Facebook and the L2 Classroom: Engaging 21st Century Students

Jason Garneau, Darrin Griffin and Sherry Venere

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The current generation of undergraduate students sees technology as synonymous with their daily lives and may be considered digital natives in that “they have spent their entire lives surrounded by and using computers, videogames, digital music players, video cams, cell phones, and all other toys and tools of the digital age” (Prensky, 2001, p. 1). The ECAR Study of Undergraduate Students and Information Technology, conducted annually by EDUCAUSE, consistently demonstrates the prevalence of technology in students’ lives. The 2014 report reaffirms previous years’ findings that “technology is embedded into students’ lives, and students are generally inclined to use and to have favorable attitudes towards technology” (Dahlstrom and Bischel, 2014, p. 4). Social networking is an extension of students’ identities as digital natives and the current popularity of social media sites like Yik Yak, Twitter and Facebook are a testament to the role of social media in their lives.

Social media sites (SMSs) are web-based services that allow individuals to create user profiles within a closed system, connect to other users with similar interests and make their profiles and networks visible to one another and the public (Boyd, 2008). Since the advent of SMSs in the early 2000s, the number of participants in social networking has increased exponentially. The social networking site Facebook currently boasts 1.39 billion monthly active users (Facebook Newsroom Statistics). This phenomenon has taken hold of our personal lives so much so that approximately 44% of the population of US and Canada are daily users of Facebook, including the authors of this paper as well as many in the Corps of Cadets.

Facebook is one of the most popular social media sites in existence and it and other social media sites are frequented by undergraduates multiple times a day (Dahlstrom and Bischel, 2012, 2014). Since Facebook’s inception in 2004, educators around the globe have sought ways to incorporate this highly popular SMS into the academic sphere, focusing on its usefulness in areas of communication, collaboration and resource sharing. Boyd (2010) expanded her previous work on social network sites to examine the implications of the SMS as a networked public. Mazman and Usluel (2010) surveyed undergraduate student Facebook users to determine how the SMS...
may be used for educational purposes at the university level. McCarthy (2010, 2012) has studied the use of the SMS in the first year university experience and how Australian university students may collaborate and mentor one another through Facebook. Arteaga Sánchez et al. (2014) have examined the factors and social dynamics that influence Spanish university students to engage with course Facebook pages. Facebook itself has made efforts to encourage the use of the SMS in academia by publishing their own guide for educators, Facebook for Educators and Community Leaders. This guide suggests ways that educators may leverage the website and provide guidance on privacy and safety features. Textbook publishers have also joined the discussion of social media and the classroom, as evidenced by Pearson’s recent study of faculty perception and use of social media for teaching and learning (Seaman and Tinti-Kane, 2013).

To date, educators have piloted and implemented Facebook groups and pages to serve a variety of purposes. Some have experimented with the use of Facebook as a replacement for common learner management systems, like Blackboard, Moodle, and Sharepoint portals. Learning management systems are typically used to provide students with materials, foster interaction between students and instructors, and manage assessment (Meishar-Tal et al., 2012). However, these are often costly and infrequently used by students. Leveraging the frequency with which undergraduates visit Facebook, educators have explored the use of groups and pages in order to disseminate course information, administer course assignments, and provide additional learner resources (Wang et al., 2011, 2012; Irwin et al., 2012, Meishar-Tal et al. 2012).

Facebook has also been used to achieve more concrete academic goals in a variety of disciplines. The L2 classroom, in particular, has utilized it to reinforce language use and cultural awareness in support of students’ socio-pragmatic competence, or “language use in a sociocultural context” (Blattner and Fiori, 2009, p. 4). To that end, it has been used to host discussion forums, assess foreign language writing, and enhance community building within a course, including connecting students and native speakers of the L2 across the world. To date, the most popular use of Facebook groups in the L2 classroom has been as a platform for language practice and discussion forums. Such activities may require students to write and/or respond to posts in the target language and these posts may be used for assessment purposes or simply to provide extra practice. Damron (2009) addressed the utility of the Facebook group for

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1 The research on Facebook’s use in academia is understandably recent and constantly growing. Those sources listed above and found in the bibliography are merely a selection of the growing body of research and those that most closely relate to this research project.
informal community building and student interaction in the L2 Korean classroom. Terantino and Graf (2011) provide ways to practice beginner and intermediate level Spanish writing within a Facebook group. Blattner and Lomicka (2012) connected a U.S. French class with a partner university class in France to facilitate a French-English language exchange via discussion boards. Eren (2012) employed the Facebook group to provide his English language learners with weekly supplementary activities in order to determine if this practice advanced their language ability.

