

Facebook as a teaching tool

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Abstract—The most popular social networking site (SNS) Facebook gets new users every day and because of this incredible spread of the network, we explore an option of including different features of Facebook into courses. There are many ways we can connect with students through Facebook and by that we use time outside course hours to communicate with them. We also expose privacy issues that appear while using this SNS. Facebook can be used as a supplemental tool in courses, because it is an environment students feel familiar with.

Keywords-social networking sites; Facebook; teaching tool; user awareness; students; educators.

I. INTRODUCTION

Facebook was established by Harvard student, Mark Zuckerberg in February 2004 [1]. It was first used only by Harvard students, eventually to other university and high school students in 2005 and in 2006 it went open to all public [2]. Number of active users on Facebook is currently around 500 million [3] and there are more than 2 billion users of internet [4], so we can conclude that almost every fourth user of internet is also using Facebook. Facebook also became the most popular social networking site in 2009 [5] and that is why we focused our research on this network.

We researched possibilities of using SNS Facebook as a teaching tool or as a supplement to other courseware (e.g. Moodle). Web 2.0 technologies (e.g. blogs, social networks, wikis etc.) are giving us the advantage to use them in our courses since the students are quite familiar with these technologies. We can use these advantages to collaborate and share with students.

We explored articles on similar topics and tried to use some of the developed Facebook applications for courses. Facebook was at first developed just for students and that is why many researches focus mainly on students' use of Facebook. At the time of this research we also used applications specifically available for teaching on Facebook.

In this paper we present the usage of Facebook as course supplement and privacy issues while using Facebook as a teaching tool. At the end we finish with conclusions and discussion about the results.

II. BACKGROUND

While Facebook's primary purpose was sharing information among friends and looking up people in our network [1], we also explored possibilities of using Facebook

as a teaching tool. Previous communication technologies like e-mails and chat rooms have already been integrated into courses so there could also be some use for integrating SNS Facebook.

Facebook has become a big part of students' lives and that is why Facebook could have a great potential when we use it for education. In 2006 80 per cent of colleges in the USA had Facebook and in these colleges about 85 per cent of students had Facebook accounts [1].

In a survey where the main goal was to understand how contacts through Facebook were influencing student's perceptions of faculty, two thirds of the students reported that they are comfortable with faculty on Facebook site [6]. They also found that "contact with the professor on Facebook had neither a significant positive nor negative affect on students' ratings" [6].

On the other hand Facebook is a commercial product and educators shouldn't force students to use it. So the solution of avoiding the mentioned concern is that Facebook could be used as a supplement to the course, but educators should still consider students who do not want to use Facebook and give them the assignments or course materials through some other communication channel.

III. USING FACEBOOK FEATURES AS COURSE SUPPLEMENTS

There are more ways we can use Facebook features as course supplements. We can either use applications that are mostly developed by third parties and shared through Facebook or we can use features that are developed by Facebook. Among these are Facebook Chat, Pages and Groups.

We will first present Facebook applications and some examples of applications that can be used in courses and afterwards present other communicational and presentational features of Facebook which can be used in the educational process.

A. Using Facebook Applications

There are quite many applications that we could use as supplements to courses. We selected a few applications that are appropriate for the purpose we are looking at. Among all applications we can find applications where educators can share their course slides (SlideShare, also on Figure 1.); post videos (Webinaria Screencast Recorder); publish course schedules (Courses 2.0, also on Figure 2.); make course quizzes (Quiz Monster, Quizlet) etc. There are also some

applications that are useful especially for students. These applications allow students to check for reviews on courses from previous students (Rate My Professors); they can publish notes on courses and share them with their classmates (Notecentric Courses and Notes); they can share class schedules and selected courses with their classmates (Courses 2.0, Course Profiles); students can create study groups where they all join in one place (Study Groups) etc.

In TABLE I. we made a comparison of the presented Facebook applications. The column “User” compares for whom the application is most suitable for – either for an educator, for a student or for both. The column “Application requirements” includes information about which information in users’ profiles does the application require access to. Almost all applications require basic information at the profile of the person that adds the application. This includes name, profile picture, gender, networks, user ID, list of friends, and other information that the user has shared with everyone. Application Quizlet also requires the approval for the application to send emails directly to the user. The user therefore has to agree with giving their information to third party applications. This is also a privacy concern that we expose in the chapter IV.A.

TABLE I. COMPARISON OF FACEBOOK APPLICATIONS

| Facebook Applications | User | | Application requirements | | Monthly active users |
|-------------------------------|----------|---------|--------------------------|-------------|----------------------|
| | Educator | Student | Access basic information | Send emails | |
| SlideShare | X | X | X | | 766.267 |
| Webinaria Screencast Recorder | X | X | X | | 100 |
| Quiz Monster | X | X | - ^a | | 1.932.698 |
| Quizlet | X | X | X | X | 59.771 |
| Rate My Professors | | X | X | | 1.603 |
| Notecentric Courses and Notes | | X | X | | 67 |
| Courses 2.0 | | X | X | | 1.057 |
| Course Profiles | | X | X | | 283 |
| StudyGroups | | X | - ^b | | 208 |

a. Information on application requirements not given
 b. Application is not working at the time of access

SlideShare application in Figure 1. allows anyone with the added application to share their slides with everyone on Facebook. Educators can use it to share their slides with students and can allow them to download the presentation. Students need only a browser with internet connection and they do not need any other programmes to view the presentation.

