

**LEARNING THROUGH SHARING :
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**Surfing the social media wave in an educational setting to
promote participation and community development**

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1. INTRODUCTION

Web 2.0 technology facilitates participation and information-sharing on the Internet and as a result it has led to the advent of the social Web. This sharing of content occurs both in the private and public sphere and at a personal and professional level. It is thus not surprising that teachers -and students alike- want to be connected and take advantage of the huge potential given to them by the social media and are integrating this technology into their teaching/learning arsenal.

We can nevertheless question whether (and how) this use of the social media has really changed teaching and learning practices and whether social networking sites are really connecting people and facilitating community creation and development.

In an attempt to address these issues, this paper will observe and analyse online practices of staff and students in a language learning support context. After briefly describing the context of the study, it will compare participatory and use patterns on an institutional virtual learning environment (VLE) and on a Facebook page during two consecutive years. The change of platforms from a VLE to a social networking site (namely Facebook) was brought about by support staff in an attempt to increase students' participation by using a media which is popular amongst them. The findings from the study of participation on these two sites will be complemented by the results from a feedback questionnaire on student's perception of a sense of 'community belonging' in both learning settings.

These preliminary results and the ensuing recommendations for further applications can be a stepping stone to initiate a dialogue on the use of social media for language learning in general and for community building in particular.

2. SOCIAL MEDIA & SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES

The advance in computer technology, allowing for instant online communication and the easy creation and sharing of user-generated content via web-based and mobile applications, enabled the advent of social media (McLoughlin & Lee, 2007). This interactive dialogue on the net has become a societal phenomenon, entering our life under various forms and for a range of functions and purposes. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) created a classification scheme for social media types containing six categories: collaborative projects (e.g., Wikipedia), blogs and microblogs (e.g., Twitter), content communities (e.g., YouTube), social networking sites (e.g., Facebook), virtual game worlds (e.g., World of Warcraft), and virtual social worlds (e.g. Second Life). For the purpose of this research, we will concentrate solely on social networking sites.

Since they first emerged, the penetration rate of social networking sites has increased very rapidly. A survey carried out in 2008 (Murray, Hourigan, Jeanneau) at the University of Limerick amongst 75 non-specialist language students revealed that 97% of the respondents had a presence on these platforms and that 51.5% had a profile on more than one networking site.

In recent years, Facebook is the overall “winner” in the popularity race. Hew (2011) highlights that its use is “nearly ubiquitous amongst students” (p. 663)

Over the past few years research on the academic and pedagogical use of Facebook is starting to emerge (Hew, 2011; Lampe et al, 2011; Lamy, 2011). This site is often presented as a platform to organise group activities or to discuss course or assignment details (Bosch, 2009; Lampe et al, 2011). Hew’s research review (2011) concludes that although the learning purposes are stated by students as a motive for using Facebook, in reality its use remains essentially social and the educational function is still very marginal amongst students. The present study will attempt to determine whether these findings can be verified in our context.

3. COMMUNITY BUILDING

The popularity of social networking site relies heavily on their propensity to initiate a feeling of belonging (Arnold & Paulus, 2010). McMillan and Chavis (1986) have been influential in their studies on defining the concept of ‘sense of community’. They highlight four key elements building this feeling: i) membership (feeling part of a defined group which holds boundaries); ii) influence (the reciprocal influence of members on each other, the fact that they all have something to bring and take to the rest of the group); iii) integration and fulfilment of needs (it is what binds the community together, even though the needs of each member might not be the same, it expresses what each one gain from his/her participation); iv) shared emotional connection (feeling of closeness experienced by members, it is often associated to shared history and experience). They establish that there is a link between sense of community and the “ability to function competently in the community” (p. 6): the more developed the sense of community is, the highest the level of participation is. These elements are thus crucial when studying participation on social networking sites and when trying to establish whether community building can occur on these sites.