As avid social media users and L2 instructors, the authors of this paper sought to find a way to bring social media use into their foreign language courses in support of cadet education and leadership development. In order to support the mission of the United States Military Academy, the curriculum of the Academy is contained in a 47-month program of physical, military and academic training. The required course of study results in the cadets having nearly every minute planned out for them, as indicated by the following two tables:

The table on the left is known as the ‘Buff Card” or the official Academy Schedule, and this information has been further explained in the table on the right. As indicated by these tables, the

2 “The mission of the United States Military Academy is to educate, train and inspire the Corps of Cadets so that each graduate is a commissioned leader of character committed to the values of Duty, Honor, and Country and prepared for a career of professional excellence and service to the nation as an officer in the United States Army.”
cadets are actively engaged from 6:30 in the morning until midnight. Given their very active
daily schedules, cadets are often too busy to seek out course information on external course sites
like SharePoint and Blackboard, and often do not sift through the mountain of email waiting in
their inbox. As a result, it can be difficult to both communicate course information and share
cultural knowledge that may enhance and enrich their course experience. They instead use their
“free” time on myriad SMSs. The researchers determined that in order to effectively engage with
the cadets in the digital realm, they needed to meet them where they already are, i.e. in the SMS.
A simple observation of the cadets immediately prior to and following class reveals that the first
and last thing they check is Facebook.

The LX204 Facebook pilot project, described herein, highlights the value of SMSs,
specifically Facebook, as an extension of the classroom in an effort to meet cadets where they
already are. This pilot project leveraged the current practice of using Facebook as a supplement
to existing learner management systems as well as utilizing it to expand students’ cultural
awareness. Facebook groups in Russian, Arabic and Spanish allowed instructors and cadets to
exchange useful course information and resources in a location both frequent on a daily basis.
More importantly, these groups also provided an environment with low affective barriers for
cadets to practice their L2 and to become exposed to relevant cultural information related to the
L2. In doing so, the instructors and cadets fostered a collaborative environment that increased
learner autonomy and enhanced cadets’ regional expertise and cross-cultural competence.

163 cadets joined the Facebook group associated with their 204 level Russian, Arabic or
Spanish course, comprising at least 50% of each course’s enrollment.3 All three researchers
taught at least two sections of their respective courses and served as the administrator of the
group associated with their course. They also observed the groups associated with the other two
languages. The Facebook groups associated with this project were completely voluntary, and
there were no graded events associated with them. That is to say, they were not used to formally
assess language use. Furthermore, all groups were designed as “Secret,” meaning that one must
first be invited into the group by another member and then approved by the group administrator.
Only members of the group may search for it and only members are able to post and see what is
posted.

3 Russian: 73 participants of 133 cadets enrolled; Arabic: 52 participants of 102 cadets enrolled; and Spanish: 38
participants of 76 cadets enrolled.
Facebook groups allow people with common interests to share information and bring a valuable functionality to the classroom in a format with which cadets are already familiar. Group design and framework was identical across all three languages. The researchers used these L2 Facebook groups to communicate relevant course and cultural material to the cadets. The cadets, in turn, viewed the posted material and commented on it, or made their own postings. This consisted of posting course administrative information, such as syllabi, lesson lists, exam reviews and study materials. Instructors were also able to create calendar reminders for graded events, which automatically populated the cadets’ Facebook calendar and appeared in their Newsfeed. Attention was also paid to exposing the cadets to cultural information that they might not be able to access on their own.

