

I “Like” It: How to Increase Facebook Group Enrollment and Engagement for University Programs

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Abstract

The rise in social media use over the years brought Facebook to universities across the US, so departments and programs are currently experimenting with using it for academic and communication purposes and they are finding it to be beneficial (Wang, Woo, Quek, Yang, and Liu, 2013; Clements, 2015; Guo, Shen, and Li, 2018; Heiberger and Harper, 2008). This research presents a case study of how to improve a pre-existing university departmental Facebook group and suggests actions based on a successful implementation strategy in the Department of World Languages at Western Carolina University in North Carolina. Other studies on Facebook groups analyze the creation and use of a Facebook group, making this study unique because the original Facebook group was created for the department in 2012, yet five years later, there were only 64 members in the group, demonstrating that the group was not optimized to its full potential. This study found that fourteen specific actions can increase the number of members within the group while encouraging engagement. The strategic actions in this study tripled the number of Facebook group members over a ten-month period and promoted intercultural diversity and communication.

Keywords: Facebook group, diversity, languages, members, communication, social media

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Introduction

Universities in the United States realized quickly that using social media is important to students. While there are many choices with social media, Facebook continues to be the most popular social media platform in the US (Greenwood, Perrin, & Duggan, 2016). According to Brenner and Smith (2013), of 1,895 interviews conducted with American adult internet users, 89% of users from the 18-29 age group use Facebook. Facebook is not only a tool for the common individual, but also a pedagogical tool for educators and a space where groups can form to support and encourage learning and communication. Facebook groups can be classified as open, closed, or secret to give the administrators options to protect the privacy of group members (Miron & Ravid, 2015). Group members do not have to be “friends” on Facebook, but the group space allows for a virtual experience similar to a classroom, yet the members access the information when they want and as frequently as they desire. Because of the notification function on smartphones, group members receive reminders to check new content that is posted, which is helpful by encouraging engagement. The following study discusses how a fairly inactive existing Facebook group for a university language department can be revived to increase membership and engagement in the virtual environment. While this study focuses on a language department, the study provides useful suggestions that could be applied to other university programs or departments.

Background on the Study

Western Carolina University is situated in the western region of North Carolina in the United States. The Department of World Languages at WCU provides education through its language programs in Cherokee, Spanish, French, German, and Japanese. A Facebook group called World Languages @ WCU was created on March 13, 2012 by Dr. Santiago García-Castañón in an effort to create a channel of communication with students and alumni that would allow for sharing relevant or interesting information (S. García-Castañón, personal communication, October 27, 2017). This is worth mentioning because the group originally began as a networking tool, yet later became an academic virtual learning space where students, faculty, and supporters of the department could communicate and share academic content.

Problem

Table 1: Total Student Enrollment in the Department of World Languages at Western Carolina University

Semester	Number of Students
Spring 2012	548
Spring 2017	578
Fall 2017	704

As seen in Table 1 above, the Department of World Languages Western Carolina University had 548 students taking language courses in the spring of 2012 and had 578 students taking language courses as of January 30, 2017 (M. Allen, personal communication, October 27, 2017). The World Languages @ WCU Facebook group only had 64 members after approximately five years of being in use. Using these figures, this would mean that only approximately 11% of current students in the

department were members of the group, but some members were faculty members or alumni as well. This percentage was perplexing because although multiple generations are represented at the university, the majority of university students in the US represent Generation Z, according to a 2013 study of full-time enrolled undergraduate students at 2 and 4-year public institutions (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013). Generation Z students are known to be constantly connected and as discussed earlier, 89% of the 18-29 age group in the study by Brenner and Smith (2013) use Facebook. This data suggests that the students were and are using Facebook for many purposes, but very few were members of the World Languages @ WCU Facebook group. The group was only being used occasionally and the content was outdated. An additional problem with the Facebook group was that it was not inclusive of all of the languages represented in the department.

