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Using Social Networks to Promote Collaboration and Leadership in Foreign Language Learning

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Abstract

The importance of using Web 2.0 tools such as social networking sites to enhance the learning experience has been increasingly recognised in the literature (Blake, 2013; Blattner & Lomicka, 2012; Blattner & Fiori, 2009; Lomicka & Lord, 2009; Mazer et al, 2007; Mynard, 2011; Peeters, 2015). Social networks foster autonomous learning, encourage student motivation and increase their social relationships (Promnitz-Hayashi, 2011). This article discusses how the use of Facebook can promote not only a sense of community of learners but also leadership development in language learners. Through the creation of an online learning community of practice and the use of Facebook groups, students' interactions and interventions were analysed in order to explore the relationship between social networks, foreign language learning, collaborative learning and leadership development in a university context.

Keywords: social networks, Facebook, leadership, collaborative learning, learner autonomy

No one today can deny the importance of exploiting new technologies to enrich the learning experience, and the field of language learning is no exception to this (Blake, 2013). Among the different Web 2.0 tools that can be used in foreign language learning, both inside and outside the academic setting, are social networking sites (SNSs), whose popularity has increased exponentially over the last few years. A growing number of studies have explored how SNS can be usefully exploited in foreign language learning, as they foster target language input and output while promoting learner autonomy (Promnitz-Hayashi, 2011).

Not only can SNSs be used to share resources, materials and news, but they also have the potential to encourage students' engagement and motivation, and increase self-confidence in the target language (Akbari, Pilot, & Simons, 2015; Akbari, Naderi, Pilot, & Simons 2016; Brick, 2011; Lomicka & Lord, 2009; Mazer, Murphy, & Simonds, 2007; Mills, 2011; Mynard, 2011).

Moreover, together with other Web 2.0 tools, SNSs allow for the development of online communities based on higher levels of interactivity, collaboration, inclusion and participation, thus opening new opportunities to explore new and different relationships between students, their peers and their teachers (Harrison & Thomas,

2009, p. 112). Social networks have been described as “a collaborative space” (Peeters, 2015, p. 188), a social environment where the language learning process can become more communicative and participatory as well as more reflective (Mynard, 2011).

On the basis of these premises, the aim of this study is to investigate how the integration of SNS (i.e. Facebook) in university language learning, and more specifically in a blended learning course, can lead not only to increased peer collaboration and enhanced learner autonomy, but also to an evolution in students’ roles in the learning process. In fact, the use of SNS in the target language can help students take charge of their own learning and become more confident learners, and this can lead to more effective language learning experiences, both individually and collectively. The present study thus explores the impact and influences that the incorporation of Facebook into the language learning environment can have on students’ behaviour and their changing role as learners.

Leadership: From Teachers to Students

The present study takes the view that the concept of leadership is closely connected to teaching and learning. Knight (2010, p. 121) affirms that “it is recognized that leadership, learning and teaching are strongly interconnected” and quotes Liu (2010, p. 16), who states that a leader’s main role is that of a teacher, and that a teacher is also a learner:

[...] if you are not teaching, you are not leading. In a teaching organization, everyone teaches, everyone learns, and everyone gets smarter everyday. [...] Being a teacher also means being a learner. It isn’t only that you learn first and then teach, but that you learn through teaching.

The important connection between the role of teacher and that of leader is thus quite obvious. However, since new learning environments are becoming increasingly learner-centred and self-access learning is increasingly fostered in higher education settings, the role of the teacher is changing as a result, as well as that of the student. The language teacher often acts as a mediator or facilitator in the learning process while the students have the opportunity to take control of their learning.

Knight (2010, p. 121) also argues that peer teaching enhances student responsibility and collaboration and that

having students learn through teaching (i.e., the sharing of what they have learned) is a promising approach for preparing students to succeed in the global workplace where leadership, learning, and teaching skills are highly valued.

Based on these assumptions, it can be argued that not only teachers, but also learners can act as leaders, and SNS seem to offer the ideal space to explore these dynamics, as they allow students to “become autonomous in a socially interactive environment by exploring the target language through communication, collaboration, and experimentation” (Blake, 2013, p. 156).