Each researcher posted at least once per week on language and/or cultural-related topics. Cadets were encouraged to “like,” respond to instructor posts, and voluntarily post questions and comments related to the course as well as the target language and culture. Instructor posts were primarily in the L2, but cadets were permitted to post in either the L2 or English. As the researchers hoped to encourage cadets’ interaction with the L2, they refrained from making significant error corrections. In-depth discussions of grammar, for instance, were reserved for the classroom where all students, including non-group members would benefit. The researchers were able to assess the level of interest in any given post by the “seen by” or “like” notifications. Each researcher also identified an area on which they wanted to focus special attention. The Russian and Arabic groups sought to further expose cadets to the written form of the L2, as both contain alphabets and grammar significantly different from English. The Spanish group sought to focus on the prevalence of Spanish in the local and regional community, as the New York metropolitan area contains a robust Hispanic population.

The framework and implementation of this pilot project was driven by the following research questions: 1) How do cadets respond to the extension of the L2 classroom through Facebook? 2) In what areas do Facebook groups add value to the language classroom? and 3) Are L2 Facebook groups an effective way to provide access to course information, reinforce the target language, and expand cadets’ access to information about the target culture?

In order to assess these research questions, we examined student activity over the course of the spring 2014 academic semester (AY 14-2) and administered a Likert-type rating scale and multiple-choice question survey concerning participation in the Facebook groups. The research
questions above drove instructor observation and assisted with the design of the survey questionnaire. The survey was administered at the conclusion of the semester and therefore should be considered a post-questionnaire. 69 participants across the three language groups took the survey. This survey was anonymous and completely voluntary. As such, no discrimination was made among the language groups. The survey link was posted in each Facebook group for a period of seven days and cadets anonymously answered questions regarding their participation in the Facebook groups. The ten questions of this survey dealt with the following areas: cadet perception and use of the Facebook groups (questions 1-3 and 6-7); access to information related to the target language and culture (questions 4, 5, and 10); and the use of English and the target language in the groups (questions 8 and 9).

Concerning cadet perception and use of the groups, over 95% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the groups were a useful platform and safe environment to exchange course information. Syllabi and lesson lists were posted at the start of the semester and course materials, such as graded event guidelines and reviews were posted as needed to each group. Posts from cadets concerning administrative issues and troubleshooting may be placed in this category as seen in the Russian example post to the right. Over 75% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they used the groups to access course information such as syllabi, exam reviews, etc.

Cadets responded positively to the increased access to the target culture provided by the groups. Posts related to the target culture ranged from current events to popular culture. While most posts of these types were generated by the researchers, cadets occasionally posted relevant

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4 Instructor observations closely relate to the content of the survey questions and, as such, will be discussed along with the discussion of survey results.
5 An exemption to the Internal Review Board process was completed and granted prior to the administration of this survey.
6 All names and pictures have been removed from cadet posts in order to protect their privacy. Instructor names and pictures appear with their permission.
cultural information on their own. The following Arabic and Spanish examples show both instructor and cadet participation:

Over 96% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the groups provided access to current events and media related to the target culture that they would otherwise not have seen on their own. Additionally, over 70% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the groups motivated them to seek out additional resources related to the target culture. Lastly, over 75% percent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the groups motivated them to continue their connection with the target language and culture beyond the course.

The use of the L2 versus the use of English varied across the three groups. Both instructors and cadets used the L2 and English, as shown in the examples above, but researchers made a concerted effort to post and/or respond to posts in the L2. Only 25% of respondents were more receptive to posts in the L2, with the majority being more receptive to posts written in English. However, it is interesting to note that the language in which cadets responded to a post was largely dependent on the language used in the original post. 30% of participants agreed that they were more likely to respond in the L2 if the original post was in the L2 and 47% of participants agreed that they were more likely to respond in English if the original post was in English. Only a combined 22% agreed that they would respond in a language different from the original post.
Based on the results of the above, there was clear value added to each L2 course via the Facebook group. Value was added in the area of administrative tasks in that the researchers were able to share important course resources and cadets were able to troubleshoot course technology and other administrative issues. Value was added in the area cultural awareness and expansion in that both the researchers and cadets were able to exchange links, media and other information related to the target culture. This type of information is largely underrepresented during the class period due to time and material constraints. Value was added in the area of use of the L2 in that cadets were further exposed to the written form of the L2, even if they did not always respond in kind.