Reinforcing the sense of community belonging has been established as a key element for the resource and support centre studied in this paper as this feeling has an impact on motivation as highlighted by Pavlenko & Norton (2007): “The process of imagining and reimagining one’s multiple memberships may influence agency, motivation, investment, and resistance in the learning of [languages]” (p. 669). Aceto et al (2010) go even further in emphasizing the impact of online communities in the learning process by stating that they “(...) provide the context, resources and opportunities to expand the members’ horizons and awareness of themselves and of other members” which in turn leads to “(...) other forms of learning, such as knowledge and skill acquisition for practical and professional aims” (p.6).

Finding the most appropriate platform to foster this type of learning was thus paramount to our study.

4. SOCIAL & EDUCATIONAL CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

Located at the heart of the Languages building, the Language Resource Area (LRA) offers to all language learners some learning activities (Language Partner Programme, discussion groups) as well as a range of resources in the six languages taught in the School and at all the levels represented (from ab initio for some undergraduate

courses to advanced level, especially for some postgraduate courses). These are provided on a self-access and voluntary basis. The role of the centre is mainly to support language learning, to increase learners' autonomy, to encourage the transfer of skills, and to develop a community of language learners. The underlying principles for the development of this centre were borrowed from research in the field of language advising/language counselling (Mozzon-McPherson & Vismans, 2001) with an emphasis on "helping learners acquire the knowledge and skills to manage their own learning" (Rubin, 2007:1).

A Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) was initially developed in 2009 to add flexibility to the services already offered. This proved to be challenging as this VLE - unlike VLEs set up for online courses, designated modules or specific cohorts of students - had to address the needs of a wide audience ranging from 1st years to postgraduate students, from language specialists to non-specialists. The established VLE contained an extensive resource repository (for the six languages taught in the School and at various levels for each one), a calendar of events, an announcement space for events and various discussion forums (one for each of the six languages and some for specific topics such as language exchange partners). Even though the VLE remained open, a Facebook page for the centre was created in September 2010. The main objectives of this page were to reach a wider audience and to offer to students a platform where they might feel more at ease to communicate.

5. RATIONALE AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This paper investigates whether (and how) the use of social media has changed teaching and learning practices and whether social networking sites are really connecting people and facilitating community creation and development.

More precisely, this research endeavours to answer the following questions:

- What are the patterns of use and participation of both staff and students on the institutional VLE and the Centre's Facebook page?
- How do these two platforms impact on students' sense of community?
- What are the students' perceptions of these sites and of their pedagogical value?

6. DATA COLLECTION & METHODOLOGY

In order to address these issues, the online practices of staff and students on two different platforms (an institutional virtual learning environment (VLE) named Sulis and on a Facebook page set-up for the centre) were observed and analysed. The data was collected during two consecutive years, namely February 2010 to 2011 for the Sulis site and February 2011 to 2012 for the Facebook page. The general quantitative data (number of users, visits, activities...) were collected from the statistical tools on both platforms. A qualitative study of the content of the sites was then carried out (including a study of the posts, likes...). In addition to the data analysis, two online surveys were carried out using SurveyMonkey to get feedback from students. The questionnaire pertaining to the VLE was undertaken in Spring 2011 and was accessed by 60 respondents. The one concerning the Facebook page ran at the beginning of February 2012 and was completed by 64 respondents.

7. DATA ANALYSIS

7.1. Overall use of the platforms

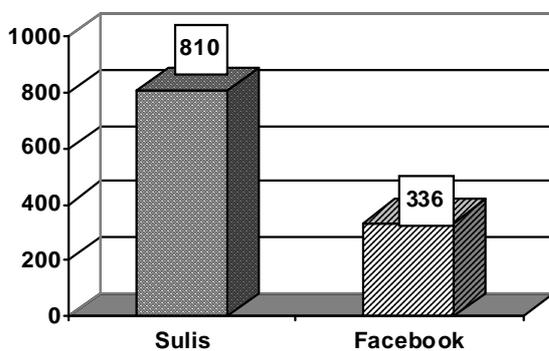


Fig 1. Number of users/'fans'

