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ENHANCING MOTIVATION THROUGH STUDENT-TEACHER FACEBOOK RELATIONSHIPS

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Abstract

Teacher accessibility is not limited to the time spent in the classroom, and the use of Facebook as a tool for motivation between teachers and students, through immediacy and sincere engagement, is invaluable. This paper aims to explain the benefits of using Facebook, discuss set up issues and present feedback from students on its implementation. It also focuses on the establishment of social networking between students and teachers as being advantageous in terms of empathy, connection and empowering students to express themselves. Various researches in the field of motivation, and reflections on my personal experience with Facebook's use will be expanded upon.

Keywords

Motivation, Technology

1. Introduction

Low student motivation is one of the most serious challenges faced by teachers at the tertiary level. One cause may be the lack of opportunities students and teachers have to interact with each other at a deeper, more personal level than the classroom typically allows. While some teachers find time for face-to-face communication with their students outside class hours, various obstacles make it difficult for many teachers to do so. The online social networking service Facebook is one way to establish and maintain more meaningful teacher- student relationships. This article will offer the rationale for using Facebook as an educational tool to supplement the classroom experience. It will also provide guidelines for

doing so, and provide narrative student data pointing to Facebook's impact on their motivation.

2. Rationale for Using Facebook

According to Vincos, over one billion subscribers worldwide (1.189 billion), Facebook is the logical social network for teachers considering how to make professional and/or private connections with students (Vincos, 2013). A comprehensive study from Illinois State University emphasizes that teachers connect through Facebook by disclosing themselves to their students through humor, enthusiasm, and immediacy (Mazer, Murphy, & Simonds, 2007). Friending means "to include (someone) in a list of designated friends on a person's social networking site" (Friend, 2014). Mazer, Murphy, and Simonds point out that friending students enables the teacher to become part of the student's life more than the once or twice a week classroom meeting allows (2007). Anderman and Anderman (2010) state that, "teachers have different ways to express their concerns for their students, but an important point is that any ways that teachers can express genuine care and concern for their students will result in positive benefits for the students" (p. 193).

Facebook's attraction can be summed up by Joinson (2008) who states that, "Users derive a variety of uses and gratifications from social networking sites, including traditional content gratification alongside building social capital, communication, [and] surveillance..." (p. 1035). This success has translated into classroom utilization as well. Lepi states that, "two-thirds of all faculty have used social media during a class," with the two most widely used forms being Youtube and Facebook (Edudemic, 2012). Establishing student-teacher relationships publicly on Facebook has helped instructors within their classrooms. In one case study, Simmons, was having trouble building bridges and trust with his class. He reflects on his use of Facebook to improve his relationships with students and on how it "laid the foundation for freedom [that] results in powerful, honest writing" (After all section, para. 18).

When one considers all aspects of the students' learning process, motivation toward learning affects all else that follows. In addition, using Facebook to connect and network with students results in the development of supportive and caring relationships that lead to teachers becoming part of students' lives outside the classroom in a public way.

One simple example of immediacy can be found in the simple recognition of a student's birthday via reminders sent on Facebook, which take seconds to acknowledge. Also, students enjoy student-teacher interaction about their ups and downs and

congratulations on their accomplishments. If you are involved in the lives of your students in this small way, you can see these events unfolding through their posts, and comment accordingly. If the topic warrants privacy, students can initiate more in-depth discussions through the more private message function. Facebook allows for communication about personal drama, successes, and academic concerns that students may never have the chance to discuss, considering the busy lives teachers and students lead.

Facebook enables various levels of contact. Research results prove suggest the efficacy of student-teacher Facebook friendships. Through teacher self-disclosure in which teachers reveal themselves outside of the classroom through humor, enthusiasm, and immediacy, students' learning motivation improves. Furthermore, this results in a majority of student perceptions of teachers becoming more positive when they related to their students via Facebook (Mazer, Murphy, & Simonds, 2007). A Facebook friendship is a tempting way to connect with students in either a superficial or more meaningful way, and the overall motivational benefits of friending your English language students on Facebook make it a valuable educational tool. The next sections will offer some basic guidelines for making it a positive experience for both teacher and students.

3. How to Begin Using Facebook

3.1 Setting up your Profile

To begin with, the Facebook profile a teacher opens up for students to friend will need to be cultivated carefully, depending on individual privacy comfort zones. Facebook's website clearly explains how to use its Groups function and various ways of selecting filters that segregate various groups of people within your profile allowing posts to be made that are private to one group and open to others. I kept my real name profile with all my true-to-life Facts as my profile for my students, friends and family. It is possible to establish a second profile that can be just for your students' access, however, this second profile is forbidden by Facebook officially. Some teachers may be apprehensive to join their students on Facebook for privacy issues. However, there are privacy settings available within Facebook, and the option for students and teachers to remove posts or hide information from the general public. As a teacher who has been doing this for over four years now, I have found that it has been an enriching process and privacy issues have not been an issue.

3.2 Establishing Participation as Optional and Non-Evaluative

As in life, forcing someone to interact with you on Facebook defeats the purpose of being their friend. Adding a compulsory aspect to student-teacher relationships on Facebook,

de motivational (Saikai & Kikuchi, 2007). Mention Facebook in class, welcome friends via your profile, and then wait as students join on their own. Not all students will friend you; students who lead private lives and do not want their information posted on Facebook either have not joined Facebook or are very selective in who they friend. However, those who do will have a real interest in developing a more friendly relationship outside of the classroom boundaries.

