibly due to major assignments, exam revision and other courses. In 2009 the *Facebook* assessment will be compressed into an intensive 6-week program to capitalise on the initial enthusiasm and interaction of students. Lastly the design and construction of course-specific *Facebook* applications, as opposed to using the default 'group' and 'event' tools, will enhance the experience by ensuring a more cohesive design language throughout the course content, and a stronger connection between the 'in-class' and 'on-line' environments.

The project will be adapted for the same course, *Imaging Our World*, in 2009 based on the results of the pilot study carried out in 2008. To further the sample and gain a stronger understanding of the advantages and disadvantages of online communication between peers in design education, a move to collaborate with other Group of Eight universities will be instigated. A range of tools will be assessed and students at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels of study will be included, as the benefits of online communication go well beyond instigating peer interaction. Firms across various design fields are now actively sourcing potential employees through online networking tools such as *Facebook*, forums and blogs, reinforcing the validity of incorporating such communicative tools into current design education.

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