

# Informal use of social media in higher education: A case study of Facebook groups

Erik Adalberon

PHD researcher, University of Agder  
[erik.adalberon@uia.no](mailto:erik.adalberon@uia.no)

Roger Säljö

Professor, University of Gothenburg/University of Agder  
[roger.saljo@ped.gu.se](mailto:roger.saljo@ped.gu.se)

## ABSTRACT

Recent research in Norway reveals significant differences between how students and educators in higher education report using social media in the context of university activities. Students seem to use such media at their own initiative and largely outside the academic agenda. This study looks further into students' use of social media by means of a case study of four, student-initiated, Facebook groups created in connection with campus-based courses. The main function of such groups appears to lie in providing an arena for managing practical and social aspects of academic life and for asking for and disseminating information. Occasionally, academic contents are addressed by students asking for clarifications or initiating discussions.

## Keywords

social media in higher education, Facebook in higher education, digital media in higher education

## INTRODUCTION

The role of digital media in higher education has been discussed for decades. As is generally the case when discussing the relationships between technological innovations and educational practices, there is a tension between, on the one hand, those who see the educational system as slow to make use of the promises of the new resources, and, on the other hand, those who are sceptical of the claims made regarding the advantages of such media

for teaching and learning. Selwyn (2014, pp. 10–18) contrasts what he refers to as the ‘booster’ and ‘doomster’ discourses, respectively, painting radically opposing pictures of the potentials of technologies. The promises of digital universities, online courses and computer-mediated, collaborative forms of learning are set against the potential losses of features of traditional academic culture such as seminars, face-to-face tutoring, critical reflection and building of social relationships (cf. e.g. Goodfellow & Lea, 2013; Crook & Bligh, 2017). These conflicting positions parallel those that we recognize from extended discussions at other levels of the educational system, and in society at large, between what Postman (2011) refers to as technophiles and technophobes (for discussion, see Cuban, 2001; Säljö, 2017).

As we have learned from extensive research into the rapidly growing field of science and technology studies (STS), technologies do not determine social practices (Bijker, 1995). When inserted into established social practices, artefacts will be responded to and utilized in very different manners. As an alternative to adopting a deterministic and essentialist perspective, in which the use and impact of innovations are explained in terms of properties inherent to the technology *per se*, a theoretically more fruitful approach is to understand artefacts as constitutive elements of sociomaterial practices that involve artefacts, people and institutionalized forms of interaction (Orlikowski, 2007). Thus, the artefacts are ascribed agency within sociomaterial practices as is expressed, for instance, in the approach to technology studies suggested by the so-called Actor-Network Theory (Latour, 2005; Law & Hassard, 1999). In this case, such an approach implies that rather than expecting uniform impacts of innovations when introduced into long-established educational practices, the critical issues to explore concern how sociomaterial practices – the concrete doing of teaching, learning and student life – are transformed when new artefacts are taken on board and become an integrated part of everyday institutional life (Ludvigsen et al., 2011; Säljö, 2012; Mäkitalo, Linell & Säljö, 2017).

### Social networking sites in higher education

In the present study, the focus is on Facebook as an example of a social networking site that allows for sustained communication over time and for community building. Facebook currently has well over 1.7 billion users (<http://www.statista.com>), and students across the world have been, and still are, diligent users of Facebook and several other social networking sites. As early as 2007, studies of British undergraduates, for instance, indicated that ninety-five per cent of the students were regular users of social networking sites (Mori, 2007). Research has also shown the diverse ways in which social networking is useful for students. It provides a way of making friends at university, of inquiring about practical matters when entering university, for maintaining relationships with family and friends at home and for a range of other purposes. As Madge, Meek, Wellens, and Hooley (2009, p. 152) conclude in their study of Facebook, social networking appears to fulfil multiple functions and be ‘part of the “social glue” that helps students settle into university life.’ Selwyn (2009, p. 157) argues that Facebook provides a ‘space where the “role conflict” that students often experience in their relationships with university work, teaching staff, academic conventions and expectations can be worked through in a relatively closed “backstage” area.’

