# ESSAY

# Supporting Older Students in the Research Journey: Assessing a Facebook Group

Michael Nycyk
Department of Internet Studies, Curtin University of Technology Perth Western Australia
michael.nycyk@gmail.com

With many students over 40 years of age undertaking research studies, the need for support and connection with others is vital to research completion. Educational Facebook groups have a well-researched history of what constitutes successful practice, but it is unknown if, and to what extent, those running such groups assess their performance for their members. This paper discusses a case study of an older students Facebook group and the challenge of conducting research to assess how it supports members. Examples from the study are provided to illustrate an example of such assessment, with the conclusion that older learners can be successfully supported and connected with others in their research journey.

*Keywords: Educational Support; Facebook Group; Older Learners; Social Media*

U ndertaking research studies at an older age brings challenges that can be solved by peer interactions using social media platforms. Students increasingly join Facebook groups for education support and connection to others on the same journey. These groups have become Communities of Practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) combining personal and educational support, in turn becoming places of knowledge creation. Research on the use and success of Facebook groups for education is abundant; yet an identified gap is how, minimising bias, the administrators of a group can assess its performance. This case study discusses a group for older research students called PhD Owls - Older, Wise Learners (OWLS) that demonstrates how scholarly, ethical research can be conducted to give insights into how the group's members view joining and being part of a supportive online community.

**The Unique Older Learner and Social Media**

Research studies are demanding with noncompletion rates high for many reasons. Students may feel their supervisors and schools do not understand their challenges and intervening life events or are unwilling to give practical and emotional support (Appel & Dahlgren, 2003; Martinez, Ordu, Della Sala, & McFarlane, 2013). Issues experienced include, employment and family responsibilities such as raising children, financial concerns, confusion over requirements as the student moves to independent studies and isolation especially part-time students (Zahl, 2015). Studies have also identified as a key reason for student failure is they do not feel heard by colleagues, which is considered damaging to student emotions (Ali & Kohun, 2007).

Facebook studies of educational support groups have repeatedly reported their benefits, especially the value of increased interaction and connection with other students (Shewmaker, 2014; Churchill, 2009). Older learners have unique needs requiring different forms of support that university electronic systems may not provide. The task-orientated nature of such platforms ignores the social aspects of group learning (Wang, Scown, Urquhart, & Hardman, 2014; Stone & Posey, 2008). Older students using Facebook for educational support has grown as trust in, and confidence in using them has. Researchers identified that when students join Facebook groups, led discussions and offer help, it creates a desirable environment for providing emotional support during difficult times, which is viewed as being a successful factor in students joining and interacting in them (Gray, Annabell, & Kennedy, 2010; Hadjioannou, Shelton, Rankie, & Danling, 2007).

Such research also claim advantages that social media education support groups foster have included making interaction and collaboration possible across global boarders, giving information and resource sharing abilities and assisting with developing critical thinking (Mazman & Usluel, 2010; Ajjan & Hartshorne, 2008). Students have found Facebook to be of benefit because it enables peer feedback, has good group interaction tools and has, as Mason (2006) describes, a goodness of fit within a social context. The overall benefits are the sharing and cooperative elements where students being with like-minded people feel close to them and that they are making friends (Holmes, Greenhill, & McLean, 2014).

A case study examining a postgraduate Facebook group found its success lay in normalizing the challenges of the doctorate, making students feel less alone (Satchwell, Partington, Barnes, Gurjee, & Ramsdale, 2015).  Emotional support was also found as being highly valued as students struggle with frustration, fear, anger, confusion and guilt, and by identifying positive comments in the group as affection, feel much like virtual pats on the back that assist with the student's stamina in continuing their thesis work (Satchwell et al., 2015). Al Zboun, Al Ghammaz and Al Zboun's (2018) study claimed the desire to learn and acquire knowledge was effectively supported by joining Facebook groups. Social media is generally less abandoned than virtual communities by students, as Deng and Tavares (2013) suggest, attesting to its benefits as a student support system.

Therefore, overall the research suggests Facebook educational support groups function as effective communities of practice giving practical study and emotional support to students. Older students can greatly benefit from using them and receiving such support. The identified main benefits are, the sharing and cooperative elements where students being with like-minded people feel close to them and that they are making friends (Holmes, Greenhill, & McLean, 2014).  Knowledge is shared as each member is both novice and expert depending on the topic (Nistor, Daxecker, Stanciu, & Diekamp, 2015). Student Facebook support groups are assessed as an overall a positive place to give encouragement, empathy and understanding for those on a challenging research journey (Barcellini, Delgoulet, & Nelson, 2016).

