PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS USING AND REFLECTING ON SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES (FACEBOOK, EDMODO) FOR COOPERATIVE LEARNING IN TEACHER EDUCATION PROGRAMS

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Social networking sites like Facebook, Edmodo and Twitter are increasingly used as tools in blended learning approaches in higher education, including teacher education programs. This paper is based on a research project focused on the use of social networking sites as cooperative learning tools in teacher education. The project involved two student groups from the USA and Australia, who were exchanging views on Edmodo, a social learning platform. Group members were enrolled in undergraduate courses at The University of Texas at Arlington and The University of Queensland in Brisbane, Australia.

The project aimed to investigate how American and Australian students used Edmodo to exchange their views on literacy learning and children's literature. ‘Before’ and ‘after’ surveys also aimed to elicit how the pre-service teachers reflected on social learning experiences using Edmodo and Facebook. The research, conducted from August to October 2013, involved 94 Australian and 57 American students. Data was collected from student online posts on Edmodo and from the ‘before’ and ‘after’ surveys collected via survey software Qualtrics. The project addressed the following research question: what are pre-service teachers’ perspectives and behaviours when using Edmodo and Facebook for cooperative learning?

Cooperative learning is generally recognised to promote socialisation into academic learning groups (Cohen, 1994). Increasingly, the use of social networking sites to support cooperative learning in higher education has become a research focus (Liu, Kalk, Kinney, & Orr, 2010; Sarsar & Harmon, 2011; Smala, 2012; Williams & Chinn, 2009), and emerging studies conducted in teacher education programs have shown that pre-service teachers use social networking sites in a variety of cooperative learning settings (Hutchison & Wang, 2012; Smala, 2012).

The data was analysed using a framework based on blended learning concepts (e.g. Garrison & Vaughan, 2011) and cooperative learning theory (e.g. Slavin, 1990; Gillies, 2007; Brown & Ciuffetelli Parker, 2009). Findings indicate three new contributions to this field: 1) Edmodo provides facilities that can support the major requirements of cooperative learning for international groups in teacher education; 2) social learning sites like Edmodo are not automatically embraced by students just because of their similarity to the privately used Facebook, and need extensive monitoring and ‘prompting’ by the lecturer; 3) students are highly critical of the use of social learning sites if the benefits are not made explicit (e.g. through extensive lecturer posting and intervention) or tangible (e.g. through assessment items/marks linked to the social learning).