Various definitions and conceptualizations of leadership have been put forward by different scholars. However, very few studies have concentrated on the concept of leadership in language learning environments. Indeed, leadership is rarely mentioned in the literature. Knight (2015) reported two definitions that may be useful in the context of this study:

Leaders are agents of change – persons whose acts affect other people more than other people’s acts affect them. Leadership occurs when one group member modifies the motivation or competencies of others in the group. (Bass, 1990, p. 19-20)

Leadership does not denote radically different things for different scholars. One can detect a family resemblance between the different definitions. All of them discuss leadership as some kind of process, act, or influence that in some way gets people to do something. (Ciulla, 1998, p. 11)

These two definitions shed light on two fundamental features of leadership: *change* and *influence*, that is, how leaders are able to change a given situation and encourage people to do things. The conceptualization of leadership as an ‘influence relationship’ provides a useful framework within which to interpret student interactions in the context of an online community of practice.

Another conceptualisation of leadership that may be applicable in the context of SNS is the one that emphasises the importance of *collaboration*. Collaborative leadership¹ is the result of a collaborative effort, where responsibility is shared by everyone and there is no one leader in the traditional sense; collaborative leadership is about the *process* rather than the *people*. Collaborative leaders encourage and motivate potential leaders and help people make real connections with one another. The concept of collaborative leadership can be applied to a variety of situations, and it seems particularly relevant in the context of learning, where teachers may act as collaborative leaders who encourage new leadership from within the group. As this paper will argue, SNS provide opportunities for the emergence of both traditional and collaborative leadership in a learning environment.

Social Networks: Collaborative and Autonomous Learning

In a social constructionist view of learning, SNS in an educational context can be exploited to create a collective, shared and collaborative learning environment, which may result in higher achievements than just individualistic learning (Johnson & Johnson, 2004; Mason & Rennie, 2008). Collaborative learning online places students at the centre of the learning experience which takes place in authentic language settings (Karpati, 2009). By promoting common ground, collaboration, friendship, a sense of belonging and a feeling of affiliation (Pugliese, 2017), SNS allow students' social relationships to increase. As highlighted by Chartrand (2012, p. 97),

Advances in technology mean that today, learners of a language can easily interact with their peers in meaningful practice that helps foster language acquisition and motivation. That is, tasks that make use of Web 2.0 interactivity can significantly raise students' potential to generate meaningful output and stimulate their interest in language learning.

As noted by Blake (2013, p. 161), "increased motivation and improved performance in language classes have long been associated with the feeling of classroom community", and "Facebook can clearly enhance a student's sense of belonging". In

¹ <http://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/leadership/leadership-ideas/collaborative-leadership/main>

this online environment, students can develop empathy, self-confidence and social awareness, and construct an image of themselves as autonomous language learners.

Crucially important for the use of SNSs in language learning is the notion of autonomous learning: social networks can be used as a way to encourage autonomous and student-centred learning, allowing learners to develop a voice (Little, 2007) and use the target language, individually and collaboratively.

SNSs in this study are integrated in a blended learning environment which combines classroom learning and self-access/online learning, thus creating “a social network enhanced blended learning environment” (Mynard, 2011, p. 302).

Facebook: A third space for learning

Social networks have revolutionised communication, especially among young generations as well as students in Higher Education (Akbari et al, 2016). Facebook (FB), with more than two billion users, is undoubtedly one of the most widespread and successful SNS (Blake, 2013; Blattner & Lomicka, 2012; Chartrand, 2012) and has become the most popular in Western countries (Godwin-Jones, 2010).

Since their inception, SNS have had a strong appeal for language teachers and learners (Harrison & Thomas, 2009). However, only recently have teachers and educators started to experiment with targeted ways to use this well-known SNS for language learning purposes (e.g. Hamilton-Hart, 2010). Indeed, FB can be used as an extension of the classroom (Schwartz, 2009) and as a support network for effective self-access learning (Peeters, 2015) to motivate students and encourage them to share ideas, thoughts, videos, resources and activities and to express themselves in authentic ways (Chartrand, 2012).

