

Facebook, social integration and informal learning at University: ‘It is more for socialising and talking to friends about work than for actually doing work’.

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Abstract

Whilst recent studies suggest that over 95 per cent of British undergraduate students are regularly using social networking sites we still know very little about how this phenomenon impacts on the student experience and, in particular, how it influences students’ social integration into University life. This paper explores how pre-registration engagement with a University Facebook network influences students’ post-registration social networks. Research was conducted with first year undergraduates at a British University using an online survey. Students reported that they specifically joined Facebook pre-registration as a means of making new friends at University, as well as keeping in touch with friends and family at home. The survey data also illustrate that once at University, Facebook was part of the ‘social glue’ that helped students settle into University life. However, care must be taken not to over-privilege Facebook: it is clearly only one aspect of students’ more general social networking practices and face-to-face interrelationships and interactions remain important. Students thought Facebook was used most importantly for social reasons, not for formal teaching purposes, although it was sometimes used informally for learning purposes.

Keywords: Facebook, social integration, informal learning, British University undergraduate students.

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Introduction

According to Beer and Burrows (2007, 1.2), the exciting potential offered by Web 2.0 technologies¹ for ‘reworking hierarchies, changing social divisions, creating possibilities and opportunities, informing us, and reconfiguring our relations with objects, spaces and each other’ are yet to be fully explored. Nowhere is this more evident than in the broad arena of teaching and learning, where empirical studies of the realities of how technological developments in social software are impacting on pedagogic practices, educational social relations and online/offline interactions between educators and students remains a sparse, if growing, field of research (Selwyn 2007).

Web 2.0 technologies involve increased information sharing and collaboration between users. The term includes social-networking sites, video sharing sites, wikis, blogs, and folksonomies (also known as collaborative tagging or social indexing) where users are increasingly involved in creating web content as well as consuming it. Such Web 2.0 applications are becoming more and more embedded in the daily and mundane routines of everyday life, particularly for young people in many places and a variety of different social settings (Hargittai 2007; Kim and Yun 2007; Lange 2007; Leander and McKim 2003; Tufekci 2008). To date, research on social networking sites (SNS) has received most sustained interest (boyd 2007a; boyd and Ellison 2007; Thelwall 2008). In the field of education, such interest has tended to revolve around students’ educational use of social networking sites (Ellison et al. 2007; Selwyn 2007), the use, perspectives and interactions involved in educators accessing social networking sites in their pedagogic practice (Hewitt and Forte 2006; Mason 2006; Mazer et al. 2007) and related issues of trust and privacy in the use of these social networking sites for educational purposes (Acquisti and Gross 2006; boyd 2007b; Dwyer et al. 2007; Griffith and Liyanage 2008; Mitrano 2006). This work has tended to focus on the higher education sector, in a range of different educational establishments, mostly located in Anglo-America. However, it is equally clear that there still remains a dearth of empirical data exploring how online social networks might be used to aid socialisation more generally into higher educational establishments and culture, how such social networking sites are then used by students for support and socialisation purposes whilst at

University and how these social networking sites might be used by higher educational establishments to support this socialisation process in the futureⁱⁱ.

This lack of research is perhaps surprising given a recent study by Ipsos Mori (2007) on behalf of JISC suggests that well over 95 per cent of British undergraduate students are regularly using social networking sites. However, still little is known about how this phenomenon impacts on the student experience and, in particular, if and how it facilitates new students' social integration into University life. This project was therefore developed to focus on:

- how pre-registration engagement with a University Facebook network influenced new students' post-registration social networks;
- how Facebook was then used by first year undergraduate students for support and socialisation purposes whilst at University;
- whether there is any role for social networking tools to be used by University support services and academic departments to enhance the social and academic integration of students, from the student perspective.

Research was conducted with first year undergraduates at a British Universityⁱⁱⁱ using an online survey. The focus was on Facebook as this is the social networking site that has become one of the most popular online destinations (Hargittai 2007), particularly for British students of higher education, acting both as an important social domain and a powerful communication tool in young people's lives (Pastore 2002 cited in Fox et al 2007, 540)^{iv}.

