

The European Conference on Educational Research:

The Past, the Future and Present of Educational Research in Europe

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# PARALLEL SPACES?

How Students use social network sites  
to organize learning  
in the context of university courses

# OVERVIEW



1. Starting point and context
2. Theoretical background
3. Methodology
4. Results
5. Outlook

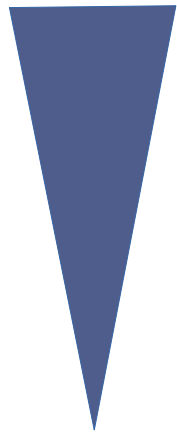
## STARTING POINT

Little usage of communication and collaboration tools  
in LMS of university courses

: **compensatory use (closed groups) of Social Network Sites?**

Closed groups as **informal spaces** for learning, collaboration and cooperation,  
which exist *parallel* to university courses and *beyond control* of teaching staff?

# RESEARCH QUESTIONS



- How do students use *social media* in the context of university?
- How do *social network sites* (SNS) go along with university courses?
- How do university students use *closed groups of social network sites* (SNS) to organize learning processes connected to university courses?

Focus on students' perspective

*NOT:* How to use/implement SNS as a teaching tool!

# THEORETICAL BACKGROUND



- “Personal Learning Environment” (Attwell 2007)
- „Media Ecology“ (Hug 2007, Clark et al. 2009)
- “Communities of Practice” (Wenger 2009)
- “Online Learning Environments” (Meder / Iske 2009)

# METHODOLOGY



- Problem-centered interview (Witzel, 2000)
- Request for participation:  
Facebook, university courses
  - Cologne: 7 interviews (3 male, 4 female;  
disciplines: special education, music,  
economic sciences, intermedia)
  - Frankfurt: 7 interviews (2 male, 5 female;  
disciplines: educational sciences, economic  
sciences)
- Analysis: theory-driven

# METHODOLOGY: Interview Guideline



## 1. Opening question

“In the context of their university courses students often use the internet. How do you use the internet for the university? Please tell me...”

## 2. Questions generating narrative,

e.g. “Please remember: Have your usage of Social Network Sites, especially of groups, changed during the last years? If yes: How?”

## 3. Questions generating understanding

referring to narrative (1.2)

## 4. Socio-demographic data



## RESULTS (1)



- Facebook as a **de-facto standard** among students,
- **preferred** instead of learning management systems:  
*“they go there as soon as they start studying, otherwise they are left out somehow...”*
- Different **types of groups** of SNS in university context:  
(university in general, general BA/MA-programme, cohorts of BA/MA-programme, individual courses, ...)
- **Diversity** of tools and practices



## RESULTS (1 - example)

*“And why do people use Facebook instead of Ilias, what would you say?”*

*“I personally think, that these **university platforms are often confusing** ... And yes, I think you can discuss more detailed questions easier with your **fellow students** than with the general roundup on Ilias.”*

*(18 years old male student of Intermedia)*

## RESULTS (2)

How do university students use closed groups of social network sites (SNS) to **organize learning processes** connected to university courses?



- Exchange of experiences, pieces of advice, hints, suggestions
- Questions referring to qualifications, free places in courses, exchange of places
- Practical training, jobs, registration for courses and exams
- Organization of working groups

## RESULTS (3)

- (closed groups of ) SNS: **no replacement for / shift of** subject matter related communication and cooperation...
  - *Little/no debate on learning content,* but exchange of organisation information
  - Learning process (debate on content) rarely take place in SNS-groups

## RESULTS (3 - example)

“It’s a kind of a *question and answer-game*. You get *information* about your exams, specific topics of your courses, ...”

*(24 years old male student of special education)*

“The purpose of these groups is *exchange*. Someone posts a question, then there is a discussion, I mean, *everybody posts his or her answer and that’s it*. The main things are appointments, deadlines and when and where to meet.”

*(25 years old female student of special education)*

## RESULTS (4)

- (closed groups of) SNS  
relation to learning is **not self-evident, not obvious**
  - SNS are rarely associated with „learning“ in formal contexts, rather SNS are associated with leisure time / recreation
  - Clark et al. (2009): „Digital Dissonance“
  - Students: critical view on question whether SNS should be integrated into formal university as a learning tool

## RESULTS (4 - example)

“Somehow it’s a *private* platform you use in your free time and not where you can exchange job related opinions or experiences, because no *job-related* conversations take place here either. *Somehow that doesn’t go together.*”

*(24 years old female student of business administration)*

## RESULTS (5)

- Little discussion about **judgements or criteria**:  
“fair exam“, “good examinant“, “easy exam“, “capable lecturer“,  
  
→ Often **exchange of positions, without discussions!**  
For example controversy, is XY a good lecturer?  
Criteria for judgement?
- **Periodical usage**: periodical usage/frequency/intensity:  
at the beginning / at the end of the term → organisation



## RESULTS (6)

- **General ambivalence**
  - All interviewees **use** (closed) groups of SNS,  
But: **criticise** Facebook (privacy protection, business model)
  - **Justify** or **rationalise** own usage...  
...not important... no really private information... no intensive use...  
“I only use it because my fellow students use it ...”

# OUTLOOK

Function of SNS in university context:

- “**Social glue**” (Madge et. al., 2009)
- “‘**identity politics**’ of being a student” (Selwyn, 2009)

„[...] Facebook has become an important site for the informal, cultural ***learning of 'being' a student***, with online interactions and experiences allowing **roles** to be learnt, **values** understood and **identities** shaped.“

(Selwyn 2009, 171)

## OUTLOOK

- Expand understanding from *learning-related* to *educated-related* use of SNS (Selwyn 2009)
  - Recounting and reflecting on university experience
  - Exchange of practical information
  - Exchange of academic requirements of courses
  - Displays of supplication, disengagement and/or moral support
  - 'Banter' (i.e. exchange of humour and nonsense)

→ Extend interview guideline / perspective

# OUTLOOK

- Increase **number of cases**
- Analysis of **systematic differences** in relation to
  - Faculties (humanities versus natural sciences)
  - Examination regulations
  - Undergraduates (BA) / graduate students (MA)
  - Size and composition of (closed-) group
- **Scalability** of results (→ quantitative online questionnaire)

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A person is seen from the side, looking at a laptop screen. The background is blurred, showing what appears to be a bookshelf. The overall image has a blue tint.

Thank you...

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