Within the frameworks of constructivist and participatory perspectives on learning that have gained prominence in recent decades, and given the fact that students are frequent users of social media (even though the particular sites seem to change), many scholars have also asked questions about how the interactive potentials of such sites may be exploited for institutional forms of teaching and learning. The experiences, as reported in research, seem to be mixed (Hung & Yuen, 2010; Manca & Ranieri, 2013; Yang, Wang, Woo, & Quek, 2011). In several studies it has been reported that students tend to see social networking sites as private zones, more suitable for informal, personal and general communication rather than as contexts for academic work (cf. Baran, 2010; Cain & Policastri, 2011; Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007). This picture is confirmed in a recent Norwegian large-scale study (Ørnes, 2015), where students report using Facebook quite actively in the context of higher education, while teachers do not report doing so.

However, during the relatively short history of social media, there have also been several attempts to integrate such resources in academic work in various fields. One area where attempts to exploit the affordances of social networking have been rather frequent is in foreign language learning, in particular in the context of learning English as a foreign language (Lantz-Andersson, 2016). The arguments for this are obvious for several reasons. Such sites provide rich opportunities for peer-to-peer communication, for reading, writing and hybrid activities that are conducive to developing language proficiency (Lantz-Andersson, Vigmo & Bowen, 2013).

Thus, research gives a picture in which social networking is at some kind of boundary or liminal state. Judging from the research findings, the instructional affordances of Facebook have been tested in various contexts, and for various purposes, but there still appears to be some hesitancy concerning their usefulness in such settings. Teachers and students alike, although for different reasons, seem to be hesitant. In the present study, our focus is on observations in Norwegian higher education where students report using social media, including Facebook, quite frequently at university, while teachers do not report using them to any significant extent (Ørnes, 2015). This indicates that there might be a 'backstage area', to use Selwyn's expression, where Facebook plays an important role for student life without being part of the curricular activities.

### Studies of Facebook interaction

There are relatively few studies that document the actual practices of using such resources in instruction by analysing the interactions that take place. One example of such work is given by Lantz-Andersson (2016), where the communication between students in secondary school in a closed Facebook group was analysed. A result of this study indicates that the interaction patterns between users while learning languages are similar to the patterns known from the traditional school setting. In other words, the social media setting does not seem to change the communication significantly but expands the possible contexts in which students socialize and use the target language. Another study presented by Selwyn (2009) reports a case study where a Facebook 'wall' activity of university students was analysed. Of the 909 students participating, 76 per cent (694) had Facebook profiles and most of these (612) were accessible publicly. During the period of 18 weeks documented, the students produced almost 68,169 wall postings, and 4 per cent of these were judged to relate to university

life. Using an analytical approach inspired by grounded theory, Selwyn found that the interactions relating to education concerned five themes: '(1) recounting and reflecting on the university experience; (2) exchange of practical information; (3) exchange of academic information; (4) displays of supplication and/or disengagement; and (5) "banter" (i.e. exchanges of humour and nonsense)' (p. 161). Selwyn concludes that Facebook seems to serve as a continuation of informal interaction that is a feature of university life and that takes place during breaks, in coffee shops and in other settings. Using the 'backstage' metaphor of Goffman (1971), the author also argues that Facebook served 'as a ready space for resistance and for the contestation of the asymmetrical power relationship built into the established offline positions of university, student and lecturer' (Selwyn, 2009, p. 172). This is an interesting observation which indicates that there are some systematic feedback activities going on between students that never reach those responsible for teaching and learning. Although this research was published a few years back, and the technology has moved on, the communicative needs expressed in these categories seem generic and can be seen in similar, recent studies (Aaen & Dalsgaard, Vivian, Barnes, Geer, & Wood, 2014).

In the present study, the knowledge interest centres on students' use of Facebook, but the premise for our study is different. The focus here is on analysing Facebook activities organized by students in relation to specific university courses that they attend. Thus, in the Norwegian context, it is quite frequent that students set up Facebook pages that relate to courses they take. Indirectly, this trend is also visible in the observations reported by Ørnes (2015) that students use Facebook at university, but that their teachers do not seem to do so. The activities, thus, are not initiated by members of staff, nor do they participate. In this sense, they constitute, as Selwyn (2009) argues, a backstage region, to use Goffman's dramaturgical metaphor. Goffman (1971) makes a distinction between onstage, where social action is visible and where people are concerned about the audience they are engaging with, and the backstage, where they may relax and do not have to engage in 'impression management' in the same sense. An example of such a difference is that a student when participating in class has to assume the role of student that is expected in the context of engaging with teachers and fellow students. Backstage, for instance during coffee breaks with a close friend, her behaviour and priorities may be very different when discussing academic matters. The social medium context that we explore may be seen as serving such a backstage function where only students have access, and it is thus in relationship to this audience that the impression management will take place. The questions we are trying to answer here are:

What purposes does a course-relevant Facebook group serve for undergraduate students in various academic subjects?