The paper is divided into six sections. After this introduction which lays out the background to the study, section two summarises the methodology of the research project. Section three focuses on pre-registration use of Facebook while section four outlines the way in which Facebook has been used to aid social integration into University life. Section five focuses on the role that Facebook might play for University support services and academic departments. Section six draws some conclusions.

Methodology

In December 2007 the Facebook network for the University in this study listed 10,000 members, comprising current and past students, and staff. This project involved research with first year campus-based undergraduate students studying for a first degree. An online survey of first year Facebook users at the University was conducted in order to explore how they used Facebook for social integration into University life and for academic purposes. This paper is based on the results of the online survey which was carried out over a six week period between April and June 2008. This time frame was selected as most online survey response rates fall off after the first two weeks (Madge and O'Connor, 2002). Moreover, it was felt that conducting the online survey in the summer term also meant that the students would have had time to reflect on their transition to University life, integration into student culture and use (or not) of Facebook for learning, all key aspects of the research project.

The sampling strategy involved a multi-modal approach: the online survey and project were publicised via the University Facebook network, halls of residence Facebook groups and the University's weekly email bulletin to all staff and students. Students were also invited to participate via email messages from their departments and via face-to-face requests in lectures. A final reminder message/invitation to participate was sent to all people in halls (who would mostly be first years) by the University Registrar. These mixed recruitment methods elicited a total of 213 responses, equivalent to a response rate of 7 per cent of the first year full-time campus-based undergraduate population. This sample size is equivalent to a confidence interval of +/-6.5 per cent at the 95 per cent confidence level (ie. if the survey was repeated 100 times, 95 out of 100 administrations would yield results within +/- 6.5 per cent of the current results). Most respondents were home students (89 per cent compared to 86 percent for first years at the University), female (67 per cent compared to 53 per cent for the University as a whole) and the disciplinary background of the sample population broadly represented that of the University as a whole (for example, 20 per cent of the sample population were from the Science Faculty compared to 18 per cent from the University as a whole; 28 per cent from the Social Science Faculty compared to 24 per cent from the University and 19 per cent from the Arts Faculty compared to 24 percent from the University a whole). Any results must be seen in the light of these mild biases towards home, female, social science students.^v

However, given the size of the University Facebook network, and given the broad replication of the University's disciplinary structure in the survey sample, we consider that the results of this study are broadly generalisable to the first year undergraduate campus-based population at this specific University in 2008. Moreover, although the questionnaire was based on the quantitative tradition, there was ample opportunity for respondents to elaborate on any point made, through the use of many open questions. These more detailed quotations are presented verbatim below, selected both for their 'typical' nature and being illustrative of the point being made. Below, the three main research findings are presented and discussed; the first of these is regarding pre-registration use of Facebook.

Pre-registration use of Facebook

Whilst several studies have illustrated the significance of Facebook for undergraduate students once they have joined the higher education sector (Ellison et al., 2007; Hargittai 2007; Selwyn 2007), less is known about how prospective students use Facebook *prior* to commencing University. Our survey revealed that more than half (54 per cent) had been members of Facebook at school or college prior to starting University, 25 percent had joined Facebook immediately before joining University while a further 13 per cent joined immediately after starting University. Further exploration of these data revealed that many students specifically joined Facebook pre-registration as a means of making new face-to-face friends at University, particularly with people in the same hall or on the same course, whilst also using Facebook to keep touch with current friends and family from home. This double use of Facebook (by those using it prior to starting university) to retain current friendships from home, and to make new ones at University, is highlighted by the quotes below in response to the question 'why did you originally join Facebook'^{vi}:

To meet people before coming to university and because most of my friends at home used it.

Because my friends all had it and one of them told me that it was a good way to meet people going to the same uni as me.

To hopefully get into contact with people who were living in my building or were on my course through facebook groups. I hoped that knowing these people before I got there would give me a head start at uni.

