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Facebook

Title	Facebook
Publisher	Facebook Headquarters: 156 University Ave. Palo Alto, CA 94301-1605
Homepage	http://www.facebook.com
Type of product	Web-based Social Networking Utility
Platform	Web-based Service
Minimum system requirement	A personal computer (PC or Mac) with Internet connection and one of these browsers: Internet Explorer 6, 7, 8; Firefox 3; Safari 3
Founder and CEO	Mark Zuckerberg
Online Help Center	Documentation and various articles online at http://www.facebook.com/help.php
Price	Free

Introduction to Social Networking

The growth and evolution of the Internet in recent years has led to the creation of new ways for people to meet, collaborate, and reinforce new and existing relationships as part of a new generation of online social networking possibilities. Web sites such as Facebook, My Space, Twitter, Bebo, and Classmates, to name a few have taken off in recent years as a means of turning traditional static Web pages into communication arenas that arm users with a plethora of communication tools—blogging, wikis, picture and video sharing—to make networking possible.

What is intriguing about this whole phenomenon is its social impact on our daily lives. Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe (2007) point out a number of studies suggesting that social networking and "Internet-based linkages" fostered through networking sites can strengthen relationships through the use of online technologies that are freely available. In fact, there appear to be positive psychological benefits, including enhanced well-being and self-esteem, which can result from positive online engagements with others (Valkenburg, Peter, & Schouten, 2006).

However with the rush in popularity of social network sites, there is a common assumption that social network sites serve primarily as a means of bringing new people together—an online meeting place where strangers converge. Research seems to indicate otherwise. Boyd and Ellison (2007, p. 211) state that "what makes social network sites unique is not that they allow individuals to meet strangers, but rather… they are primarily communicating with people who are already a part of their extended social network." Furthermore, Coyle and Vaughn (2008) echoed this conclusion in their own research, noting that their respondents did not use social networking sites as a primary reason for meeting new people. Rather, social networks appear to allow people to re-establish, maintain, and build upon past and current relationships with those whom we already know in the offline community (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Chu & Meulemans, 2008). Finally, Joinson (2008) says that users are interested in keeping track of acquaintances (a form of covert surveillance of peers) which drives the high frequency of visits. Rather than viewing these resources only as a means to forming new relationships (e.g., key pals, language partners, email exchanges with other language classes), web sites like Facebook can be used to serve as information portals in academia (Ganster & Schumacher, 2009)

With these issues in mind, there are a great many potential benefits of using social networking sites for language instruction, whether such learning takes place in a traditional classroom or via Web sites. This article provides an overview of Facebook, outlines ideas on adjusting settings and options, and illustrates how educators can use Facebook applications to develop an online community and learning presence.

Overview of Facebook

Facebook was the brainchild of Mark Zuckerberg, a student at Harvard when he first launched the site in February 2004 with the help of his friends, Eduardo Saverin, Dustin Moskovitz, and Chris Hughes. In a televised *60 Minutes* interview (2008), Zuckerberg explains one of his main motivations for creating Facebook:

It used to be the case, like you'd switch jobs. And then maybe you wouldn't keep in touch with all the people that you knew from that old job. Just 'cause it was too hard . . . But one of the things that Facebook does is it makes it really easy to just stay in touch with all these people.

In a nutshell, Facebook is a social utility that allows users to create a simple, online presence—a Profile—that can connect family, friends, and even long-lost acquaintances from around the world by sharing pictures, videos, online discussions, and links. Facebook also provides different online presences besides profiles, including Groups and Pages that can accommodate individuals as well as organizations and companies.

Currently, Facebook has more than 300 million active users with more than 6 billion minutes spent on the site each day. Other fascinating aspects of Facebook are that the fastest growing group of users is those 35 years and older, and that 70% of all Facebook users reside outside of the United States.

How to Use Facebook

Getting started with any social networking site requires a certain amount of skill to navigate the multiplicity of options available to users. Keep in mind that as with any technology, users should identify their needs first and then select specific options and settings as part of a Facebook account. Too often, users feel overwhelmed by the available options and may experience cognitive overload on how to manage the technology efficiently. Furthermore, some users set up a Facebook account only to discover some time later that their pages reveal more information about themselves than they initially suspected because the users did not understand how to select the best privacy settings for their needs.

