

Use Of Facebook Group As Learning Arena – Experiences From A Higher Education Course In Law Education

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to develop knowledge about the use of Facebook groups as a learning arena in higher education. In this case, a closed group on Facebook was used in combination with videos and seminars in a regular university context. 41 students participated in the subject of family - and succession law at a university in Norway. We have chosen a qualitative approach using two different datasets. A print-out of the communication in the Facebook group constitutes one of the datasets, and a focus group interview with one group of students accounts for the other dataset. We discuss the findings in the light of a sociocultural approach to learning, where we look more closely at how the lecturer and the students use the closed group in Facebook as a tool to develop knowledge. The content presented was mainly practical information and academic posts. The academic posts form a pattern, largely characterized by limited questions and answers sequences. The closed Facebook group is to a lesser extent used as an arena for discussion. If this potential is to be realised, it is important that the lecturer is aware of how he can contribute to development of the communicative space as a learning community.

Keywords: Learning community, situated learning, dialogic teaching, social media

INTRODUCTION

Today's students are part of the 'net generation'. Use of social media, such as Facebook, is part of the digital lifestyle. In the past two decades, awareness has increased regarding students' social interaction and knowledge development through online communities (Alrushiedat & Olfman, 2014). The digital development and growth of social media entails that time and space for learning has acquired new meaning. The development of online communities gives rise to new opportunities for teaching and learning. Therefore, it is important to investigate this new teaching context.

In this study, we will focus on social media, specifically the use of a closed Facebook group as an arena for interaction and learning in higher education. Our starting point is teaching at a university in Norway, where the lecturer of the subject 'family and succession law' (12 credits) utilised a closed Facebook group to promote interaction and communication. The teaching took place over one semester and consisted of three main components: video lectures, seminar assignments and seminars. Attendance on campus was mandatory for students during the seminars. Work relating to video lectures and the seminar assignments could be conducted remotely. The intention of the Facebook group was for it to function as a forum for interaction and as a supplement to the university's learning platform, Fronter, and the physical meetings in class on campus. This was communicated to the students and they were invited to become members of the group with a request to actively participate in the Facebook group with questions and in academic discussions.

PREVIOUS RESEARCH

The purpose of this study is to develop new knowledge about the use of Facebook groups as a learning arena in higher education. Our study is limited to formal use of Facebook in a formal teaching context.

Use of social media in teaching contexts in higher education is a burgeoning research field. The results of studies relating to pedagogical use of Facebook are contradictory (Manca & Ranieri, 2013). The majority of studies highlight the pedagogical opportunities (Jeljali, Al Naji & Khazam, 2018; Donlan, 2012). Far fewer argue that Facebook is not a suitable medium for educational purposes (Wiese, Skues & Williams, 2011). The disadvantages that are highlighted relate to privacy concerns. Concerns are also expressed regarding communication via social media replacing or limiting face-to-face communication.

We have identified three reviews relating to use of Facebook in higher education (Aydin, 2012; Manca & Ranieri, 2013, 2016). Manca & Ranieri (2013, 2016) find that Facebook is mainly used as an arena for discussion and cooperative learning, sharing of information and learning resources, and also as support for development of the contents of the subject. Aydin (2012) summarises in his review that there is a lack of research relating to Facebook as a pedagogical resource in teaching contexts. He also emphasises the value of lecturers to a greater extent utilising Facebook in the development of new learning designs.

When we examine the studies discussing pedagogical use of Facebook in formal teaching contexts in more detail, cooperation, information and knowledge sharing and interaction and communication are the areas that are highlighted. These areas are partly overlapping.