To keep in touch with friends and for a bit of fun. Also to see if I could find anyone going to Uni living in my halls.

So that I could keep in contact with the people from my secondary school and to share photos with people. I then realised that I could talk to the people I would be meeting at university through the groups and networks on Facebook and so started to use it to search for people in my future halls of residence or course.

In total, over half of the respondents (55 per cent) had used Facebook to make new ‘virtual’ friends prior to starting University. The modal and median number of friends they had made were five but there were a few exceptional cases where students claimed to have made a large number of online friends (up to 260) prior to arrival. The results also suggested that most students in our survey joined Facebook (not another SNS) because Facebook was associated with University level education. This corresponds with the findings of Boyd (2007c) who reported that Facebook’s University origins attracted those school students aspiring to go to University. Similarly, in our study, at school the teenagers had predominately used Beebo or Myspace accounts, while their move to University was associated with Facebook emerging as the dominant social networking site. This process is again illustrated by the quotes below:

I heard it was the ‘Uni thing’.

I joined because all my older university friends had one and as it is primarily a networking group meant for university students, I decided that I wanted to be on it.

Because I know it was the main method of communication at university and it was a good way to stay in touch with friends from home.

Had previously used 'bebo' as a way of simply talking to my friends whilst apart without the need to both be at a computer at the same time with instant messagers. But was drawn to facebook, when all my mates switched to that, and was encouraged by the photo tagging system and simplicity of the sites presentation.

It is clear therefore that Facebook was an important social tool used by the majority of the respondents to aid their transition to University. The importance of making new online friendships with people in the same hall, course or University is apparent- but so too is the importance of Facebook for keeping in touch with already existing friends as older offline relationships shift to the online domain. Thus a complex picture is emerging whereby many students are not simply transferring offline relationships to an online mode, *or* moving from

online to offline relationships; rather many students are doing both simultaneously. This is significant in that much previous literature has tended to argue for *either* offline relationships developing into online ones (Ellison et al. 2007; Lampe et al. 2006; Selwyn 2007) *or* for online worlds to move offline (McMillan and Morrison 2006). By contrast, our research suggests that online and offline worlds are clearly coexisting, but used in different ways for developing and sustaining different types of relationships. For example, face-to-face friendships from home have been developed and sustained through continued online interactions, while newer online relationships have flourished at university and developed into face-to-face in-depth relationships. This reiterative use of the virtual and place-based worlds is important in providing a flexible multimodal approach for young people traversing their new lives and identities as students.

Social integration into University Life

Once at University, the students in our survey utilised Facebook to aid their settling-in process and at the time of the survey (April to June 2008) they had a mean average of 81 online friends in the University Facebook network. However, as might be expected, the standard deviation was extremely high (62) and this number of friends conformed to the power law distribution of Shirky (2008) – that there were a few students with a very large numbers of friends in the University Facebook network and many with relatively few. In this case, the modal number of friends within the University Facebook network was 30, whilst there was one individual who had over 460 Facebook friends in the University network and a further eight with over 200.

Thus this Facebook network continued to support the students' friendship formation during their first year of study (although it must be acknowledged that being friends on Facebook did not automatically relate to being friends in 'real life'). A resounding 97 per cent of respondents had more friends on Facebook at the time of the survey than they did before starting University. Indeed, 75 per cent of students said they used Facebook more than they did prior to starting University and 62 per cent of respondents considered that the way that they used Facebook had changed since they came to University. These changes were characterised by three main features. Firstly, Facebook was used to keep in touch with old friends and to chart the University experience to them through the posting of photographs, group chat for virtual friends etc; secondly, Facebook was used initially for planning social

events, joining University groups and keeping up to date with what was happening socially with peers currently at the University; and, finally, and most significantly, Facebook was used extensively to make social links with others at university, thus enriching their socialisation process. Each of these points is charted below.

