

Social media tools to enhance collaboration with students and colleagues

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Introduction: How social media has changed the way we communicate

Since the public introduction of Facebook in 2006 (Phillips, 2007) and exponential growth in the number of social media platforms and smartphone users in recent years, activity in the virtual world has, in one way or another, become a societal norm. Checking one's phone in the morning is routine daily behaviour for most people. Michelle Klein, the Head of Marketing at Facebook North America, told Social Media Week 2016 that the average millennial checks their phones more than 150 times every day (Smith, 2016). These developments raise some interesting questions for language teachers. What if we could take advantage of this habitual behaviour and turn it into professional development by connecting with other educators around Australia? What if students could collaborate with other students outside school hours to communicate with each other in Japanese under our supervision? And why should we as educators be limited to using social media platforms solely to share personal memories and experiences with our friends and family?

Background

School profile

I teach Japanese at a government secondary school located in the western suburbs of metropolitan Melbourne, where there is a mixed demographic ranging from low socio-economic single-parent families to middle class, two-parent families. Many students view language learning as a secondary option compared to subject areas such as STEM and English, as language learning is often perceived as too difficult beyond simple script recognition (in the case of Japanese) and how to ask each other's name.

With increasing mobile data allowances on affordable smartphone plans, students and teachers are more readily connected to social media than ever. During 2012, in order to create an online collaborative platform for my students to interact outside of class time, I trialled various education social media platforms, with limited success. One student suggested setting up a private group on Facebook that students could join without the teacher friending them. In order to ensure I was not working counter to any departmental guidelines, I consulted the Department of Education Victoria 'Using Social Media' policy prior to setting up a Facebook private group. I observed social media usage behaviours in my colleagues and decided to implement an approach similar to the one used to connect Japanese teachers through social media platforms for professional development, resource sharing and support. The following sections discuss these two initiatives in more detail.

Establishing online learning communities

When establishing a 'learning community', one must understand the nature of community, including its purpose, characteristics, and how it is formed and maintained. According to the *Dictionary of Sociology* (Marshall, 1998 as cited in McInnerney and Roberts 2004, p. 75) the

term 'community' refers to *a gathering of people within a singular social structure, or a sense of belonging to a social structure*. Berlanga, Bitter-Rijkema, Brouns, Sloep and Fetter (2011) take the definition further by adding the existence of a specific or joint goal, similar interests and hobbies within the communities. Garrison (2007) also invokes 'common purposes' when defining community. 'Warm' and 'sociable' conduct that fosters improved communication and a safe environment that tolerates mistakes are viewed as a positive social presence essential to creating productive and beneficial online learning communities (Kear, 2010).

Establishing online collaborative learning spaces takes little effort, but maintaining such groups by moderating and providing support to others can be difficult and must be built on consistently appropriate behaviour and trust. Gerdes (2010) places strong emphasis on the importance of trust and its influences on the overall outcomes of collaborative projects. When setting up a platform for students, ongoing support and moderation is crucial, as students often need prompting before they feel confident to post or comment proactively.

It is also necessary for the teacher and students to understand the purpose of the online group being created. For example, the purpose could be to foster enriched discussions and share ideas between individuals. Without clear goals and purpose, the group can quickly lose focus and members will not participate and collaborate willingly and effectively. Relevant content and frequent posts that encourage interaction help maintain momentum within the group. It is also crucial for the teacher to model respectful online behaviour and demonstrate the positive impacts social media sites can have on individuals.

Utilising 'online' classrooms

The specific ways I utilise the Facebook group with my Year 12 students differ depending on class dynamics and learning styles. I primarily use the group for two purposes. It is an excellent platform to check students' understanding at the end of the day through asking formative assessment type questions. This can be as simple as typing up short sentences using vocabulary and grammar structures learned earlier in the week, which students are required to translate or respond to using familiar sentence structures and vocabulary. If you have a particular student who has certain weaknesses in grammatical usage, such as particles, it is possible to tag the student in the relevant question to ensure he or she responds directly. Another use of the group is for online reminders or passing on information regarding upcoming assessments or events. When Facebook groups are small, the platform shows how many members have viewed the post, which is an efficient way to track how often your students view your posts.

When it is difficult for participants to anticipate outcomes without instantaneous responses it is crucial that clear guidelines for participant roles and commitment be developed. The primary benefit to using a Facebook group is that most Facebook users are already familiar with the functionality and features of the social media tool, as it is often incorporated into users' daily routine for personal use. Schools often warn students about their online presence and potential consequences of certain behaviours. Utilising Facebook as a platform is a real-life opportunity for teachers to model and teach acceptable social media use: not making personal details available, and protecting their professional image by never posting unacceptable material.