Purpose of the Study

This study aimed to serve as an intervention in a previously established Facebook group to increase membership and engagement. Two main goals were established by the researcher:

1. Double the number of members in the World Languages @ WCU Facebook group (64) while provoking more participation from faculty and students.
2. Make the group inclusive of all languages represented in the department.

Research Question

How can an existing Facebook group be changed to increase membership and engagement with university faculty and students?

While the creation of a Facebook group could be beneficial to a university program, this study focuses on changes that could be made to an existing group, as the Department of World Languages at Western Carolina University already had one in place.

Significance

The interest in the use of a Facebook group for academic purposes has increased over the years, as researchers have found beneficial results (Wang, Woo, Quek, Yang, and Liu, 2013; Clements, 2015; Guo, Shen, and Li, 2018; Heiberger and Harper, 2008). This research adds to the studies completed on Facebook groups, yet is unique because it encourages language learning without focusing on a single second language and it tests strategies to increase membership and engagement within the group. The Facebook group also serves as a virtual environment to promote Community Language Learning (CLL), which may be appropriate for newer generations of students (Fisher, 2017).

This study addresses the low Facebook group membership numbers in World Languages @ WCU and may serve as an example to model for other language programs and/or departments in the US.

Data

The data is found at World Languages @ WCU on Facebook and is publicly available once the member is approved. Member approvals are only required for behavior management purposes and to ensure that each member is an actual person. The data used in this study covers a period of ten months from January 30, 2017 to October 30, 2017. Quantitative data is available on Facebook to show the number of members, views, likes, and comments. Qualitative data is also available within the group, as posts can be seen by all members.

Data Analysis

Because the main goals of this study are to double the number of Facebook group members and make the group more inclusive of all departmental languages, the analysis is simply to observe the trends over the ten-month period while specific actions are taken to increase the membership number and state the success or failure of the multiple language representation goal.

Scheduling posts and engagement analysis (“insights”) are two functions that are beneficial to administrators because the “insights” feature permits the viewing of key metrics such as: actions, views, likes, reach, post engagements, messages, and videos (Lua, 2017). Some social media dashboards like Hootsuite do not currently offer analytics for Facebook groups because of a business agreement.

The “group insights” feature was utilized in this study to analyze the engagement in the group quantitatively instead of manually counting or calculating the membership and engagement data.

Goals

1. Double the number of members in the World Languages @ WCU Facebook group (64) while provoking more participation from faculty and students.
2. Make the group inclusive of all languages represented in the department.

Framework for Actions

This Facebook group mentioned in this study is public and does not only have university students, yet the purpose of the group is to provide a space for people who study, support, and teach world languages at Western Carolina University. This space was created based on the availability of new technology, taking into account the communication style of those born after 1995, known as Generation Z, as the majority of students studying at Western Carolina University represent that generation.

Seemiller and Grace (2016) conducted a study to analyze Generation Z’s characteristics, learning styles, engagement, and outlook on life through surveys of 1,223 students in the US, born 1995 or later and found that “...Generation Z students use Facebook the most in comparison to other mass communication methods” (p. 72). Seemiller and Grace (2016) also discussed the fear of missing out (FOMO) observed with Generation Z that explains why they are constantly connected and checking their phones, even moments after waking up. Seemiller and Grace (2016) explain,

“Generation Z students are comfortable with sharing their opinions or expertise and use multiple platforms...to do so” (p. 77).

Ahern, Feller, & Nagle (2016) explored 260 undergraduate students’ use of Facebook groups to understand what motivates students to use them and what benefits they receive from being involved with the groups and found that students are members of Facebook groups for both social and educational reasons. Facebook groups allow students to seek information with ease, communicate quickly and efficiently, and learn from others while creating a sense of community that they can access remotely on their own time (Ahern et al., 2016).

The researcher identified seven major themes in the studies by Seemiller and Grace (2016) and Ahern et al. (2016) to develop actions for the Facebook Group World Languages @ WCU. These themes are:

1. Fear of Missing Out (FOMO)
2. Teachers and peers are role models
3. Education matters
4. It is okay to share opinions
5. YouTube is valuable
6. Diversity should be embraced
7. Hybrid experiences are interesting

The themes are specifically designed for the Generation Z students, but they may apply to other generations as well.