Keeping in touch with old friends

First, the respondents indicated that they used Facebook to keep in touch with friends from home. This was an important use of Facebook and survey respondents indicated that 31 per cent kept in touch on a daily basis with friends from home (comparable to the 37 per cent that kept in touch with University friends on a daily basis). Through group conversations and posting of photographs to share experiences, many students utilised Facebook to maintain pre-existing friendships and links with people from home, which, as Ellison et al. (2007) suggest, may offset feelings of ‘friendsickness’ as the students move to a new location. These links to ‘home’ were resoundingly to keep in touch with friends, not family, and in several instances the fact that the students did not have to pay for their communication (in comparison to texts or phone calls) was considered an advantage. The quotes below illustrate these points.

I now use it to keep in contact with all of my friends from back home. Also its good to have a group conversation and all the emails get saved so organising things with friends is easier.

It has only changed a little, but since coming to university I have used to site more to share in other people's experiences I suppose, possibly due to being apart from people back at home, so that I don't feel left out.

I now use it as a place to store photos, see events that will be happening and to keep up with friends that i dont get a chance to physically see that often as they are at other universities etc.Its a cheaper way of communicating to people rather than phoning or texting.

Previously no more than occasional communication with rarely seen friends. Now for sharing information, contacting a large number of people, and sharing recent personal news with friends amongst other things. I keep in contact with people who aren't local anymore. I use it much more, to contact international friends during the holidays. I can also contact friends from home, and see what they've been upto via pictures.

Planning social events

Secondly, the use of Facebook had changed on actually arriving at University as it was used extensively in the early days for joining University groups, planning social events and communicating with new online friends at University. A key use of Facebook for respondents was for finding out about, and arranging, social events. Indeed, 49 per cent used Facebook on a weekly basis and 23 per cent on a daily basis, to find out about social events. The majority of the respondents said that they regularly checked the University groups and halls groups. Interestingly, while 31 per cent of respondents had used Facebook on a daily basis for checking out the profile of someone they had met socially, only a small minority (10 per cent) had used it on a daily basis to check out the profile of someone they had seen but had never met, while a tiny 0.5 per cent admitted to using it on a daily basis to find someone to date. For internet savvy young people, in a new and challenging higher education environment, once at University Facebook was used cautiously to make social links with people they had first met socially, which somewhat counters the popular perception of Facebook as a free-for-all online dating agency. The quotes below highlight the role of Facebook as ‘an integral part of student life’ and its importance for organising social activities.

I have logged on more often to see updates and search for uni friends. I think it is an integral part of student life as mos students have a profile. Its also a good way of breaking ice barriers and making friends during freshers, after a night out you always add people you meet or they add you.

I have joined university orientated groups and I get updates and invitations to events that are taking place in and around the university. Many social events organised through Facebook, meeting people through Facebook, groups for organisational purpouses rather than simply fun.

I use groups and events far more to organise social/work activities and photos have become very important for my friends. I now use it a lot more for sharing photographs, and making plans with people.

I know use it to keep up-to-date with current university affairs through the Events section of the Facebook website, along with the many groups etc. which have been created for that purpose.

Making social links with others at university

Despite this increasing, but small, educational role of Facebook, it is clear that the socialisation element was the most significant feature of Facebook for new students. Overall, 21 per cent of respondents felt Facebook had been very important in helping them to form friendships at University and a further 52 per cent said it had been important or quite important. Only 27 per cent of respondents felt that Facebook had not been important in helping them to form friendships at University. Similarly, 43 per cent agreed and 13 per cent strongly agreed with the statement “Facebook has helped me settle into University”. When the students were further asked how important they felt Facebook had been in helping them integrate into University life, 24 per cent said Facebook had been very important and 30 per cent important. Only 19 per cent felt that it was not important in aiding their integration into the world of higher education. Facebook had clearly been important to some students in this settling in process but less so for others. More work is needed to disaggregate which students had found it particularly beneficial, and why (see Wellens et al, in progress).

