

## **Enhancing the student experience in large classes: Facebook as a support tool for students in an enabling education**

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### ***Abstract***

*Higher education has embraced social media as a tool for: enhancing the student experience, improving engagement with course material and to develop social networks. As part of a global shift towards widening participation, the Australian government has implemented policy to promote representative access at University. As a result of this policy, the tertiary sector now has more diverse students entering via enabling programs. These programs are designed to build students' competency with the knowledge and academic literacies required for success in an undergraduate degree. However, there are a number of challenges present for enabling students; Guided in the concept of Communities of Practice, the aim of this study is to examine how a social media site may help offset some of these challenges and enhance the student experience for enabling students.*

***Keywords:*** *Inclusive pedagogy; large classes; Facebook*

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## **1. Description of Teaching and Learning Context**

Within the enabling program offered at UniSA College, students may elect to take Australian Culture and Society (HUMS1052), a foundation studies course that has over 400 students enrolled across multiple campuses. It is a course designed to provide students with an overview and introduction to sociology based within an Australian context.

However, regarded as a large class, Australian Culture and Society has experienced a number of challenges. Scott (1995) suggests large classes are connected to the rise of 'massification', a term that emphasizes the increase in student enrolment numbers seen in the last 20 years. Trow (2000) discusses massification as a process that has seen a move away from traditional elite forms of university where only the privileged and affluent could experience, to a space where there is now open access to university, irrespective of prior educational experiences and socio-economic backgrounds.

For students who enroll in pathway programs, they are often more likely to experience interrupted educational journeys and are come with a host of prior negative educational experiences that affect both their confidence as well as their ability as learners (Stokes, 2017). Australian Culture and Society has been designed using inclusive strategies to involve students from underrepresented backgrounds with University education.

Florian and Linklater (2010, p. 370) stated "Inclusive pedagogy focuses on extending what is ordinarily available as part of the routine of classroom life as a way of responding to differences between learners rather than specifically individualizing for some". Australian Culture and Society is a course that is designed to embrace and value students prior experiences, also known as "funds of knowledge" (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). Inclusive teaching practice helps bridge the gap between students life experiences and connecting this to coursework, thus helping them feel more connected to their studies.

## **2. Literature Review**

Although traditional face-to-face instruction offers many benefits for learning, time and space continue to be problematic for traditional education. The growth and development of online learning is one reflection of the changing attitudes to higher education and the move away from traditional face-to-face learning. When employed as a support tool, social media sites may offer distinct advantages and benefits for students not typically seen in the class room. Qi, Monod, Fang and Deng (2018) note that social media has become a popular topic in the literature and one of the fastest growing media platforms allowing people to communicate and share information (Pornsakulvanich, 2018).

Whilst there are a host of social networking sites available, Facebook is often regarded as the most prevalent social networking sites tertiary students typically engage with (Stutzman

(2006). Pornsakulvanich (2018) suggests that Facebook has changed the way people connect with their social networks and allows users to not only maintain current and existing relationships but also build and generate new networks even if they have never met in person before.

Whilst there have been a number of studies that have explored the implications and affects Facebook has had within society and on its individual users it has only been recently that we have seen Universities employ Facebook as an education tool. With what has been a relatively young life, Facebook has already had a series of trials and tribulations to report. Yet, it still remains as one of the most popular social networking sites available, and of note to the current research is the primary tool chosen in this study to help understand student engagement, online activity and how that contributes to their education and student experience.

Eckert and Wenger (2005) define a community of practice “as an ongoing collective negotiation of a regime of competence which is neither static nor full explicit” (p. 583). Research suggests that communities of practice are in fact everywhere and that we may all knowingly and sometime unknowingly belong to them (Wenger, 1998). This may include being part of a community of practice at work, at home, in our leisure pursuits or as a student in education settings.

### **3. Implications for Practice**

The range of positive student engagement and outcomes expressed on the UniSA College Facebook group is testament to the benefits this inclusive and innovative pedagogy can provide for large courses within enabling education.

Building student networks and providing a platform for them to interact, support and help each other in an informal and relaxed environment proves to be beneficial in this current study. Whilst retention remains a challenge for enabling programs largely due to the fact that many of these students have complex needs and are underrepresented in the wider student cohort. Large courses present a host of challenges to educators, one being the fact that many students can feel like a number rather than a person, resulting in student attrition. However a benefit of the Facebook group is that administrators of a Facebook group can track how students are progressing, what questions and concerns they are having and furthermore administrators can respond in real time in a relaxed and casual environment.

Students demonstrated strong engagement with the Facebook group and therefore consequently their studies. The sheer number of posts and discussions reflects their level of involvement, concern and consideration for their foundation studies, assessment and overall student experience.

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