Leveraging Facebook as a peer-support group for students

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports the use of Facebook in a Digital Marketing course in a Finnish university as a peer-support group for a course consisting of 80 marketing students. It identifies seven types of student- and teacher-generated content: (1) topical course information, (2) substance updates, (3) course ideas, (4) related-course recommendations, (5) event updates, (6) job updates, and (7) feedback on business ides. It also discusses educator's parameters and their problems. For example, risk of artificial communication if participation is required but motivation is purely extrinsic. Commercial social networks may be useful in education because they are user-friendly, easy to adopt and involve less friction than isolated systems, such as Moodle. Peer support frees up teacher's time but needs to be devised correctly to encourage students to participate. In practice, the teacher needs to invest time and effort in providing interesting content and help. More than technology, barriers of peer support relate to social issues and expertise – the students must differ in their knowledge to a degree where peer support becomes possible, and feel comfortable in both asking and providing help. Based on this case, churn in the group can be kept low even after the course by posting interesting content which differs considerably from typical course-related virtual communities.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter reports the experiences of using Facebook as a peer-support tool in a university course ("MA8 Digitaalinen markkinointi", 6 ECTS). It connects to peer learning literature that includes previous experiences from many empirical settings, as well as literature on learning via social media sites (SNS). For example, Webb and Mastergeorge (2003a) studied learning in collaborative mathematics classrooms in a US middle school. Kear (2004) reported the experiences of distance learners of technology at the UK Open University, focusing on two courses where computer conferencing has been used in different ways: for optional peer support and for assessed group activities. My course was carried out in the spring term, 2012, and the functionality of Facebook Groups is based on that time. The course itself was organized for the first time – it was a digital marketing course in a Finnish university attended by bachelor-level students. Facebook Groups enable to create a private (closed) community in which students who had registered in Facebook could freely join. The objective of the chapter is to discuss the advantages and challenges of using the Facebook Groups function in attempting to create a peer support group for students of higher education.

THE CONCEPT OF PEER LEARNING

Peer learning is sometimes referred to with 'cooperative learning' and 'collaborative learning' (Strijbos, Martens, & Jochems, 2004). Other terms used in the literature include 'peer tutoring', and 'peer assessment' in which students evaluate one another (Topping, 2005). They are based on substituting the hierarchical, uni-directional relationship between the educator and the student with peer interaction, so that ideally the students work in a group to enhance each other's learning. Thus, the teacher's role becomes more of a facilitator, rather than the definitive authority. This is different from teaching, tutoring or peer tutoring, all which imply an unequal partnership among participants (Keppell, Au, Ma, & Chan, 2006). Noted by (Kear, 2004), "as members of a learning community [students] can support each other in building knowledge, (…) explore their current understanding,

build on what they already know, and gain a range of different perspectives" (p. 151). Further advantages include potential for improving learning and achievement, increasing students' motivation and time on task, increased self-esteem, liking and acceptance of others, empathy, and development of teamwork skills (Webb & Mastergeorge, 2003b). Finally, peer learning is linked to lifelong learning and promotes skills that students can apply to real-world professional settings (Keppell et al., 2006).

The psychological stream of peer learning is rooted in the constructivist approach of both Piaget (1952) and Vygotsky (1964), according to which the learner actively constructs his own meaning and understanding. The interaction with others helps to efficiently internalize knowledge that could otherwise remain distant and unprocessed "text in a book" (Webb & Mastergeorge, 2003a) – in a reciprocal peer learning internalizing happens reciprocally for both the one asking help and the one providing it, as they are both engaged in active processing of the subject matter (Johnson, Johnson, & Holubec, 2008). Peer learning in a virtual environment combines pedagogy and technology, thereby increasing the distance between learners and the requirement for efficient communication via a learning platform (Strijbos et al., 2004). Whether the environment is a virtual learning platform or a classroom, peer learning is based on the same constructivist principles. In the case described here, the course was not virtual, but a normal lecture course. Therefore, the Facebook group provided additional support and was not required to participated or included in the course assessment.

The following figure represents a conceptual classification of peer learning and related concepts.