What patterns of activity can be identified in the groups in terms of initiatives taken and postings submitted?

## METHOD

The point of departure for this case study was to find and analyse Facebook groups created by students, and, preferably, old groups where most of the content had been posted in the past and where the activity had come to an end. Since most of the content on Facebook is

written communication, it is possible to analyse conversations that have taken place from the early stages of this particular medium. Studying such material is a relatively new and therefore not a very well described field of research. The method used here can be described as a non-participant ethnographic study (Bryman, 2012; Selwyn, 2009), since the objective is to observe and describe the activity in an online community. Thus, our interests are primarily descriptive.

## LOCATING SUITABLE CASES

Finding suitable groups was possible through several searches with keywords assumed to be part of the name of the group, place of study, course, year of examination, and so forth. In this study we made an initial search and found thirty-two groups in a first round, and nineteen in a second round, that might serve as potential cases for analysis. After sending a standard message to the group administrators, with a brief presentation of ourselves and the intentions of the study, we obtained four cases where everyone agreed to participate in the study. The need for consent was important. The four groups that make up our data had been initiated and used by students taking the same course, and students differed with respect to course, place of study, size, and activity level. In other words, they represent quite different parts of the student population and will show a variety of practices.

## METHODS OF ANALYSIS

The analysis of the communication in these groups was done both with a quantitative and qualitative knowledge interest as a background. At a general level the approach can be described as a kind of content analysis where the written postings were categorized with respect to the themes they addressed. A preliminary analysis revealed that the five previously mentioned themes identified by Selwyn (2009) would serve well as an analytical lens. This procedure had the added advantage that it made it possible to see if the patterns in the Norwegian context were similar to or different from what Selwyn found in his study almost ten years ago.

In concrete terms, the first step involved a process where every post during the first twelve months was analysed and categorized according to the themes identified by Selwyn. Instead of analysing the content of both posts and comments separately, the comments were sorted under the same theme as the corresponding posts, and counted towards the total number. Even though the nature of each comments could deviate somewhat from the original theme in the post, it would have been challenging to distinguish the content due to the diverse nature of the comments. In our view, a post is the basis that triggers discussions, and creates activity in the group. Sometimes posts discussing academic matters turn into a discussion of non-academic matters, and vice versa. We assume this will be a zero-sum game, and, in any case, we do not assume that the quantifications represent robust measures but rather provide a hint about the general nature of activity in these groups and the functions that the groups fulfil for the participants.

As a second step, the posts and responses from each user were counted on an individual level. Since the number of posts and comments produced by the students was considerable,

only the first five months, from the beginning of the semester until New Year, were included. The data give an indication about who is active, and who is not (except for reading, perhaps). This kind of counting was pointless in Case Three due to low activity, and was left out of the report. The intention was to reveal if there were any tendencies or patterns, and with so few posts the validity of any claims would have been low.

After these initial quantifications, a qualitative analysis followed in order to characterize the interaction that had taken place. In this analysis of the content, we looked for tendencies found in the groups, for instance what kind of messages has been conveyed and in what manner in this backstage arena. Citations were selected in order to illustrate the nature of conversation, and this was done on the basis of their representativeness. Many posts and comments followed the same kind of structure with specific questions and direct answers. Such citations, taken from Facebook groups communicating in Norwegian, were translated. This process was done with care in order to preserve the original intent, and accompanied by footnotes if necessary.

## RESULTS

In this section we will start with a short introduction of the cases, and then present the results in two different subsections. The first subsection will give an overview of the level of activity in the groups, while the second will attend to the nature of the discussions.

### Introducing the groups

The four groups had students from four different educational institutions. The Facebook pages were established in connection with courses in humanities, law, science and art. These courses were one-year lower grade courses, except in Group 4, where the group followed a two-year master's programme.