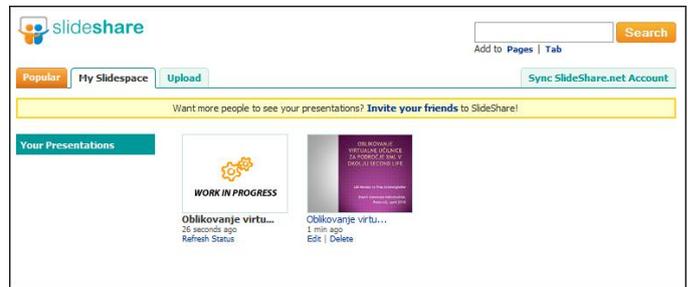


Figure 1. SlideShare application on Facebook.

Courses 2.0 application in Figure 2. is mostly aimed for students who can organize their schedules, export their calendars with their course information on time, location and dates. If the institution where the student is signed in has all their courses entered in this application, students can easily add their selected courses. Additionally, they can share and compare their course schedules.

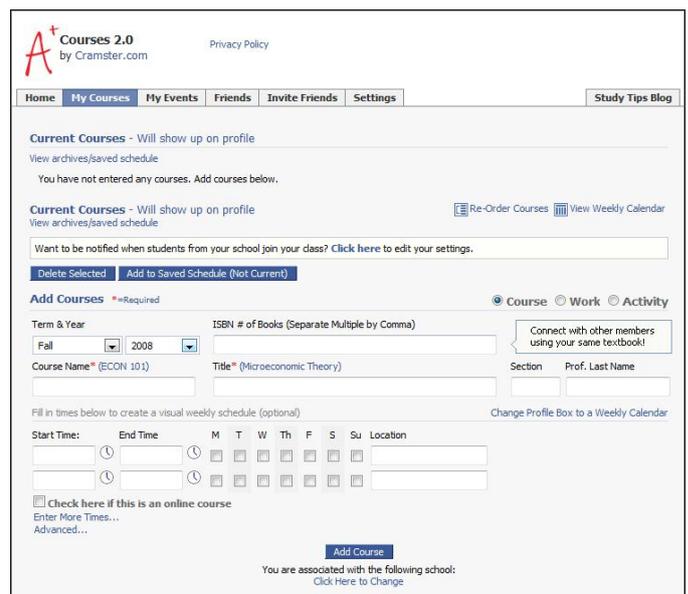


Figure 2. Courses 2.0 application on Facebook.

There is no unique application that would allow users to do everything that we can do with courseware software such as Moodle. But as Facebook is a big part of students’ community, we can use it as an environment where students feel at home.

Facebook is also giving everyone a chance to build their own applications [7] so educators could also consider building an application with all the features they need for a specific course.

B. Other ways of implementing Facebook into courses

Facebook can also be used as a notification and discussion board for students. Normally forums are used for these types of discussions, but creating a Facebook Group for courses and making a discussion on the Wall of the Facebook Group can be used instead of forums. Educators can also post links, videos and images on the wall of the group and acquaint students with latest happenings in the field covered by the course or redirect students to Facebook Applications with course materials.

Facebook Pages are the next feature that Facebook developed and it allows users to make discussions on course topics on the wall similar to Facebook Groups, but it was primarily designed for someone or something famous since a user that presses Like for the Facebook Page, becomes a fan of that page. This could also be a way to connect students with educators, but the more appropriate way is Facebook Groups where smaller number of users are normally grouped together.

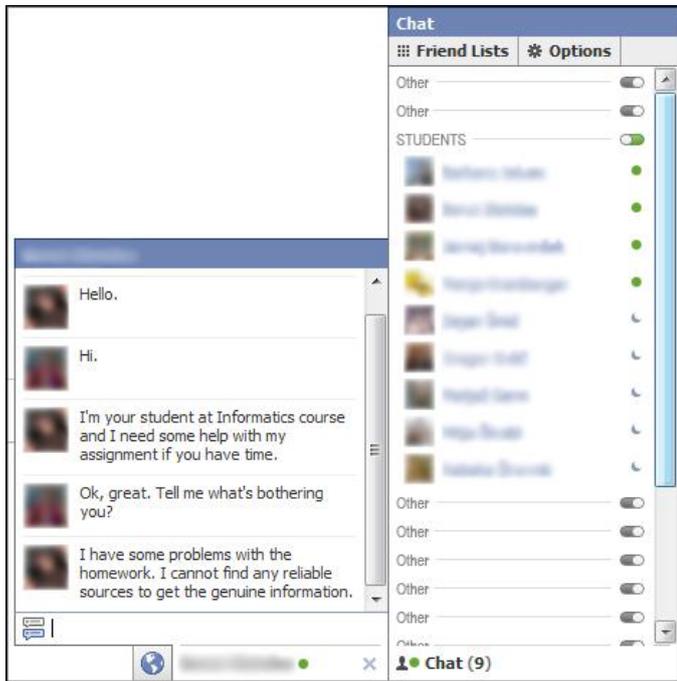


Figure 3. Example of Facebook chat conversation and lists in Chat.

