# Social media in enabling education

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This paper argues that students from rural and low socio-economic status (LSES) backgrounds, who undertake enabling education, benefit from the social, cultural and network capital which digital, narrative and connective platforms may provide in pre-tertiary teaching and learning. In particular, this paper discusses the trial of the use of the social networking site Facebook as a learning management system within an enabling tertiary preparation program designed to raise the aspirations and widen the participation of economically and geographically disadvantaged young people. It also discusses the role of new media in an approach to Tertiary Preparation which recognises that to succeed in their university study, non-traditional students need to develop not only academic skills and confidence, but the skills and confidence to survive and thrive in the broader digital society.

## Background: equity policy

Despite decades of federal government policy initiatives addressing access, equity and participation in higher education, students from rural and remote Australia still encounter significant obstacles and constraints to tertiary study. Moreover, while access to higher education has improved for some targeted equity groups, such as women and students with disabilities, people from low socio-economic status (LSES) backgrounds who live in rural or remote areas remain doubly disadvantaged (National Board of Employment, Education and Training [NBEET], 1996; Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations [DEEWR], 2008). These least advantaged students (LSES students from rural and remote areas) are less likely than their urban peers to believe that higher education is attainable and less likely to report that their parents and teachers have encouraged them to aim for university study (James, 2010). Commonwealth scholarships and other equity initiatives have not and cannot compensate for the cumulative effects of social class and the unequal distribution of social and cultural capital along class lines. While distance from universities is a significant constraint, the socio-economic background of the student has the most pervasive and profound effect on higher education participation (James, 2001). Moreover, although the most recent Review of Australian Higher Education (DEEWR, 2008), or 'Bradley Review,' makes scant mention of social class or cultural capital, these well-established sociological terms go a long way toward explaining the persistent problem of inequality in higher education and how it ought to be addressed.

In response to this recent Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (Bradley) report

into Australian higher education (DEEWR, 2008), the Australian federal government introduced funding programs designed to enhance LSES participation and mandated that by the year 2020, twenty percent of undergraduate students would be from low socio-economic status backgrounds. Australian universities have a long way to go in meeting this target however, their increasing investments in flexible learning and digital technologies notwithstanding. Over the past ten years higher education participation rates have stalled for LSES students and have actually declined for rural/regional and remote/isolated students (DEEWR, 2008), suggesting the *Fair Chance for All* (DEEWR, 1990) promised by national equity policy in the 1990s is far from realised. It appears contemporary Australian higher education equity policy is an inadequate response to the compounding sociocultural problems of geographical location and social class positioning in a nation increasingly divided along rural-urban lines (James, 2001; James, 2010; Australian Human Rights Commission 2001).

Like most other Australian universities, this regional university has introduced a range of equity programs designed to address this persistent problem of the underrepresentation of rural and LSES students. In Queensland, as in most other Australian states, state governments have also introduced programs and partnerships designed to improve rural education and support the transition from secondary schooling to tertiary study (DET, 2011). Both federal and state policy recognises that the failure to develop the abilities of rural and LSES students will have significant long term consequences for the Australian economy and society. More than half of Queensland state schools and almost one quarter of state school students are in rural and remote areas (DET, 2011). Improving the participation

rates of these students in higher education is critical, and not just for the Australian economy in 'human capital' terms. The focus in this paper, is how pre-tertiary equity and enabling programs which include the explicit development of social, cultural and network capital through the use of new, social media platforms provide a powerful teaching and learning strategy for addressing both participation and retention issues for rural and LSES students.

Unlike their urban counterparts, rural LSES students are frequently required to leave home and leave behind their existing support networks of community, family and friends in order to acquire the benefits of a university education. Unless adequate social and cultural connections, networks or 'webs' are provided to support their transition, these students may be overwhelmed by what they have lost and left behind instead of guided toward what they have to gain from tertiary education. For rural working-class students in particular the middle class, urban and urbane culture of the university can feel intimidating, alien and alienating. The cumulative sociocultural and psychosocial effects for students disadvantaged by both social class and geographic isolation relate therefore not just to issues of access (and getting into university) but also to how the students feel once they get there (issues of retention). Hence, established modern utilitarian (human capital) approaches to equity policy which focus on economic rationality and rational consumer choices are inadequate when what is required to widen participation is a postmodern focus on feelings, friendship, relationships and emotions (social and cultural capital). As recent research conducted at the University of Queensland suggests, "the strongest influencing factors for retention of low SES students are *social*, rather than institutional" (Karimshah et al., 2013, p. 12). Research on student retention at the regional Queensland university discussed in this paper also suggests a focus on identity and relationships which develops a sense of place, community and connectedness is necessary to support students in their tertiary transitions and in their first year experience (Noble & Henderson, 2008; Noble & Henderson, 2011). Hence, to effectively address imbalances in higher education participation and retention, equity programs need to adequately and explicitly address sociocultural issues in contemporary, digitised learning environments. Using networking digital platforms, tools and strategies, the Tertiary Preparation Program discussed here has developed such an approach which gives equal emphasis to the development of academic skills and the cultivation of social, cultural and (digital) network capital.

