Qualitative analysis of academic group and discussion forum on Facebook

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Abstract

An academic group and discussion forum were established on Facebook for a cohort of postgraduate students studying the concepts and principles of e-learning. The Forum had a constructivist, student-centric ethos, in which students initiated topics for discussion, while the course leader and administrator facilitated. Previous research was conducted content analysis of the topics and academic discourse, but the present study focuses on social aspects, investigating social- and study-related pursuits and determining whether synergy can exist between them.

A literature study shows how social networking by students, initially social, began to overlap with academia, leading to establishment of groups for academic purposesand forums for subject-related discussions.In the present study, data was triangulated and two methods of data analysis were used. *Qualitative analysis* was undertaken of *free-text data from students' reflective essays*to extract socially-related themes. *Heuristic evaluation* was conducted by expert evaluators, who investigated *forum contributions and discourse* in line with contemporary learning theory and considered the social culture of participation. Findings of the qualitative analysis of students' perceptions and results of the heuristic evaluation of forum participation confirmed each other, indicating a warm social climate and a conducive, well-facilitated environment that supported individual styles of participation. It fostered interpersonal relationships between distance learners, as well as study-related benefits enhanced by peer teaching and insights acquired in a culture of social negotiation. The environment was effectively moderated, while supporting student-initiative. The mixed-methods approach of evaluating essays and discussions showed a virtual community where most participants experienced a sound balance of social- and study-related benefits, but with a stronger focus on academic matters.

Keywords: E-learning, evaluation, Facebook group, online discussion forums, qualitative analysis.

1. Introduction

Social networking sites (SNSs) are increasingly used in academia. This paper discusses the social climate of an academic group and online discussion forum (ODF) established on the SNS, Facebook, to enhance learning for postgraduate distance-learners studying a course called 'Concepts and principles of e-learning'.

ODFs are a common component of web-based groups and e-learning environments. The distance-education institution,University of South Africa, provides ODF's on its official site, but we offered an alternative supplementary group and discussion forum on Facebook to a postgraduate cohort. It had a constructivist, student-centric nature, where students personally initiated the discussion topics. The course leader and an administrator facilitated as *guides on the side*, not *sages on the stage*. The aim

was to encourage interaction that provided subject-related information and academic discourse. Early research on the Group (Anon, 2010) involved content analysis of the student-initiated topics and discussions, using quantitative frequency counts of interaction types and qualitative discourse analysis to investigate the content. It was found that active participation supported learning. Secondary benefits occurred as relationships developed.The present study, therefore, considers social aspects of the Group.

2. Literature Review

Various studies address students' use of SNSs and determine that the interactions are primarily social (Madge, Meek, Wellens and Hooley, 2009; Selwyn, 2009). In an online survey of 600 student users, Mazman and Usluel (2010) found they visit Facebook for approximately 30 minutes daily, mainly for socializing. A meta-analysis of 36 studies on students' and teachers' use of Facebook, indicates little educational use (Hew, 2011).

Although academia overlapped with social, there was limited educational use. According to Lampe, Ellison and Steinfield (2008), Facebook is ubiquitous on US campuses with the typical user visiting for 80 minutes daily. Academic matters such as lectures, reading materials, deliverables, and instructors are mentioned and about 15% used Facebook to contact lecturers. Selwyn (2009) studied Facebook Walls of UK undergraduates, visiting over 600 sites with public viewing profiles. Four percent of exchanges related to academic schedules, venues, lectures and deliverables, while another theme was criticism of keen students, seminars and lecturers.

There are current reports on explicit academic use of SNSs. Four case studies on social networking by students (Jones, Blackey, Fitzgibbon and Chew, 2010) indicate a divide between students' learning space and personal space, yet acknowledge that educators should leverage SNSs and create environments for independent learning, reflection, and communities of inquiry. Mazman and Usluel (2010) define educational use of Facebook as involving *communication* – discussions and information; *collaboration* in groups; and *resource sharing via* videos and links. There is increasing academic use of Facebook in South Africa. Bosch (2009:147) did a 'virtual ethnographic' study of Facebook profiles of 200 students, supplemented by interviews with students and staff who communicated via Facebook and found that the experience undid 'traditional power hierarchies'. Students were more engaged on Facebook than on the official course management site. Many belonged to groups for societies and academic programmes, where they shared resources and logistical information and checked class-related material. Visagie and de Villiers (2010) surveyed 32 South African academics, 56% of whom would consider using Facebook as an academic tool.