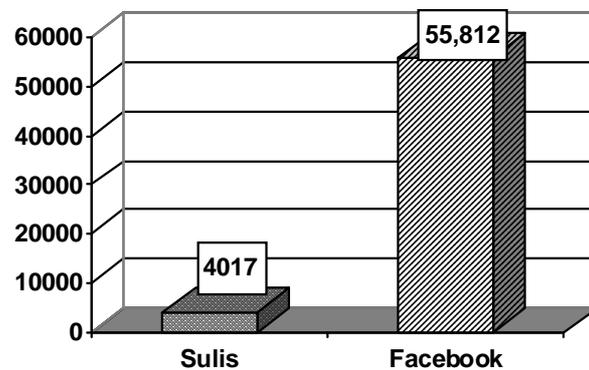


Fig. 2. Number of visits/page views

When we observe the overall use of the two platforms (Figures 1&2), the differences are striking. Even though there are over twice as many users on the VLE, the Facebook page was viewed over 55,000 times (as opposed to just over 4,000 visits over a similar timeframe of a year for the Sulis site). Some of these divergences in results can be explained by the set-up of the sites.

The higher numbers on the VLE can be explained by the fact that the site was manually populated by the staff of the centre with all the students learning a language in the School. Although access to the site does not automatically equate to use of the site, a vast majority of the students entered on the VLE logged in to check it out.

However, out of the 810 actual users, 30 % accessed the site only once (we may assume they did so out of curiosity).

Conversely, the number of ‘fans’ on Facebook does not truly reflect the number of users of the Facebook page, as users do not have to have “liked” a page to be able to visit it. The actual number of users is thus more difficult to ascertain. The data from figure 3 (though restricted to a 3-month period) shows how some posts were “reached” (i.e. accessed) and highlights the ‘viral’ nature of Facebook (the information passes from users to users via their ‘Wall’ as shown by the top curve on the left-hand side graph). This can explain the high number of page views. Moreover, we can also speculate that a page viewed does not necessarily equate to a page read. So we cannot assume that the information, while displayed on students’ profile, is taken on board.

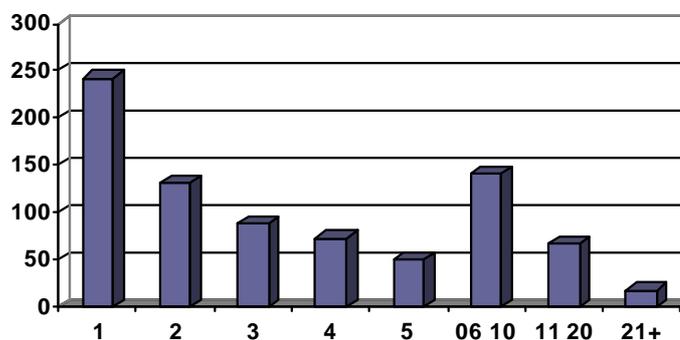
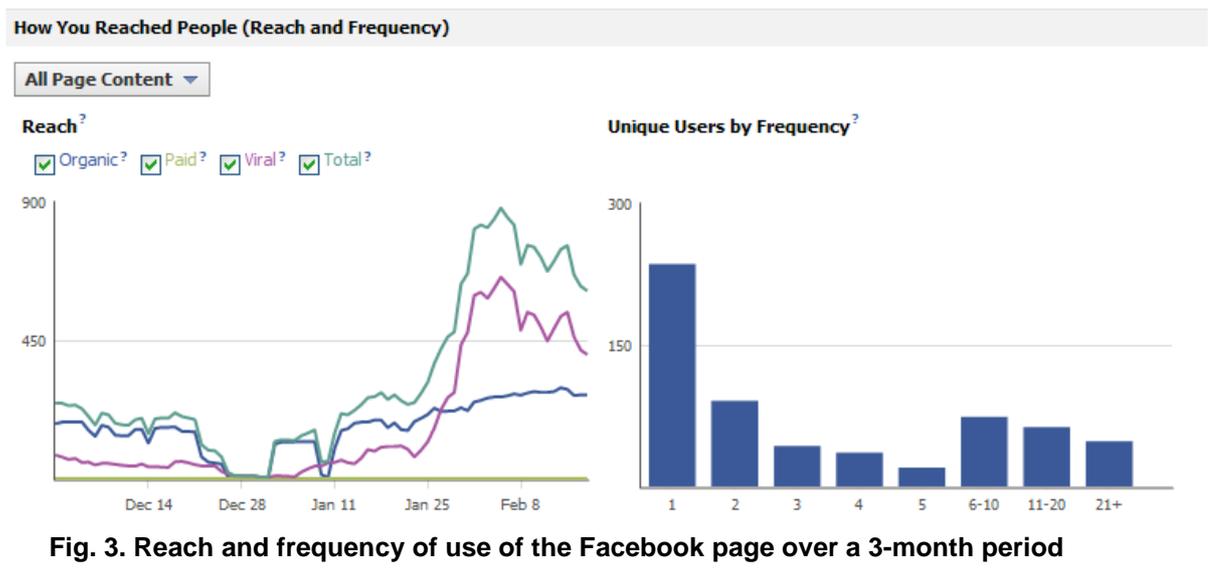