[insert "Figure 1 Concepts relating to peer learning" about here]

For example, Webb has studied peer-learning in a small group environment (see Webb & Mastergeorge, 2003a; Webb & Mastergeorge, 2003b; Webb et al., 2006) Virtual environments use technology to unify students in virtual peer learning. Kear (2004) describes the history of peer learning systems, identifying text-based bulletin boards, email lists, computer conferencing systems, Internet newsgroups, and commercial virtual learning environments (VLEs). She also distinguishes between synchronous and asynchronous systems – the former involves real-time interaction (e.g. conferencing), whereas the latter is a recollection of messages (e.g. discussion forum or Facebook group). It is notable that synchronous systems require a high degree of coordination; however, engagement during them can be higher than in static discussion boards[i]. Participation, in turn, describes the behavioral aspect of peer learning: if the environment is the structure, participation is the process taking place in the structure. The framing of peer learning behaviors can also be referred to as 'scripting'. King, (2006) defines scripting as "structuring and regulating interaction during collaborative learning" (p. 15), consisting of roles, activities and sequence of activities during a collaborative learning process. Scripted collaboration, e.g. peer learning guided by guidelines given by the teacher, can take both online and offline learning contexts – one can find more material on this approach to peer learning by the use of keyword 'computer-supported collaborative learning' (CSCL).

Webb and Mastergeorge (2003a) distinguish between help-seeking and help-giving behaviors. In a simplified model, peer learning needs both help-seekers and help-givers to function; and the two need to be balanced in proportion. (Strijbos et al., 2004) set out to design a method for computer-supported group-based learning (CSGBL) and identified critical elements that influence interaction among students. These included learning objectives, type of task, degree of pre-structuring, group size and computer support. In an unrestricted peer-support group, such was our case, the teacher sets little or no tasks and rules for the group, instead expecting it to take its shape based on specific needs of the participating students. This can be seen as a required guideline if the participation is voluntary.

Participation has been found to vary greatly among students, regardless of incentives and course rules. Stated by (Kear, 2004, p. 162):

> Some students will only take part if the course assessment gives them marks for doing so. Some will take part because they gain information and help from others, which supports their learning. Others value interaction for its own sake, and gain support and motivation from others students in the forum.

Clearly, there are individual motives and the inherent *agency effect* of free will (Bandura, 2001) which results in different behaviors and which cannot be absolutely manipulated by the teacher framing the course. However, the level of participation can be influenced in many ways. It is essential, for example, that the teacher "kick-starts" the peer learning process by providing the rules of interaction and initial content (Webb & Mastergeorge, 2003a). However, when the teacher takes over the interaction, students may fall back to their passive role. When the students initiate the topics, they are likely to correspond to active instead of passive learning. Webb and Mastergeorge (2003b) note that the lack of cognitive restructuring leads to a situation in which students may become unable to correct their misconceptions or lack of understanding.

Furthermore, it must be noted that informal peer learning is common, with or without technology. It takes place when students "discuss lectures, assignments, projects and exams in casual social settings" (Keppell et al., 2006, p. 454). Formal peer learning, then again, is structured into the course and advocated explicitly by the teacher. Webb and Mastergeorge (2003b) argue that self-explanations help students "internalize principles, construct specific inference rules for solving the problem, and repair imperfect mental models" (p. 363). In regards to peer learning via social network sites, it is crucial that these self-explanations are made explicit to others. Second, it is important that students apply the learning from self-explanations into problem solving – otherwise, they risk a false sense of competence (Webb & Mastergeorge, 2003b). Finally, it is important that errors and shortcomings are revealed during the process of problem solving, as it may activate the group as a whole to provide support in finding better solutions (*ibid*.).

APPLICATIONS OF SOCIAL NETWORKS IN LEARNING AND TEACHING

Benson, Filippaios, and Morgan (2010) studied how students apply social network connections to "build their social capital, share knowledge and enhance their employability prospects" (p. 1). They applied social capital as a theoretical lens, and were mostly interested in the use of social media throughout the student lifecycle, comprising of the period of studying as well as later career progression. Rodriguez (2011) examined the shift of academic activities from private environments to the web ('public sphere'), and focused on regulations and laws that apply (or do not apply) online, such as intellectual property rights, copyright law, and the fair use exemption. Lee and McLoughlin (2007) argue that the 'closed classroom' model will be replaced by learning through various social media outlets, some of which are operated by educational institutions (e.g. universities) while other are student-run. In similar vein, they argue that students become producers of learning materials rather than just passive consumers of it. Although we have seen such cases in e.g. Youtube, where one can find student-made videos on many topics, the production of educational content is still marginal and the consumption patterns in many mainstream services, such as Youtube, focus on entertainment, not educational content. Therefore, these wild visions may somewhat constitute of hype. On the other hand, specialized learning portals, such as Khan Academy, provide extensive content – but even in these cases the contribution to content creation is highly centralized, and it would seem that the majority of students lack the interest, time, motivation, or skills[ii] to produce useful learning material. The quality of learner-generated content (LGC) has been specifically studied by Pérez-Mateo, Maina, Guitert, and Romero (2011) who developed a set of quality criteria.

