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# Can spontaneous Internet activity serve the goals of school?

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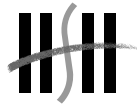
**2016/2**



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## 1 Introduction

The culture of the social media, usually engaged out of school, is fundamentally different from that of the school. The differences can be reduced to a *culture of spontaneity, absence of prescribed learning goals and voluntary participation* vs. a *culture of goal-directedness, regimentation and involuntary participation*. The question arises whether the culture of social media, not just as ICT tools, can become part of school learning while retaining their uniqueness, and while school retains its.

Two possibilities come to mind. One possibility is that the two cultures cannot be forced to reside under the same roof (except when the social media become subservient to the school's goals) as they are so radically different. School usually has its prescribed goals which are not a matter of choice (Biesta, 2009); students' preferences play at best only a minor role. The exact opposite is the case with the social media, as when they become the central theme of learning, mainly serving students' diverse preferences and desires (Ito, et. al. 2013). In the latter case, the main mission of school as a socializing agent to serve society's conception of "Bildung" (Biesta, 2013), is badly weakened.

The second possibility is to have the use of social media as an integrated part of instruction, affording voluntary elaboration and spontaneous reflection about school material through out-of-school free exchanges among students. Such exchanges are not designed, if designed at all, to serve the traditional learning goals of school but are related to them. Rather, their use is to allow "going beyond the information given" for exploration and expression (Dabbagh & Kitsantas' 2012). However, this approach is based on much self-regulation, an approach that has been criticized for lack of cognitive structure, cognitive overload, and empirical evidence (Kirschner, Sweller, & Clark, 2006). Still, these authors speak of academic learning. What about other kinds of learning, such as attitudes and beliefs? Indeed, would not personal, voluntary exchanges between groups of strangers affect their prejudices and stereotypes (Pettigrew, 1998)? It is this possibility, based on the contact hypothesis (that we tried to examine in the present experiment, using Facebook (FB) to positively affect through on-line interactions among eleventh graders in Norway their perceptions of native Norwegians and immigrants, respectively.

We asked two main questions:

- (a) To what extent do students actively participate in the use of the FB, as suggested?
- (b) To what extent did their participation affect their prejudices, stereotypes of and attitudes toward the "other side"?

## **2 The study**

### **2.1 Participants**

Two groups of students were selected for the study – an 11<sup>th</sup> grade class from a native Norwegian neighborhood school in Bergen and a similar class, as similar as possible, from a new immigrants' neighborhood school. Equating the two classes in terms of their social-economic status (SES), mastery of the Norwegian language or grades, was not possible. This would have perhaps strengthened the internal validity of the study but badly reduce its external validity. We still believed that the differences between the groups were an integral part of their respective identities and attributes. There were 36 native Norwegian students and 15 immigrants. All were volunteers who agreed to participate in the study.

### **2.2 Procedure**

The study was first introduced by the teachers who were very positive about it. They were both accommodating and reflective, suggesting practical changes during the period of planning. During the experiment the teachers mainly observed the FB groups (no active participation in the discussions), but they did spend time during their own classes to motivate the students for this project.

Students created four groups of six to eight in each class and started exchanges among them in each group. These exchanges were related to the current curriculum which was based on social science, mainly around historic events from the First World War. We introduced a new topic with specific questions each week (for 4 weeks in total). The students discussed these topics within their respective groups. The researchers would interfere and motivate the students if the discussion went slowly with follow-up questions. This was carried on for 4 weeks, until we shifted the focus from

curriculum to social (everyday) life. We kept the same "model" for another 4 weeks with no curriculum based material. Students were then informed that the task was to preferably communicate with students from the "other" class. It was stressed that the communication was voluntarily, yet they were also encouraged to talk about personal issues both on the public platform, but also personally. The teachers had informed the students about simple ethical "guidelines" on how to behave during the discussions, besides this, the students were free to interact how they saw fit on what matter they wanted. We stressed that the ultimate goal was discussions and interaction, not problems-to-be-solved.

### **2.3 Regarding the amount of exchanges**

The students interacted a great length of time, but the quality was not as great as expected. Facebook allows for someone to just "like" another person's comments. Meaning that replies were short and superficial; often just pressing "like" was followed up with a short comment. In short, they did what they were asked to do in a literal sense, not what we hoped for.

### **2.4 Measures**

Two similar versions of a questionnaire were created, one for the native Norwegian class and one for the immigrant class. All items were on Likert-type scales ranging from 1 (do not agree) to 5 (totally agree). The questionnaires were group administered on two occasions: pre- and post-intervention occasions. The questionnaires tapped four constructs, as follows:

*Attitudes towards the other side:* 16 items. Example: "Norway should not allow more immigrants"; "New immigrants enrich the Norwegian culture".

*Stereotypes:* 6 items. Example: "The Norwegians are not friendly"; "New immigrants are industrious people".