Signing up for an account at http://www.facebook.com is easy by filling out a simple form with required information. Facebook is based on real identities; a person's real name, not an alias, should be used. Once the initial sign-up page has been filled out, users will be directed to a page where they can find friends. Keep in mind that Facebook will recommend and match possible friends in part based on the information and email that is provided, allowing users to send immediate Friend requests to people they know. Then, users will be guided through a series of questions to help Facebook prepare an initial profile. Once these steps have been completed, Facebook sends a confirmation email to complete the registration process.

Type of Online Presence

The first thing to keep in mind after setting up a personal profile is determining the right type of presence on Facebook that meets your needs and objectives. In addition to a personal profile, Facebook Groups and Pages can be set up to meet and target different audiences and purposes. The rest of this article covers many aspects that apply to different Facebook options.

Privacy Settings

Before customizing the content of a Facebook account (profile picture), users should configure and customize their Profile based on the amount of information they want to share with others. For many of the features, including posting pictures, users can decide on the specific people to whom they grant access to their personal information. The levels of privacy include: Only friends they choose, friends of friends, no one, or everyone online. With so many options, users should first decide how they plan to use a Profile, what information they plan to share, and who they want to be able to view it. By default, the Facebook settings provide more visibility than some people might feel comfortable with, so these settings should be adjusted accordingly. This is particularly relevant when Facebook is being used in schools.

Unfortunately, students tend to sign up for networking services without considering the possible implications of sharing personal details online. If teachers or language programs assign students to use Facebook as part of class instruction or a learning activity, it would be wise to conduct a hands-on training session or create an online instructional video to guide students through the process to achieve the best results. Furthermore, because there have been numerous reports of

malicious attacks on users' Facebook profiles, providing some training on safe social networking can be extremely beneficial in minimizing potential future problems.

In addition to such privacy issues, educational institutions should establish policies that define professional boundaries with students and outline what is appropriate between teachers and students.

Adding Friends

Once a Profile has been created and privacy settings have been adjusted, more friends can be found and added beyond those that were added during the initial set up of a user Profile account. Keep in mind that users often feel the temptation of adding as many friends as possible to boost their Facebook visibility, thinking that a high number of friends somehow equates to greater online popularity. While this can be a boost to one's ego, some users might regret inviting the world to view their personal lives. Thus, users should be judicious in accepting friend requests or sending invitations. Facebook gives you the option of a short message along with the friend request. Those who have used Facebook extensively realize that you often end up receiving friend requests from complete strangers around the world. One positive feature of Facebook is that if you choose to ignore new friend requests, nothing is sent to that person indicating that you have done so.

There are a number of ways that new friends can be located and added to a Facebook profile. First of all, Facebook will try to use its own database to see if the email that was used to register for an account is associated with other Facebook users, so when an account is first opened, a Friends Suggestion list will be displayed. Other factors that contribute to the suggested list of friends include the networks to which one belongs on Facebook, including work, location, educational background, and mutual friends. Because this is a computer-generated process, this process will often display people that are not associated with you at all. In my particular case, I knew most of the people in the suggestions list in the beginning; however, over time, I was acquainted with fewer and fewer of them.

Second, the Facebook importer feature can be used to upload a person's email contact list/ address book from popular email programs and identify mutual friends. Once the list has been imported, users can select friends to contact. Keep in mind, however, that if a person doesn't import all of the email addresses from their email accounts, Facebook will still keep a record of the database that was uploaded.

Finally, you can manually search for friends by typing in a name or email address and to check Facebook listings for possible matches.

Friend Lists

One of the most underutilized features is the ability to create Friend Lists. Basically, Facebook allows users to create groups of friends that only have access to specific parts of their profile that

they choose, including pictures and videos. This feature is particularly helpful—-and essential—when users want to keep their private interactions with family and close friends separate from simple online acquaintances, classmates, or teachers. Facebook lets you customize exactly what each list can see and do on a personal profile. Furthermore, it is also a good idea to keep one's personal life separate from his/her professional life; there is no need to let a boss know information that could affect his/her perception of a person's work ethic or aptitude to carry out the job, no matter how benign one's free time activities are.

Unfortunately, the number of options and settings to choose from can overwhelm a user that tries to use them, and people often don't know how to customize these settings until something embarrassing occurs. Of course, common sense dictates that a person use caution in any online networking environment, but the thrill of seeing oneself online can trump wise use of social utilities like Facebook.