The vision of Web 2.0 learning, as thought by some authors, is depicted in Table 1, comparing "old" and "new" ways.

Table 1 Vision of Web 2.0 learning

Old way	**New way**
Teacher as authority	Teacher as facilitator
Teacher as content producer	Students and teacher both as content producers
Closed classroom	World wide web

Regarding the shift in content production (such as learning material), Rodriguez (2011) notes that "user-generated content (UGC) […] no longer limit[s] users to being passive consumers of content

but enable them to become active participants and even authors in a collaborative social environment." The ideology behind user-generated content is based on the so-called Web 2.0 movement (O'Reilly, 2005), according to which users generate the content for web platforms to monetize – the analogy in an educational environment is that the students create educational content for other students to help them to internalize subject matters. Therefore, learner generated content can be highly useful, and in fact embody the concept of virtual peer learning, at least when it is broadened beyond immediate interaction between students. The role of the student, therefore, seems to be changing from passive consumption of knowledge into producing helpful material to other students. In fact, Lee and McLoughlin (2007) argue that "the UGC [user-generated content] movement is reshaping the debate over both *what* we teach and *how* we teach it." So far, this has proven correct in predicting students' search habits, which utilizes more and more tools such as Wikipedia and Google (sometimes up to a point where source critics is forgotten), but regarding peer learning in virtual environments, there is still much to develop. Yet, the existence of learner-generated content and its dissemination through computer-mediated networks leads to a tremendous opportunity for virtual peer learning.

WHY FACEBOOK?

Several features of Facebook increase its convenience for educational purposes. For example, link previews show information about the target prior to clicking, which may reduce the barrier of clicking as users are more aware of what to expect. Such an influence may lead to increasing click-through-rates (Yoo, 2009). In addition, the instructor is able to see how many members saw a specific post in the group. This is not possible by using many other tools, Moodle included. The overall user-friendliness of Facebook is also high compared to alternatives. Students can also be invited by email, although the feature was not used this time. Because students frequently visit Facebook, they receive notifications of new content.

Table 2 Subjective evaluation of Facebook Groups and Moodle

	Facebook	Moodle
Frequency of visits	+	–
User-friendliness	+	–
Information on who saw the post	+	–
Link previews	+	–

+ = high/yes – = low/no

Ultimately, the decision to choose Facebook as a course community tool was based on three premises:

(1) *Convenient to set up* – Based on the teacher's previous experience, Facebook groups are much faster to set up than their alternatives (e.g. Moodle, which was the main reference point due to previous experience and the fact it is widely used in the focal university). For example, setting up a Moodle page for the first time required around 20 minutes, whereas setting up a Facebook group was less than five minutes. Obviously, there are learning gains associated with a consistent use of Moodle but despite some benefits, more steps (and hence, time) are required for setting up a Moodle group.

(2) *Installed user base* – It was assumed, correctly as it turned out, that the vast majority of students are already registered in Facebook. This enables easy joining to new groups, as well as integrating the course into the natural 'social workflow' of students. After all, studies show the average user visits Facebook daily, even many times a day (Stern & Taylor, 2007; Joinson, 2008). Facebook's penetration of the Finnish population is around 43%, amounting to 2.2 million users (Socialbakers.com, 2013). Among the young populace, the figure is much higher, since one fourth of the Finnish users are counted into the 25–34 age group (*idib.*). The installed user base mitigates the 'cold start' problem which arises when the community is empty and the steps for joining require a cognitive effort. In addition, the students are using their own identity, not a pseudonym, which reduces the risk of spam messages and increases the likelihood of high-quality content (albeit personal identity may increase the barrier of asking "stupid questions").