To compare the groups, only the first twelve months of Facebook activity were analysed. There is no sign of involvement by academic staff members in the groups, and every group was established in the early period of the course, probably less than three weeks after the beginning. The number of students (N) in the Facebook groups varied from 9 to 54, and the number of contributions (posts and comments) varies from 123 to 2,308.

### Overview of activities

In Table 1, the distribution of activities in the four cases is summed up, and the contributions are categorized in accordance with the model suggested by Selwyn (2009). The total number of contributions, the number of students, average comments on each post, and average contributions per student are presented in the lower rows. The table represents twelve months of activity. Group 1 is in the arts, Group 2 in the humanities, Group 3 in law, and Group 4 in science.

Table 1 Content analysis of the four groups (over twelve months).

Conversation theme	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Group 4
Academic information	423	422	20	51
Practical information	755	994	34	79
University experience	313	143	5	21
Supplication/disengagement	232	151	2	0
Banter	585	444	62	49
<b>TOTAL</b>	2308	2154	123	200
Users (N)	30	54	9	20
Comments/posting	6.5	2.5	13.7	5.9
Avg. contributions (Total/N)	76.9	39.9	3.7	8.3

As can be seen, groups 1 and 2 have a large number of contributions compared to groups 3 and 4. Although the number of students varies, it is obvious that some groups have been more active users than others. The members of Group 1 are by far the most frequent users of this medium.

Contributions with practical information represent the most frequent theme in the groups, except for Group 3. In Group 2 this theme makes up forty-six per cent of all postings. Such posts and comments ask for when and where a lecture will take place, when an assignment is to be finished and so on. Thus, the Facebook group is used as a source of information about day-to-day practicalities.

Banter was also a quite frequent activity in all groups, and in Group 3 this was the most frequent type of contribution. This category includes posts like, for example, sharing pictures and funny videos, and telling jokes. We have placed most contributions that do not belong to the other categories here.

Displays of supplication or disengagement, and recounting and reflecting on the university experience, were less frequent categories, although there was quite a number of contributions of this type in groups 1 and 2.

Table 2 shows a list of the eight most active students during the first five months of activity in three of the groups. These are summed up in two columns, where the number of contributions from each student, and the percentages their contributions yielded. In addition, the total number of contributions for the period is reported at the bottom. Groups 1, 2, and 4 had sufficient number of contributions by the students to be analysed further, while Group 3 has been left out due to low overall participation.

The purpose of this analysis is to say something about the activity level beyond averages. Instead of assuming that the Facebook groups are of equal importance to all students, we found it relevant to look further into the activity level at an individual level. Of course, importance cannot be measured solely by involvement, but here we assume that active participation is at least an indicator that the individual for some reason finds an activity significant.

Table 2 Contributions of the most active students during the first five months.

	Group 1		Group 2		Group 4	
	Posts/comments	Per cent %	Posts/comments	Per cent %	Posts/comments	Per cent %
S 1	250	23.8	279	19.4	20	20
S 2	92	8.8	184	12.8	13	13
S 3	83	7.9	141	9.8	11	11
S 4	80	7.6	112	7.8	6	6
S 5	70	6.7	74	5.1	5	5
S 6	64	6.1	67	4.7	5	5
S 7	61	5.8	53	3.7	5	5
S 8	57	5.4	38	2.6	4	4
S 9	44	4.2	36	2.5	4	4
Total	1,437		1,049		100	

The table shows that there is a clear pattern in the sense that a few students are most active. The most active student in Group 1 has written about 2.5 times as many posts and comments as the next one, and is responsible for almost twenty-four per cent of the total number of contributions. In Group 2, there are a few students who show a high level of activity. Seen as a whole, the nine students listed here are responsible for more than sixty per cent of the total activity, which means that a large portion of the members contribute very little. We can only assume that they are reading the posts and comments, following the developments at a distance. Since some of them mark posts with a 'like' and comment from time to time, they show signs that they are paying attention to the events in the group. We will come back to this.

#### Themes discussed in the groups

The quantitative analysis shows that the most prevalent theme in these groups is characterized as 'exchange of practical information.' Compared to the analysis by Selwyn (2009), where 'banter' was described as a prominent theme, the course-related groups of the kind that are included in our data seem to be oriented towards spreading information about daily practicalities of where and when to be. At the same time, some also ask for assistance about how the academic machinery works. An example of this kind is the post from Group 3, where a student asks *Aren't the grades going to be published in Fronter [The LMS]?* Informative responses to such questions were generally given by fellow students in the group, although questions sometimes were left unanswered as well.