There are a number of reasons why FB has the potential to be an effective tool in language learning in a university context. First of all, today’s students are for the most part familiar with Web 2.0 and with SNSs, which are usually part of their everyday lives and often define their communication style. Today’s students, who are part of the so-called “Net Generation” (Jones, Ramanau, Cross & Healing 2010), are accustomed to using Web 2.0 tools in different aspects of their lives. However, the use of new technology is not just related to age or generation. White & Le Cornu (2011) distinguish between “Residents”, people who see the Web as a place where they enjoy spending time and who are comfortable expressing their identity in virtual spaces, and “Visitors”, who use the Web as a tool whenever they need it but do not

“reside” there. The Visitors and Residents typology has been put forward as an alternative to - and an evolution of - Prensky’s (2001) famous binary opposition between digital Natives and digital Immigrants. White & Le Cornu’s distinction is not based on age or gender and is not a polar distinction but rather a continuum. Individuals, and as a consequence learners, may sometimes function more as Visitors and sometimes more as Residents, according to their motivation (White & Le Cornu, 2011). This paradigm, based on the metaphor of place and grounded on the importance of motivation, has important implications for online learning. Today’s students may operate mainly as Residents, but this does not necessarily mean that they have the digital literacy to use technology for specific purposes (i.e., learning).

Most university students have a FB account, and associate it with their personal sphere and identity; they use it for self-presentation and to establish personal identity, for social interaction (through a one-to-one or one-to-many communication style) and to share their views, emotions and experiences (Blattner & Lomicka, 2012). From an educational perspective, FB can function as a ‘third space’ of learning which bridges the gap between the academic setting and the students’ personal sphere, between the online and offline social networks, between self-access or autonomous learning and social learning.

The Study

This study seeks to investigate how the use of SNSs (i.e. Facebook) integrated with blended language learning environments can influence students’ attitudes and behaviour, leading to a negotiation of roles through enhanced peer interaction and collaboration. The following research questions were formulated:

1. How do students shape their learning behaviour through online collaboration?
2. How does the social environment of FB establish or encourage different roles among teachers and students?
3. How can the social framework of FB be used to explore and promote different kinds of leadership?

The research project (FB project) involved two classes of university students in their first year attending an English Language and Translation Course at the University of Parma, taught by the same teacher in two different Departments

(Foreign Languages; Communication Studies). Although involvement in the project was voluntary, a significant number of students attending the two courses decided to participate: a total of 266 students took part (85% of the total number of attending students). Both courses adopted a blended learning approach consisting of traditional classroom hours and online learning using the University e-learning platform (Moodle), which provides students with opportunities for self-access learning. The integration of FB therefore offered an extension both of the physical environment of the classroom and of the virtual space of the e-learning platform. While the university platform is mainly used in relation to the contents of the course, FB provides a virtual space where students can discuss not only topics and materials of the course but also communicate freely in the target language and interact with each other, establishing and negotiating different kinds of relationships and roles, as well as expressing their identities as learners of English as a foreign language.

A preliminary survey was administered to the students, asking general questions about their familiarity with FB and their FB usage (See Table 1). What emerged from their responses is that the majority of students already had a Facebook account (95%) and that the main reasons for using it were of a personal and social nature rather than for educational or learning purposes. Furthermore, students' responses revealed that while most of them followed the University's official Facebook page to obtain news and information (90%), no one had ever used FB in a foreign language course and only 10% had used it in a different course. Students' responses thus indicated that FB is an everyday tool that is part of their lives but they are not accustomed to using it in an educational context. In other words, the students had never used FB for learning purposes, inside or outside the English classroom.

