The communities of Italian university students are generally created institutionally as part of the Learning Management Systems of the academic organizations. Aided by the massive expansion of social networks among the younger generation (CENSIS, 2012, Nielsel, 2012), many groups are spontaneously opened by students on Facebook, while it is rare that such spaces are opened and moderated by a university Tutor.

Some recent studies emphasize the complexity of managing in a functional way not only the communication stream, but also the production of contents (Rivoltella & Ferrari, 2010).

The aim of this case study, focusing on a Community of freshmen enrolled in the Early Childhood Education Degree course at the Catholic University of Brescia (2011/12 academic year), is to advance a proposal of a moderation model in the 2.0 environment.

The research methodology was based on the mixed method approach (Creswell, 2003): 10 structured interviews were conducted with some members of the group (Anderson, 1990), in addition to the analysis of 100 posts.

The results bring out data about the usefulness of being part of a group created in an informal space and the importance of the role of the Tutor within the group, as a representative of the University.

KEYWORDS: Social network, Facebook, e-Tutor, e-moderating, community.
1. Theoretical background

1.1 Student communities in Social Network

Historically communities were created within Web portals before the spread of social networks. They were focused around a discussion board, organized by topics. Today we are witnessing the spread of Social Network community environments, in which the participatory culture can emerge (Jenkins et alii., 2013; Ranieri & Manca, 2013).

Several authors are discussing about the use of the social software among formal and informal educational contexts to promote effective social interaction and learning (Minocha, 2009; Selwyn, 2009, 2012). Rivoltella & Ferrari (2010) described the properties of the “2.0 Education”: it’s socially oriented, handy at use and allows the content building. For example, creating your own “group” on Facebook and inviting people to take part is quite easy, there are some tools to share and create contents (text, pictures, video, pools...) and to link people with the same interests.

The communities of Italian university students are generally created institutionally as part of the Learning Management Systems of the academic organizations. Aided by the massive expansion of social networks among the younger generation (CENSIS 2012, Nielsel 2012), many groups are spontaneously opened by students on Facebook, while it is rare that such spaces are opened and moderated by a university Tutor.

In the case study analyzed, the Community of first-year students enrolled in the Early Childhood Education Degree course at the Catholic University of Brescia was hetero-directed (Garavaglia, 2010). It was conceived of and designed by a university Tutor who asked to have a space to communicate with the students. This is a formal community created in an informal Facebook setting. Opening a community in that environment and not within the LMS of the university, where all students have an account, was a very clear choice, which in some ways may seem unpopular. It was assumed that users had an account on Facebook, running the risk that some of them did not have or did not want to have a Facebook account. However the data was encouraging: out of 114 students, 91 registered during the 2011/12 academic year, and almost all of the students (80% of the sample) chose to take part.

1.2. E-Tutor: the importance of e-moderation in 2.0 Communities

In this case study, the Tutor’s was an e-moderator, a figure that has always been involved in the moderation of online communities (Rivoltella, 2006). He’s the Tutor of the system, not a disciplinary expert, responsible for the dynamics of communication, socialization and monitoring. Investigating the professional identity of the e-Tutor is important for understanding the actions implemented, in order to identify the complex system of functions (Rotta & Ranieri, 2005; Rizzi & Tassalini, 2010).

Moderating in a Social Network is quite complex, due to the fact of being in an informal setting, where the classic moderation tools available in any LMS (Petti, 2011) are absent. The e-Tutor needs sophisticated skills, since also – and
especially – in this kind of environment their professionalism could be strategic, in terms of media education. Moreover, the ease of use of Web 2.0 applications that allows users to easily add contents requires that along with the communication stream, the e-Tutor also moderates the documents sharing between users (Rivoltella & Ferrari, 2010). The very high level of synchrony determines an almost immediate interaction (Rivoltella & Ferrari, 2010): consider how quickly the comments to a post on Facebook appear. There are two possible risks: on the one hand, communication can easily go “off topic”, leading to an increase in communication drifts (Rivoltella, 2003), and secondly the ease with which the medium enables posting messages makes obsolete the old adage «First think, then talk (then write)». According to Rivoltella (2006), as we can see in Figure 1, the e-moderator functions as:

- **Technician.** He is asked to help the students inhabit these 2.0 spaces. Although they are more intuitive than the LMS, the retrieval of information is more difficult. The e-Tutor is required to organize the space in a functional way, inventing new moderation strategies. In our case study, the Tutor created the Facebook group, set the privacy level and accepted members carefully;
- **Collector.** He gathers and organizes information by creating shared files and inviting people to use them properly, moderating the production;
- **Organizer.** He reminds members of the deadlines (for completing assignments), appointments (meetings with Tutors, seminars, conferences) and provides the organizational and bureaucratic support (providing contacts and links to notices);
- **Animator.** He creates a climate of fruitful interaction between participants, encouraging exchanges and creating adequate communication regarding context and users;
- **Scaffolder.** He supports the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 2002). He offers emotional scaffolding to students when the problems seem to be insurmountable, promoting a serene and relaxed atmosphere;
- **Observer.** He monitors in real-time the group, intervening when necessary but otherwise fading (Salmon, 2000).

![Figure 1. E-Tutor functions (Rivoltella, 2006).](image-url)
2. The case study context

2.1 The “Group Tutor” at the Università Cattolica

In 1999 the Catholic University established the figure of the group Tutor, considered one of the fundamental services provided to students, whose mission is to prevent situations that lead to abandonment or renunciation of formal studies. The activity of tutoring takes place in conjunction with the Faculty and is coordinated by the competent authority in different locations, who forms the groups of students assigned to each Tutor. The activities planned are for students enrolled in the first year to facilitate the entry into the university context and for students continuing their studies, with initiatives responding to specific needs.

2.2 The Facebook group of the First-year Early Childhood Education Degree Students

At the institutional level, the Catholic University of Brescia does not have an established tradition of student communities for Education Faculty students in Blackboard, the platform adopted by the University\(^1\).

In October 2011 the Facebook group of the first-year students enrolled in the Early Childhood Education Degree\(^2\) was activated, in accordance with the two Group Tutors who had obtained prior approval of the coordinating professor of the Education Faculty and the Orientation-Placement Office. It has been advertised on the homepage of the Office as well as by letter and email, during weekly scheduled group meetings and office hours.

The stated goals of the Facebook group are:

- to share links of relevant news on the University website and useful study materials;
- to facilitate the creation of a community, allowing students to “network”, in order to activate mutual support between attending students and workers, making it a space for socialization.

The privacy policy was initially set as “secret”: the visibility of the group, the list of members and posts were allowed only to members. The requests to join were approved by the Tutor after verifying the identity of the student, comparing the requests received with the names provided by the offices. All members are free to post on the wall, insert photos and files.

---

1. During the 2008/09 academic year, during my first year as a Tutor, I opened the First-year student Community in Blackboard. During the following years (2009/2010, 2010/2011) I opened First-year student “closed” Community groups in Facebook.

2. Before opening the group, I searched Facebook for other analogous groups opened by first-year students at the Università Cattolica di Brescia: there were none.
3. Methodology

The case study, conducted with the aim to propose a moderation model in the 2.0 environment, used a mixed method approach (Creswell, 2003). Telephone interviews were carried out with 10 members of the group (Anderson, 1990), contacted via Facebook private messaging. The interview collected data about the reasons they joined the group, initial expectations and satisfaction levels, usefulness of the group, strengths and weaknesses of having a Tutor-moderator within the group, changes detected after the Tutor was no longer part of the group.

In terms of quantitative analysis, 100 posts published on the Facebook group wall since its opening (October 2011-April 2012) were analyzed in order to focus on the role of the Tutor moderator and the implemented communication and organizational strategies. A grid for the analysis was developed to systematize the user name and type (moderator and student), actions carried out by the moderator, the communicative intent, the of post and description, topic, relevance, presentation of comments, likes, tags.

4. Analysis of the interviews

From the interviews with the 10 active members of the Facebook group first of all the reasons that pushed them to join the group have emerged.

It can be mentioned among the most cited word of mouth (“other girls had joined and they told me that the community was useful, so I decided to enroll”) and the promotion of the group during the face-to-face meetings conducted by the Tutor.

The Facebook group was not promoted on the Degree Course site, where it might have been an important option for the enrolled full-time workers who were rarely able to attend the university activities and did not know the other regularly attending students.3

Their expectations regarding the group were met and can be summarized in the need to receive information, to be better briefed on all matters relating to the Degree course (classrooms, exams, workshops, practice teaching experiences...). These expectations highlight the instrumental use of the group: an environment to get information, rather than providing it.