Main Facebook Applications

Once you adjust the privacy settings and create Friend Lists, you can learn to make the most effective, educational use of Facebook's main applications, including the **Wall, Photos, Videos, Events,** and **Notes**. First of all, the **Wall** (Figure 1) is a dedicated space on a user's profile where messages can be posted and viewed based on the user's privacy settings. This is where visitors can share their thoughts and ideas on any number of topics. The **Photos** section of Facebook allows users to create photo albums, upload photos, and comment on pictures. Users can also allow visitors to post their own pictures. In addition, users can upload **Video** clips and even allow other users to upload their own video productions. Posting **Events** or announcements of upcoming activities can be added to a profile, and the **Notes** (Figures 2 and 3) application is similar to a blogging feature in which people can leave more lengthy entries.

In order to visually illustrate some of these features, I have included some screen shots from my own Facebook page in accordance with Facebook policies (2009).

Educational Applications of Facebook

With all these options, schools, libraries, and educational Web sites can harness Facebook's popularity in pedagogically-sound and productive ways using specific applications as indicated below:

The Wall:

- give students an opportunity to get you know the instructor or classmates better with appropriate content on your own life, interests, and plans
- provide quick answers to questions on language and culture (as seen in Figure 1)

Figure 1. *The Wall*

Events:

- inform students of dates and times of study groups and additional workshops
- announce upcoming language, cultural, and social events in the community (i.e., an information portal)
- upload short videos of key portions of class lectures for review
- remind students of upcoming tests, assignments, and projects

Links:

- post links to helpful online resources that support the class curriculum

Notes:

- post homework assignments and upload model examples of what is expected for specific classroom tasks
- provide homework help from teaching assistants in a teacher-created private group
- create topics for online and classroom discussion (see Figure 2b. Notice that an administrator can edit notes, but not comments on the Wall)
- post a summary of classroom lectures for review
- organize a peer-tutoring program where students from different proficiency levels assist lower-level students with the language skills and cultural adjustment

Figure 2. *Notes on Facebook*

Figure 3. *Notes on Facebook*

Videos:

- have guest speakers address the group through uploaded video content
- post student drama productions, speeches, and debates
- create teacher-training videos to demonstrate instructional techniques and approaches
- upload video clips for inclusion in content-based instruction or as part of cross-cultural training (see Figure 4)

Figure 4. *Videos Posted to Facebook*

Facebook Limitations and Shortcomings

Although Facebook has garnered a worldwide base of very active users, a number of shortcomings can affect its usability for classroom or other academic purposes. First of all, having the ability to moderate posts before they appear on Facebook's Wall (something not available at this time) would be very helpful for a number of reasons, including screening inappropriate content and language. With a Facebook personal profile or group, users can control who views their content and posts to the Wall, and comments posted using the Notes application can be edited. However, comments posted on the Wall cannot be reviewed or moderated before they are posted.

Although social networking is designed for the free, unfettered exchange of ideas, this is often not the case in academia where educators are responsible and potentially liable for the content on sites in which they and their students participate. Of course, Facebook gives users the ability to delete and block the posts of offenders, but a more proactive approach to moderating posts before they are posted on the Wall (or at least the option to do so) would provide security and peace of mind for students, program administrators, and parents of students.

Furthermore, once comments are posted on the Wall (whether it be on an individual profile, a group, or an organization's Facebook page), they cannot be modified or edited. The only choice that the user has is to delete the old posting and add a new response. This can be a redundant process for anyone maintaining content on Facebook. An explanation of why these features are not included as part of a user's profile is not apparent even though many Facebook members have posted such inquiries on the Facebook site. For these reasons, other services like

Blogger.com or MySpace.com might suit the needs of people or organizations that want the ability to moderate comments beyond simply deleting them.

Conclusion

Educause (2006, p. 2), a nonprofit association promoting the use of information technology, stated the following quite plainly:

Any technology that is able to captivate so many students for so much time not only carries implications for how those students view the world but also offers an opportunity for educators to understand the elements of social networking that students find so compelling and to incorporate those elements into teaching and learning.

Online social networking is a tool that is here to stay, and it is proving to be a powerful ally in connecting people, both old acquaintances and new friends, around the globe. However, just like with any new technology, potential users should determine their instructional and learning needs before launching their presence to the world through Facebook. Although Facebook provides some interesting tools that are currently being used in academia, the sheer number of features and privacy settings needed to customize a profile can take time to master. Equally important is that Facebook provides limited ability for users to moderate and edit comments before these are posted, something that could be important for language learning purposes. Despite these issues, educators should find a number of interesting features that, when used judiciously, can serve as an information portal for students.

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