1. <i>Do you have a FB account?</i> YES (95%) NO (5%)
2. <i>Do you open FB every day?</i> YES (100%) NO (0%)
3. <i>Do you follow the University of Parma FB page?</i> YES (90%) NO (10%)
4. <i>Have you ever used FB in a university course?</i> YES (10%) NO (90%)
5. <i>Have you ever used FB in a language course?</i> YES (0%) NO (100%)

Table 1. Preliminary survey

Facebook Groups: A community of learners

The integration of FB in the English course mainly took advantage of Facebook Group functions. As stated by Blake (2013, p. 160), “the Group application can be utilized in language classes in a variety of socially constructive and psychologically satisfying ways”. Moreover, the social framework of FB, by encouraging peer-to-peer communication, “seems to be highly applicable to support learners in developing self-regulated learning strategies through peer collaboration” (Peeters, 2015, p. 177).

The teacher created two closed FB Groups, with the aim to generate communities of practice (Blattner & Fiori, 2009). The Group was joined by 177 students of Foreign Languages (90% of the total students attending the course) and by 89 students of Communication (80% of the total students attending the course). Since privacy and “friending” can be delicate issues (Blattner & Lomicka, 2012), students were not required to add each other as FB friends. In this context FB primarily functioned as a network connecting students who already knew each other relatively well, because they were all attending the same course. What is interesting to investigate is how the use of FB impacts on social connections in terms of learning attitudes and behaviour.

Joining the group was voluntary, as well as participation in the forum through different kinds of interventions. The Group Forum is a way of bringing the community of learners together (Blattner & Lomicka, 2012), allowing students to interact freely in a stress-free environment: they can express their opinions, attach links, share ideas, photos, videos, event invitations and add comments.

FB in this context is used as a complement and extension to the classroom and to the e-learning environment as an interactive tool to encourage learner autonomy, student communication and peer collaboration through weekly discussions of topics and sharing of materials, resources, links and ideas. The social environment of the FB Group promotes socialisation and community building (Peeters, 2015), while at the same time enhancing the potential of self-access learning, since students explore new possibilities of learning outside the traditional academic environment and they do so in independent and personal ways.

Diffusion of power

This study is based on the assumption that a collaborative environment enables active learning and the collective construction of knowledge, which are fundamental aspects in the social process of learning (Harrison & Thomas, 2009). The collaborative nature of learning is strictly linked with the “decentralisation of power”, which entails the “breaking down of socially-constructed power/knowledge hierarchies” (Simmonds, 2016, p. 40).

Within the FB community, power relations were decentralised as a result of the different roles played by the teacher, who functioned as a facilitator of online interaction, a mediator or moderator, initiating the first discussions and occasionally commenting on students’ posts. By refusing to act as a deliverer of knowledge, the teacher placed the students at the centre of the learning experience, viewing them as “contributors of knowledge” (Beldarrain, 2006, p. 149) and creating a more “egalitarian” learning environment (Simmonds, 2016, p. 38).

In this way, FB becomes a space for the diffusion of power: when the teacher loses power, the student gains the opportunity to contribute to the construction of knowledge through peer collaboration and peer mentoring/teaching. In this way, FB can have an impact on the student-to-student relationship as well as the teacher-to-student one, because “it decreases the asymmetric power relationship normally maintained in the standard classroom hierarchy by putting everyone on more of an equal footing” (Blake, 2013, p. 161). As observed by Everhard (2015, p. 301) in her study on peer-mentoring in self-access language learning, “a mentoring relationship is one between equals and is therefore not hierarchical”. This type of relationship, based on cooperation and mutuality, results in the “empowerment of all the people involved”. Ruegg, Sudo, Takeuchi, and Sato’s (2017) study on peer tutoring shows how collaborative learning provides opportunities not only to support academic achievement, but also to improve learners’ communication and leadership skills.

The FB project

The FB project was mainly aimed at

- verifying whether students feel more confident and comfortable to express themselves in the target language in an online, informal environment than when they take part in oral face-to-face discussions in the classroom,

- promoting a sense of group outside the university classroom and more generally outside the academic setting, in order to allow students to interact in the target language in a social environment and to explore and acquire new roles, such as mentors, mediators and group leaders.