Indeed, when presented with the statement “Without Facebook I would be lonely”, only 3 per cent of respondents strongly agreed, 16 per cent agreed, 17 per cent neither agreed nor disagreed, 35 per cent disagreed and 29 per cent strongly disagreed. Facebook is thus clearly only *one* component in helping *some* students settle into University and in the opinion of many students, it was not crucial in overcoming loneliness, suggesting the continued importance of face-to-face relationships when making the transition to University. One feature of note is that students’ use of Facebook seems to be maturing through their first year. At first it was used for finding out about social events and activities, but as year progressed, it appeared to be increasingly used to develop more meaningful and intense online relationships and more mature forms of communication, thus becoming an integral part of University life and a student’s daily routine.

Before Facebook was more about looking at other peoples profile and adding as many people to your profile so that it seems that you have loads of friends but now its more about just adding good friends and not just any random person that you happened to meet on the train!

Before it was about finding new friends, however now it's more about keeping in contact with my friends at uni and especially back in my home town.

I use it much more than I did before, to communicate with friends for many different reasons. Previously I was only using it for fun, but now I also use it to get in touch with people and to arrange to meet people

I now talk to all of my friends who are at university here or in other places and talk about uni life in general whereas before I used it to search for people who were going to be on my course, in my accommodation etc.

Indeed, 84 per cent of students agreed or strongly agreed that “Facebook is part of my everyday activity/routine”, with 61 per cent agreeing or strongly agreeing that they felt “out of touch” when they had not logged onto Facebook for a while. When presented with the statement “I feel that I am part of the Facebook community” 68 per cent agreed or strongly agreed. These results again support the suggestion that whilst Facebook is only one component of social life at University, it remains an important one.

As Selwyn (2007) has highlighted ‘Students often use Facebook in the micromanagement of their social lives, as an arena for social exploration and to develop social networks with their peers at University and from previous institutions they have attended.’ Whilst this was the case in our study too, Facebook was also very significant in maintaining friendships from home and in making the transition to University. Facebook was certainly an important part of the ‘social glue’ that helped students settle into University life, that kept the student body together as a community and which aided communication (especially about social events) between the student body. However, care must be taken not to over-privilege Facebook: it is only *one* aspect of undergraduate students’ general social networking practices at University and clearly face-to-face relationships and interactions remain significant.

Educational potentials?

Research has suggested that Facebook is a potentially useful tool for promoting effective academic practice. Mason (2006), for example, suggests its utility lies in its reflective qualities, its mechanisms of peer feedback and its collaborative models of learning while Selwyn (2007) notes its attractiveness lies in its ease of educated related interactions between students, albeit often in an informal way. In our research a clear picture emerged whereby first year undergraduate students generally thought the use of Facebook was most importantly

for social purposes, secondarily for informal learning purposes (i.e. for student-to-student interactions about academic work-related matters) but definitely not for *formal* teaching purposes (i.e. between staff and student and involving formal assessment).

Informal teaching purposes

As the academic year progressed, some students (albeit the minority) extended their use of Facebook from its purely social origins, to increasingly use Facebook for educational purposes. However, this still remained a minority use: only 10 per cent of respondents used Facebook for discussing academic work with other students on a daily basis and less (1 per cent) to contact University staff, in comparison to 23 per cent using it on a daily basis to find out about social events. However, as the students became more embedded in university life, Facebook was increasingly used by some students in an informal way for contacting other students to organise group meetings for project work, for revision and for coursework queries: it became more than just a *social* network for some students but started to show signs of its informal educational networking potential.

When I first joined university, I used facebook to make new friends. I now use it to keep in contact with people when asking for assistance on work and revision.

I sometimes use facebook to get in contact with people in my seminar groups regarding work etc. I can also plan social events with university friends.

Messaging to arrange work with other students- not just social

I have a few contacts that are on my course and i can ask them questions about work rather than just chatting.

our group for a project communicated via facebook because we used that more often than checking our email so could get messages to eachother faster.