Studies that highlight cooperation refer to the importance of being able to cooperate on assignments, projects, the development of teamwork and the development of learning communities (Mazman & Usluel, 2010; Lonn & Teasley, 2009). Sharing research and subject matter, and quick and easy dissemination of information is highlighted during information sharing (Jelheli, Alnaji & Khazam, 2018; Wannapiroon, 2012). Lecturers can use Facebook to communicate and discuss with students in a less formal manner (Prescott, Stodart, Becket & Wilson, 2013). Furthermore, Facebook is suitable for communication and interaction between students (Henderson, Selwyn & Aston, 2017). This provides opportunities for questions, reflection and commentary on various course-related topics and issues.

A study by Wang, Woo, Quek, Yang & Liu (2012) found that students prefer Facebook over more traditional learning platforms. Students perceive Facebook as more accessible; they visit the site more frequently and spend more time on the platform, compared to traditional learning platforms. The number of posts by students is almost four times higher on Facebook. Furthermore, the students' posts address more complex topics and generate more detailed answers. Similar results are also found in the studies by Kent (2014) and Awidi, Paynter & Vujosevic (2019).

This summary of previous research shows that there continues to be a lack of studies examining use of Facebook groups as a pedagogical resource. We have not succeeded in identifying studies that have examined conversations in Facebook groups. This is also emphasised by Deng & Tavares (2013), who express that it may be challenging to access empirical data from Facebook groups that would make it possible to study interaction and participation. Furthermore, additional research is needed that highlights how students experience the use of Facebook groups as an aid for own learning (Deng & Tavares, 2013; Awidi et al., 2019). On this basis, we have developed the following research questions: What characterises the communicative space in the Facebook group, and what experiences do students have with the use of the Facebook group as a learning arena?

THEORY

This study is based on sociocultural theory and a situated perspective on learning. This perspective focuses on community, participation and activity in the situation, specifically how students and the lecturer interact, how they negotiate meaning and jointly develop knowledge.

Characteristics such as community, participation and activity shift the focus from the student as an individual to the learning community. Through active participation in a learning community, the student will acquire experiences and knowledge (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Learning and knowledge are situated in that they are anchored and interwoven in the specific cultural and social context of which we are a part. We often say that knowledge is distributed between participants in the community. The actors have different knowledge and skills, which jointly form a common knowledge base. Language as the mediating tool is emphasised (Vygotsky, 1978). It is through dialogue and language in a broad sense that knowledge is developed. Based on this learning perspective, the lecturer's primary task is to facilitate interaction processes and participate with their added knowledge in the learning community (Dysthe, 2012). The lecturer has a key role and serves as the scaffolding in the students' learning process (Bruner, 1996). The students can also function as scaffolding builders for one another.

In this study, we focus on how the lecturer and students jointly negotiate meaning and develop knowledge, based on the premise that they are to understand one another. We will focus on what conversation patterns develop. Here we see parallels between conversations that develop on Facebook and those referred to in the literature as classroom conversations. In our context, Facebook can serve as a communicative system that intentionally is to result in dialogic teaching. Dialogic teaching, introduced by Alexander (2008), seeks to stimulate thinking and learning. Dialogic teaching is characterised by having a purpose, it is collective, reciprocal, supporting and cumulative. The teaching has common learning objectives, the lecturer and students jointly work on learning assignments, listen to one another and share ideas. The students' views are taken seriously, and the lecturer expands on the students' previous knowledge. Barnes (2008) distinguishes between exploratory and presentational talk. Exploratory talk invites the students and lecturer to try new ideas, receive feedback on these and sort their own thoughts (Barnes, 2008). Presentational talk is tied to fixed content with fixed answers. In presentational talk, the answers, or responses, are evaluated and presented

as preconceived. Barnes (2008) emphasises that both presentational and exploratory talk are important for learning but that the lecturer must know the difference, as well as when it is suitable to use the different forms of talk.