As academic use of Facebook increases, research is occuring on subject-related discourse in groups and communities. The primary author did detailed content analysis of discourse on a discussion forum (Anon, 2010). First-year students participated in peer-initiated topic-based conversationsin a systematic and well-articulated way (Rambe and Ng'ambi, 2011). Informal learning occurred in a social-constructivist community where students and instructors conversed and shared knowledge to help each other better understand the subject matter (Ractham and Firpo, 2011).

3. Research design and methods

The research question is:
Did the venture serve both social- and study-related pursuits in a synergistic manner?

To evaluate whether academic forums on Facebook can have a synergistic value, we focused on the social culture and interaction patterns described by students in reflective essays and by heuristic evaluators studying the discussions. We investigated whether the Forum supported personal participation styles and valuable interaction. The tone, nature, impact and facilitation of the discussions were considered and the ethos of the community. The study investigates the integration of social aspects and serious studies, using a mixed-methods research approach (Creswell, 2009) with two evaluation methods:

Study 1: *Qualitative analysis of free-text data* from students' *reflective essays*. These perceptions were qualitatively analysed using a form of *grounded theory*.

Study 2: *Heuristic evaluation* (HE) by four expert evaluators, who investigated *forum contributions* in line with contemporary e-learning theory and social climate. These evaluations were mainly *quantitative.*

There was data triangulation, as both essays and forum discourse were analysed, and methodological triangulation via qualitative analysis and HE's. For ethical reasons participants were informed that research was being conducted, and informed consent forms were signed.

4. Study 1: Qualitative analysis of free-text data from students' reflective essays

Membership of the Group was encouraged, but not compulsory. Thirty of the 40 in the cohort joined. Twenty seven completed the course, including 21 Group members, twelve of whom were very active on the Forum. Findings of the analysis follow, categorised under themes and sub-themes that emerged and supported by groups of related quotations from students' esays. The students whose reflections are quoted, are cited, e.g. P1 represents Participant 1 and NP1, Non-participant 1.

4.1 Social vibes and ethos of the virtual community
Students had varying perspectives on the ethos and impact of the discourse.

Virtuality became Reality:
Distance disappeared as learners got 'to know each other' and conversed 'in the presence of peers'.
'Since it is often after the classroom that students get to real knowledge sharing, SNs can play a major role in informal social learning, giving access to each others' implicit knowledge'.
'The group are friendly, enthusiastic and passionate about the subject...the interaction is excellent'.
People were 'a community'.
'If I share my thoughts, I like to know who is listening. It is gratifying to interact with people with a common goal'.
'What you teach fellow students is embedded in your mind longer...because you say it to people'(P3, P5, P12, P14, P17).

Culture and tone of interactions:
The environment was warmand conducive to discussions. Some students built relationships and conversed off-forum. Although real-world academia can be self-focussed and competitive, the Group culture was not geared to personal achievement.
'The best is that users freely share their sources of information, how they interpret concepts, and their personal experiences'.
'Wisdom of crowds...the whole is greater than the parts'.
'Make or break depends on support of peers...those with experience and intent to help can mentorand guide novices in social networking'.
'I enjoyed interacting with fellow students on a social level, although I did not benefit academically'.
'Interaction was enjoyable and fulfilling'.
'I have (previously) used forums to pose questions and seek answers, but I disliked the dull, standardized and uncreative way they were presented'.
The tone was informal yet cordial: 'Nobody addressed the lecturer as "Madame", yet there was no use of "shortcuts like B4,2b or LOL"' (P4, P6, P7, P13, P16, P27).

Removal of isolation:
'Standard, boring distance-learning was enriched'; 'the sense of isolation dissipated'.
To a long-term distance-learner, it was 'a thrilling experience. The first exotic e-fun occurred when fellow-students introduced themselves as if sitting alongside me, but writing from Australia, Japan, Namibia, Pretoria' (P1, P4, P12).

Challenge, yet affirmation:
Written words do not vaporize like spoken words, which calls for careful reflection before posting.
 '... a new-found sense of pressure to understand what I was reading'.
'Someone else was going to be read it, and give their opinion' (P13, P21).
However, contributing brought affirmation: 'The brief experience when I shared my views was a turning point...My confidence peaked...'.