These quotes highlight the potential of Facebook to *informally* discuss academic work. Indeed, in our research 46 per cent of respondents stated that they used Facebook to *informally* discuss academic work with other students on a daily or weekly basis and 22 per cent on a monthly basis. Almost half of the students were therefore using Facebook for some sort of informal academic purpose every week (e.g for revision, arranging group or project work, often initiated by students themselves and not part of a formal requirement of a course). By contrast, only 7 per cent reported that they had used Facebook as a formal part of

their learning experience. Indeed, when presented with the statement “Facebook is helpful to my academic life”, only 22 per cent of respondents agreed while 29 per cent neither agreed nor disagreed, 32 per cent of respondents disagreed, and 18 per cent strongly disagreed. This probably reflects the fact that students login to Facebook far more frequently for social rather than academic purposes and see it predominately as a social tool, not an academic one. Interestingly, 25 per cent of respondents felt that their academic work was often or very often affected by the amount of time they spent on Facebook while only 17 per cent of respondents reported that their academic work was never adversely affected. So clearly from the student perspective, Facebook is only an important aspect of their formal academic experience in so much as it distracts them from their formal studies!

Facebook and formal teaching

There were several activities that the majority of students did *not* use Facebook for, such as checking out the profile of a member of University staff (68 per cent said they had never done this) or communicating with University staff (91 per cent had never used Facebook for this). Facebook is therefore currently used by students for communicating with other students, not with University staff, findings replicated by Hewitt and Forte (2006). Moreover, when respondents were asked if there were any ways they thought Facebook could be utilised to enhance teaching and learning at the University, 43 per cent responded negatively, explaining that Facebook was a social networking site, not a tool for academic work. Some examples of student responses about using Facebook for teaching purposes are provided below, which highlight the strength of feeling over this issue:

No: Facebook and education should be kept strictly separate. Facebook is a social networking site and the ultimate tool of procrastination, and while the social side of university is important and it can help build and sustain bonds between people, asking people to go on it for educational purposes is essentially giving them a green light to NOT do work. Besides, there is already blackboard and the university email accounts as an online way for the university to keep in contact with students.

Not really, people tend to come on Facebook to get away from work and that aspect of university life in my experience. Its more for socialising and talking to friends about work than for actually doing work, so Id be very reluctant to use Facebook for that purpose.

I'm not sure how I would feel if I was to be in contact with the lecturers through Facebook. I find email more straight forward and 'formal' to an extent and so it means that the work side of my life is kept separate. Facebook is a kind of escape from work and so I feel it wise to keep the two apart. However, I do use it to keep in

contact with people in presentation groups, for example, and so do feel that that part of it is very useful to me, especially during breaks from university.

No - It is used, by and large, as a distraction from the university workload. If the university tried to access the students through Facebook, I feel many people would find it distasteful as if the university were trying to encroach on or cripple our social lives.

Facebook is a social activity, academic activities should remain away from social lives.

However, 53 per cent of respondents did reply more positively about the use of Facebook for formal teaching and learning purposes and they made a series of suggestions about the ways in which Facebook could be used. These included providing social and peer-led academic support for students in departments, revision opportunities and using Facebook to inform students of changes to lecture times. Notably most of these suggestions were not to do with the pedagogic aspects of teaching and learning but more to do departmental or module related administrative arrangements. Many of the functions suggested are already available within the University's Virtual Learning Environment but there is perhaps merit in exploring the links and synergies between the two systems. However, it must be noted a few students did suggest that Facebook might be a means through which they could access staff for queries about specific modules and courses, but the time implications for staff may well preclude this idea being workable in practice.

*You could post notices about the university on facebook as a lot of people i know check facebook more regularly than their university email accounts
I think some module information such as cancellations of lectures, could be communicated over facebook groups as it is checked more than blackboard and outlook by most of my friends, have groups on facebook to support modules then people can discuss the module on a wall between all students.*

Maybe set up a facebook group to help students with exams or revision, to see if anyone wants to study together or to get help, i know we have blackboard, but it doesnt always work

All lectures and tutors have their own facebook which they check regularly allowing students to post any queries etc. in a less formal manner than emailing.

