



The Call Triangle: student, teacher and institution

Facebook used in a German film project

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Abstract

Looking for a way to make German language study more relevant and to step out of the conventional classroom setting, I introduced Facebook (FB) as a learning platform to my intermediate German students at the University of Canterbury, New Zealand. The students took part in a film competition. A FB group was created and the films were uploaded. The students and a selected audience commented on the individual entries. German was exclusively used as the language in the group.

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1. Introduction

This paper describes a project using Facebook (FB) as a learning tool in an intermediate German Language class with 26 students. Social Networks Sites (SNSs) are a fascinating Web 2.0 tool for language learning. The use of SNSs takes teaching out of the classroom and into the private life of the student. They are an authentic means of communication and relationship building (Sykes et al., 2008). The students of the 21st century belong to the so-called “iGeneration”. Their constant use of iChat, iPod, iPhones (Mills, 2011) make them the most communicative generation to date and it is the challenge for educators to make use of these virtual worlds the students live in (Ziegler, 2007).

2. Web 2.0 tools and foreign language learning

The potential of Web 2.0 as a tool for foreign language learning is widely recognised. The network is seen as a platform for dialogue and collaboration of user-generated content and as a mutually added-value component for community building (Conole and Alevizou, 2010).

SNSs have been used in many language classrooms. Mills (2011) uses them in her French language class as a tool to exchange cultural multimedia and as a way to foster communication in the interpretive, interpersonal and presentational modes. McBride (2009) notes that SNSs are useful for self-expression and social interaction. Boyd (2010) also points out that SNSs are communication platforms that allow groups of shared interest to collaborate. She also calls them ‘networked publics’ and concludes that teenagers in particular are more likely than adults to embrace and develop strategies for managing the social complexities of the environment of networked publics.

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3. Choice of SNS

To investigate the potential benefits of SNSs mentioned above, a social media site, Facebook (FB), was used for an assignment. The assignment was based on an annual short film competition run by the Goethe Institute, ILANZ, and German Embassy in Wellington.

Facebook was used as part of the assessment of the class. The overall assessment consisted of Internet-based elements and also the more conventional paper work. FB was used as part of the Internet assessments. A Social Network Site (SNS) was chosen because of the new iGeneration learner type of students. FB was chosen over other options of SNSs, i.e. Ning, because of the following advantages:

Ning	FB
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creator of the site can invite students and new members • Unfamiliar platform • Monthly fees 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creator of the group can invite students and new members, group members can invite and administer group • Familiar to students • Free

FB as a platform was the choice of SNS. It was familiar to all the students. Students were made administrators as soon they entered the FB group. The students had a sense of empowerment by authorizing their own group. They were asked to invite at least one other German speaker they knew who was not part of the class. The idea of a SNS is to form communities using the target language (Otto and Pusack, 2009). In this case, the students created an authentic German community; German was the communal language and the FB interface language was also changed into German for total immersion.



Figure 1. Illustration taken from the site.

FB, however, has two sides to it; the very open and public function but also a group function, which is only accessible by invitation and exclusively used by members. SNSs like the FB group feature encourage interaction within larger groups of people, not necessarily from the same classroom but a wider international public.

4. Project

Students formed groups of 3-4 members. Each group made a short film (max 5 minutes), embracing in some way the title "Die Nachbarn" (the neighbours) given by the organiser of the competition.

A FB group was then created and used to upload draft copies of the films and ultimately the final versions. The site was also used as a discussion forum for the project. The films were judged in a preliminary internal competition. The three winning films of this internal selection process were chosen to be the entries for the real competition held in Wellington.

The students had a timeline to follow. The first deadline was the publication of their first draft version. FB makes it very easy for students to upload entries but also to delete or alter them. The speed of the Internet has increased markedly in recent years and all previous frustrations encountered in Internet handling have improved dramatically (Boyd and Ellison, 2007). The students in this study did not encounter any problems using FB.

As soon as the draft versions of the films were uploaded, fellow students had to offer constructive comments about the draft. After that round, the films were revised and the second deadline required the students to post their final entry onto FB. Again fellow students were invited to comment on the entries.

The screenshot shows a Facebook group interface. At the top, there are two video thumbnails: one for 'Odie Keinname' (5:00) and another for 'Emmigranten in Neuseeland [HQ]' (5:00). Below the thumbnails are two rows of comments. The first row contains a comment from Odie Keinname and a reply from Vincent Hardaker. The second row contains comments from Patrick Sullivan and Alice Rose, followed by a reply from Vera Leier. At the bottom of the screen, there is a text input field labeled 'Schreibe einen Kommentar ...' (Write a comment ...).