In addition to practical information, academic issues were also present in the groups. The questions were requests for definitions and similar that required short and direct answers. An example taken from Group 2 illustrates this: *Can anyone tell me what libertinism means?* Another student asked: *What would you say are the most important parts of*

'doomed to freedom'? These and other similar posts reflect a need for specific information and explanations helping students to go on with the tasks they are engaged in. The students thus use the group to get substantive feedback from fellow students. In addition, the more experienced students in Group 4 use their Facebook group for engaging in academic communication, although the questions in this case were a bit more specific:

The antibody one uses, is it generated by immunizing e.g. mice with the denaturized protein? Or will the antibody recognize its epitope independent of whether it's generated by the protein's 3d-structure or not?

The student did not get a clear answer to the question, but it triggered a short discussion where the others also got engaged in the matter. The other students introduced their comments with certain reservations like *I think of this like* and *as I understand it*, probably to underscore that they themselves were not sure about the answer but that they wanted to explore the issue.

A general tendency was that long discussions were rare, and there was little overt disagreement between the students in the postings. One illustration of this character of exchanges is taken from Group 2:

Student 1:

Anyone got a good and easy explanation of being-in-itself', and 'being-by-itself'?

Student 2:

Being-in-itself, The object, the reality, phenomenon. Being-in-itself is all we can sense and experience in this world. Being-for-others, The subject, consciousness  
It is your own consciousness that gives meaning to the world.

Student 1:

Thanks a lot!

Student 3:

Hmm? I would maybe summarize it like this: Being-by-itself: All that appears to our consciousness. The subject. Being-in-itself: Everything that does not appear to our consciousness (Like the world itself is without concrete meaning: It just is)

The question received a prompt answer, and the thread could have ended where Student 1 said *thanks a lot*. However, Student 3 apparently was not satisfied with the answer given by Student 2 and suggested an alternative explanation. We perceive this interaction as the beginning of a debate or argumentation, where opposing claims are made, but it ended rather quickly through the second contribution by Student 3. This lack of extended argumentation is typical of what went on in the exchanges that we have included in this category of academic information.

The three most prevalent themes in this study have one thing in common, namely the need for and the spreading of information. Practical information, academic information and banter (which is often a social type of information, like invitations, etc.) are frequently posted and dominate the content in all four cases. One reason for this might be that the

members of these groups participate in introductory courses and may be somewhat inexperienced. While some shared links or documents of relevance spontaneously, the most prevalent format of interaction was short questions written by students who needed quite specific information. For instance, one student in Group 1 asked: *What are we doing tomorrow? I'm only getting a lot of squiggles when I'm trying to download the semester plan.* She has probably forgotten where she was going to meet the next day, and the technology failed her while downloading the plan. Since the hour was somewhat late, we assume she would not consider it appropriate to call the lecturer, so the easy solution was to post a question on the Facebook group. This medium will distribute her request to all users, and if someone happens to be online, they would probably help her out with this problem.

### Variation in activity

It would appear that the level of activity in these groups is increasing and declining with the need of information. During certain periods, for instance before exams and when writing papers, the activity in some of the groups peaked, and many of the passive members became active. This is seen in groups 1 and 2, where the students posted questions concerning academic issues with higher frequency compared to the rest of the year. We believe there are two reasons for this. First, and as previously mentioned, young and inexperienced students need advice when they encounter new situations, and this need becomes quite severe at such times. Both cases are full of requests for almost everything, from definitions to the size of fonts they need for completing their tasks. Second, the Facebook groups seem to be a way for the students to keep in contact with each other. During periods where there are few organized meeting-places, for instance during the exam periods, the activity seems to increase. In such situations it would appear that they need emotional support from their peers.

Even though 'sharing academic information' is the most prevalent theme, 'displaying disengagement and/or supplication' was relatively often seen during such periods. It was not uncommon to see posts like: *I'm close to snapping!! Still have some left, but I'm so tired. LORD it's going to be good to finish this.* Such expressions of frustration are often answered with sympathy from the others, and sometimes there are attempts to encourage the frustrated individual to endure and finish. A supportive feedback might be what the student wanted to elicit with this post, or maybe she just wanted to let off some steam. In either case, many are also posting messages with *good luck wishes* before tests or exams.

