Promoting Student Holistic Development through Student Interaction in Social Networks

Joseph C. H. So and Siu Yuen Lam

Abstract—**This study examines how Facebook is being used as a platform to promote student participations in holistic development activities through interaction among students. The platform is used in an on-going student holistic development project run by a tertiary institution in Hong Kong. The study focuses on the ways are being used in Facebook by a group of student coaches to promote student holistic development, and the potential improvements of such implementation. The study aims at evaluating the effect of instant interaction between participants and student coaches via Facebook Group on the effectiveness of promotion.**

Index Terms— **Facebook, social networks, virtual communication, student holistic development, student coaches.**

I. INTRODUCTION

In the light of the immense popularity of Facebook as the leading frontier among teenagers in secondary schools and tertiary institutions to communicate and interact with peers, educators and even strangers [1]-[3], it is worthwhile to assess and explore its potential as means of communication to foster learning interest among students in different development areas. Some propose to link up online social networks and learning purposes by using Facebook as an interactive communication platform for informal learning experience [4][5], improve their learning outcomes [6], and supportive services such as peer coaching [7].

Such use of online social networks rests upon the assumption that most of the teenagers nowadays belong to the media-savvy, multitasking generation, which commonly possess technological know-how and rely heavily on multimedia in their daily lifestyle. Some describe this generation as the Generation Media, alias 'Generation M' [3] [8]. Thus, a new challenge for educators today is to make use of and explore the learning potentials in multimedia and online social networks of this generation. While Facebook creates energetic virtual communities among the 'Generation M' that can boost learning outcomes in various ways, its potential usage as learning support of self-initiated holistic development among students is yet to be testified.

In this study, we will examine in particular how Facebook is being used as a promotion platform of a student holistic development project run by a Hong Kong tertiary institution, to communicate with participants, to facilitate promotion of activities and to foster participation and interaction among participants. This paper is structured as follows. Section II introduces the background of the student development project of our study. Section III illustrates the ways in which the Facebook Group has been implemented to facilitate interaction between participants of the project. Section IV discuss our reflections on initial evaluation of its impact and Section V presents some future work along with concluding remarks at Section VI.

II. BACKGROUND OF PROJECT SUCCESS – PROJECT FOR PROMOTING STUDENT INITIATED HOLISTIC DEVELOPMENT

In this study, we investigate students from a community college affiliated with a large-scale university in Hong Kong. The college offers 2-year associate degree (AD) and higher diploma (HD) programmes spanning science and technology, communication and social sciences, business and a number of specialized areas for students after their graduation from secondary schools. Most students are between 18 to 22 years of age, who can be described as the 'Generation M'.

The project being studied is called Project SUCCESS (hereinafter, "PS") which is run by the college as an official student holistic development scheme. PS aims to provide a platform which facilitates the students to plan and record their progress and self-reflection in personal development throughout their year-long participation in co-curricular activities. Participants of the project are expected to search for and take part in a wide range of co-curricular activities to achieve a set of milestones, and they are required to submit a portfolio detailing their experience and reflection at the end of an academic year. Several types of services are provided to students in order to assist them in keeping on their progress in the project. During their studies, a wide range of co-curricular activities being run by college and external organisations are promoted via school emails, posters and guidebooks.

Dr. Joseph C. H. So is the Deputy Chairman of Student Development Committee of the Hong Kong Community College, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, HKSAR, China. (e-mail: joseph.so@hkcc-polyu.edu.hk).

Siu Yuen Lam is the Project Associate of the Hong Kong Community College, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, HKSAR, China (e-mail: ccderek@hkcc-polyu.edu.hk).

III.   USE OF FACEBOOK IN THE PROJECT

Starting from 3rd Oct 2011 when a new cohort of the project commenced, the project has been running with the introduction of two new features: Introduction of student coaches and kick-off of a Facebook Group page.   Student coaches aim at providing guidance and assistance to PS participants, as they all have performed well as participants in the previous year. They are responsible for organizing promotion activities, issuing bulletins, updating regularly the contents of the Facebook Group page, and offering advice and guidance when necessary.   Seven student coaches are recruited and they work as a team to offer support and advice throughout the academic year. It is worth to note that no coach was assigned specifically to any participants.

The official Facebook group has since recruited 134 participants as "fans" out of the total number of 522 participants in PS. Student coaches have been using Facebook group as a platform to communicate with participants, including updating latest information, promoting activities, distributing bulletins and answering enquiries. Participants do not communicate with the coaches not via email or noticeboard but via Facebook wall, making a collaborative effort to share all the information related to the project. Postings on the wall of the Facebook Group are not being censored or filtered, although the administrators (Project owner and student coaches) reserve the right to remove any messages with indecent, obscene and violent content, a right which has not been required to exercise until now.