However, there were challenges in engaging cadets through social media connected to their courses. For example, the researchers observed that while they posted weekly, cadet participation was much more sporadic. Cadets primarily responded to instructor posts in lieu of posting individually. When posting individually, cadets tended to post administrative and troubleshooting questions and occasionally share cultural links. This had led the researchers to identify motivation as the main challenge to the use of Facebook groups in the L2 classroom. It is a challenge involving active participation versus passive consumption. As no graded events were associated with the groups, even extra credit activities, cadets were not required to actively participate by posting and commenting. It was difficult at times to even have cadets engage by “liking” a post, the lowest level of actively participating in the groups.

Despite an identified lack of active contribution on the part of the cadets, their passive engagement with the groups confirms the interest of the participants. All respondents agreed that they accessed information and resources by both visiting the group page and through their Newsfeed. In fact, over 68% of respondents accessed the information and resources primarily through the actual group page. By actively engaging with the group page, it may be assumed that the cadets were actively interested in these resources and information, if not willing to respond to them. Therefore, it may be concluded that the L2 Facebook groups are an effective way to provide access to course information, reinforce the target language, and expand cadets’ access to information about the target culture.

In addition to the effectiveness of the groups in a given semester, the L2 Facebook groups contribute to the larger goal of developing cross-cultural competence and regional awareness.
among the Corps of Cadets. As the Army has made the transition to Regionally Aligned Forces, the L2 Facebook groups give cadets extra exposure to cultures that they would not normally encounter on their own. By improving this competency, cadets are thus better equipped to learn about the culture of the region with which their future brigade is aligned. They are able to achieve a deeper level of cultural proficiency more quickly, thereby becoming a valuable asset to any organization to which they are assigned. This novel use of social media in the L2 classroom both informs and encourages students to continue to pursue connections with the target language and culture through world and regional events and personal and professional interests. Thus, following the course, they are still anchoring language to their path of life-long learning. While as newly commissioned officers, they may not be assigned to a brigade aligned with the region they studied, by being broadly exposed to cultural topics, they become more sensitive to cultures outside their own, in line with the departmental objective to develop cross-cultural competence.

The L2 Facebook groups also contribute to development of cadets as responsible users of social media. By participating in these groups, cadets consider their own digital presence and the importance of responsible social media practices. Responsible use of social media and establishing a reputable digital identity are paramount to their success as the cadets get ready for a life in the public eye. To this end, the researchers have worked to not only model appropriate behavior in an online forum, but also demand the same from the cadets. By creating an environment of inclusion, and not one of avoidance, the cadets learn what it means to be appropriate and professional in the digital environment. Up to this point, their actions in this digital environment have had few, if any, repercussions in the real world. Teaching the cadets that their actions online have real world consequences and reflect on their professional image is the first step in responsible social media use and is the cornerstone of creating a professional digital identity.

The success of the L2 Facebook groups in the LX204 classrooms of Russian, Arabic and Spanish supports the current trend to leverage social media networks in our classrooms and universities for academic purposes. As the primary purpose of the groups is to extend the classroom community and enrich the course experience, the very nature of the groups allows them to be utilized across the Academy. They are not tied to course-specific graded events and

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7 Cross-cultural competence and regional awareness are key components to the Department of Foreign Languages’ series of outcomes for language majors.
thus may be employed in various disciplines across various levels. At present, the L2 Facebook
groups have expanded into intermediate and advanced level language courses, as well as
providing the model for other languages to implement Facebook groups in their courses.
Additionally, as the Academy increases its efforts to make the curriculum more interdisciplinary,
the L2 Facebook groups are an ideal way to connect region-specific courses across departments.
For example, Intermediate Russian (LR371) may connect with Geography of Russia (EV371);
Advanced Arabic Through the Media (LA475) may connect with The Modern Middle East (HI
339); and Latin American Civilization and Culture (LS485) may connect with Politics and
Government of Latin America (SS384).

