

FACEBOOK AND WHATSAPP AT SCHOOL, PRESENT SITUATION AND PROSPECTS IN ITALY

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ABSTRACT

In the last few years, social media have become one of the main communication vehicles among young generations. Gradually, they are also entering the school. Starting from data collected through a questionnaire administered to approximately 2000 secondary school students and those gathered from a questionnaire and interviews with about 300 teachers of schools of the same order, we try to take stock of the spread of social networks such as Facebook and WhatsApp as a means of communication between teachers and students for educational purposes, with a main focus on the reasons for the choice for or against using social networks at school.

KEYWORDS

Social networks, secondary school, Facebook, WhatsApp, friendship between teachers and students.

1. INTRODUCTION

The widespread dissemination of electronic communication services and the great success met by social networks have led researchers to wonder about their potential in formal learning environments.

With a series of investigations into the world of adolescents' communication (Lazzari & Jacono Quarantino, 2010, 2013, 2015) we followed the evolution of Facebook and WhatsApp outside and inside Italian schools, and with ongoing research, we are trying to figure out whether, how and why secondary school teachers are ready to accept them as tools to support learning processes.

As for the students, about 8000 high school students were given a questionnaire over the course of three surveys, the latest of which, in the spring of 2015, involved about 2000 students of secondary schools in the city of Bergamo and its province. With regard to the teachers, we have begun to administer a questionnaire, which has already reached over 200 teachers of secondary schools, for now in the Bergamo province, in northern Italy, in future in the rest of Lombardy. We also carried out interviews with approximately 50 teachers and school principals.

2. STATE OF THE ART

Martin (2009), in one of the first studies on the impact of social networks on student achievement, showed that there was no correlation between the time spent online in social services and the grades of a sample of more than 1000 students at a North American university. Later, Roblyer et al (2010) found that students are more keen than teachers on using social networks in educational settings, and that the latter believe that Facebook is more suitable for personal and social use rather than for educational purposes. In a more recent study, Lim and Richardson (2016) reveal that the intensity of using social networks has a significant correlation with students' perceptions of using social networks for educational purposes, and that the advances in social networking capabilities increase the possibility for educational social networks to act as a means to overcome issues such as students' isolation or lack of community. And Lambić (2016) shows that while the generic use of Facebook does not affect academic performance, its use for educational purposes influences it.

Even Mehmood and Taswir (2013), in a survey of 100 undergraduates, show that whereas some students perceive social networks in the learning environments mainly as a source of distraction, a majority considers them their favorite tools for information retrieval, to participate in educational networks, to orient themselves to look for career opportunities, and eventually to build a sense of belonging to the academic community (p. 122).

Some scholars believe that social networks encourage the participation and development of new social and communicative skills, which prepare students for the roles that they will undertake as citizens and workers (Jenkins, 2010). Legaree (2014) claims that Facebook is an ideal vehicle to provide information and educational materials to students, since they do not need to be encouraged to attend the platform, which they already visit in their leisure time. Moreover, the students' habit to exploit the communicative mechanisms of Facebook, such as comments, leads them to be actors of the communication processes and not just passive recipients.

Mazer et al. (2007), in a seminal work on teacher-student interactions on Facebook, state that high school teachers' self-disclosure may lead students to higher levels of motivation and affective learning, and fosters a positive classroom climate. On the other hand, more recently, Camus et al. (2016) suggest that while Facebook may be better for encouraging social processes among students, learning management environments may be more effective for educational purposes. Dyson et al. (2015) suggest that the successful integration of social media into the classroom is hard to predict, because it results from complex interactions of several environmental and individual factors, related to the learners' perspective on the use of social media for educational aims.

To date, the number of reflections on the interaction of students and teachers on social networking sites is growing, often confined to the dilemmatic question of whether teachers should accept students' friendship requests within Web 2.0. With our research, we are trying to get a picture of the existing situation in Italy, to see if and how Facebook and WhatsApp can become support tools in teaching and learning processes in our secondary schools.

3. EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE AND DISCUSSION

The overwhelming success of WhatsApp is the largest evidence certified by our survey of 2015 on media consumption of adolescents; among them, the multimedia communication app has even become the first tool of communication with families, replacing the traditional phone call.

By examining in a diachronic perspective the data collected through our three student surveys, we may follow the trend of Facebook spread, from autumn 2008, in a first pilot administration, when still only 30% of secondary school students claimed to have used it a few times, through spring 2009, when percentage rose to 66%, to spring 2012, when it arrived at 90%; eventually, in the spring of 2015 it stood at 81.4%. The decline is not so clear, although the percentage of daily users decreased (from 65% in 2012 to the current 49.3) in favor of other services such as WhatsApp and Instagram. In summary, the data point out that Facebook is intended as an elective tool for information, WhatsApp for direct communication, Instagram for the dissemination of images.