(3) *Time restrictions* – During the course, the teacher was busy with finishing and presenting several conference papers, which resulted in lack of time. There was a need to manage the student questions and support requests, curbed by the fact that the course was organized for the first time! Thus, the teacher had the idea of a peer-support group in social media, in which students could help one another. Previous experiences had shown this kind of activity rather rare in Moodle, potentially because students perceive the tool as cumbersome, and so it was decided to integrate the community to a social network students often visit, namely Facebook.

THE FACEBOOK GROUP

After the creation of the group, its existence was communicated to the students. In a closed Facebook group, administrator accepts new members. Around 80 students (over 90%) quickly joined the group. Only one student in the course was not registered in Facebook which was confirmed by asking the students in the classroom. All course content was delivered by email, so joining the group was not obligatory. When approved to the group, an entrant gains access to all posts and materials shared in the group. Although there are fewer features than for example in Moodle which is the dominant substitute[iii], the ease of use as well as the fact that most students find the Facebook user interface intuitive and have registered in it make up for this. The previous point is important in regards to the 'cold start' problem, according to which users are not motivated to join due to lack of prior entrants (see e.g. Schein, Popescul, Ungar, & Pennock, 2002). Further, the anticipated ease of use is regarded to be positively associated with willingness to adopt a technological platform (e.g. Gefen & Straub, 2000).

As it turns out, adopting a community for coursework is associated with barriers of both sides – the professor and the students. The barriers can in a simple form measured through the number of steps required to join; this serves as a proxy for cognitive effort required to join (see Table 1 for comparison between Facebook and Moodle). Furthermore, peer support was important because students participated in the Google Online Marketing Challenge (for a description, see e.g. Neale et al., 2009), which required them to learn a tool for online advertising, namely the Google AdWords. Since most students did not have previous experience in it, support requests were expected. Because other students did have experience in the use of the tool, it was thought they can support their peers. Overall, peer education has many advantages, such as freeing teacher's time, improving students' self-esteem, increase interest in challenging tasks, and promote pro-social behavior (Damon, 1984).

The student- and teacher-generated content was analyzed and the following categories emerged (Table 2). The examined period was 11 months, starting from course launch. The course itself lasted seven weeks, as most university courses in this university, and included weekly lectures and exercises. During the eleven months, the support groups gained 102 posts (including posts initiated by either student or teacher, and replies).

Table 3 Types of content shared in the support group

Content type	**Students**	**Teacher**	**Frequency**	**%**
course information / questions	33	13	46	45,1
substance updates / questions	7	5	12	11,8
course modification ideas	1	1	2	2,0
course updates	0	1	1	1,0
event updates	2	3	5	4,9
job updates	4	16	20	19,6
business feedback	9	7	16	15,7
totals	56	46	102	100

As can be seen, the content divides into course-related and unrelated content. In addition, most content types are posted both by students and the instructor. Course updates relate to instructions,

details and questions about the course, also containing issues of group formation (for the course work). Substance updates included content relating to digital marketing. One relevant course and several events were shared during and after the course. The shared course had a limited inclusion and all business participants ended up being from the Digital Marketing course. After the course, the teacher posted job openings from the field of digital marketing. In addition, the group platform enables sharing events, photos and files. However, these functions were not used since all file content was delivered by email for equal treatment of students.

The instructor devised a 'Twitter game' to encourage awareness during the lectures – in the game, each slide but few contain a picture of a Twitter bird. The students can score points by being first ones to shout when a slide has no picture. One student started a poll asking whether others find the game a good idea or not. The voting was slightly against the game, and some found it disturbing, so it was removed from the lectures. It is unlikely that such a poll would have been created in Moodle, because the tool lacks such functionality. Second, during the lectures no one spoke against the game; apparently in a Facebook poll students feel more liberated in expressing their true opinions than in a face-to-face situation. Despite of the existence of the group, students approached the teacher also by email. This takes place when they are unwilling to pose questions in public – some even asked them to remain private because they were "stupid". Therefore, the teacher must make clear that there are no stupid questions in order to encourage participation. Hesitance to ask due to losing one's face (Yau-fai Ho, 1976) is a commonly known barrier for elementary questions, since students feel prohibited to pose questions they think everyone else knows answer to. This can be overcome through useful help-giving behaviors, such as explaining the logic of solution instead of providing only the solution (Webb & Mastergeorge, 2003b).