It is our understanding that the characteristics of presentational talk (Barnes 2008) are similar to a classic IRE pattern, or participant structures characterised by initiative, response and evaluation of response (Mehan, 1979). The lecturer initiates a question to which the students respond, and the answer is then evaluated by the lecturer. If the lecturer then initiates a new question, repeats, gives new meaning to or otherwise comments on the student's answer, this is referred to by Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) as *follow-up* or IRF. The IRF format has in recent years been followed up and expanded on by several researchers, including Gibbons (2009). Gibbons refers to this as IREF structure. F stands for *feedback*, as the lecturer often expands on, varies and reformulates the student's response. By asking follow-up questions or elaborating questions, the students can be encouraged to reflect on and elaborate in more detail on what they are thinking.

The IRE pattern is widely used but has been the subject of strong criticism (Høegh, 2018). In the literature, Wells (1993), for instance, notes that the structure is neither good nor bad. Advantages and disadvantages to this approach depend on the purpose for which this pattern is used. Thus, the IRE structure may be suitable in certain situations, such as in situations where the purpose is to monitor the student's knowledge and understanding (Mercer & Littleton, 2007).

METHODOLOGY

The intention of this study is to develop knowledge about the use of Facebook groups as an interaction and learning arena in higher education. In order to answer the research questions: What characterises the communicative space in the Facebook group, and what experiences do students have with the use of the Facebook group as a learning arena, we have chosen a qualitative approach using two different datasets. A print-out of the communication in the Facebook group constitutes one of the datasets, and a focus group interview with one group of students accounts for the other dataset.

Selection

All members of the Facebook group are included as participants in the first dataset. This comprises the lecturer and 41 students (17 women and 24 men). In the second dataset, the focus group interview, seven students participate (4 women and 3 men). Recruitment of participants for the focus group interview was conducted as follows: the lecturer posted information about the purpose of the study in the Facebook group with a request for students to express their interest.

Data collection and analysis

The first dataset consists of a print-out of all communication in the Facebook group for the entire semester. The print-out shows the authors of the posts, the timing of the posts, and whether the participants are starting a new post or replying to a post. The second dataset, the focus group interview with the students, was conducted shortly after the end of the semester. We used a semi-structured interview in which we asked how the students had used the Facebook group, and what positive experiences or challenges they had experienced with the use of the Facebook group as an arena for interaction and learning.

Both datasets were analysed with the aid of thematic content analysis (Fauskanger & Mosvold, 2014). Content analysis is a flexible approach to analysis of textual data and is a well-suited method to identify and classify patterns in data (Krippendorff, 2012). The work began with a coding phase where we developed codes and revised these by way of an interactive process including several cycles of analysis. First we searched for words and phrases to find patterns in the material. In the next phase, we used a conventional approach whereby we explored the material to find possible categories (Fauskanger & Mosvold, 2014; Krippendorff, 2012). This process resulted in categories that will be presented under our findings.

None of the researchers who were responsible for the collection and analysis of data had participated in the development of the teaching design or in the teaching. In the analysis work, we deliberately conducted independent analyses, separately, in order to ensure a high degree of reliability and validity. The units of analysis are individual statements by participants as they are expressed in the Facebook group and in the transcribed focus group interview.

Ethical considerations

This study was conducted in accordance with the General guidelines for research ethics from the National Committee for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences and the Humanities (NESH). The participants received oral and written information about the purpose and implementation of the study. The principle of voluntary participation, the right to withdraw from the study and measures to protect anonymity have been emphasised and safeguarded.

RESULTS

We have structured the presentation of results into two main parts. First, we present results based on the content analysis of the print-out of all communication in the Facebook group. Then, we present empirical data from the focus group interview. The findings are organised around the main topics and quotes are selected to illustrate what we interpret as key points.

PART 1 – USE OF THE FACEBOOK GROUP AS A COMMUNICATIVE SPACE

In total, 155 posts were written in the group, with 94 posts by the lecturer and 61 posts by students, respectively. The posts can be categorised into two main groups where we distinguish between starting a new post (main group 1) and replying to an already commenced post (main group 2). In main group 1, we find 65 posts. 70% of these were started by the lecturer and 30% were started by students. In main group 2, we find a total of 77 replies to posts. These are distributed as follows: 54% by the lecturer and 46% by students. In total 16 (out of 41) students have chosen to post in the Facebook group. Four of these students stand out as more active. Most students only have one post. Through the content analysis of the print-out of the communication in the Facebook group, two categories crystallised: 'information' and 'subject'. These categories form the structure for the continued presentation.