The FB project started with topic discussions in the Group Forum. The topics could range from themes belonging to the course syllabus to any other cultural, social or linguistic aspect, event or news regarding the target country. The first topic was introduced by the teacher, and the students were then free to intervene and interact by publishing their comments under the main post. The teacher had the initial role of 'breaking the ice' and afterwards let the students initiate and manage the subsequent discussion topics. The students were also free to share videos, images and links on the Group Wall. The teacher, who acted as a peer, continued to sporadically take part in discussions, occasionally initiating further topics. By acting as a simple member of the group, the teacher decided to tolerate mistakes in the target language in order to reduce students' inhibition and to encourage social interactions in the target language.

Analysis and Discussion

This study aims at drawing conclusions regarding the integration of FB in a blended language learning environment and its implications for the emergence and negotiation of new roles. The collection and analysis of data was carried out by the teacher herself, who analysed the FB posts produced by the students during the semester and observed students' changing attitudes and behaviours.

In order to investigate students' attitudes and behaviour, data was collected and analysed using a qualitative approach, through the analysis of discussion boards and posts. A qualitative methodology was preferred in order to explore the students' subjectivity: the analysis of discussion boards focused on the kinds of topics chosen by the students, the degree of student participation to each post and the attitude displayed by the students.

Discussion boards

The first discussion topic initiated by the teacher (Example 1) was a question asking students to name their favourite film and an average of 20% replied in both Groups.

TEACHER'S POST

*Good evening everybody! I have a question for you: what is your favourite film?
You can post the trailer and write a short comment explaining why you like it.*

Example 1. First discussion topic initiated by the teacher

The subsequent discussion topics, initiated by the students, ranged from simple questions concerning their favourite books or favourite actors to more detailed topics concerning linguistic issues and current or past cultural events. It is interesting to note that students' responses increased when the topic was initiated by a peer (40% to 50%), thus showing that involvement is fostered not only when students talk about what they like but also when communication is initiated and encouraged amongst themselves. The total number of posts for each topic varied not only according to the students' interest in the topic but also due to the voluntary nature of the project. In fact, there was no 'reward' (grade or extra credits) for participating in these activities, hence students decided to intervene only when they actually had something to say or when they felt that the topic was interesting for them.

Another way of promoting participation was by engaging students in discussions about current events. For instance, one of the most commented posts (50% participation) initiated by the teacher concerned the Academy Award Ceremony: several students intervened making predictions about the possible winner of Best Picture (see Example 2).

TEACHER'S POST

Which film will win the Oscar for Best Picture tonight? Let's guess!

STUDENT 1

I think "la la land" will win the Oscar for the best picture! It makes you jump to the legendary Hollywood, and the actors' performances are simply mesmerizing!

STUDENT 2

I think Moonlight will win the Oscar, just to make Trump really angry.

STUDENT 3

I think La La Land will win the Oscar for Best Picture, although I really liked Manchester by the Sea.

Example 2. Discussion board about current event

Students also generated new posts related to previous ones, for example commenting on the actual winners of the Academy Awards. The analysis of the discussion boards revealed that the students who started a new topic then acted as ‘moderators’ in the discussion when other peers intervened.

Collaborative learning, peer mentoring and leadership development

The FB project left the students free to post all kinds of resources and materials, such as videos, images and links on the Group Wall. In terms of topics, the analysis of discussion boards and posts revealed that the students of Foreign Languages showed a preference for linguistic topics (70%). The most frequent posts were videos exploring a variety of linguistic aspects (see Example 3) or images (e.g. memes, gifs) explaining the idiomatic meaning of English phrases or expressions.

STUDENT'S POST

Looking through TED videos I've found "How to Use a Semicolon" and I think can clarify when we should use this type of punctuation.

Example 3. Video shared by a student

Communication studies students, on the other hand, showed a distinct preference for cultural topics (80%). Regardless of the topic, the approach to communication in both Groups was informal and relaxed and the approach to learning was collaborative and participatory.

Indeed, what was apparent from the analysis of the posts was a collaborative attitude to the learning experience which emerged spontaneously in both FB Groups. In a significant number of cases (80% of total posts in the Foreign Languages Group and 60% in the Communication Group) students commented on peers' posts asking for clarifications or additional examples. It is interesting to note that these queries were never directly addressed to the teacher, who in truth was not acting as such, but rather to their peers, who were always ready to provide an answer, without being afraid of being judged or corrected. Example 4 shows students actively (co)-constructing knowledge through collaboration and peer mentoring.