### The OWLS Facebook Group

In 2015 an online course was offered through a Mass Open Online Course (MOOC) at the Australian National University (ANU) in Canberra called *How to Survive your PhD*, which attracted a large worldwide student cohort. One student undertaking a doctorate in medical doctor patient interactions stated during the course that older learners over 40 years of age had not as much support in their studies as younger students. When the course concluded, the student decided to continue the support by setting up a private Facebook group. Many from the MOOC joined, but word-of-mouth spread attracting interest. As at May 2018, 1943 members had joined the group.

Although the group's name has PhD in its title, not every member is undertaking a PhD thesis. Some have finished a doctorate or are changing from a Masters to one, some

are academics, others may be doing masters or coursework and some are writing academic papers. The theme of being older and wiser, and identifying as learners, was the basis of choosing an owl as a representation of the group's ethos. Administrators were chosen to monitor inappropriate postings, but content posting was made flexible as many topics arose about academic and personal issues. The group operated in the standard Facebook way of liking posts, commenting and being able to post documents and links. It also has a document storage section where students can upload their completed thesis and other academic work for others to read.

In 2017 the group's administrator was interviewed in a university online law magazine. The interview is significant as it summarizes the intent and initial success of the OWLS Facebook group (ANU College of Law, 2017):

"They'd asked us why we were doing the course so I wrote that it was difficult as an older person doing a PhD coming from a career that I'd already established, to be suddenly immersed in a very different culture," she said.

"I found it very lonely. For the people going through university the first time around, their needs for support were quite different than the needs of someone in my situation. I was in my 50's by that stage.

"I got a huge response from all of the people in the MOOC - there were about 11,000 people around the world in the MOOC - and I ended up with about 350 people writing to me and exchanging ideas with them on the MOOC chat board became very time consuming."

This interview illustrated that the creation of the group filled a needed gap in older adult student support. It suggested that the group was a positive place to join; however, this needed further verification so an internal survey was undertaken to assess this.

### Assessing OWLS Performance

With the group's fast membership growth came a need to assess its effectiveness by finding out why members joined and what the group means to them. It is reasonable to assert that many Facebook educational groups would be unlikely to do this due to time or other resource issues. With the decision to undertake a survey approved, there lay many challenges to manage to complete the analysis, such as time (all three administrators were working and studying), resources costs such as software and with ethical conduct, data

privacy and bias. All were eventually managed. A concern was that convincing busy members to fill out the survey, which meant the questions needed to be short. Having a qualitative approach rather than a survey and statistical analysis was decided as an efficient way to elicit responses. Additionally, the data collection was anonymous with no demographic data or names collected and the members knew the results may become public, which they consented to.

Despite challenges, asking why members joined, the benefits of joining and to give an example of how turning to the group for help assisted their challenges, were very useful to gather. Deeper analysis, such as country where lived, gender and age are important to collect for studies; however, being an internal survey, it was of more interest how members were relating to, and using, the group. Researchers and designers of social media must understand social practices and beliefs of the groups to maximize a group's longevity and success (Carlén & Jobring, 2005). Therefore, it is argued that the survey was useful to the group in discovering OWLS' effectiveness and performance in serving members, or not, in being a supportive scholarly community of practice.

## Members as Collaborating and Supportive Scholars

The results were analysed by the Thematic Analysis method (Bruan & Clarke, 2006). Analysing results into themes assisted with the rigor of showing reasons for member's use of the site. Although the response rate was low at 129 responses, the data received was rich in detail giving an overview of how the group was meeting the members' needs. The assessment is that the members appreciated the Facebook group for the connection and high levels of support it gave to them on their research journey. This included receiving scholarly advice such as how to write effectively, emotional support and advice-seeking. It was also felt that a community had arisen from the group even if some members did not post frequently or at all. These reasons accounted for the willingness to join the group and the benefits of being a part of it.

Support and connection were overarching themes that were repeating patterns found in the data. Characteristics that described these included, drawing on others' experiences, finding like-minded people, have access to research resources such as online articles, help with technical issues and emotional support when difficulties arose. The results were overall positive with only three responses suggesting there may be some

issues that hinder member participation, which were reported to the group's administrators.

To illustrate the claims of support and connection being valued in the group, three examples from the study are provided.

### Example One: Joining OWLS for Support and Connection

Members joined for a variety of reasons to received support and connection from others. These quotes show the move from a general to specific reason for joining:

> I was doing a PhD at a mature age and wanted to see what others thought about learning with all the tasks that older students have
>
> I really appreciated all the useful tips and sharing of experience that I gained through the MOOC so I was super pleased to be able to join this group
>
> The range of practical experience and support on e.g. note taking strategies
>
> Having a sense of community, its great having somewhere to chat PhD stuff with people on the inside rather than the friends and family who have less of an idea even if they are wonderfully supporting

The responses suggest members joined OWLS with the aim of having a community of practice that supported members on their research journey. Quotes 1 and 2 demonstrate a frequent finding of wanting to find others to obtain research advice and help. Quote 4 exemplifies the desire to be part of a community because like-minded members on the same path were seen as knowing what the member was going through and better able to understand the member's issue and help and support them.