Posts started by the lecturer

We will first present the posts started by the lecturer. The majority of these, 37 out of 46, are in the category 'information'. Most posts are found in the start of the programme and in the final two weeks before the exam.

Information

The posts in the category 'information' can be divided into three sub-groups where information relates to a) practical matters, b) students' participation and c) the purpose of the Facebook group. Examples of information regarding *practical matters* include announcements of submission deadlines, teaching hours and distribution of teaching materials. Information relating to *students' participation* is characterised by the lecturer encouraging students to actively participate in the coursework. For example:

Thank you for the great attendance at the info meeting yesterday! Hope you have started working on the subject and that you find that video lectures in combination with assignments is working well. It is important to get started and to work continuously on the subject.

Regarding information about the *purpose of using the Facebook group*, the lecturer communicates how he wants the Facebook group to be used. Among other things, he highlights the value of students and the lecturer being able to discuss and pose questions.

In the data, we see that sub-groups b and c are often combined in the same post. The lecturer refers to the purpose of the Facebook group to generate motivation for active participation in the group:

Does no one want to try to solve yesterday's Facebook assignment? There is no harm if anyone answers incorrectly. It is important to work on assignments in order to understand the law, and this is a forum where we can discuss smaller assignments before/between the seminars, but this requires an effort on your part.

Subject

Nine posts, out of a total of 46, are in the category 'subject'. The majority of these posts are assignments in the form of case studies. Case studies describe authentic situations from the field and contain relevant issues relating to the subject. The students receive specific questions about the case which they are to answer.

Posts started by students

Out of the 19 posts started by students, we find two in the category 'information'.

Information

In these posts, the students post questions relating to the curriculum and timing for the announcement of exam results: For example: *I have a collection of laws from 2014. Can I use this edition?*

Subject

17 out of 19 posts by students are in the category 'subject'. These posts are characterised by being short questions relating to use and interpretation of legislation, illustrated by the following example: *What is required in order to assess whether the third party is buying in good faith pursuant to Section 35?*

Replies to posts

We have now accounted for who posts in the Facebook group and what characterises these posts. It is also interesting to more closely examine what characterises the replies to these posts.

Posts in the category 'subject' started by the lecturer

It is mainly posting in the category 'subject' that generates replies from the students. Therefore, we have chosen to examine more closely the communication that develops in these posts. As a whole, the material shows that when the lecturer starts posts, it is mainly students who reply by answering the questions in the assignment. The lecturer then provides feedback to the students' answers, as the following example shows:

Lecturer: *Very good! Correct calculation and correct basis. You could also have referred to Section 1, second paragraph, which holds that the children of the testator are to inherit equally.*

This is a typical example of how the lecturer responds in the form of an evaluation of the students' answers. When the lecturer responds to students' replies, it is also very typical that he starts the reply by using the words 'very good', 'super' or 'good', to express that the students' participation is positive. Furthermore, there is a tendency for the lecturer to also elaborate on the students' answers.

For instance, where more than one student replies, these communication sequences are characterised by the first student replying, only answering parts of the assignment. The next student then answers other parts of the assignment. We only find one example of a communication sequence where the lecturer starts a post and more than two students respond. In two of nine posts, we find that the lecturer posts assignments without receiving any response.

Posts in the category 'subject' started by students.

When students start posts in the category 'subject', more students tend to respond. Students' responses often involve them asking questions which indicate that they have not understood how various legislation should be interpreted, or they are testing their own interpretation, own reasoning and argumentation.