'It was heartening to see that a number of fellow-students agreed... '.
'Being introvert, I only made one comment, but it is a start'.
'Participating with the professor and fellow students, I felt honoured to be part of the exercise and especially getting accolades for my contributions' (P2, P25, P27).

4.2 Support for individual styles
Most students found the Group and Forum supportive. Several exercised pro-active leadership and initiated topics, while others saw it as a place to participate in discussions without the exposure of contact-learning. Yet others chose not to contribute, but observed and 'listened'. They benefitted, although some fellow-learners did not appreciate having observers.

Non-intimidating:
The ethos encouraged certain members to be forthcoming.
'Should I take initiative?...it was clear this was a place to take charge...Grasping the new-found freedom, I decided to start...'.
'Some are outspoken and involved in everything, with quick responses, but others keep to themselves'.
They could '...have a brainstorm session' (P7, P13, P17).

Better than the classroom:
Some were more comfortable conversing on Facebook than in a conventional classroom.
'Sharing is less rigid than when responding to questions in a class'.
Learners are 'not frowned upon when they express themselves however they feel comfortable'.
'People are less afraid, and speak without fear of being mocked' (P7, P17).
'It eliminated possible first-line prejudices that might have occurred in a contact situation. One considered the content and not the person' (P21).
'Got more feedback than in class situations, where a few students may dominate' (P4).

Daunting:
Some felt intimidated and inadequate. They feared negative responses or no response.
Exposure to 'some refined and polished contributions, led to feelings of academic inferiority'.
'People can be afraid to express views, because they are unsure of relevance and accuracy'.
'You would like to contribute or ask questions, but wonder if you will look stupid' (P5, P10, P21).

Responses to postings:
Contributors anticipated responses to their postings:
'...demoralised if no feedback is forthcoming'.
'The time-independent nature of the interactions meant that discussions were sometimes drawn out, preventing immediate feedback...'.
'You wait for the response when somebody is online' (P8, P16, P21).

Observers
Some struggled to join the Group, while others perceived it as a safe space for learning without contributing, just watching and listening, yet without the negative connotations of 'lurking'. Certain participants were disturbed by these onlookers.
P25, who was an observer, explained, 'I go on forum to see if someone asks what I want to know. It helps me know if I am going in the correct direction. I log in daily and am disappointed when there are no new contributions'.
'I experienced frustration when just a few participants contributed, though I realise that some preferred to read what others wrote rather than contributing'.
'Some joined the group, but did not make any postings'.
'Some students joined but kept silent...just watching, a bit creepy!' (P1, P17, P27).

4.3 Facebook and Web 2.0
Web 2.0:
In contrast to Web 1.0 where users access existing Web content, Web 2.0 empowers them to personally contribute content. In the context of education,
'Web 2.0 means a learner-centric approach' (P16).

Social paradigm shift:

More a 'social revolution'/ 'social phenomenon' than a technological issue.
'...a paradigm shift...we need to relinquish tried and tested ways, which takes time and not everyone joined the revolution' (P7, P8, P16).
Some could be 'even more sociable than before' but 'others are just not sociable' (P12).
Several cited Ebner (2007), 'Technical issues will be solved quickly, but to change the thinking about learning and teaching is hard and long'.
'We can't expect everyone to feel comfortable with social tools, but change is a constant...' (P3, P11).

Academia on Facebook:
Some were convinced that this was the way forward:
'For someone like me, who already uses Facebook and enjoys working smartly, Fb provides a single point of entry from which I interact socially, stay up to date, and participate in communities...I am comfortable using it as a learning tool'.
'This type of discussion forum works with what is already available'.
'We are the mobile-interconnected-global-village generation with Web 2.0 Fever' (P7, P13).

Furthermore, Facebook is ideal for forums. 'It is well-structured with predefined areas for discussions, the Wall for banter, sections for pictures and videos, membership lists, ways to handle permission and access; global interconnection' and 'You can reach members personally by accessing profile pages'.
'...a co-operative environment that fosters trust among learners and instructor', allowing students to 'learn from one another' (P7, P11, P13, P18).
P11 made a strong statement: 'Educational institutions should use Facebook for learning and make links from their institutional websites'.

Shy users and silent users:
Facebook breaks barriers for those who are shy. Despite being a public space, it provides concealment that shields members when passing opinions.
Those who 'struggle to socialise' or 'have difficulty with social skills' find it easier to communicate on Facebook than face-to-face.
'Collaborative online learning has brought major changes, so that learners with low self-esteem can communicate and comment without physical interaction' (P4, P8, P10).