### Example Two: Benefits of Joining

Asking members about what they saw as benefits of joining also matched the themes of support and connection. The results also assisted the administrators in judging if the group was fulfilling the aims of creating a supportive, safe scholarly environment. The first quote illustrates the benefit of connecting with others and sharing their experiences:

> Shared experiences of people like me who have (a) substantial life experience, (b) manage complicated lives while they study

This suggested drawing on others' experiences was a valuable benefit all members could utilize to solve their issues. Other comments supported this were:

>Support and information from people who are also undertaking (or are considering) a PhD journey at an older age
>
>PhD is a lonely path; this fulfils the need to belong, support and be supported; positive experience
>
>As an external student and in my late 50s it is a lifeline to know there are other older students out there
>
>Social support. Knowing there is a group of people in the same situation who I can offer support to and can provide me with support if I need it

The overall assessment of the reported benefits of joining OWLS is positive with these comments being tied to members seeing support and connection benefitting their research works. Facebook education groups exist to solve issues; in this assessment it was found that problem-solving was a motivator for joining.

### Example Three: Help Sought and Solutions

The survey asked the type of help and solutions that members obtained from the group to assess if it was meeting the members' needs. From the themes it was concluded OWLS did this very well, with the results demonstrating this was the group's main strength. For example

>I was feeling terrible last November, it was my birthday and no progress in my thesis, so I posted my issues on the group and got more than 20 positive comments within a few hours. Some even offered to review my writing. It was so great!
>
>It helped me when I could 'confess' my trials and frustrations of a difficult home life and so many just rallied, empathized, agreed...and 'it' was out, acknowledged, perhaps validated (not alone), and I was more able to move forward
>
>Asked about my confirmation panel presentation, got a range of great suggestions, followed some of them and did very well
>
>Technical assistance with various software people's different experiences were very helpful

Concluded from these themes was the group was a place where members felt they could ask for different types of support and help. This needs to be placed in the context of older

learners. This group is unique. They have returned to study after much career and life experience, with many lacking confidence or having fears about negotiating the political, technical, scholarly and emotional issues that arise, especially when undertaking research studies. An assumption can be that younger students are more technologically proficient and have the energy and time to complete research studies. The group provides support to counter this and, as the themes suggested, gave access to other members who are empathic of the research journey challenges older students are undertaking.

## Conclusions and Lessons Learned

The main lesson learned was the difficulty of conducting an internal survey in an ethical, timely and scholarly way. It is suggested this was done with attention paid to survey design, minimizing and eliminating study bias, protecting informants and obtaining their consent to release their data into scholarly channels such as this journal. There were also further criticisms that were considered. The survey assessed performance, that it was meeting members' needs. Not asking demographic details may be an issue, such as gender, location and age. To answer this, the administrators were concerned with assessing the performance of the group to discover what members thought of it. This is why the survey's limited focused scope worked and that for this survey, demographics were considered not as important as the member's actual views. Also, although the opportunity to criticizing the group was offered in the questions, the majority of members were complimentary of the group, suggesting a high satisfaction with its function as a supportive, caring educational social media group.

There are also other issues to consider when assessing Facebook groups. Kent's (2016,) study of Facebook education groups lists a comprehensive set of problems in using Facebook including, bullying, unwillingness to share due to privacy concerns, differing levels of computer literacy limiting confidence to post and copyright issues when providing resources. All these issues can be managed by administrators. However, members should be given the opportunity to voice such concerns so the group can continue to support all members safely. The survey did not uncover such concerns; therefore, it is advisable to ask some questions about improving the site so these issues can be addressed.

The strength of this case study of an educational Facebook group is for academics, social media practitioners and professionals to consider a way of making sure members' needs are being meet. All the literature discussed in this case study explained the reasons for Facebook educational group success, with the presented survey results suggesting many success factors present in those studies are seen in the OWLS group. There are methodical and ethical challenges in conducting such research; however, it is argued this can be done well to maintain the group's longevity. Such assessments are important to the growing cohort of informing the group's owners about best practices for member attraction and retention. The strength of studying older learners' use of social media to support their research studies can further enhance our understanding and knowledge of effective practices that benefit student's progress in the challenging research environment.

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## Online Connections

To follow Michael Nycyk in social media: @brismike1965 on Twitter