Every degree should have its own facebook group so people from the same course can communicate asking for advice and help in assignments etc would be bonus if lectures could answer questions here too.

I think that if important points were put up on a specialised group on facebook, that people would be more likely to look at them than at emails. Also, I think it is a good opportunity for setting up debates and student based question and answer sessions.

In addition, 41 per cent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they would *not* like tutors to contact them via Facebook for formal teaching purposes. When presented with the broader statement “It is inappropriate for tutor’s to use Facebook” 20 per cent agreed, 30 per cent neither agreed or disagreed and 36 per cent disagreed. It appears therefore there are a range of opinions regarding tutors using Facebook, but generally, students were not overly keen on the idea. This supports the findings of Mazer et al. (2007, 13) who note that teachers using Facebook to foster staff-student relationships should do so with caution, as from the student perspective it was important that staff should only self-disclose appropriate information. One detailed account of a more positive outlook on staff-student interaction is noted below but this type of opinion was in the minority. The quote does, however, certainly support the case made again by Mazer et al. (2007) whereby students accessing the site of a teacher could be associated with higher levels of motivation, more affective learning and a more positive class room climate.

I think the staff should have and encourage Facebook relationships with students, allowing students to see a more human and accessible side of their tutors. I think that all this nonsense about extra-curricular friendships between students and staff being inappropriate is not only insulting and anachronistic but also incorrect. The university has many immensely educated members of staff, but throughout my academic life, the teachers in whose classes I performed best were those with whom I had the best relationships, irrespective of their level of knowledge. Teaching someone is in itself an intimate thing, and so too should be the relationship between teacher and pupil. Facebook facilitates light hearted banter and friendship, and I think this jesting, this personal knowledge of each other makes for the best human communication and also the best pedagogy. I realise that is something quite taboo, but as adults, I am confident that university students can be trusted to have mature and appropriate relationships with the staff in a way that builds trust and desire for approval, and thus improves efforts and performance...and I'm not just talking about the students!

Finally, the students were also asked whether they considered it appropriate for staff from the University to contact them via Facebook in the future for teaching, marketing, pastoral or administrative purposes. In all cases the majority of students were opposed to the idea. The responses are summarised in Table 1 below.

Table 1. First year undergraduate student opinion regarding University administration contacting them via Facebook

	<i>Yes (per cent)</i>
Administrative matters	33
Teaching matters	42
Marketing matters	46
Pastoral or personal support matters	47

A clear picture is therefore emerging whereby the students thought the use of Facebook was most importantly for social reasons, not for formal teaching purposes. Although it was sometimes used informally for learning purposes by students, they were not overly keen on the idea of being contacted by their tutors via Facebook for formal teaching purposes. Just under half of the respondents considered it to be acceptable for University of staff to be contacting them for teaching, marketing or pastoral matters but only one third were happy to be contacted for administrative matters. Here the students appeared to draw a distinction between the positive use of Facebook for departmental and module level administrative arrangements (many of their suggestions for using Facebook related to notices, timetabling and setting up discussion groups) and the more negative view with respect to contact via Facebook for central University administrative matters.

Conclusions

Although the results are only specific to first year undergraduates at the specific UK University in which we conducted our research, given recent research findings that over 95 per cent of British undergraduate students are regularly using social networking sites (Ipsos Mori, 2007), it would be surprising if similar trends were not occurring at other Higher Educational Institutions in the UK. We can therefore conclude that:

- Facebook is an important social tool used by the majority of the respondents to aid their settling in process at University;
- Facebook is part of the ‘social glue’ that helps students settle into University life, that keeps the student body together as a community and which aids in communication (especially about social events) between the student body. However, care must be taken

not to over-privilege Facebook: it is only one aspect of students' social networking practices and clearly face-to-face relationships and interactions remain significant;

- A clear picture is emerging whereby the students thought the use of Facebook was most importantly for social reasons, not for formal teaching purposes. Time spent on Facebook (for social purposes) was sometimes to the detriment of that available for academic study. Whilst Facebook was sometimes used informally for learning purposes by students, such as to collaborate on group projects, and some students thought it might be useful for making departmental level administrative arrangements, most were not overly keen on the idea of being contacted by their tutors via Facebook.