Then there were silent observers – see Section 4.2. Some were insecure, but essays indicated that others had indeed joined, but been unable to access the Forum. At least two wrote on the Wall, but could not participate in discussions until it was too late (P4, P5). The functionality of Facebook and access to Groups has since been improved.

Synchronicity and asynchronicity:
There was little use of synchronous Chats, although a few learners held small-group conversations in real-time. Asynchronous interaction via social networking offers Ebner's (2007) 'Triple A Factor: anytime, anywhere, anyone', regardless of location and time (P3).

Opinions varied on asynchronicity. Some appreciated that 'questions and answers could be carefully thought out before posting', whereas another felt that it 'detracted from spontaneity...debate is interrupted by time lapses' or conversely that 'it moved fast, I struggled to contribute' (P1, P17, P21). Asynchronicity results in different threads and, at times, it was difficult to follow them all.

Non-compulsory membership:
A high achiever chose not to join, 'I have a solitary, intrapersonal and introspective learning style. I ponder and evaluate, write down thoughts,...tackle problems and solutions alone' (NP1).

4.4 Control and management
Management of the forum was challenging. Since the explicit ethos was student-initiation of discussions, we positioned ourselves as facilitators between the extremes of strong control and hands-off. Educators who take academia to social networks, must exercise discernment. Management involved carefully watching accuracy of the content, as well as security.

Reliability and validity:
Members and a non-member expressed concern about how to distinguish between fact and the opinions of peers:

There was 'potential both to confuse and illuminate,...confusing when it's a collection of "I think..." without proper backing. However, when the posts are well thought through and backed with credible references, the potential for real learning is high' (P21).
'Teachers should set standards and test contributions before they are posted on the site' (P3).
Our response to this, is that pre-approval is infeasible in forums and, secondly, as facilitators, we were loath to destroy spontaneity. Monitoring must be done after postings, and be handled with discerning public comments and private communication with offenders. If content was merely 'weak', we did not react, but on one occasion when discourse veered off-track, the course leader responded by pointing to theory.
This concern may have been a reason why some students did not join:
'What proves that the points shared by a student are true and valid?' (NP2).

Security:
Some students felt threatened by security breaches. We erroneously admitted an *intruder*, believing he was a student whose registration was not finalised. He participated, then posted adverts for motivational courses and financial products! A disconcerted student unveiled him when they communicated off-forum and she challenged him with an academic question he could not answer: 'It is exciting to say I have encountered an *e-stalker*! Yet I must question how he managed to infiltrate our group' (P1). As facilitators, we immediately removed him. The shrewd P1 picked up another anomaly: 'A profile image introduced a beautiful young lady and we chatted away on academic matters. Her achievements amazed me. After a few weeks she admitted to being "he", an older student, who had borrowed his daughter's Facebook membership (with Prof's permission) due to logistical difficulties'.
'It is difficult for me to use Facebook socially, let alone as a learning tool. My reservations are due to lack of security...' (P11).

Control, please!
Some students wanted tighter management:
'Such platforms need proper control and facilitation'. 'All content should be verified'. 'A weekly question from the facilitators might have encouraged more interaction'. 'People should not be allowed to say just anything – there was irrelevant content on the Wall' (the intruder). 'Without verification or personal discernment, learners could be misled by inaccurate statements'.
One quried whether a discussion forum could be effective without 'central guidance from a lecturer or teacher' (P3, P4, P12, P17).

Constructivism:
Others appreciated the constructivist-style freedom and low-level control:
'Well moderated; well managed'.
'A new paradigm of teacher-learner interaction. The course leader merely facilitates and guides'.
It was 'not dictated by the teacher' who is adapting 'to new ways of teaching and guiding'.
It could have been managed 'by fixed principles, but that would curtail the conversation – which was not the idea behind this free, natural learning interaction'.
'The input snippets received from the leader and administrator are gold nuggets'.
(P1, P2, P7, P8, P16).
The Forum was an implementation of the current 'focus on cognitivism and constructivism' (P18).

4.5 Academic and social interactions
To users accustomed to using SNSs for entertainment, the playing fields now offered study facilities!