Actions

1. Email students individually, inviting them to the FB group. This relates to FOMO, as mentioned by Seemiller and Grace (2016).
2. Announce the existence of the FB group in classes. This relates to FOMO, as mentioned by Seemiller and Grace (2016).
3. Post link to FB group on Blackboard courses with an optional invitation to join. This relates to FOMO, as mentioned by Seemiller and Grace (2016).
4. Post more photos to group of students and faculty. Teachers and peers are role models to Generation Z (Seemiller & Grace, 2016).
5. Post articles about faculty success stories. Education matters to Generation Z (Seemiller & Grace, 2016).
6. Create polls to encourage group participation while gaining information about students and faculty. Generation Z students don’t mind sharing their opinions (Seemiller & Grace, 2016).
7. Post and re-post entertaining videos from YouTube and campus events. YouTube is valuable to Generation Z (Seemiller & Grace, 2016; Sparks & Honey, 2014).
8. Post culturally-relevant articles to encourage reading. Generation Z students embrace diversity (Seemiller & Grace, 2016). Group members share common ground, so the content is relevant to them (Ahern et al., 2016).
9. Encourage students to post in group. This may be a challenge for Generation Z students, as Seemiller and Grace (2016) noted that Generation Z students have a tendency to just observe what is going on, as they do with reality shows, yet students

appreciate the ease of posting in a group over other methods, such as email (Ahern et al., 2016).

10. Provide event information within the group. This creates a hybrid experience, as members can read and plan online before going to an event in person. Generation Z students like hybrid experiences (Seemiller & Grace, 2016).

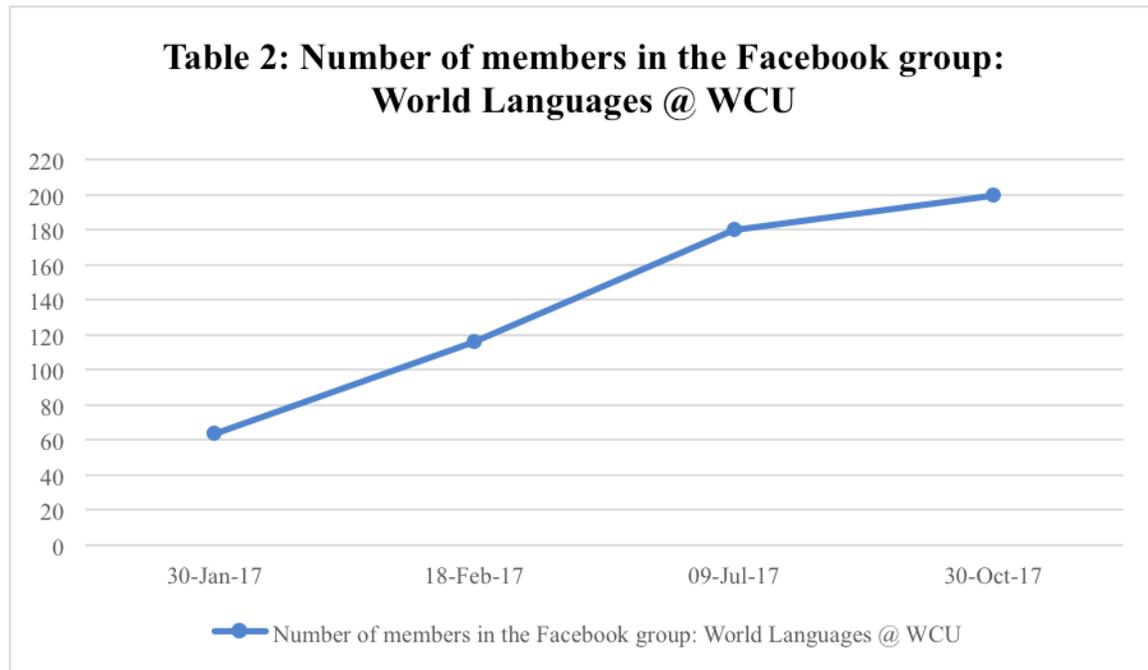
11. Invite others to join while at conferences. This provides networking and continuing education opportunities for students and faculty members and adds to the diversity of the group. Generation Z students embrace diversity (Seemiller & Grace, 2016).