IV.   REFLECTIONS ON THE USE OF FACEBOOK

Reflecting on the effectiveness of the Facebook group throughout the past eight months, the student coaches generally agree that this is a very convenient way to maintain connection with participants since the project does not hold regular activities and meetings. The Facebook group as a medium of communication offers a more flexible and always-ready channel to facilitate their work anytime they are available: between classes, after classes, during lunch time, at home, and also during their meetings with friends. They can introduce what they have been doing with their schoolmates when being approached; they can upload posters and information of different student holistic development activities via their smartphones whenever they get to know; they can answer enquiries to one person on the Facebook wall and the rest of the "fans" will be able to read them thus reducing the possibility of answering the same enquiry repeatedly throughout the year. "Fans" can also further respond by writing comments, share them, and "like" or "dislike" them.   Consequently, the circulation of information related to the project has been boosted by the instant notification of the Facebook function and has reached its readers directly and effectively.

Thus, it is expected that, compared to previous years before the Facebook group was introduced for the project, involvement of participants in college-wide and those organized by external organizations have increased, as the group becomes a reliable source among participants to search for activities as it would be constantly updated with the latest information. Accordingly, it will help students know and explore many NGO and external organisations which they are unheard of before, and they will be more willing to try what students coaches have promoted. This is likely resulted in a higher chance for participants in joining a wider variety of activities.

Participants, in addition, will also make use of such medium of communication to raise questions about the project although their postings may not have been regular, and it is foreseen that more questions will be raised when they start to prepare their self-portfolio for submission in August 2012.

V.   FUTURE WORK

With the above project background, we will proceed to assess the overall impact of the Facebook group in promoting student holistic development. A complete review will be conducted when the cohort of the project ends. The evaluation will be conducted on both quantitative and qualitative models. On the quantitative level, we will investigate the effect of the platform on fostering communication and self-initiation on holistic development among participants. The usage among all participants who had joined the group as an indication of the effectiveness of interaction among them will be measured. It is useful, for example, to count the posts being made by different parties, including participants, student coaches and the project owner and response rate of posts with different nature (e.g. activities, enquiries, instructions or notice, etc.).

On the other hand, reflections can be conducted with the student coaches and their feedback can be used as qualitative assessment. The core questions of interviews can be related to whether the Facebook Group was an effective alternative communication platform other than traditional methods such as email or posters, as well as the evaluation of interaction between different parties within the Facebook Group.

VI.   CONCLUSIONS

Many educators have argued that we should not underestimate the emerging effect of the Internet and its consequential social networking environments on students' learning experience in formal or informal settings. This study illustrates the ways in which Facebook potentially positively affects the interaction between both participants and activity organizer for co-curricular activities in a tertiary institution, especially when it is related to rapid circulation of information. Interaction among students outside the classroom, especially on the online social networks may lead to a more complex learning procedure for students that can be either rewarding or bemusing. A more comprehensive research would provide valuable insights into the Facebook phenomenon among students as learners in the near future.

REFERENCES

[1] M. J. Bugeja, "Facing the Facebook" in *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 2006, C1.

[2] R. Capriccioso, "Facebook face off" in *Inside Higher Ed.*, 2006 [Online]. Available: http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2006/02/14/facebook

[3] S. Vie, "Digital Divide 2.0: 'Generation M' and Online Social Networking Sites in the Composition Classroom" in *Computers and Compositions,* 2008, vol.25, pp. 9-23.

[4] C. M. K. Cheung, P. Y. Chiu, and M. K. O. Lee, "Online social networks: Why do students use facebook?" in *Computers in Human Behavior*, 2011, vol. 27, pp. 1337-1343.

[5] C. Madge, J. Meek, J. Wellens, and T. Hooley, "Facebook, social integration and informal learning at university: it is more for socialising and talking to friends about work than for actually doing work" in *Learning, Media and Technology*, 2009, vol. 34, no. 2, pp. 141–155.

[6] A. Y. Yu, S. W. Tian, D. Vogel & R. C. Kwok, "Can learning be virtually boosted? An investigation of online social networking impacts" in *Computers and Education*, 2010, vol. 55, pp. 1494-1503.

[7] P. Parker, D. T. Hall, and K. E. Kram, "Peer coaching: a relational process for accelerating career learning" in *Academy of Management Learning & Education*, 2008, vol. 7, no.4, pp. 487–503.

[8] D. F. Roberts, and U. J. Foehr, "Generation M: Media in the lives of 8–18 year-olds (Report)" in *The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation*, 2005 [Online]. Available: http://www.kff.org/entmedia/7251.cfm.

Joseph C. H. So received his PhD degree in Information Engineering from The Chinese University of Hong Kong. Dr So had been working as an Internet Protocol Specialist at Pacific Century CyberWorks (PCCW) for several years, concentrating on broadband network development, network management systems, and data centre services, then as the Network Operation Centre Manager of a multinational Internet infrastructure service provider. Dr So is currently a Senior Lecturer and the Deputy Chairman of Student Development Committee of the Hong Kong Community College, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, HKSAR, China. He is a Chartered Engineer and a member of the Institute of Electrical and Electronic Engineers. Dr So is particularly interested in the Peer-to-peer Networks, Internet and World Wide Web Technologies, and Educational Technologies

Siu Yuen Lam currently works as a Project Associate of the Hong Kong Community College, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, HKSAR, China. He has been coordinating research projects on the assessment and evaluation of student holistic development among tertiary students.