CONCLUSIONS

In solving the students' problems, it can be said the Facebook group performed decently. Only one request, directed to other group members (relating to group formation) was left unanswered; others were answered either through peer support or by the teacher. More precisely, the "peer-support ratio"[iv] was 2.54, meaning that for every one post made by the teacher, two-and-a-half posts were made by students (regarding the course). Despite of relatively low participation by the instructor in the social networks, the course participants did not on average report dissatisfaction in course evaluation about the support received. However, it must be noted that emails were exchanged as well, although the idea was to minimize their number, and students of course received face-to-face support during exercise classes. Figure 1 depicts the frequency of posts over time.

[insert "Figure 2 Frequency of posts" about here]

Two major points arise from the graph:

(1) *Low churn among members*. After a year from the course, the group contains 79 students. At its peak, the group had 85 students; therefore the churn has been less than 10%. Since opting out in Facebook is extremely easy, this indicates that students find the content useful even after the course has ended. An alternative explanation is that they simply would not go the trouble of opting out – however, the "seen by" feature reveals consistently that 80–100% of members have loaded the page with the most recent posts. This indicates that the content is actually read.

(2) *Constant activity*. Although the level of activity has decreased since the stopping of group, there has been consistent communication. This differs from many other course communities that quickly die out after the end of the course, as student and teachers have not motivation to frequent them. In contrast, visiting Facebook is a daily ritual. Notable is also that both the teacher and members of the group have continued to contribute after the course, mostly focusing on relating to job opportunities in the field of digital marketing.

Overall, it is an interesting experiment to let students coordinate communication and support among themselves. While it does not remove, nor should it, the intervention by the course instructor, it may reduce the workload of answering repetitive emails and instead directing students to the support group. Considering that this activity is highly time-consuming and in many cases the students' questions overlap, such reorganizing of workflow can provide efficiency gains. The principle is similar to crowdsourcing, in which the crowd takes ownership of certain activities of the firm. Of course, it is interesting to see that commercial networks, free to access and use, may replace some specific tools. In some sense, this is logical as diffusion to workplace can take the informal route as well (e.g. using Skype as a calling tool has replaced VoIP solutions in some organizations, driven by users rather than IT departments). In some cases, specific communication tools may find it difficult to compete against category leaders which can afford to invest heavily in user-friendliness and subsidize the price or set it to zero ('freeify'), as a consequence of using advertising as a monetization model.

On the other hand, Rodriguez (2011) notes that "by using these [Web 2.0] tools, academic content, discussions, and other interactions no longer live in the safe, controlled world of academia but now become public - living on public servers, retrievable by public search engines, where most, if not all, are owned by for-profit and public companies." While this represents a risk of increased dependence on profit-oriented and unpredictable web companies, in the current situation the competition among web services as well as the low marginal cost of offering web services favors free usage for teaching purposes. Further, I would like to note it is also possible to form private groups within social networks whose index is not accessible by third parties, or indexed by search engines. These can be called 'embedded networks' or groups within groups. For example, in Facebook one can choose whether the group is public or private (in private groups, the administrator approves new members). Further, enterprise social media tools such as Yammer bring the social network experience into an organization by creating a private social network, in which members of the organization can start new groups based on their interests. This is particularly useful for large organizations with many divisions, specialists and individual with varying interests (the groups can serve both professional and hobby-based needs). In fact, it is a common misbelief that the technology (or "Web 2.0") would automatically lead to forced transparency, or loss of proprietary systems. In reality, one can easily opt for a closed system, as many educators still do[v].

As noted by Webb et al. (2006): "Teachers often instructed using a recitation approach in which they assumed primary responsibility for solving the problem, having students only provide answers to discrete steps" (p. 63). This was not the case here, since the teacher made an explicit argument that he would be away for some time during the course. Despite this "threat", most students still turned to the teacher when facing difficulties (and were of course assisted, although sometimes with a delay). This could indicate that even the younger-generation students (in their 20s) are not familiar to virtual peer-learning – most likely, this is not a question of technological knowhow, but rather a sign of strongly internalized teacher-student hierarchy. The observation is supported by the fact that the students were repeatedly advised to turn to the support group to find help. This contradicts Webb et al.'s (2006) second challenge for peer learning – "teachers rarely encouraged students to verbalize their thinking or to ask questions" (p. 63). It is not self-evident that the existence of technology or a new communication channel leads to its active usage – as hypothesized by (Kear, 2004), "some students find the medium 'cold', or are daunted by the apparent quality and quantity of others' contributions" (p. 160).