12. Spend approximately one hour per day researching content and posting frequently. The study by Ahern et al. (2016) found that 45.9% of undergraduate students (93% were ages 18-24) regarded posting on the Facebook timeline as important.

13. Create a YouTube Channel to integrate video of faculty and students. YouTube is valuable to Generation Z, as students report using it to supplement the material learned in courses (Seemiller & Grace, 2016; Sparks & Honey, 2014).

14. Share posts from other WCU language programs. Generation Z students embrace diversity (Seemiller & Grace, 2016). The Facebook group creates a sense of community (Ahern et al., 2016).

Results and Discussion



As seen in Table 2, the combination of all aforementioned actions produced positive results, as the number of Facebook group members more than tripled in a period of 10 months. There were 64 members on January 30, 2017 and the numbers increased to 116 members on February 18, 2017, then to 180 members on July 9, 2017, and finally to 200 members on October 30, 2017.

The actions also increased the engagement with faculty members, students, and WCU supporters. Posting frequently and sharing interesting photos and videos provoked

many members to view, comment, or like the content. This group also promoted the other language program groups within the department, which increased the number of views, likes and comments. Because posts were inclusive of all languages, the content was found favorable by many members. This was a significant finding, as representing multiple languages was beneficial to the whole group.

The integration of the YouTube Channel was particularly engaging and easy to analyze with the analytics function on YouTube. A series called “iLanguage Talk” was created in which the researcher recorded interviews on video with WCU professors to discuss language and culture topics. This gave the professors a voice and space to share their expertise. Once uploaded to YouTube, the episodes were easily posted to the Facebook group. Further analysis on iLanguage Talk will be provided in a future publication by this researcher.

The number of views can be seen within the Facebook group and that average number also increased with the positive trend in the number of group members, as seen in Table 2. Also, because one action was to post frequently, many group members simply viewed the content, but did not interact. There were some discrepancies between the number of views on YouTube videos posted in the group and the number of views in the YouTube analytics. This may suggest that members clicked on the content to read the description, but did not actually view the video. Similarly, some questions or polls were answered only by a few, yet a significant number of members viewed the post.

Graphic A: World Languages @ WCU Engagement Numbers and Days



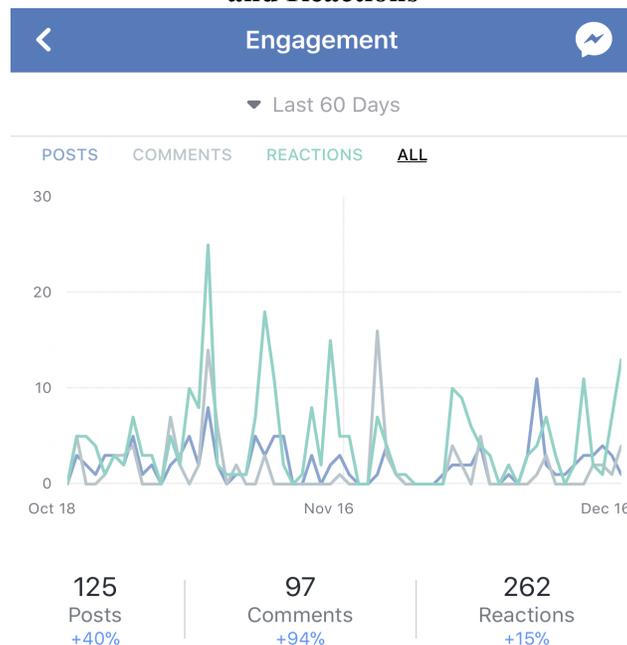
As mentioned previously, Facebook groups do currently provide some data analysis to understand engagement within the group. Graphic A above indicates that there are 164 “active members”, which demonstrates that some members want to be a part of the group, but are not actively involved or engaged. Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday are the most popular days for engagement within the group, so this could suggest that either more posting could be done to increase engagement on other days or the prime time to engage with the group is between Tuesday-Thursday.