STUDENT 1 <i>It's a piece of cake.</i>
STUDENT 2 <i>Sorry but I can't get the meaning... can someone explain it to me?</i>
STUDENT 3 <i>I think it means that something is very simple. Perhaps the cake is so delicious that it's simple to eat it!</i>

Example 4. Collaborative learning and peer mentoring

This kind of collaborative approach, which is obviously more difficult to achieve in a face-to-face classroom context, can help enhance students' self-esteem and make them more aware of their active role as members of a community of learners. Moreover, it should be noted that unlike other forms of peer mentoring/teaching where the students are 'officially' assigned their role as tutors/teachers, in the FB context their role as mentors/teachers emerged naturally and each student more or less consciously chose a role for her/himself.

The numerous examples of peer mentoring/teaching indicate how students were ready to take on new roles in a stress-free online environment, actively contributing to the construction of knowledge and bringing *change* to the community of learners. Through the co-construction of knowledge, learners are more involved not only in their own process of learning, but also in the community's overall learning process, thus acting as collaborative leaders. Breaking down power hierarchies led to a more comfortable learning and social environment where students not only felt free to express themselves without any inhibition or obligation, but also one where they took responsibility for the community's learning. The social environment of FB thus seems to stimulate collaborative leadership. Indeed, the overall tendency observable from the students' posts is one of enhanced participation, interactivity and collaboration.

What also emerged is that some students spontaneously took on the role of group leaders and contributed to promoting a sense of community outside the classroom. Indeed, the FB Group is also as a group of friends who share common interests, such as films, music, art, and so on. The group leaders frequently intervened on the Group Wall by suggesting or promoting activities, thus establishing an *influence* relationship, literally encouraging other students to do things (see Example 5-6-7).

STUDENT'S POST

*I would like to signal to everybody that tonight will be broadcasted on TV8 channel the Rom-com "Did you hear about the Morgans?"
I wish you all a good evening.*

Example 5.

STUDENT'S POST

This is the Original Version Movie programme. Don't miss it!

Example 6.

STUDENT'S POST

In case you don't have any plans tonight, don't miss Macbeth in the original language!

Example 7.

Although the use of FB in an English course was a totally new experience for students, both groups participated actively in the discussion topics and students interacted with each other, helped each other and established new roles. In this online environment, which is both social and educational, students create roles for themselves, acting as mediators, mentors/teachers and leaders. Collaborative leadership is thus something that students build themselves through communication with others and through a process of shared learning which can help them in their personal development as language learners.

Conclusions

This study has shown how Facebook can function as a third space of learning that allows students and teachers alike to participate in collaborative learning processes and that also fosters students' social relationships. The use of SNS is relevant not only in terms of their impact on active language learning and in target language output but also how they influence students' overall personal development as learners and their relationships with peers and teachers, enabling them to express their identities and to negotiate their role in an online environment.

Overall, the incorporation of Facebook into an English blended course highlighted the positive and beneficial impact of using SNS in the context of higher education:

1. The motivational and social components (Tassinari, 2012) of learner autonomy are promoted: students independently decided when to intervene in discussions, what to say and what to share with their peers.
2. Learners feel free to express themselves in the target language without being judged, which naturally leads to reduced inhibition, increased self-esteem and self-confidence to the point that some students spontaneously take on the role of mentors and even that of group leaders.
3. Collective and interactive learning, together with the disruption of power relations, can lead to a shared, communal process of learning and to the emergence of collaborative leaders, who help other students make real connections with one another.

This study has highlighted the applicability of Facebook in blended learning environments in creating a third space that promotes the development of “processes of democratisation” (Simmonds, 2016, p. 41) and encourages students to become more proactive learners, whose actions can cause change and have an influence on other learners. Therefore, SNS provide a virtual and collaborative space for students to explore different roles in their language learning process, ultimately making them more aware of the social nature of learning.

Notes on the contributor

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