Social network services are highly suitable for knowledge sharing among students – therefore, is it appropriate for educators to encourage this behavior, and try to mitigate (social) barriers while creating incentives (potentially by taking active participation into account in student assessment) and creating some preliminary policy or program, as peer-learning interactions seem to require a kick-start for taking off. Low technological distance does not imply low social distance which is why ice-breaking activities are needed, even in a university course where major share of participants are acquaintances to one another. Based on my experience, attitudes – both among students and teachers – are changing much more slowly than technology, and more slowly than what the hype has promised. For example, Pérez-Mateo et al. (2011), Rodriguez (2011) as well as some other authors have drawn a

direct analogy between user-generated content and 'learner-generated content', so that "there is no doubt about it that in the Web 2.0 context, we are witnessing a change in the role of users who now becoming the true 'protagonists' of a process that includes active reading and creative writing (…)". The relationship is by no means this simple, and I predict it will take a long time until the potential of virtual learning environments is fully exploited in higher education.

RECOMMENDATIONS

First, for this particular method to function, the students would need to be registered in Facebook, and willing to join the group. In Finland, this is commonly the case. It also seems that once students are registered in Facebook, they are not resistant to joining an educational group, but rather interested in doing so. This indicates student interested in peer learning as well as e-learning which is under rising interest by the academia as well as schooling systems (e.g. Garrison, 2011; Zhao, Zhou, & Nunamaker, 2004) Second, the tone of communication can be more liberal than in (most) class room settings. Substance information can preferably be shared in the form of links. In particular, videos and topical news / reports from the substance area are desirable. In many cases, the Internet is full of informative content. For example, Google provides tips on YouTube about digital marketing. Additionally, many academic institutions, such as Stanford University and MIT, share a considerable amount of educational content online[vi]. Some parts of them can be used to extend course themes and to provide the students hints in finding additional information. Of course, the instructor must pay careful attention to sharing only relevant content as a curator – as there is a risk of it being perceived as spam, the shared content needs to match the course theme and support learning. For an enthusiastic professor, it is important to know that not all students share the same passion for the topic (on the other hand, some do, which is why it is important to create a strategy for content-posting).

When designing the rules of peer learning for course interaction, the educator would benefit from considering the following start-up variables:

1. **Required participation from students**
    - If yes, and all else is equal, a higher level of activity is achieved.
    - If no, and all else is equal, a lower level of activity is achieved.
2. **Type of student motivation**
    - If intrinsic, and all else is equal, a higher level and quality of activity is achieved.
    - If extrinsic, and all else is equal, a lower level and quality of activity is achieved (and required participation may be necessary).
3. **Formal teacher's assessment of students' peer learning activity**
    - If yes, and all else is equal, a higher quality of interaction is achieved.
    - If no, and all else is equal, a lower quality of interaction is achieved.
4. **Formal peer assessment of students' peer learning activity**
    - If yes, and all else is equal, a lower level of activity but higher quality is achieved.
    - If no, and all else is equal, a higher level of activity but lower quality is achieved.

First, requiring participation of students forces them to produce content in the platform. However, there is no guarantee that the content is authentic and truly helps in learning; in contrast, there is a risk students only provide "artificial" content for the sake of appearances. This, of course, would not apply if all students embodied a strong intrinsic motivation, in which case the requirement to participate would become obsolete – students would happily participate anyway to aid their own learning. In cases where intrinsic motivation is unclear *a priori* or it is expected to vary among students[vii], it may be appropriate to formally require participation, if a high level of activity is the goal. If, however, the goal is rather to emphasize quality, requiring participation from the less motivated students may have a negative impact. This can be tackled by grading the participation, i.e. including it in the formal assessment of the course; given that students are made clear that they are assessed by the quality and not frequency of their contribution, a formal assessment would improve the quality of individual contributions. The risk here is that peer learning is more than individual contributions; it is mutual

interaction between students. By creating a competitive setting, the educator may in fact decrease the willingness to help, or encourage other type of strategic behavior (e.g. students more willing to provide help than asking; or competing who is the first to answer to a question). Regarding the level of interaction, assessment can either increase it (if students understand it as a part of assessment) or decrease it (if students without questions and comments whose quality they suspect is not satisfactory; an outcome that the educator would wish to avoid). Similarly, enabling peer assessment could introduce competitive elements that may prohibit the altruistic motives demanded by a functional peer support group. As noted by (Keppell et al., 2006), peer assessment "may inhibit the very process of peer learning that they are attempting to promote." On the flipside, it can improve the quality of content shared in the platform as students put in a lot of effort to not to look bad among their peers.