The data indicate that the groups constitute communities for as long as the course goes on. During holidays most activity ceased, and the group appears not to fill any wider function for the members.

### ACTIVITY AT AN INDIVIDUAL LEVEL

In Table 2, where the individual contributions are counted, it is evident that there is one person in each group who is significantly more active than the rest, especially so in groups 1 and 2. Approximately one-fifth of all posts and comments were written by this person, which signals that he or she has taken the role as a leader in the group. Why one individual moves into some sort of a leader role is not possible to discern in this study, but different roles in social media have been described in previous research (Strijbos & De Laat, 2010).

Some refer to such individuals as ‘captain’, and describe them as a leading figure that spontaneously takes charge of the group. In this study, the most active member in Group 2 does not act like a captain in the traditional sense. He seldom initiates any activity, but was often the first to respond to academic questions, and he was in the middle of most discussions. The nature of his comments was often quite substantive, asking for additional information to understand the background of the question. The discussion below between Students 1 and 2 is one example where Student 2 is the active one.

Student 1:

Can anyone give me an easy explanation of what ‘the destructive movement of consciousness’ is?

Student 2:

Is this from ‘Fear and Trembling’?

Student 1:

It’s from ‘Sentenced to Freedom.’ I’m not that good at reading the instruction content

Student 2:

Can’t remember that one. What page is this from? Sounds like it’s part of the belief and the leap one have to take?

Student 2:

Now it’s me who’s mixing this up, I believed this was the book about Kierkegaard

Student 1:

Page 63

Student 2:

I’m not sure, but according to Sartre the consciousness is in a constant state of self-neglecting, or annihilation if you like, where the consciousness always renews and transcends itself. ‘Being-by-itself’ (conscious being, Existence-being) annihilates ‘In-itself’

Although Student 2 does not have the answer, he starts a dialogue where he engages in the problem, and tries to find a suitable explanation. This conversation can be regarded as an instance of group thinking, where individuals help each other to solve a common problem (Säljö, 2001, pp. 112–113).

In addition to the people taking a leading role in groups 1 and 2, there seems to be a number of fairly active students who contribute with a significant number of posts and comments. Their position as stable producers of content results in continuous activity in the group, and gives a wide range of perspectives in discussions. However, the majority of the members in all cases contribute little or nothing to the group activities; they appear as ‘lurkers’. In all the present cases, ‘lurkers’ are quite common, and they only contribute occasionally during the four months we followed individual contributions. They might have little to share themselves, but a function in Facebook revealed that they at least have seen, and maybe read, the content posted in the groups. A general trend in social media is that most users prefer just to read (Ørnes, 2015), which also seems to be case here.

## DISCUSSION

The idea behind this study was to explore different student-active, course-relevant Facebook groups in contemporary Norwegian higher education, and to scrutinize possible purposes and patterns of activity in this resource. The background of this interest was the observation that students report using Facebook as a resource during university studies, while teachers do not report doing this. This indicates that there are parallel activities going on where the two groups do not meet but where still activities relevant to university life are negotiated. A specific interest of ours is the extent to which Facebook provides a stage for backstage activities where matters are raised in a different manner than they would be in class.

When comparing our findings with those reported by Selwyn (2009), we noticed that although the categories used were relevant for classifying our empirical material as well, there were still some differences. The student-initiated Facebook groups analysed here contain less banter, and a greater proportion of academic posts. Part of the reason for this difference may be that the students in this study have a shared educational activity, and, we might assume, a shared interest in the subject they study and in the concrete matters of teaching and learning. As we have substantiated in our research here, the conversations of an academic nature in the Facebook groups are often a matter of posing questions, and seeking answers in the group. For the most part, such questions are simple in their form, and the few attempts to discuss the content further are getting little response. This would mean that although they bring academic questions to the front, there is little interest to use the group for an elaborated conversation about the topic. We would therefore claim that one of the main purposes of the group is to be an arena for quick reference.