The LX204 Facebook pilot project shows the efficacy of using the SMS to expand the L2
classroom. Due to the busy nature and prevalence of Facebook in the cadets’ lives, the
researchers saw an opportunity to extend the cadets’ language community beyond the four walls
of the classroom. The L2 Facebook groups proved to be a productive means of engaging cadets
in the digital realm and supporting course objectives. Cadets responded positively to the use of
the Facebook groups and their passive participation belies their enthusiasm and engagement with
the groups. The researchers are encouraged by expansion of the pilot project to include six
languages, five language levels, and approximately 500 cadets and look forward to extending
the project further across the Academy.
References


### Appendix 1: LX204 Facebook Project Survey Instrument

1. Facebook is a useful platform to exchange course-related information.  
   | Strongly Agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |

2. The LX204 Facebook group was a safe environment for sharing ideas and resources related to the target language and culture.  
   | Strongly Agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |

3. The LX204 Facebook group provided useful resources to support my language learning in reading, listening, writing and speaking.  
   | Strongly Agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |

4. The LX204 Facebook group provides access to current events and other media (art, music, etc.) focused on the target culture I would otherwise not see on my own.  
   | Strongly Agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |

5. The LX204 Facebook group motivated me to seek out additional resources and media related to the target culture outside of the classroom.  
   | Strongly Agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |

6. I used the LX204 Facebook group to access important course information including announcements, syllabi and other resources instead of Sharepoint and email.  
   | Strongly Agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |

7. I accessed information and resources from LX204 Facebook groups primarily through:  
   - My Facebook Newsfeed  
   - Visiting the Group’s Page  
   - Email/Push Notifications  
   | Strongly Agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |

8. In general, I was more receptive to posts in the:  
   - Target Language  
   - English  
   | Strongly Agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |

9. The LX204 Facebook group provided useful resources to support my language learning in reading, listening, writing and speaking. I was more likely to post/comment in (X language) when the original post was in (Y language).  
   - Target Language/Target Language  
   - Target Language/English  
   - English/Target Language  
   - English/English  
   | Strongly Agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |

10. The LX204 Facebook group has inspired me to continue my connection with the target language and culture after completion of this course.  
    | Strongly Agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |
Appendix 2: LX204 Facebook Project Survey Results

**Facebook is a useful platform to exchange course-related information.**

- Strongly Agree: 32
- Agree: 34
- Disagree: 2
- Strongly Disagree: 1
- N/A: 0

Total Respondants: 69

**The LX204 Facebook group was a safe environment for sharing ideas and resources related to the target language and culture.**

- Strongly Agree: 45
- Agree: 20
- Disagree: 1
- Strongly Disagree: 0
- N/A: 0

Total Respondants: 66
The LX204 Facebook group provided useful resources to support my language learning in reading, listening, writing and speaking.

- Strongly Agree: 29 responses
- Agree: 35 responses
- Disagree: 2 responses
- Strongly Disagree: 0 responses
- N/A: 2 responses

Total Respondants: 68

The LX204 Facebook group provides access to current events and other media (art, music, etc.) focused on the target culture I would otherwise not see on my own.

- Strongly Agree: 35 responses
- Agree: 31 responses
- Disagree: 1 response
- Strongly Disagree: 0 responses
- N/A: 1 response

Total Respondants: 68
The LX204 Facebook motivated me to seek out additional resources and media related to the target culture outside the classroom.

I used the LX204 Facebook group to access important course information including announcements, syllabi and other resources instead of SharePoint and email.
I accessed information and resources from the LX204 Facebook groups primarily through (Check all that apply):

- My Facebook Newsfeed: 34
- Visiting the Group's Page: 46
- Email/Push Notification: 20

Total Respondents: 67

In general, I was more receptive to posts in the:

- Target Language: 17
- English Language: 50

Total Respondents: 67
I was more likely to post/comment in (X language) when the original post was in (Y language).

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<td>English, English</td>
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Total Respondants: 64

The LX204 Facebook group has inspired me to continue my connection with the target language and culture after completion of this course.

<table>
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<th>Response Level</th>
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Total Respondents: 67