Odie Keinname
Emmigranten in Neuseeland [HQ]
Dauer: 5:00

6. Oktober 2010 um 15:15 · Gefällt mir · Kommentieren · Teilen

Odie Keinname Hoffentlich das ist besser, Ich habe es korrigieren aber es ist nicht perfekt.
6. Oktober 2010 um 15:49 · Gefällt mir

Vincent Hardaker Ich mag den betrunkenen Junge :D
6. Oktober 2010 um 15:53 · Gefällt mir

Patrick Sullivan You didn't correct his name?
6. Oktober 2010 um 17:16 · Gefällt mir

Alice Rose Ich denke dass es ganz gut gemacht ist . Es ist einer meiner Lieblinge!
6. Oktober 2010 um 20:17 · Gefällt mir

Vera Leier immer noch meine große Nase! aber der Film ist echt gut!
6. Oktober 2010 um 22:37 · Gefällt mir

Schreibe einen Kommentar ...

Hannah Chapman Hannah, Ingrid, Alice
Nachbarn im Krieg
Dauer: 5:06

5. Oktober 2010 um 15:33 · Gefällt mir · Kommentieren · Teilen

Figure 2. Video posts and entries taken from the group site.

The decision of what films to send to Wellington was made after a semi-public viewing of the films. After the presentation, the audience, which consisted not only of the students but also of some of their chosen FB friends (most of them native speakers of the L2) voted for the three best films. The three films selected were then entered in the official competition in Wellington.

The final assessment mark for each student consisted of three parts. 30 % of the final mark was for the group film project judged by the instructor and student teacher, 70% was based on the individual performance of each member of the group. The individual mark resulted from two assessments. The group interviews were conducted and students graded each other. They graded each others' teamwork and participation. The individual language mark was based on a project diary. Each student had to write a diary during their film project, consisting of at least 10 entries written in German. The assessment considered Lafford's (2009) suggestion that there is a need for new criteria to measure learner 'progress' when dealing with group work (Lafford, 2009).

5. Method

The pedagogical goal of the exercise was to use group work to develop and enhance the students' motivation to learn the target language. Using FB authorises students and motivates them to identify with their target language and creates a unique group identity. The effectiveness of the task was measured with a variety of tools.

Two surveys were conducted, a pre-survey before the start of the project and a post-survey after completion. The class had 26 students; 17 answered the pre-survey and 11 answered the post-survey. The focus of the first questionnaire was on attitudes towards group membership in general and experience they had with Facebook. The questionnaire consisted of the following multiple-choice questions:

Pre-questionnaire:

1. Are you familiar with Facebook?
2. Do you find it easy to work as a group member?

After the project, a post-survey was conducted and the students were asked to answer again on their attitude towards group work and on the experience with FB. Multiple-choice was used but space was available for additional comment.

Post-questionnaire:

3. How did you find the group membership after the project?
4. Did you find Facebook easy to use with your filmwork?

After the completion of the project, each group of students was invited to come for an interview with the instructor. The interviews were part of the formal assessment process but were also as a tool to examine the students' opinion about the exercise. The results of the interviews were transcribed and analysed.

6. Outcomes

The students (12 female and 5 male) were between 17-20 years old and were in their second-year. They had completed a full year of intensive German instruction or 3-5 German instruction years in a high school.

The pre-survey showed all but one of the students used FB. The pre-survey revealed the students had reservations about group work. Seven didn't think it a very good idea, 3 didn't like it and 5 were in favour of a group assignment. The post-survey showed attitudes had changed: the 'like it a lot' answer was ticked 7 times and only 2 students disliked it. All the participating students found FB easy to use.

7. Conclusion and Discussion

Group membership helped motivate the students by developing a strong sense of belonging, which was reflected in the classroom atmosphere. The students had the opportunity to get to know each other better and the online environment made it easier for the groups to keep in contact and discuss their project online.

Opinions are mixed about group assignments and their outcomes. Conole and Alzivou (2010) see problems with collaborative activities. They found that the learning perception of students constructing knowledge with collaborative assignments was lower than students adopting a traditional knowledge acquisition model (Conole and Alevizou, 2010). Such problems with collaborative work are acknowledged but the positive online and in-class atmosphere that resulted from collaborative exercises was seen to increase motivation and improve willingness for learning.

Assignments like this one need to be carefully planned before integration into an existing curriculum. FB (or a similar SNS) is a useful tool to integrate into the language curriculum, provided students are well trained to use FB; the processes involved and potential benefits must be explained clearly. It would be interesting to find out what level of learner proficiency should be targeted in order to make the best possible use of this type of learning media (McBride, 2009). Social Media has the big advantage in being able to create an environment mixed with native speakers of the L2. McBride (2009) calls the native speaking members 'interlocutors'. It would also be of interest to question the invited native speakers and see how they liked being part of such an environment. Using SNSs in a country geographically far removed from the home nation of the native language will definitely yield great benefits.

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