As a whole, these groups had a prevalence of posts where the students spontaneously shared information, both practical and academic. In addition, there was a fair number of socially oriented posts in most of the groups. The slight variation between groups suggests that the students have more than one reason for being part of a Facebook group, and, in general, we might say they write about the things that matter the most to them in their current context, like, for example, questions about the curriculum, changes in class, and social arrangements. This might say something about why students establish these groups in the first place. All the groups investigated were established shortly after the start of their respective courses, and even though some groups were characterized by a moderate level of activity, the students must have perceived an initial need for this arena. Although it has been questioned if we can count most students as intuitive users of ICT and social media (Ståhl, 2017), creating groups for certain contexts seem to be a common, cultural practice that has been established, and that the students are habituated to. On this basis we might claim that traditional meeting places like libraries, coffee shops, and breaks where informal chatting takes place, have been supplemented by online arenas fulfilling similar functions. Thus, in this sense the medium provides a backstage arena with a low threshold for raising mainly practical concerns, and, to a moderate, degree expressing frustration and anxiety.

Furthermore, we might also say something about different roles students had in this context which they themselves control. While some are quite involved in either social or academic matters, or both, most are not taking part at all. They appear as so-called 'lurkers' (Strijbos & De Laat, 2010). Some claim 'lurkers' can learn through reading posts and com-

ments (Gray, 2004), but in the two groups with few posts, there appears to be little for them to share. In physical meetings, there are other contextual elements of communicative dynamics that enter into the picture, for instance various non-verbal actions that are possible to observe, but in this text-based medium, such triggers for continued interaction are not available. We assume that both the active individuals and the group of students that share and play active roles in some of the cases are of vital importance to the communication generated in the group. With frequent posts and responses these two groups provide an online arena that is both interesting and welcoming for most participants. However, the overall impression is that sustained commitment appears to be a problem, even in cases where students themselves have created the facility.

Finally, the information this study provides about informal Facebook groups opens some new possibilities for research. A written medium like this will potentially provide a rich source of data that can shed some light on, for example, what the students are engaged in during the study period, what difficulties they encounter, and what themes that concern them. Although the data might be biased by the more active students, and the voice of the 'lurkers' might not be heard, it is still a document that reflects some interesting features of the group dynamics of being a student.

## CONCLUSION

This study serves as an example how students use Facebook groups as part of their studies. The results show that they are using Facebook as an arena to share predominantly practical information. Although it might be a popular medium for many users in other activities, there seems to be a minority of the users who are actively participating in these student generated groups. The results confirm the interpretation in research that such groups mainly function as backstage arenas, where small talk and practical information are shared, and this is the case even in settings of this kind where the students have an academic course in common. The proportion of discussions that concern academic issues is low, and such discussions are not sustained over longer periods of time. However, it is still an interesting observation that students themselves create and use Facebook groups as resources for managing university life. Thus, there is a perception of a need for such course-based spaces in academic life, even though they may not become very active as the course continues, and even though they are not part of the academic institution, or of discussing and learning academic knowledge.

## LITERATURE

- Aaen, J., & Dalsgaard, C. (2016). Student Facebook groups as a third space: between social life and schoolwork. *Learning, Media and Technology*, 41(1), 160–186.
- Baran, B. (2010). Facebook as a formal instructional environment. *British Journal of Educational Technology*, 41(6), E146–E149. doi:10.1111/j.1467-8535.2010.01115.x
- Bijker, W. E. (1995). Sociohistorical technology studies. In M. F. Fox, S. Jasanoff, G. E. Markle, J. C. Petersen, & T. Pinch (Eds.), *Handbook of science and technology studies* (pp. 229–246). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Bryman, A. (2012). *Social research methods* (4th ed.). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