The percentage of Facebook daily users progressively grows from 10.4% for the second year of middle school, to 32% of the first year of high school, reaching 63.1% for the pupils in their final year. Note that from the sample we excluded, for several reasons, the first year of the middle school, that is 12-year-old pupils; on the other hand, Facebook might not be used before the age of 13 and WhatsApp before 16. The data may be interpreted in various ways: the phenomenon can be regarded as a sign of progressive disaffection over Facebook by the new cohorts, or rather as a sign that Facebook is a more appropriate tool for more "mature communications".

In the meantime, Facebook has entered Italian schools, with a trend characterized by rapid growth and an equally quick descent: from an almost alien tool in 2008, to a service frequently used by more than half of high school students in 2012 (closed groups), then falling in 2015 to just over 30% in high schools and around 20% in middle schools, crushed by the emergence of WhatsApp, which is used frequently by 74.5% of middle school students and by 84.6% of high school students.

Despite this high rate of use of social media by students, these platforms are still struggling to be adopted in schools, mainly because of a lack of involvement by teachers. Namely, while they are rather keen on

exploiting sharing tools, such as, first of all, Dropbox (teachers participate in more than 90% of the uses of Dropbox), Facebook groups and WhatsApp do not meet with the favor of teachers (13.7 and 8.4% respectively).

The attitude against WhatsApp is quite understandable, probably due to their desire not to share their phone number. As for Facebook, the choice is due to remarks about the opportunity of befriending students (even if joining groups does not require being friends).

To examine the problem we have set a new research agenda, based on a questionnaire administered to secondary school teachers (N = 215 up to now) and on interviews with teachers (41) and school administrators (10). The survey is not easy to complete, because of difficulties in building the sample. For the interviews, initially we contacted teachers directly known by the research team, then we applied a snowball strategy; for the online questionnaire, contacts are reached through the trade union organizations, which forward our web address to their mailing lists; their mediation guarantees a rather uniformly distributed sample. In any case, the survey is slowly advancing, with a main focus on the reasons for the choice for or against the use of social networks in class, looking for any correlations with:

1. Teachers' digital skills: eight questions, such as:
 - a. *Do you find using computers difficult? Would you be able to generate a table of contents using Word?*
 - b. *Would you be able to write an Excel formula such that the content of a cell is OK if the content of the adjacent cell is greater than 5 and XX else?*
2. Their perception of personal self-efficacy: 11 questions, such as:
 - a. *Are you able to engage even the most reluctant and difficult pupils?*
 - b. *Are you able to gain the trust and esteem of your colleagues?*
 - c. *Do you know how to deal with the problems related to the inclusion of pupils with special educational needs?*
3. Their perception of collective self-efficacy, that is of the school in which they operate: seven questions, such as:
 - a. *Does your school convey a positive image?*
 - b. *Does your school know how to adapt teaching to the opportunities provided by educational technology?*

The whole questionnaire includes about 70 questions; the answers will receive careful consideration when the sample is more robust, but from a first glance at the data gathered until now, some evidence begins to emerge, which is in keeping with the updates of the questionnaire administrations.

First of all, about half of the respondents have a Facebook account, which is used quite briskly: 75% left a Like in the last 72 hours.

About 76% are against friendship in Facebook between teachers and students, less than 9% agree, and the others are in a neutral position. On the other hand, less than 44% agree with those school principals who have banned teachers from befriending students on Facebook. This share is more or less equivalent to that coming from interviews with school principals: 4 out of 10 agree with those colleagues who banned friendships on Facebook, 3 disagree and 3 are neutral; 6 out of them are against friendship on Facebook between teachers and students, 3 are favorable, 1 is neutral.

Among Facebook users, only 18% say that they use it to exchange teaching materials with students, either directly or indirectly (through a student who acts as a bridge). According to the interviews, reasons for non-use are explained in reference to two types of concerns:

1. Privacy:
 - a. *I believe that the personal life of a teacher should remain private in the eyes of their students and families.*
 - b. *I'd feel uncomfortable, knowing that they use the network daily, and therefore frequently would have access to my pictures or information.*
2. Fear of compromising the teacher student relationship:
 - a. *It fosters a too confidential rapport, which puts a strain on the relationship between teachers and their own pupils.*
 - b. *I think it is absolutely detrimental to accept a friend request from your own students. They bring the relationship to an inadequate level.*

- c. *The teacher's role is also to judge. A friend, even if Facebook friendships are rather different from the real ones, does not judge you, so there's just the risk of confusing the two planes and compromising the educational relationship.*

Regarding the fear of privacy invasions, it is interesting to note, however, that only 2 out of 41 interviewees report that they publish personal contents, and in any case both of them have students among their friends. The lack of appropriate specific digital skills is rejected as a significant reason not to use Facebook at school.

4. FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS

The research presented here for the first sharing with the scientific community, in order to stimulate reflection and gather valuable information, continues with the administration of the questionnaire to teachers and the coding and interpretation of the interviews, which have so far generated about seventy pages of typewritten text.

As soon as the statistical sample is more consistent, a statistical model will be applied to spot the correlations among data. Our main hypotheses aim at verifying whether the resistance of teachers to using Facebook at school is influenced by low levels of digital competencies and a feeling of personal or collective self-efficacy, as well as their age, number of years teaching, or educational background.

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