Using the Facebook group was great because everyone in my class had it [Facebook] and we already knew how to use it. When I had questions, I could just ask and someone, not just the teacher, responded. (Year 12 Student, 2016)

Another collaboration platform I regularly use with my students is a Cloud-Storage platform, Box.com. While the Facebook group is predominantly used for communication, Box.com caters for sharing classroom resources and checking work that students submit online to shared folders. At the beginning of each school year, I create a shared folder for my Year 12 students, where each student gets his or her own online folder. When submitting writing practice, students are required to submit their written work directly by simply taking photos using their mobile phones and uploading using the Box.com app. I then use annotation software such as 'Explain Everything' on the tablet to record my annotated notes and voice instructions as a video and upload these back into their folders, which they can view in their own time. Students benefit greatly from this method as they can view the feedback multiple times as well as hear the correct pronunciation. Both of these platforms, as well as others with similar functionality, can also be used with colleagues as collaborative tools.

Social networking for teachers

In 2014, I established a collaborative Facebook group, Japanese Language Teachers of Australia, in order to address the lack of opportunities for Japanese teachers to effectively connect and share ideas across different states in Australia. The purpose of the Facebook group was to create a nation-wide collaborative space that encouraged the sharing of skills, professional knowledge and development and support for teachers encountering the unique difficulties of teaching Japanese in Australia. I was not alone in identifying the need for greater connectivity, as this issue was addressed during the panel session at the National Symposium for Japanese Language Education in 2014.

Prior to the group's establishment, Japanese teachers predominantly communicated through email newsletters at state level, and there was limited opportunity for interstate teacher communication, resource sharing and collaboration. This prompted me to explore the option of using a Facebook group as a way to share and collaborate between educators from different states and sectors. Initially, I used my professional connections to recruit potential members while blocking fake users or users with no connections to Japanese language education. The group steadily grew in numbers over three years and currently consists of more than 2,400 users (as at December 2017).

Members are generally very active in sharing useful teaching-related resources and requesting assistance. Posts requesting ideas, resources, or assistance from others often attract many responses, demonstrating the dedication of members and their willingness to help others regardless of their backgrounds. According to a survey of members of the Japanese Language Teachers of Australia Facebook group I conducted in 2016, more than 80% of respondents indicated the main reason they participate in the group is to share ideas with other teachers. The remaining respondents reported using the group mostly to ask questions. These responses indicate high levels of interaction and perceived usefulness of the group.

Online learning communities have become more readily available to individuals, regardless of geographical location, thus allowing communication and collaboration in synchronous and asynchronous manners. Ke and Hoadley (2009) refer to learning communities as effective ways for teachers to gain professional development skills by allowing the sharing of ideas and

knowledge through practice and theory. The ability to approach other teachers across state and national boundaries for professional development ideas and teaching resources could contribute to improved best practice in teaching methodologies on a local basis.

Benefits and pitfalls

Benefits

Students and teachers are already familiar with the functionality of popular social media platforms, and therefore the use of such platforms for learning purposes is readily absorbed into daily social media habits and behaviours. The informal appearance of formative assessments conducted through social media platforms creates an easy to use and student-friendly approach to essential data gathering. By providing a supportive and interactive environment where students feel respected and safe to make errors, teachers can create a more friendly ‘face’ to language learning, particularly in the senior years.

Groups aimed at teachers often consist of active members who contribute regularly by responding to questions and sharing ideas. Teachers feel supported and validated by sharing their knowledge and requesting information from each other. It has been indicated by teachers in the Facebook group that, through the group, they have discovered new teaching strategies and resources regardless of their experience levels. Teachers are able to develop low-effort formative assessment that produces an accurate reflection of individual student understanding of material being taught. Cloud-based storage of resources frees up physical space and significantly increases the ability to share resources in a school-wide, state or even global capacity. This capacity is particularly important to teachers in regional or rural areas that may feel isolated or have access to limited resources, and professional development.

Pitfalls

Students may feel they are constantly monitored and required to follow and respond to posts that come up at inconvenient times of day. Some students may also feel their social media usage is being intruded upon by their teachers. If a student has their access to social media removed for some reason, they could be disadvantaged in the classroom unless steps are taken to mitigate the loss of access to the online material.

Although it is great for teachers to be able to connect with students and colleagues at all times, it is also difficult to switch off and disconnect from the virtual world. In order to alleviate this issue the teacher can set boundaries and limits about their availability, such as protecting their personal time from being eroded by not responding to posts after a set time. There is a risk that constant connectivity could increase teacher burnout. There are potential down-sides to the use of social media for collegial sharing as well. Teachers could feel pressured to perform ‘better’ after seeing others teachers’ posts about what they are achieving with their students.

Conclusion

Participants become part of learning communities due to their similar learning goals and objectives. This is true for both student-based groups and teaching-based groups. Members of the Japanese Language Teachers of Australia Facebook group come from diverse backgrounds, but they all have similar interests and goals, which are to enrich their knowledge and understanding of Japanese Language in educational settings and to share their

ideas in discussions. These groups provide numerous opportunities for participants to ask questions, seek clarification, and contribute their ideas and knowledge to the benefit of the rest of the group community. Social media plays a large part in modern society; students in the twenty-first century are constantly exposed to this and expected to be familiar with it. Many future occupations require the use of social media to promote products and services, and collaborate with others. As teachers, we can seize this opportunity to prepare our students with skills likely to help them succeed in the workforce of the future.

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