## Network capital

Since the 1990s governments across the political spectrum in Australia and in other Western countries have sought to support and expand social capital with the idea of creating stronger, more cohesive and better connected communities. Moreover, rural regions have always had what is now termed social capital in the sense of community ties, links and networks which can be mobilised for the common good. From a critical and sociological perspective however it is important to point out that not all networks are equal. In rural communities for example social networks may be more likely to lead young people back to labour in their local area or place of origin rather than raising aspirations to university study and alternative career pathways.

As James (2010) points out, depressed rural economies, reduced services (including reduced educational services) and reduced infrastructure have all contributed to a growing social and class divide in Australia between rural and urban regions. As a result the choices of rural students are often limited by their social and cultural as well as geographical location (James, 2010). The rhetoric of choice in this context tends to favour the already culturally privileged (James, 2010). While middle class families for example may be in a position to compensate for their geographic isolation by sending their children to private boarding schools and residential colleges, this is generally not an option for working class rural families.

The larger issue is that higher education still generally reproduces rather than redistributes all forms of capital in part because rural and working class students do not feel at home there. University entry and even the successful completion of an undergraduate degree may not translate into economic security and social mobility if students remain disadvantaged by a lack of social and cultural connections. As Bourdieu (1984, 1985) pointed out some time ago, the reproduction of class based inequalities in society and in education is not only a material, economic process but depends also on differential access to social and cultural capital. Inequality is maintained through the symbolic realm of culture, through beliefs, traditions, values, lifestyle and language. Moreover, an individual's life outcomes will be shaped by their social networks, contacts and connections to friends, family and peers who may (or may not) offer useful help, support, information and advice (Bourdieu 1984; Coleman 1990). Sadly, for rural working class students there is a fine and difficult line to tread between maintaining ties to their community and being tied down by their community.

At the level of policy and practice, equity initiatives therefore need to address not only limited access to educational credentials for underrepresented groups (like LSES rural youth), but also the unequal distribution of social and cultural capital across regions and social classes. Digital equity initiatives in particular must extend to the realm of culture where identities and aspirations are made, to impact significantly on students' life choices and chances. Although most digital literacy interventions and digital equity initiatives aim to improve the quality of

life of socioeconomically disadvantaged groups relative to more advantaged groups, there is little evidence at this point that this has actually been achieved (Po-An Hsieh, Rai and Keil 2011, p. 248). As Po-An Hsieh et al. (2011, p. 247) suggest, attempts to address digital inequality for socioeconomically disadvantaged groups must simultaneously develop both cultural capital (self-belief) and social capital (support from peers) as the two forms of capital reinforce each other.

This paper suggests young people from rural and low socio-economic status backgrounds may also benefit from a form of digital network capital to establish and maintain ties online with new friends who are also adjusting to university life and raised aspirations. Twenty-first century teachers and learners are, as Castells (2004) suggests, living in the "network society" whose social structure and power relations are made up of networks connected and powered by communication technologies. It follows, if we accept that ours is a network society, equity issues must also be understood in terms of connectivity and access to the 'right' networks. As Castells (2004, p. 4) points out: "Networks work on a binary logic: inclusion/exclusion." In other words, we define ourselves by who we are like and who we are not like, by those we socialise with and those we are socialised by. Within this network model, the accumulation of contacts, or "friends" to use the language of online social networking, maybe just as important as the accumulation of educational credentials in determining life outcomes. Moreover the size, diversity and resources of an individual's network of contacts can determine the opportunities made available and the individual's ability to capitalise on those opportunities. Digital literacy in this context requires not only knowing how to use a networked computer but knowing how to build and maintain a network of mutually beneficial social relationships online.