Integration of social and serious:
The *Wall* and *Introduce Yourself* provided informality. They offset the distance and set a friendly context for the study-related pursuits. Most members felt that social networking and studies could be effectively combined. Several mentioned the incorporation of 'fun', 'entertainment', 'informality',' interactivity' into learning (P4, P7, P8, P14, P16, P17, P21).
'I definitely recommend e-Learning via Facebook'.
'I learned to melt into social networking scenes, let the resistance go, flow with the wave, yet keep wearing the academic hat'.
'Push and pull factors: friends pull; academia pushed us to view Facebook as a serious tool'.
'Social and educational tasks are executed simultaneously. I peep at the study group site each time I log on' (P1, P7, P10).

Given their ubiquity, it would be 'short-sighted to ignore Web 2.0 applications' for educational purposes' (P21, citing Ebner, 2007).
Even a non-member commented, 'Facebook has caused addiction...a study group there could be a good way to study' (NP6).

Distractions:
Some struggled with distractions:
'Other Facebook interactions and the whole Internet could easily pull one away...'.
' ...numerous inviting sites could attract learners to something totally different'.
'Family and friends found me and nagged to be my friend'; '...friends determined to "poke" me'.
'It calls for a change in mindset among those who see it as a fun tool and miss its essence in learning'(P1, P16, P17, P21).

Potential distraction was a reason not to join. 'The literature indicates that SNS tools and systems incorporate high interactivity to keep users interested. This could distract from learning' (NP2).

4.6 Nature of discourse and debate
Interactive communication between peers:
Simulated face-to-face discussions were enriching for distance learners:
'The ability to interact with people of similar interests from anywhere in the world, was a definite advantage. One could tap into the collective consciousness of a diverse group of people'.
'We are exposed to having views challenged and can engage in discussions of the subject matter'.
'Different perspectives on same topic...'; 'Opinions differ over same material, but without challenging others disrespectfully' (P2, P7, P10, P21).

New insights:
Matters emerged that learners had not identified independently. Students learned from their peers and it is notable that the more active participants all performed well in the examination:
'Collectively the learners are exposed to an abundance of information...collaboratively they digest content and information within a short time'.
'...useful perspectives, beyond what one would obtain by merely reading the articles'.
'The whole community benefits from one anothers' insights'.
'Current information and state-of-the art development make a significant contribution to learning'.

And a most perceptive point by three different students:
'By posting ideas, we solidify our thoughts. By reading others' responses, our ideas are refined'.
'I gained insight through reading posts of others, and the process of thinking through my responses helped clarify issues'; 'When reading fellow students' input ..., my own interpretation changed'
(P2, P10, P16, P21, P25).

Generational differences:
Some older students joined Facebook as novices and became avid contributors. However, the approaches differered. Some students mentioned their need to print, while students from the Net-generation prefer the e-word to the printed or spoken word:
'The ability to recall and regain online discussions is vastly superior to non-e-learning scenarios of searching through paper-based materials or trying to recall verbal conversations (P21).
'I view Facebook as a purely social tool for the younger generation and unsuitable for academic purposes. It was a novel approach, but should have just been an experiment...' (P27).

5.   Study 2: Heuristic evaluation by expert evaluators

Four expert evaluators, profiled in Table 1, conducted a heuristic evaluation (HE) to investigate Forum contributions against contemporary e-learning theories with humanistic values and to assess the social climate of the Forum. They considered criteria to establish whether the discussions conformed to the pedagogy associated with constructivism, customization and creativity, as well as judging the social aspects of the experience.

Table 1: Profiles of the expert evaluators

Evaluator	Occupation	Expertise	Involvement in Group?
A	Researcher	Evaluation; E-learning	No
B	Lecturer	E-learning environments; HE	Active contributor
C	Usability practitioner	Usability evaluation; E-learning websites	Administrator
D	IT professor	E-learning; Human-computer interaction.	No

One evaluator had been a student in the Group and another was the administrator. All four were 'double experts' in both e-learning and heuristic evaluation. Evaluators did not see the essays (Study 1 data), but considered and evaluated the Forum discourse.

Constructivism involves personal goals, knowledge construction and interpretation, and multiple perspectives on issues. Constructivism entails active learning, independent research, collaboration, application to authentic tasks, and real-world situated learning. *Customisation* entails learner-centricity and adaptabilty, allowing learners to take initiative regarding (some of) the content, foci and circumstances of learning. *Creativity* is characterized by innovation within functionality and by engagement and motivation of learners.

