Chapter 13
The Universal Appeal of Facebook©:
Providing Access to Tertiary Students from Australian Aboriginal Communities

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ABSTRACT

The positive and negative aspects of using Facebook© as a crucial communication tool between Aboriginal academics and their Aboriginal students will be discussed within this chapter. Initially, the authors’ use of Facebook© was to provide support for our Australian Aboriginal students within their own communities. The original intention was to supplement existing electronic forums provided by the University to maintain contact with students between study blocks, encourage reluctant technology users to interact online, and build links to the students’ own communities and families. In 2009, the authors’ students were involved in a research project (Milton, Gruppetta, Vozzo & Mason, 2009) and their use of Facebook© to interact with students was recognised as innovative and the authors were encouraged to investigate the potential within another research project (Vozzo, et al., 2011). From a peripheral practice conducted by two Australian Aboriginal academics, the importance of utilizing Facebook© to build social capital and support an Indigenous Academic community has become crucial to the success and retention of our Aboriginal tertiary students. The authors’ most recent research project relies heavily on Facebook© as the main communication tool due to the vast distances between Aboriginal communities in Australia and the variety of technology provided by each state/territory.

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INTRODUCTION

This Chapter reports on continuing developments in the use of Facebook as the most effective communication tool between Australian Aboriginal academics and their Australian Aboriginal tertiary students within the Bachelor of Education (AREP) Course at the University of Western Sydney (UWS) in Australia. The authors acknowledge that ‘Facebook’ is a Trademark and the use of the name is copyrighted as indicated by the initial use of the © symbol. Further reference to Facebook throughout this chapter will omit the symbol to ensure readability, however the authors concede all rights of trademark and copyright remain with the legal owners of Facebook. The positive and negative aspects of using Facebook as a crucial communication tool between Aboriginal academics and their Aboriginal students will be discussed in relation to the available literature on the use of Facebook to support tertiary students and the perceived benefits and detriments involving the use of Facebook in general. Student demographics and the methodologies of two separate research projects conducted over the past three years will be included in order to provide detail of our experiences. Future plans for extending our research in this area will be detailed in the conclusion.

BACKGROUND

Student Demographics

The University of Western Sydney (UWS) has offered the Bachelor of Education (AREP) (Primary) as a block program specifically targeted for Australian Aboriginal students since 1983. The delivery has been via residential blocks of lectures, workshops, tutorials and research, with distance education models employed during the remainder of the semester and between the block residentials. Initially the Aboriginal Rural Education Program (AREP) targeted only rural students but now caters for both rural and metropolitan students and has an increasingly younger and broader demographic. Many of the accommodations provided to address the circumstances of geographical isolation in the initial program were also found to be of benefit to urban Aboriginal people who were often socially isolated in the wider Australian community. In the early years of the program the majority of students were mature age females but in the last few years we have had an increasing number of younger students and many more male students are enrolling in the course. The course is a four year undergraduate equivalent of a Bachelor of Education (Primary) run over five years.

There are approximately 100 students enrolled across the five years of the AREP Education course with greater numbers in the first two years and fewer in the final three years due to natural attrition and an early exit point. Students with personal circumstances that interfere with their ability to finish the full degree can gain a qualification with a Diploma of Indigenous Studies at eighty credit points, a point which has earned favour from the Australian Aboriginal Communities. Students are aged from 17 years to 65 years with the majority of students aged 17 to 21 years. Students attend their residentials in Sydney, however are drawn from a range of areas across Australia with students residing in Queensland (approximately 1415 km away, almost equivalent to the distance from Luxemburg to Rome), Northern Territory (approximately 4000 km away, a greater distance than the 3,115 km from Lisbon to Copenhagen), Victoria (approximately 877 km, almost equivalent to the distance from Paris to Milan) and Western Australia (approximately 4040 km, almost double the distance from Edinburgh to Naples). In terms of distance travelled by these students, if a map of Australia was overlaid on a map of Europe, the distance from west to east would be greater than the distance between Ireland and Turkey. The distance north to south would be greater than that between Sweden and Spain. In contrast to Europe most of Australia is sparsely populated, arid and very poorly serviced compared to the few large and coastal population centres. This poses immense