Facebook also enables Chat (Figure 3.) by default and users can chat with their added friends. This means that educator and his students should be friends on Facebook if they would want to make good use of this feature. One way of implementing Facebook Chat into our course is to set up an hour when the educator will be available to students via Facebook Chat. It is suggested that the educator would put all students into a separate List named for example Students and then the educator could turn on the group when they would have their hour to chat about the course. It is easy to turn on and off when all added friends on Facebook are in different lists. It is also important for everyone to be aware of their privacy settings, which is the topic of the next chapter.

IV. PRIVACY ISSUES WHILE USING FACEBOOK AS A TEACHING TOOL

While integrating Facebook into our classes, it is important to be aware of privacy issues concerning Facebook. When we use any of the possibilities mentioned in chapter III educators expose different information from their profiles to their students or to applications and vice versa. In this chapter we will look into privacy of Facebook users.

A. Application's access to educators and students profiles

If educators use applications on Facebook as a supplement to the courses than users have to agree that the application has access to some parts of user's profile. This means that educators' and students' data could be threatened by third parties which develop these applications. One could argue that it is not ethical to ask students to add applications like this. On the other hand educators could develop their own application on Facebook, but then they would have access to students' basic information which could be even more unsuitable for some students. Then again it is quite easy to communicate with students via applications and send them course material etc.

B. Privacy settings of educator and student profiles on Facebook

User has to register on Facebook with his valid e-mail address [8]. The user has a chance to set his privacy settings by his wishes. In a case where educators and students would use the same application, they would be able to access parts of profiles that are visible to everyone from each other so it is really important to make users aware of the importance of privacy settings. Even if the educator and student are not friends on Facebook, they can still access each other's profiles and if the profile is open to everyone, educators and classmates can see a lot of personal information about students and vice versa.

The default privacy settings have been changing quite frequently in the last years of Facebook's existence and Facebook has been opening more and more parts of profiles in their default settings in the past years [9]. As seen in Figure 4. the default privacy settings on Facebook allow everyone to see user's status, photos, posts, biography, favourite quotations as well as family and relationships. If for example the student hasn't changed his privacy settings, the educator can easily come to certain conclusions about student's lifestyle and so on.

There is no possibility to hide user's profile picture on Facebook, which can be quite useful in the usage of Facebook as a supplement in our courses since we can connect faces and names with students in the classroom. A student can also access educator's profile picture if they have it published and can easily identify the educator even before the start of the course. If the profile picture is inappropriate, not being able to hide the profile picture, is certainly a disadvantage.

| | Everyone | Friends of friends | Friends only |
|--|----------|--------------------|--------------|
| Your status, photos and posts | • | | |
| Bio and favorite quotations | • | | |
| Family and relationships | • | | |
| Photos and videos you're tagged in | | • | |
| Religious and political views | | • | |
| Birthday | | • | |
| Permission to comment on your posts | | | • |
| Places you check in to [?] | | | • |
| Contact information | | | • |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Share a tagged post with friends of the friend I tag | | | |

Figure 4. Default privacy settings on Facebook in March 2011.

We should pay attention to privacy settings of both, students and educators. The best way to make students aware of privacy issue is to tell them already at class that they should protect their profile on Facebook. Educators themselves should also be aware of this. Another option of securing educators privacy is creating a new account just for using it for the courses. On the other hand, if students take a look at educator's profile with his personal information and interests, it can also encourage student's motivation for the course [10].

V. CONCLUSION

Not too many courses have so far implemented Facebook into their contents, but it certainly has some advantages. Since students use the SNS in their everyday life, they are quite comfortable in this environment. On the other hand, some students might not be so interested in using Facebook at all so there is a limitation that hardly allows educators to use only Facebook in their courses. But there is still a possibility to use it as a supplement to the course.

We explored different applications that could be in use in courses and also different Facebook features like Facebook Groups or Chat that could be useful in courses. A mixture of Facebook features and some Facebook applications could be a good supplement to other courseware programmes that we use.

Another issue that we've been looking into are privacy issues. It is not recommended that educators and students get too close already in the classrooms so it is not suggested to mix private and academic life on Facebook either. This is why students and educators should look into privacy settings very carefully before starting a course activity on Facebook.

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