*Feelings toward the other side:* 5 Items. Example items are: "I feel afraid when I with new immigrants"; "I feel comfortable when with native Norwegians".



*Desired social distance*: 6 items. Example items are: "How willing are you to invite a foreign immigrant to your home?"; How willing are you to attend the cinema, a concert or a party with a native Norwegian?

### **3 Results**

By and large, the study did not yield any results that support our second possibility, namely – that the use of FB as a spontaneous tool for out of school intergroup elaboration and reflection on school material would lead to significant changes of stereotypes, attitudes, desired social distance or feelings toward the "other side": new immigrants to Norway. This it appears, negates Ito's (2010) optimistic view of the use of social media for civic education: "The gap between the energies that kids bring to their peer-based politics and social engagement, and their participation in in more adult-centered civic and political worlds, presents a missed opportunity". The only (slight, but statistically significant at the  $p >.05 < .10$  level) changes we detected were: An increase of *negative view* of immigrants by the native Norwegian group, and an increase in immigrants' willingness for social contact with native Norwegians.

### **4 Discussion**

The question is what kind of conclusion, even if only tentative, could be reached on the basis of this study. First, it needs to be said, in response to our first question (To what extent did the students actively participate in the use of the FB, as suggested?) that while there were quite intensive exchanges between the students of both groups, they were relatively short and shallow, as if to get rid of the task. Students' view was that Facebook is outmoded and thus of little interest to them. We might have chosen a more updated and text based social tool that would require more detailed and thoughtful exchanges.

Such observations reinforce the view of the incompatibility of the two cultures. And yet, was the issue fairly and validly tested in the present study? One could argue that there wasn't sufficient time on task (Berliner, 1992) or amount of mental effort invested in the exchanges (Salomon, 1983) to allow for the desired changes.

On the other hand, it might well be that the use of a social medium such as Facebook, based as it is on spontaneous and voluntary participation, with no prescribed learning goals and any regimentation, is not suitable for attitudinal changes. Would a more technological advanced tool make a difference or is there a built-in incompatibility between the free spirit of the Internet and the relative rigidity of the school? Sanger (2010), one of the founders of Wikipedia, wrote as follows:

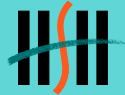
There are drawbacks with each of these [Internet and school], however. First, as to online student forums, attempting to spark a lively online, real-time, always-on conversation among reluctant students is apt to be about as easy as sparking a more traditional lively conversation among similarly reluctant students. That is, the remarks in both forums can be disappointingly perfunctory and not apt to teach much to anyone except, maybe, the student making them.

Moreover, attempts to change perceptions of another group while much of the society around expresses negative views of it, might be too much of a task to be left for spontaneous and unguided Internet-based exchanges (e.g., Phelps, et. al., 2011). After all, as it has been said, it might be easier to split an atom than to change attitudes. Indeed, prejudices, stereotypes, desire to avoid immigrants, and negative attitudes toward them are not the creation of the individual youngster but part of a social, consensually-held ethos. Two months of exchanges between Native Norwegians and immigrants, even when they create a sense of inter-personal friendship, are insufficient to overcome that ethos and to change one's attitudes toward the other *group*. Changed attitudes do not easily generalize to another group. Most likely, one would need much direct and ongoing contact (Salomon, 2014). Internet tools of the FB kind cannot replace direct contact (Salomon, 2014).

Can we then reach any clear conclusions about the use of a tool like FB for civil studies involving changes of attitude? Our *tentative* response is that it cannot, but it is clear that much more research is needed, research that examines outputs of the uses of social media, not only the inputs.

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The culture of the social media, usually engaged out of school, is fundamentally different from that of the school. The differences can be reduced to a culture of spontaneity, absence of prescribed learning goals and voluntary participation vs. a culture of goal-directedness, regimentation and involuntary participation. The question arises whether the culture of social media, not just as ICT tools, can become part of school learning while retaining their uniqueness, and while school retains its. The purposes of this study are to explore (a) To what extent do students actively participate in the use of the Facebook, as suggested? and (b) To what extent did their participation affect their prejudices, stereotypes of and attitudes toward the «other side»?

Two groups of students were selected for the study – an 11th grade class from a native Norwegian neighborhood school in Bergen and a similar class, as similar as possible, from a new immigrants' neighborhood school. The students interacted a great length of time. Two similar versions of a questionnaire were created, one for the native Norwegian class and one for the immigrant class. The study did not yield any results that support the assumption that the use of Facebook as a spontaneous tool for out of school intergroup elaboration and reflection on school material would lead to significant changes of stereotypes, attitudes, desired social distance or feelings toward the «other side»: New immigrants to Norway. The changes we detected were an increase of negative view of immigrants by the native Norwegian group, and an increase in immigrants' willingness for social contact with native Norwegians. These findings are discussed.

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