## The project: social media in a tertiary preparation program

This short paper reports on initiatives developed within the enabling education division of a regional Australian university which aimed to address some of the social and cultural obstacles underlying inequality in higher education participation through engagement with new digital tools and approaches. It provides a necessarily brief overview of relevant outcomes of action research projects led, developed and delivered by the author of this paper, who is also an active enabling education practitioner. These projects have combined digital tools, digital pedagogy and emancipatory pedagogy in attempts to improve the participation of non-traditional, rural and LSES students in higher education.  Through the embedded use of social media and a holistic approach to tertiary preparation overall, these project(s) successfully facilitated social integration and enculturation within an enabling program targeting rural and LSES students with

low secondary school results. During the project(s), members of the teaching team gathered both qualitative and quantitative data in order to evaluate the program and its engagement of digital platforms and social networking technologies. To gather data on student perceptions and experience, a survey instrument, using a 5-point Likert scale gauging students' level of agreement with each evaluative statement, was administered to the twenty 17 to 18 year old participants of the 2012 tertiary preparation (intensive pathway) program and to the forty-one 17 to 18 year old participants of the 2013 tertiary preparation (intensive pathway) program.  These surveys also included open-ended questions to provide more in-depth insight into the students' experiences. More recently, twenty participants in the 2017 semester 2 tertiary preparation program completed surveys and focus groups which also tested their perceptions and experiences of social media and digital literacy in the context of enabling education.

This paper argues digital tools and strategies have impacted significantly and positively on the learning and university experiences of targeted rural and LSES students in the enabling education program. However it is important to distinguish between the broad concept of digital or eLearning, which has been in ascendancy in recent decades, and the distinct digital *narrative* platforms of Facebook which facilitate the creative expression and sharing of personal *self*-narratives. Despite the early promise of eLearning in the 1990s to overcome the historical Australian 'tyranny of distance' (to allow students to study anywhere and anytime), in reality the digital revolution in higher education has not radically altered the participation share of rural and remote students. Increased internet access in the information age has not significantly reduced the historical rural-urban imbalance in Australian higher education participation, in part because more information is not, in and of itself, the answer. This paper suggests that the narrative and connective platforms of social media may provide more effective digital strategies for meeting the social, cultural and emotional needs of rural, non-traditional and LSES learners in enabling education programs. In particular, the 'friending' or social networking mechanisms of social media may promote the sense of connectedness or digital 'network capital' which contributes to student retention.

### Facebook as a learning management system

As McLuhan (2001, p. xi) pointed out; "We shape our tools, and thereafter our tools shape us." Young people today have been shaped by social networking and other new media tools. These tools have blurred boundaries between public (social) and private (personal) and between labour (work) and leisure (entertainment) within a postmodern network society. Against such a backdrop, support for disadvantaged and underrepresented groups in higher education should include the capacity to

reinvent, perform and share new identities which digital networking tools allow. Moreover, the informal, personal or 'friendly' feel of networking technologies can potentially smooth the transition to university culture for non-traditional students, while simultaneously presenting a less intimidating approach to digital literacy than more traditional eLearning platforms.

Our experience suggests web-based social networking sites such as Facebook are valuable for building a sense of classroom community, demystifying higher education and democratising power relations between tertiary students and teachers. International research suggests Facebook is already part of the "social glue" which assists undergraduate students in their transition to university life and culture (Clare, Meek, Wellens and Hooley, 2009). Moreover, research into the use of social networking site Ning in higher education contexts found the social sharing features of Ning useful for enhancing student engagement, peer support and for "strengthening students' emotional connectedness" within a learning community (Hung and Yuen, 2010, p. 711).

Our experience with Facebook supports previous research (Hung and Yuen, 2010) which suggests that by uploading photos and videos and sharing personal interests and hobbies, students on web-based classroom social networking pages are engaged in a different kind of interaction than that provided for by established university eLearning platforms and more traditional digital learning management systems like Blackboard or the Moodle StudyDesk. While the online university learning management system (LMS) tends to revolve around courses and delineated units of information, Facebook foregrounds the person and his/her connections and personal interests. Essentially, with Facebook the true value is in the users and in the social network itself, not the information they exchange. Similarly, much university eLearning still tends to be largely dry and formulaic and word or text-based in stand-alone systems (with token web links) which cannot compete with the dynamic, visual, personalised, connective and narrative architecture of Facebook and other networking new media. Moreover, early focus group data from 2017 participants suggests non-traditional students may feel overwhelmed with the organization of course materials into very many tabs, boxes and windows, and prefer the narrative, personal and social presentation and building of ideas and information which social networking tools encourage.