The evaluation template comprised twelve evaluation statements rated on a 5-to-1 scale and a space for open-ended feedback. Table 2 tabulates the criteria against the results.

Table 2: Results of heurstic evaluation

Strongly agree (5)	Agree (4)	Neutral (3)	Disagree (2)	Strongly disagree (1)

Category and criteria – rated on the scale above	Average rating
Constructivism	
The activities undertaken in the Group are highly constructivist.	3.5
Participants in discussions think independently and make personal interpretations.	4.125
Discussions moved beyond the curriculum and applied concepts in the real world.	4.75
Cross-criteria average	**4.125**
Customisation	
Participants can customise the time and place of their interactive learning.	5.0
The discussion forum is learner-centric in that participants could select and initiate their own topics for discussion and could contribute personal content.	5.0
Cross-criteria average	**5.0**
Creativity	
Academic discussions in the Forum represent an innovative way of using Facebook for learning purposes.	5.0
Participants responded to the Group environment in creative ways.	4.25
Cross-criteria average	**4.625**

Social culture of the Group					
Interaction on the Forum took place in a friendly and conducive environment.					4.5
The distance learners who joined the Group got to 'know' each other.					4.5
The ethos of the Forum supported individual styles of participation.					4.0
Cross-criteria average					**4.33**
The way the Forum was managed, resulted in a space that was:					
rigid/strictly controlled (1)	firmly controlled (2)	balanced and well moderated (3)	led by students, with leaders on the side (4)	led by students, with leaders hands-off (5)	**3.5**
Rate the activities and discussions on a spectrum from: (1) Solely Social......................................to......................................Serious Studies (5)					**3.5**

There was close consensus between evaluators and differences between ratings assigned to particular criteria, never exceeded 1. Table 2 shows the average rating assigned to each criterion. Evaluators recognised the social-constructivist nature of the Group with participants' personal insights, independent interpretations, and applications to real-world phenomena beyond the curriculum. The cross-criterion average rating was 4.125. Customisation of learning was unanimously rated at 5.0, since participants could choose the time and place of their activities. Learner-centricity allowed them to initiate topics and match their needs by contributing (or not) in their preferred style. With regard to creativity, the expert evaluators' cross-criterion average was 4.625. They felt that Facebook provided a novel, engaging environment for social learning. It fostered innovative strategies, such as posting links to articles and communicating one-on-one off-Forum.

Ratings on the Forum's social climate averaged 4.33. Evaluators regretted that participation was not higher, but in open-ended responses, summarised this academic venture on Facebook as a 'very positive experience', 'novel way of using social media', where 'students got to know each other academically', 'platform of trust', 'positive energetic vibes', and 'enough moderation to ensure correct feedback without dampening the student voice'. In evaluating management and facilitation, two evaluators selected '3', and two assigned '4', averaging 3.5 and indicating a well-moderated Forum, yet primarily student-led. Similarly, on the spectrum between 'solely social' and 'serious studies', two chose '3' and two chose '4', again averaging 3.5, right of centre, indicating sound balance but stronger on the academic functions.

6. Conclusions

The findings of evaluations based on data triangulation and methodological triangulation, confirmed each other, providing a positive answer to the research question:
Did the venture serve both social- and study-related pursuits in a synergistic manner?

Synergy results when the combination of factors produces a joint impact greater than the sum of their separate effects. This Facebook venture was shown to be synergistic, as students benefitted socially and academically in social-constructivist interaction. Free-text essays with the students' own perceptions were analysed qualitatively, while forum interactions were heuristically evaluted according to contemporary learning paradigms with human values. Both sets of results indicated a harmonious social climate that fostered thought-provoking discourse, as students posted, responded, received feedback and gained insights that enhanced serious studies. Conversely, the study-related pursuits of research, interpretation, and sharing/discussing concepts, led to social negotiation and interpersonal connections. The supportive ethos encouraged most members to be forthcoming. Others, feeling inadequate, experienced the Group as a safe space for learning without contributing. The environment was facilitated in a way that encouraged student-centricity, yet was effectively moderated when necessary. There was a synergistic balance of social- and study-related aspects, conducive to studies and to social engagement, but with the stronger focus on academia. Although not all students joined or contributed actively, formerly isolated distance-learners became a community of practice. These findings should encourage academics to establish forums on social networks.

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