Fig. 4. Frequency of use on Sulis (VLE)

Interestingly, the graphs on figures 3 and 4 also reveals that overall, the pattern of use is similar on both platforms, with a high percentage of unique visits, a steady decrease in numbers up to 5 visits, and a significant proportion of users who can be classified

as frequent users (6 visits or more). The only noteworthy differences in this pattern of use are the higher ratio of 6-10 visits on the VLE and the larger amount of users with more than 21 visits on Facebook. But overall, the frequency of use is not significantly higher on Facebook, as it could have been inferred.

7.2. Details of activities on the platforms

We can note that the VLE is primarily accessed to read content and the other activities (adding content, updating the calendar, posting information) are restricted to staff (even though the setting of the VLE allowed students to post as well) (see Figure 5). This tends to show that from a student point of view, both the Sulis and Facebook sites are used in a similar way (mainly to access and read content). However, differences appear when we observe the types of activities and interactivity on both platforms (Figures 6, 7 and 8).

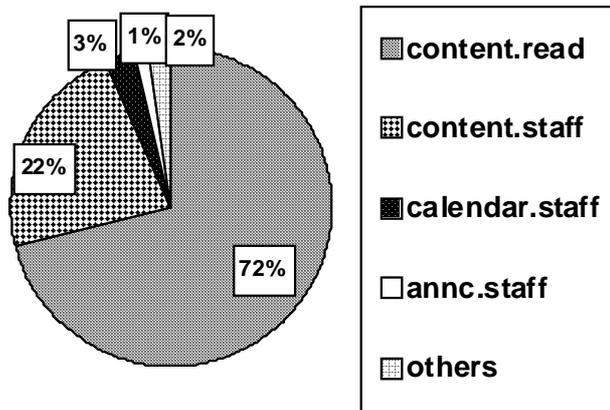


Fig 5. Types of activities on Sulis: Total: 5283

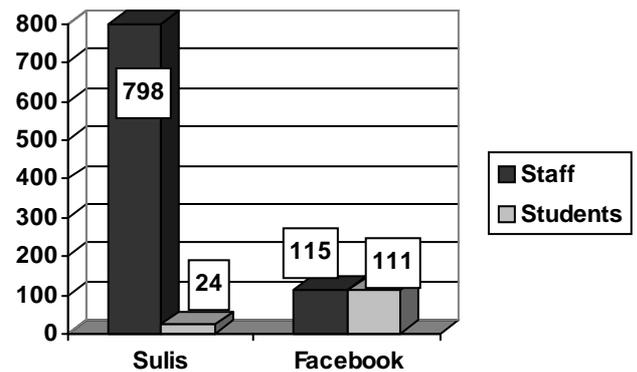


Fig. 6. Staff & student participation

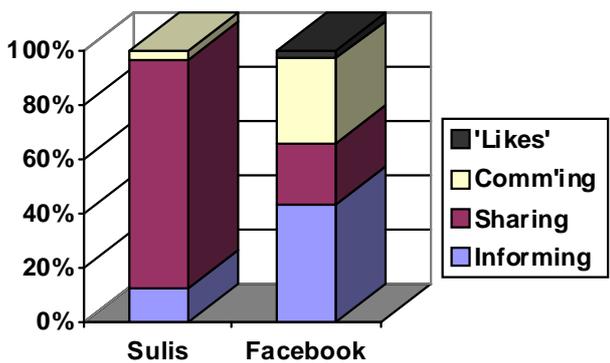


Fig. 7. Types of staff participation

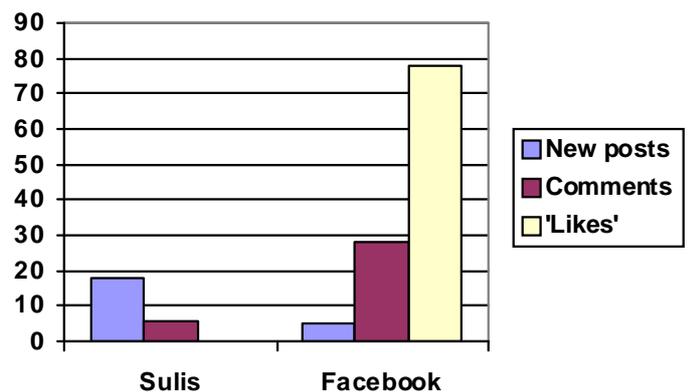


Fig 8. Types of student participation

The most salient feature when observing Figure 6 is the discrepancy in the level of staff participation between the two platforms. This can be explained by the nature of the participation on both sites. On the VLE, staff frequently shared useful resources for students (links, material...). This represented 83.5% of all the staff participation

on the site. As detailed in Figure 7, this function is far less developed on the Facebook page (22.5% of all posts) which is used more extensively to inform students (e.g. events in the School, language-related events in the country, new material acquired by the centre, funding opportunities...) and to communicate with them (e.g. queries about future material to be purchased, survey of favourite foreign movies, response to students posts or comments...). Facebook thus seems to hold a more dialogic function. This observation is reinforced by the level of student participation, which is five-time higher on the social networking site. Even though 70% of the student participation is limited to a 'like', it shows an involvement and a certain level of engagement with the content of the page. Furthermore, the number of comments is also four-time higher on Facebook, which supports the idea that Facebook contributes to a higher level of communication.

7.3. Feedback from online users

To complement the data analysis from the two sites, two surveys were carried out to get feedback from students. The results from these questionnaires can be divided into three broad categories: usefulness of the sites, participation on the sites and sense of community or community building.

- Usefulness of the sites:

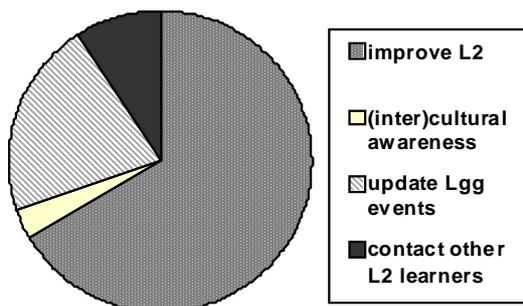


Fig. 9. Usefulness of Sulis

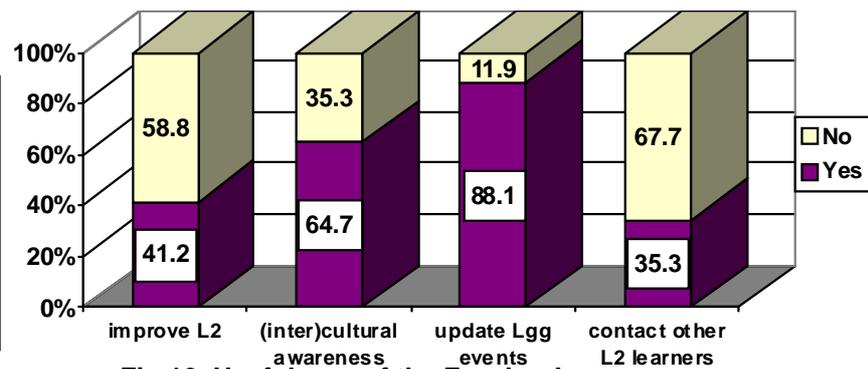


Fig 10. Usefulness of the Facebook page

The data from Figures 9 and 10 reveals students' perception of the usefulness of the two sites, even if the majority of students opt for the educational value of the VLE and the informative value of the Facebook page. The informative role of the VLE also represents a sizeable proportion of the replies (it could be explained by the calendar and announcement functions of the site). More interestingly, it is worth noting that the students view the Facebook page as a good tool to raise (inter)cultural awareness and

the educational function of the page is also acknowledged, though not receiving a majority of approval.

When asked to compare the two sites and express their preferences, students place Sulis largely ahead for educational purposes (73% against 27% for Facebook) citing the larger availability of learning resources as the reason for their choice (*“The Sulis page provides access to many more resources which I find very helpful”, “there is more information on Sulis to help language learning”*). Preconceptions concerning the two platforms also influence their choice: *“I use the sulis page as I associate that with college work. I use Facebook as a social site, I do not use it for educational purposes”*. When it comes to ease of use, ease of access and overall enjoyment of the platform, the trends are reversed, with Facebook topping the poll (77% versus 23% for the VLE): *“Facebook, as it feels socialable and more enjoyable rather than Sulis”, “Facebook is easier to access and gives you info fast, without having to search for it”*. Finally, we can also notice that several students recognise the value of both platforms but for different functions: *“I suppose they are both good, but for different purposes”, “Sulis is more useful for serious revision, but the LRA page [on Facebook] is something I would check regularly”, “Sulis is a better source of academic resources so I prefer this, Facebook has lots of potential”*.

- Participation on the sites

Only 12.8% of the respondents to the questionnaire concerning the VLE acknowledged to have posted a contribution to the site as opposed to 31.1% of the respondents of the Facebook survey.

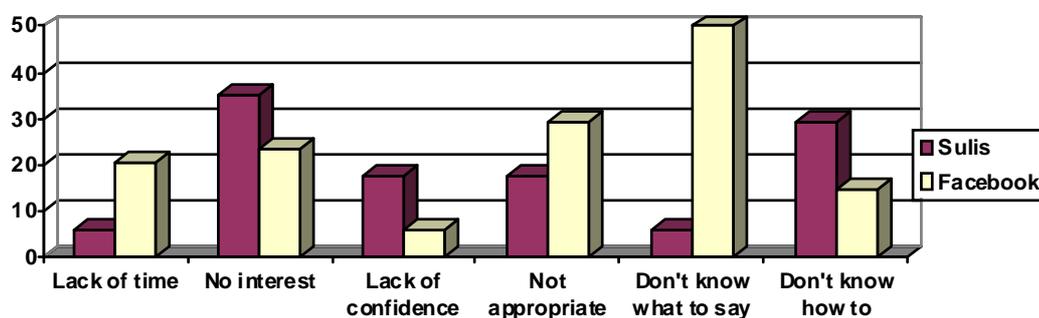


Fig 11. Reasons for not contributing to the sites (in %)