- Cain, J., & Policastro, A. (2011). Using Facebook as an informal learning environment. *American Journal of Pharmaceutical Education*, 75(10), 207. doi:10.5688/ajpe7510207
- Cuban, L. (2001). *Oversold and underused: computers in the classroom*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Crook, C., & Bligh, B. (2016). Technology and the dis-placing of learning in educational futures. *Learning, Culture and Social Interaction*, 11, 162–175
- Ellison, N. B., Steinfield, C., & Lampe, C. (2007). The benefits of facebook "friends"; Social capital and college students' use of online social network sites. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 12(4), 1143–1168. doi:10.1111/j.1083-6101.2007.00367.x
- Goffman, E. (1971). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.
- Goodfellow, R., & Lea, M. R. (2013). *Literacy in the digital university: Critical perspectives on learning, scholarship and technology*. London: Routledge.
- Gray, B. (2004). Informal learning in an online community of practice. *Journal of Distance Education*, 19(1), 20–35.
- Gray, K., Annabell, L., & Kennedy, G. (2010). Medical students' use of Facebook to support learning: Insights from four case studies. *Medical Teacher*, 32(12), 971–976. doi:10.3109/0142159x.2010.497826
- Hung, H.-T., & Yuen, S. C.-Y. (2010). Educational use of social networking technology in higher education. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 15(6), 703–714.
- Lantz-Andersson, A. (2016). Embracing social media for educational linguistic activities. *Nordic Journal of Digital Literacy*, 10(01), 50–77.
- Lantz-Andersson, A., Vigmo, S., & Bowen, R. (2013). Crossing boundaries in Facebook: Students' framing of language learning activities as extended spaces. *International Journal of Computer-Supported Collaborative Learning*, 8(3), 293–312.
- Latour, B. (2005). *Reassembling the social: An introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Law, J., & Hassard, J. (Eds.). (1999). *Actor Network Theory and After*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Ludvigsen, S., Lund, A., Rasmussen, I., & Säljö, R. (Eds.). (2011). *Learning across sites: new tools, infrastructures and practices*. London: Routledge.
- Madge, C., Meek, J., Wellens, J., & Hooley, T. (2009). Facebook, social integration and informal learning at university: 'It is more for socialising and talking to friends about work than for actually doing work'. *Learning, Media and Technology*, 34(2), 141–155. doi:10.1080/17439880902923606
- Mäkitalo, Å., Linell, P., & Säljö, R. (Eds.). (2017). *Memory practices and learning. Interactional, institutional and sociocultural perspectives*. Charlotte, NC: Information Age Press.
- Manca, S., & Ranieri, M. (2013). Is it a tool suitable for learning? A critical review of the literature on Facebook as a technology-enhanced learning environment. *Journal of Computer Assisted Learning*, 29(6), 487–504. doi:10.1111/jcal.12007
- Mori, I. (2007). Student expectations study 2007. Coventry: Joint Information Systems Committee.
- Orlikowski, W. J. (2007). Sociomaterial practices: Exploring technology at work. *Organization studies*, 28(9), 1435–1448.
- Postman, N. (2011). *Technopoly: The surrender of culture to technology*. New York, NY: Vintage.
- Säljö, R. (2001). *Læring i praksis: et sosiokulturelt perspektiv* [Learning in practices: a sociocultural perspective]. Oslo: Cappelen akademisk.
- Säljö, R. (2012). Literacy, digital literacy and epistemic practices: The co-evolution of hybrid minds and external memory systems. *Nordic Journal of Digital Literacy*, 12(1), 5–20.
- Säljö, R. (2017). Apps and learning: A sociocultural perspective. In N. Kucirkova & G. Fallon (Eds.), *Apps, technology and younger Learners: International evidence for teaching* (pp. 3–13). London: Routledge.

- Selwyn, N. (2009). Faceworking: Exploring students' education-related use of "Facebook". *Learning, Media and Technology*, 34(2), 157–174. doi:10.1080/17439880902923622
- Selwyn, N. (2014). *Digital technology and the contemporary university: Degrees of digitization*. London: Routledge.
- Strijbos, J.-W., & De Laat, M. F. (2010). Developing the role concept for computer-supported collaborative learning: An explorative synthesis. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 26(4), 495–505. doi:http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2009.08.014
- Ståhl, T. (2017). How ICT savvy are digital natives actually? *Nordic Journal of Digital Literacy*, 12(03), 89–108.
- Vivian, R., Barnes, A., Geer, R., & Wood, D. (2014). The academic journey of university students on Facebook: an analysis of informal academic-related activity over a semester. *Research in Learning Technology*, 22.
- Yang, Y., Wang, Q., Woo, H. L., & Quek, C. L. (2011). Using Facebook for teaching and learning: a review of the literature. *International Journal of Continuing Engineering Education and Life Long Learning*, 21(1), 72–86.
- Ørnes, H. (2015). *Digital tilstand 2014* (Vol. nr. 3/2015). Tromsø: Norgesuniversitetet.