One of the actions in this study was to spend one hour per day researching, developing, and posting content for the group. This took significant time for the researcher, as one hour per day for ten months totals over 300 hours.

This study found that membership and engagement can be increased by the 14 actions that were previously mentioned. It is impossible to highlight a single action that had the most impact, as many of the actions were implemented simultaneously and frequently. It is understood that the combination of the 14 actions led to the increase in members. This increase of 136 group members is significant when considering that this study took place during only 10 months. Also, the student enrollment for the Department of World Languages at WCU for the fall of 2017 was 704, so this could demonstrate that 25-28% of students are now members of the group, yet one must take into account that some of the new members are not students at WCU.

This study was also helpful to identify ways in which group members interact. Many members voluntarily chose to view content and absorb the input, yet they did not feel inclined to interact and demonstrate output. This observation aligns with Seemiller and Grace's (2016) study that found that Generation Z is "...drawn to seeing what is going on with those around them, and social media is a quick and easy way to do just that" (p. 74). Could this be considered to be passive engagement? According to Coates (2006), "Institutions should work to transform passive styles of engagement into other likely more productive styles of interaction with learning" (p. 178). While passive engagement can be seen in a negative light, it is important to note that membership in this particular Facebook group is not required, nor is it linked to any single university course. It simply serves to quench the thirst for knowledge about languages and cultures while facilitating communication with a diverse group of people. That being said, active engagement could be beneficial for the general experience in the group, so strategies to provoke active engagement could be analyzed in a future study.

Graphic B: World Languages @ WCU Engagement Through Posts, Comments, and Reactions



Graphic B is an example of the group engagement with posts, comments, and reactions from October 18, 2017 to December 16, 2017. The Facebook application on an iPhone currently restricts the view to increments of 7, 28 or 60 days, so the 60-day view is shown above to have a glimpse of the group at the end of the ten-month observation period and also the engagement moving forward. Accessing the “Group Insights” on a computer allows for a 4-month view, but does not currently have the option of a 10-month view. As seen above, the reactions tend to peak when there are more posts. This could indicate that more frequent posting could increase the engagement.

The researcher is currently learning more about effective ways to work periodically instead of spending an hour every day to work on this Facebook group. The use of Hootsuite is one way to schedule posts, yet it can be costly to use advanced features to increase group engagement.

Conclusions

The use of a departmental Facebook group for interaction with university students and faculty was analyzed in this study and found that fourteen actions can be helpful to increase the number of members, improve quality, and increase engagement. The study found that (1) emailing students, (2) announcing in class, (3) posting link to Blackboard courses, (4) posting photos of students and faculty, (5) posting articles about faculty success stories, (6) creating polls, (7) posting and re-posting videos from YouTube and campus events, (8) posting culturally-relevant articles, (9) encouraging students to post in group, (10) providing event information, (11) inviting colleagues while at conferences, (12) spending approximately one hour per day researching content and posting frequently, (13) creating a YouTube Channel to integrate video of faculty and students, and (14) share posts from other departmental language programs can all benefit the group and produce positive results. The two main goals in this study were accomplished, as the membership numbers exceeded the expectation and multiple language program posts were re-posted. This study was not only beneficial for the Department of World Languages at Western Carolina University, but also for other universities, as they can now use this group as a model of success for future implementation of a Facebook group. Further study and analysis could be done on the types of engagement activities within the Facebook group to keep members actively involved.

For the readers of this research who would like to learn more about Generation Z students, Facebook groups, or creativity with language education, feel free to connect with the researcher through social media.

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