Part 2 – STUDENTS' OWN EXPERIENCES WITH THE USE OF THE FACEBOOK GROUP AS A LEARNING ARENA

The presentation of empirical data from the focus group interview is structured based on the three main themes in the interview guide: How the students have used the Facebook group, what positive experiences and what challenges they have experienced when using the Facebook group as a learning arena.

Use of the Facebook group

The students explain that they have used the Facebook group as a supplement to the university's traditional learning platform and emphasise the value of the lecturer posting information on both platforms. "What you must have is posted on Fronter. Everything else is on Facebook". 'Everything else' refers to case studies and communication regarding solutions thereof. The students clearly state that the majority of the lecturer's posts have involved practical information and academic assignments. Some state that they have personally posted questions or answered assignments. Others clearly state that they have not posted anything in the group, nor have they wanted to. What all students have in common is that they have chosen to keep abreast with the activity in the group by reading the posts.

Positive experiences

'Accessible' is a word that is repeatedly used when the students discuss positive experiences with the use of the Facebook group in teaching contexts. The students experience that it is easy to stay updated in the Facebook group as students automatically receive a message when there is activity in the group. On the traditional learning platform,

however, the students have to log in to see if there has been any activity. In the Facebook group, all communication is visible to everyone. Thereby, the students can read and learn from what others have written. Several highlight the value of seeing what other students are wondering, and how the lecturer and fellow students solve assignments. “There were generally several who were wondering about the same thing. Then, everyone received a specific answer to the question”.

Accessibility also refers to the lecturer. Through the Facebook group, the students experience that it is easy to contact the lecturer without the communication becoming too formal. The students’ experience that they receive answers faster: “We receive answers faster than if we use email”. The threshold for contacting the lecturer via Facebook is much lower than via email: “Had we not had Facebook, I would not have asked questions. I would not have bothered to send an email”. It is also highlighted that Facebook allows for the posting of topical issues in the media.

Challenges

A low student response rate to the lecturer’s posts is highlighted as a challenge. Some students experienced that the assignments were difficult, others perceived the assignments as repetition and a reminder of what subject matter was important. Therefore, the assignments did not motivate replies. Several also mention that there is a lot to follow-up on in the same time frame: “It is unnecessary to use Facebook. I do not think there is any point in having an additional site to keep track of. Facebook, in addition to assignment seminars and coursework, is too much”. When we ask the students if they are comfortable writing on the Facebook group wall, several express that this may be perceived as a barrier. Some express that they rarely or never post on Facebook. Others state that they are not reluctant to write posts but when few fellow students were active, this influenced the motivation to case of: Should I keep writing or not?” Another aspect that is highlighted as a challenge is that written explanations from the lecturer do not always generate the same clarity as oral explanations.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The intention of this study is to develop knowledge about the use of Facebook groups as a learning arena in higher education. We asked: What characterises the communicative space in the Facebook group, and what experiences do students have with the use of the Facebook group as a learning arena? Firstly, we will summarise the main findings from dataset 1, which relate to what characterises the communicative space in the Facebook group, before we present the main findings from dataset 2, which relate to the students’ experiences with the Facebook group as a learning arena. Then, we will discuss these findings in light of our theoretical perspectives.

What characterises the communicative space in the Facebook group?

One of our main findings is that the lecturer is the one who is most active in the Facebook group. 70% of the posts are initiated by the lecturer. The lecturer’s responses to posts make up 54%. We have categorised the contents of the posts into two main groups: 1) ‘information’ and 2) ‘subject’. The category ‘information’ mainly consists of posts regarding practical matters. Furthermore, we find that the lecturer encourages the students to participate and communicates the purpose of the Facebook group. The posts of an academic nature are primarily characterised by the lecturer presenting authentic case studies followed by questions.

When we examine the students’ participation in the group in more detail, we find that out of 41 students, 16 students had posted. Four of these posted more than once. The majority of these posts, 90%, are related to the category ‘subject’. The category ‘information’ makes up 10%.