Furthermore, posting too often would be dangerous, interpreted as spam (see e.g. Hinde, 2003). Notable is that students do not seem to react negatively to promotion of other courses, jobs or events, as revealed by the low churn rate. The case would likely be much different is promotional content would be *commercial* as well. It is also important to point out that posting relevant job offers may increase students' willingness to learn the skills taught in the course – for example, digital marketing jobs are somewhat booming now in Finland which can be seen in students' attitude and also the fact that some of them post job ads in the group. Second, as shown by the type of questions / interactions, informational content is expected by the students. They intuitively acknowledge the group is mainly for the course and expect little or no entertainment, unlike elsewhere in Facebook. However, entertaining content is not excluded, but its ratio in comparison to informative posts must be in check. For example, 70/30, or 80/20, in favor of information, are some recommendations that the instructor may hold as a rule of thumb (ultimately, the ratio is arbitrary, given that the information needs are satisfied).

LIMITATIONS

Regarding the limitations of data, the nature of social networks must be noted. In some cases, they may act as initiator of discussions and not capture all events. For example, the discussion can continue by email, private messages, or face-to-face in a school corridor. Such effects are not captured by this study. Further, the students were not *specifically* asked about the use of method and whether they found it convenient or not. General feedback of the course indicated that some students had trouble learning the AdWords system, so the peer-support function was unable to replace teacher guidance in this sense. Furthermore, peer learning during the course is not restricted in this one social media group. As established, it is a highly common practice among students and takes place in school corridors, private Facebook discussions, email threads and so on. In fact, it is likely to presume that most peer learning, even in social media, took place outside the support group, in contexts where students feel free to express themselves and experience little social pressure.

FUTURE DEVELOPMENT

Future plans for the course include using the same group for coming students; in the best case, earlier students can also guide new ones in learning the AdWords tool. Damon and Phelps (1989) note two important aspects in fostering peer-learning: competitive setting and joint problem-solving. The former may decrease students' willingness to help one another while the latter has a positive effect – essentially, it is a question of team work *versus* competition. Therefore, to fully leverage the power of peer-support, the teacher should frame tasks to support joint problem solving. In practice, this requires some creative thinking. For example, extra points can be given to students who take responsibility in helping others to learn. In the course of writing this paper, the author has also learned new ways to improve his ability to "set the scene" for peer learning and collaboration in a virtual environment. It is clear that more support in guiding the students is needed to take the group to the next level. For example, Webb et al. (2006) designed their peer learning program based on activities promoting 1) classbuilding (cf. teambuilding, 'ice-breaking'), 2) communication, 3) helping skills, and 4) ability to give explanations. Such formalized activities aimed at facilitating the adoption of peer learning

mindset may become useful. Kear (2004) proposes that a discussion forum should be carefully planned and structured, and its purpose should be made clear to students. Since students may have an additional incentive to participate if the learning group activity is included in the course assessment, the educator should consider whether or not include peer support activity in formal assessment (Kear, 2004). Overall, social networking services seem to offer a feasible platform for learning activities – reaching beyond the immediate course goals. As noted by Benson et al. (2010), "social media has the potential of providing an easy-to use platform to connect students throughout their entire lifecycle – from aspiration rising, enrolment, learning and teaching leading on to employment, alumni communication and life-long learning" (p. 1).

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ADDITIONAL READING

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i For example, Google provides real-time Hangouts to enhance learning during the Google Online Marketing Challenge. During them students can ask Google specialists about campaign management.

ii Indeed, the quality of learner-produced material is not always up to par, and it is not realistic to assume all students have the know-how or interest to become "content producers".

iii In Finnish universities, at least.

iv This is simply the number of students' posts relating to the course divided by the instructor's answers. It indicates how frequently students asked and other students replied.

v For instance Moodle is a closed system, although fairly cumbersome to use.

vi See http://see.stanford.edu/see/courses.aspx and http://ocw.mit.edu/index.htm, respectively.

vii This is often the case – "even if [peer learning] is a requirement, the level of engagement will differ among students" (Kear, 2004).