Additionally, make it clear that teacher-student Facebook relationships are not connected to grades and are completely extracurricular. Another way to avoid pressure would be to wait until your particular class has ended before you friend students. This will prove that there is no obligation to become friends in order to get a better grade or get in the good graces of the teacher. Mandatorily incorporating Facebook into class, with grades would be oppressive and most likely de motivational and therefore potentially counterproductive, though it is being done by some teachers (Lepi, 2012).

3.3 Emphasizing Communication through English

Encourage students to post in English in order to improve their language skills and to develop a sense of internationalism, even if you are fluent in their first language. Here in Japan, the chance of using English outside of class is quite rare; therefore, help students realize that this is a good chance to practice their English and communicate with other English speakers. Facebook communication with students should be a non-academic communication path, so grammar and spelling correction is rarely taken into consideration, though there have been occasions when corrections might be necessary, for example when the student's English on a public post is clearly and embarrassingly incorrect. In such cases, send the student a private message about the spelling or grammar, not as a comment on their post.

Students socialize and interact outside the classroom in person and online, in an increasingly internationalized environment with friends who speak various languages. Therefore, Facebook is a tool that can encourage communication through English with friends of their same language group, international students, and friends around the world. It acts as a great unifier among increasingly internationalized student bodies (Dornyei & Ushioda, 2011) and is not specific to any particular age group. In this way, Facebook relationships help teachers and students develop a sense of community.

4. One Benefit

Students who interact with their teachers on Facebook feel they can communicate more easily with their teachers which has an influence on their learning outcomes (Mazer, Murphy, & Simonds, 2007). This extended itself into English language development in the case of one group of highly-motivated students in which I was asked to take part in their independent writing practice on Facebook chat. During the long school holiday here in Japan, this group of students independently formed a Skype group for English conversation skills, and a writing practice group. They chose a controversial topic, then all submitted written responses in basic paragraph form. In this case, I was asked to take part in and provide a model paragraph for the students expressing the teacher's point of view, and students would then state theirs in their own compositions. No grading was involved, just expression and fluency as target development. In this case, communicating with the teacher was an additional motivation, resulting in positive interaction that helped encourage expression of opinion with some constructive criticism which spurred them on with their activity. By taking the initiative to establish norms of communication on Facebook, his group exemplified the autonomy they needed to take control of their learning (Smith, 2001, p. 2).

5. Student Feedback and Other Outcomes

5.1 My students

The students I currently teach are highly motivated, and undergo a year and a half of intense English study. One of the primary goals of the department is preparing the students for study abroad, with an emphasis on the TOEFL. The department is also unique in that it attracts students from all over Asia and the world. The students are streamed and grouped after taking a placement test upon entering the department. The groups the students make their first year are fixed, and class size is small, around twenty per section. These factors lead to a sense of intimacy in the classes which, in turn, is cultivated on Facebook. In 2014, 26 out of 52 first-year students are friends on Facebook. Students also realize the value of being active on Facebook during their study abroad experience and through interactions with international students within our department.

All of my students who are also my Facebook friends were asked to respond to my call for comments and opinions about the benefits the student-teacher relationship utilizing Facebook. The request put forward was: "Please send me your private comments via the message function. How do you feel about your ability to connect with your teachers via Facebook. Both positive and negative comments are appreciated." Of the 15 students who responded, three examples are shown below. These are private responses received in the

message area of Facebook, not on the main page:

Example A

“Being able to connect with teachers makes me feel more close to them, which is a good thing I think! And it is fun to get to know teachers outside of school.”

Example B

“I did not have chance to talk with teachers a lot at school, but Facebook helped.... I think Facebook will help other students to know what teachers are interested in, too.”

Example C

“Facebook is a good tool for motivating me to studying English.... I have many friends all over the world and we can keep contact with each other due to FB. Of course, to keep in contact with them, I have to keep [maintain] my English. As a result, FB encourages me to write in English.”

Example D

An interesting issue was brought up in a comment by a fourth student. In addition to the fact that he appreciated the Facebook communication, he lamented that he felt sorry for other students who were not friends with the teacher because, in essence, they were missing out.

One example of being open and available for my students, long-distance was when one student who had gone to study abroad for a year, was homesick and going through severe culture shock. By noticing her posts on Facebook, I was able to communicate with her about her problems. In addition, I alerted her classmates to send her their warm wishes and support on Facebook. She later reported that this was effective in easing her culture shock; this network of support built through Facebook recalls Dornyei and Ushioda’s (2011), concept of “sociocultural environment”, which describes the complexity of all the factors that contribute to student motivation (p. 31).

6. Conclusion

A recent study of Japanese students by Sakai and Kikuchi defined the following major areas of student *demotivation*: teachers, characteristics of classes, experience and failure, and class environment (2007). If we focus on the teaching component, it can be broken down into attitudes, behavior, competence, language proficiency, personality, and teaching style (n.p.). Therefore, making yourself available via Facebook (attitude and behavior factors) and being engaged with your students outside of class (the personality factor), can positively affect student attitudes toward the teacher. There are other social networking sites that are increasingly popular, such as Line, and students may find Facebook to be a bit old-fashioned.

Further research could include how other forms of social media might be even more effective for maintaining connections with students. That said, in the era of social networking, teachers who limit time with students to in-class time may be seen as out of touch with their students, which can reinforce a gap between students and teachers. As a way to avoid a disconnect, university teachers can foster and maintain friendships with students and extend themselves into their students' lives, long after the light switch is turned off in the classroom. Facebook can help preserve teacher-student connections even as they venture out the university gates for the last time, and into their adult lives and careers.

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