It is interesting to examine in more detail what characterises the conversation pattern in the group. We find that the lecturer invites participation through the presentation of case studies followed by assignments and questions. Generally, it is a student who responds to the lecturer’s invitation. The lecturer providing feedback on the student’s post is a recurring theme. The feedback is generally an evaluation of the student’s answers. We see a tendency for several students to participate when academic posts are started by students. Here we see a tendency for students to expand on and elaborate on each other’s posts.

What experiences do students have with the use of the Facebook group as a learning arena?

The result from the focus group interview supports the main findings from the first research question. The students experience that it is easy to keep abreast with the activity in the group. Facebook is experienced as a more accessible learning arena than the traditional learning platform. It is especially highlighted that the communication in the group

is accessible to all. All the students read and follow the activity in the group. A low student response rate to the lecturer's posts is a challenge. Several express that there are barriers relating to presenting themselves in the group.

How can we interpret the findings?

It is obvious that the lecturer has the intention of developing the Facebook group as a learning community (Lave & Wenger, 1991) where the students can acquire experiences and knowledge through active participation. Through the lecturer presenting authentic cases, it is assumed that knowledge is situated and anchored in a concrete, cultural and social context. The students also highlight this as valuable and we see that the lecturer thereby serves as scaffolding for the students (Bruner, 1996). The lecturer facilitates cooperation processes whereby students and the lecturer are able to participate with their added knowledge in the learning community (Dysthe, 2012). In principle, the lecturer invites what Barnes (2008) refers to as exploratory talk by facilitating discussions and reflections regarding the authentic cases. However, we find that the lecturer closes the discourse so that it takes on a more presentational nature (Barnes, 2008). A general pattern is that the lecturer initiates a post, a student responds, and the lecturer then evaluates the student's response. This can be understood in light of a classic IRE pattern (Mehan, 1979).

We also find a few examples of the lecturer initiating a question that can provide new direction for the student's answer. This is referred to by Sinclair & Coulthard (1975) as follow-up or as an IRF pattern. We do not find examples of what Gibbons (2009) refers to as an IREF structure where the lecturer expands on, varies and reformulates the student's response. The communicative space in the Facebook group bears little resemblance to what Alexander (2008) refers to as dialogic teaching, where the participants listen to one another, share ideas and expand on each other's statements.

Several students highlight pedagogical advantages relating to the use of Facebook as a learning arena (Jeljali et al., 2018; Donlan, 2012). Jelhli et al. (2018) and Wannapiroon (2012) highlight Facebook as an effective tool for sharing research and subject matter. In our study, the students report that it is easier to keep abreast with the activity in the Facebook group than on the university's traditional learning platform. Similar findings are also made by Awidi et al. (2019), Kent (2014) and Wang et al. (2012). The study by Wang et al. (2012) also shows that students' posts generate more complex topics and more detailed answers. We do not make the same findings in our study.

The students in our study experience that the communication with the lecturer in the Facebook group is perceived as less formal compared to communication via email or the traditional learning platform. This corresponds with the study by Prescott et al. (2013), which highlights Facebook's advantage as a less formal arena.

Conclusion

Henderson et al. (2017) emphasise Facebook as an arena for cooperation and communication with fellow students, a communicative space for asking questions, reflecting and commenting. This was also the intention in the pedagogical design our study builds upon. Our main finding indicates that this potential has not been fully realised. Through his Facebook posts, the lecturer in the context we have studied appears to be aware of the advantages of using Facebook as a learning arena and views this arena as an important supplement in the teaching design. The lecturer actively encourages students to participate. When, nevertheless, there is limited participation and discussion in the student group, the background for this may be that the lecturer insufficiently facilitates exploratory talk whereby the students are allowed to try new ideas, receive feedback on these and thereby receive help in sorting their own thoughts. Use of Facebook as a learning arena has many possibilities. In other words, it is a medium with considerable potential. If this potential is to be realised, it is important that the lecturer is aware of how he can contribute to development of the communicative space as a learning community.

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