We therefore feel that it is important that the British higher education sector is aware of Facebook and recognises its potential and importance to students but we would recommend caution about moving into a social networking space that students clearly feel is 'theirs' for social rather than academic purposes. Aggressive marketing, teaching or pastoral interventions are not to be recommended. We follow Selwyn's (2007, 21) exhortation to 'allow these practices to continued unabated and firmly 'backstage'. However, we equally suggest that as Facebook appears to be such an important social tool used by new students to aid their settling-in process, higher education institutions could sensibly and gently act as a catalyst for this process for pre-registration students by promoting the existence of accommodation/hall and departmental Facebook groups. However, it must be remembered that face-to-face and 'real' friendships remain significant as well as virtual relations and interactions and we reiterate that Facebook is just *one* tool that new students will use to social network. So, following Hodgkinson's (2008) more critical appraisal of Facebook, making such technologies available to new students does not guarantee that *every* individual will actually become more socially connected. It is equally accurate to observe that for many of the current undergraduate generation, the boundaries between online and offsite worlds have become blurred and many students will utilise a myriad of combinations of different place-based and online-networks to develop and sustain their settling in process and maintain and develop social networks. Finally, it is clear that Facebook provides an informal learning space for some University students. On Facebook they may engage in a wide range of team working, organisational and other activities which may have relevance to their employability skills. University staff may want to help students recognise the skills that they are developing as part of this informal learning.

These conclusions aside, there is clearly potential for further research which gives a more disaggregated view of *which* students are using Facebook, how and why. The research to date has focused on Anglo-American undergraduate students who use Facebook, who often remain a homogenized student body in research findings. There are many axes of difference that might affect the role, purpose and non-use of Facebook and other social networking sites, which require greater attention. For example, does the use of Facebook vary with disciplinary background, social capital, ethnicity and access to computing facilities and how might these digital inequalities then impact on educational achievement and development of social networks in everyday lives?; How and why do postgraduate and masters students use Facebook differently to undergraduates and what language, accessibility and cultural issues might be at play to explain these differences?; What social networking sites might international students be using and how (and why) might their use differ from home students?; How does an individual student's use of Facebook change over time, suggesting the need for more longitudinal studies?; How does the broader political economy produce international (and national) variations in the use of Facebook compared to the Anglo-American focus of most research to date? These are all compelling questions that will require serious research attention in the immediate future to gain a more nuanced and broader spectrum of understanding on social networking sites and their role in higher education. As boyd and Ellison (2007, 14) suggest, 'Vast and uncharted waters still remain to be explored' in research on social networking sites.

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Notes

ⁱ As Beer and Burrows (2007, 2.8) observe, there is vibrant debate about exactly what is meant by Web 2.0 with some ‘decrying it as a meaningless marketing buzzword, and others accepting it as the new conventional wisdom’ (O’Reilly, 2005: 1, quoted by Beer and Burrows, 2007, 2.8). However, broadly speaking, Web 2.0 is commonly considered to be more interactive, collaborative, participative and more flexibly and publicly available than Web 1.0 applications, although it has to be acknowledged that many of these features were also available in some Web 1.0 applications.

ⁱⁱ The research was initially conceived of as feeding directly in to the University’s student experience committee, to directly feed into praxis with the attempt to improve students’ experience of transition.

ⁱⁱⁱ The University in this study is located in the Midlands region of the UK, with a yearly intake of about 3,000 campus-based undergraduate students.

^{iv} For an overview of Facebook see Ellison et al (2007) and for a more critical appraisal see Hodgkinson (2008).

^v This mild bias might possibly reflect the fact that one of the authors was based in a social science department and thus these students were more willing to participate.