The young participants of our tertiary preparation initiative found our group Facebook page a more natural, accessible and intuitive environment for interaction and learning than the mainstream online university learning management system or Moodle StudyDesk. Initially, an email was sent to all students with a link to the closed group Facebook site and students were added to the group by administration and teaching staff with group administration rights. There was immediate uptake and use of the site by the majority of the students who already had Facebook accounts and profiles. As one of the 2012/2013 student participants commented: "We were all on the same level - we made friendships before coming here."

Notifications were placed on the site in relation to arrival at campus, orientation and planned social events. By the first day of teaching during the trial, students had uploaded and shared photos of each other and their new environment. As one of the 2012/2013 students commented: "We all posted pictures into the group which made everyone feel involved." Informal peer learning and group work had also begun in response to teaching resources uploaded. Essentially, we were talking to students in their own language with technology they already knew. Overall this made for a less stressful transition and less intimidating learning environment for the rural and LSES participants. As most were already familiar with the informal, personal and 'friending' discourses of Facebook in their everyday social lives, our students were very comfortable using it to facilitate their transition to higher education as they shared experiences, information, opinions, memes, anecdotes and jokes about the accommodation, meet-ups, meals, assessment and workshops.

In the words of one of the 2012/2013 students: "It was a common place where we could all be new and interact." In post-program surveys 67 percent of 2012 respondents rated the Facebook closed group site as 'Excellent' while 33 percent rated it 'Good'. Moreover, 87 percent of the 2013 respondents listed the Facebook site as their preferred method of communication with University staff around teaching and learning matters. Even after accessing the official university online learning management system or StudyDesk, our students across both cohorts tended to check their Facebook profiles more regularly than StudyDesk through their ever-present 'smart' phones and other 'always on' mobile devices with Facebook applications. Students preferred the Facebook site over StudyDesk both for communicating with other students and teachers and for accessing learning resources such as lecture power points and YouTube videos. It is also worth noting that 78 percent of 2013 respondents found that the closed group Facebook site was useful for them to interact and communicate with other students before commencing the course and this social connectivity increased their confidence about starting university even though they were also frequently first in family, low attainment, low socio-economic status students. As one of the 2012/2013 students explained: "I prefer talking to people face to face or on Facebook because it's easier to talk to the person one on one. I don't really like the StudyDesk because at times it can be very confusing." Another 2012/2013 student commented:

"Interacting with students via Facebook and chat was a great way to get to know everyone and to get help with anything you didn't understand." At the time of writing, the action researcher/author of this paper is currently gathering more up-to-date data from TPP workshop participants, through surveys and focus groups, which will be available by the time this paper is presented in late 2017. So far the engagement with the 2017 closed group Facebook page by participating TPP students has been very positive and illuminating.

The closed group web-based social networking tool assisted in constructing the learning communities and social support networks which are an important factor determining career and study success, especially for first-in-family non-traditional university students. The closed group Facebook site has also allowed us to chart the growth of our students as, even after completing the tertiary preparation program, students continue to visit the site to support each other, arrange physical and virtual meet-ups and compare experiences of their undergraduate study. Unlike more traditional online university learning management systems which expel students once they are no longer enrolled in the course, it is likely these students will stay connected to social media and the closed group page in particular.

## Conclusions and updates

The utilitarian assumption behind much equity policy is the human capital imperative to avoid waste and produce more productive and skilled workers out of disadvantaged students. These students however do not exist in isolation, they come from and live within social and cultural webs or networks and enabling pathways must meet students on these digital and sociocultural terms. Questions about whether and what to study are ultimately questions about identity and self-belief, personal history, aspirations and hopes. For rural and LSES students, who do not fit into the academic mold of the traditional university student, a solution of sorts may lie in socialization and enculturation through digital networking technologies in teaching. Certainly, digital networking technologies need to be incorporated into the teaching toolbox we use to meet the learning needs of these rural and LSES youth in tertiary preparation programs. Perhaps the most important outcome, although more difficult to measure at this point, is the development of digital network capital – learning from and linking to mutually beneficial relationships online. Building and maintaining these digital social networks must be recognised as an important piece of the social inclusion puzzle for marginalised groups. When this paper is presented in semester 3 2017, new data from focus groups and surveys undertaken by participating tertiary preparation students will be presented which provides more recent and more revealing data on social media and digital literacy in enabling education. Within this tertiary

preparation program discussed we have attempted to integrate new forms of identity, sociality and connectivity within an enabling education tertiary preparation program. Through the creation and sharing of digital identity narratives, and social networks online, participants have articulated a sense of the future which is potentially transformative and enabling.

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