A comparison of the reasons for not posting on the sites reveals some note-worthy differences: while lack of confidence and of technological know-how does not seem an issue on Facebook, students seem not to know what to say and not to feel it

appropriate to post contributions. The comments offered by some students shed some light as to the reasons why these feelings prevail. *“I haven’t found anything worth sharing I guess”* and *“sometimes I feel afraid to post on it but I do feel it is useful”*. Students might feel that they do not have enough expertise to post on a page “owned” by someone they might perceive as an expert (administrator of the centre) and open to all the other language students. In parallel, students suggested more interactions between students as a way to improve both sites (*“not enough people are getting involved in it which is such a great pity”*), though several added that they did not know how this could be achieved. (*“It a great source of new and interesting information but unlike the ULSU [student union] page, people don't communicate as much - I don't think it's really able to bring people together that much. Anyways, the work that is done besides that is amazing. It's a great promoter of the events and meetings so I don't think there is much else to be doing!”*)

- **Sense of community / Community building**

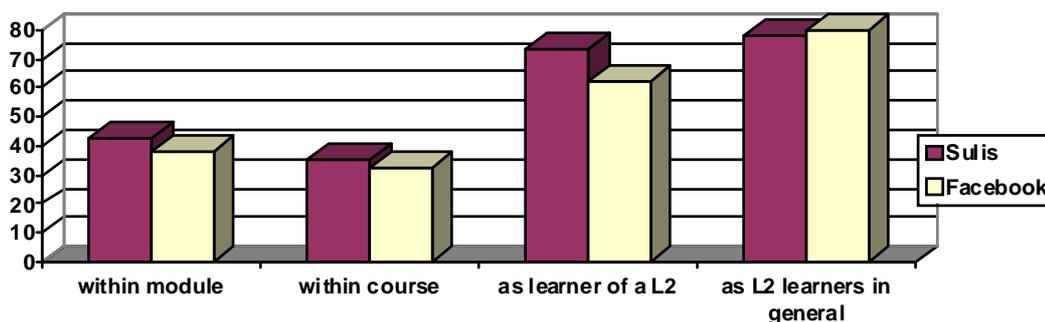


Fig 12. Contribution of the sites to building group identity (in %)

When asked about their perception of the sites’ contribution to the ‘building of a sense of group identity’, we can observe no notable differences between the two platforms. The Facebook page receives slightly lower percentage for the “specialised” category (such as group identity within a module or as learner of a specific language), this might be explained by the existing groupings per language in the resources and forums section of the VLE site on Sulis.

The students’ comments once again bring some insight into their way of thinking. For the VLE, one student remarks that: *“Sulis is too impersonal to get any sense of group identity”*. As for the networking site, students state that *“most language courses have already established their own Facebook Groups”* and *“each major option sets up their own Facebook that builds a group for us. [...] Any queries are usually put on these*

pages.” It would suggest that students do not feel the need to post on the sites put in place by the institution as they already have their own site, where they feel more at ease to communicate. Finally, amongst students’ suggestions on how the sites could be improved, several students mentioned that a more “specialised” approach would be beneficial: “*maybe a tab for each language so quick access for each student in respective fields of study*”, “*by having posts in different languages*”.

8. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Overall, it is possible to say that students enjoy having access to a Facebook page and prefer the informal feel of the social networking platform, especially when it comes to the sharing of information on events and cultural aspects. Facebook also tends to encourage more communication from students (even if their involvement is often limited to ‘likes’). However, the preconceptions pertaining to each site continue to prevail, with students failing to appreciate the educational potential of the social networking site. Moreover, feedback from students emphasizes that the ‘one site fits them all approach’ adopted by the centre might not suit all the students, who would feel more comfortable to participate in a more “specialised” community of practice. It would be worth investigating whether their lack of participation can be linked to the fact that they did not feel that they “appropriated” the site (communication is dominated by the staff of the centre who also “own” the sites). Students created their own pages where course issues and problem-solving take place at a more ‘manageable’ level. To finish on a positive note, several students have highlighted the prospective value of Facebook: “*Facebook has lots of potential!*”.

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