To the question «What was the Facebook group helpful for?» the respondents focused on the following points:

- **Exams.** The community made possible to share the exams’ questions for each course;
- **Organization.** The group allowed to quickly inform the participants about changes in classrooms for lectures and examinations carried out at short notice, to get reminders about deadlines or problems with workshops enrollment;

---

3 We point out that all the first year students received an information letter and e-mail, in which the Tutor presented his role and gave his contact information, including the Community itself.
– **Bureaucracy.** The community was useful for understanding how to carry out web-based enrollment for exams or workshops, a useful aspect especially considering that the group is composed by first year students;

– **Lessons.** In case of absence or non attendance due to work commitments it was possible to get the slides and notes from colleagues.

The interviews also indicate that the Facebook community, much appreciated by attending students, offers even greater value and exchange with the University for those students who do not attend; furthermore, University web portal is described by the majority of respondents as more complex to use than the Facebook group, where the answers appear in an immediate way, both from the Tutors and from the other members.

To the question «What are the strengths and weaknesses of having a tutor in the Facebook group» the students did not indicate any critical issues; among the strengths, the freedom of expression (within the bond of netiquette), the chance to receive «authoritative answers» from the Tutor, by virtue of the fact that he relates with the University and the organization of the communication is set by the Tutor. In this regard some aspects were considered functional:

– the creation of the document “First year examination questions” in the Files section of the group, with the questions asked by the teachers exams classified by discipline. The shared document, started by Tutor, was updated by the users;

– the proposal to include images, to develop threads (otherwise impossible, Facebook no longer hosts discussion boards) regarding doubts and questions for each course or workshop (Figure 2). This moderation proposal facilitates retrieval of discussions on a given topic, the order and visual impact, as claimed by this interviewee who said «the eye needs to be pleased as well»;

– the idea of including conferences, seminars, study days, deadlines. All this information are hosted on the University website, but selected by the Tutor and shared on the group wall.

![Figure 2. Thread example created with images](image-url)
The interviews reveal an attentive, present Tutor, who offered information and sought to respond to requests quickly by interfacing with the University offices and referring to the Institutional site, also knowing when to fade, as one student explained: «(the Tutor) answered only when it was necessary, and otherwise let us free to discuss».

The group, created during the 2011/12 academic year, continues to be active, without an “institutional” moderator. The students help each other, and, as one student said, «if the Facebook group did not exist, I would feel lost». Aside from the positive aspects, the community users underline the lack of an authoritative figure who guarantees the reliability of the information, and «puts some order», carrying on to well organize the spaces in terms of communicative effectiveness.

5. Analysis of the posts

In addition to the interviews, 100 posts from the wall were analyzed. To go back to the first post (7 October 2011) the page was scrolled using the vertical bar: this is one of the main limitations of Facebook groups, especially when the flow of communication is intense and constant. The sample of 100 posts, 37 of which were by the Tutor, was reached in 187 days, with an average of 2 messages per day. Beside the Tutor, 28 females and 1 male were the authors who appear with tranche-de-vie style pictures (Rivoltella, 2010).

In the table below (Figure 3) the types of messages posted can be observed: most of them are simple posts (5 posted by the Tutor), followed by photos with captions, links, surveys all posted by the Tutor. There were 51 help requests and 17 shared information. There were two main topics:

– logistic issues: exam rooms, cancelled lessons, how to sign up for workshops;
– didactic issues: the difficulty of the exams, exam programs, exam questions, book/notes exchange.

![Figure 3. Number of posts per category.](image)

4 One of the Tutors at the end of the mandate removed their profile from Facebook and thus part of the history is missing. This analysis focused the actions of the Tutor remained.
The Tutor always shows his intention to communicate with the group or single students using opening formulas like: «Dear freshmen», «For the participants at the meeting [tag]». Students also address the communication, usually to the whole group or to a portion: «For anyone who is taking the exam...», «Could someone tell me...», «Everybody, someone...», «Help me! Does anyone remember...». In the 100 posts analyzed, there are only four cases in which students directly addressed the Tutor, without tagging him: «Tutor, I have a problem», «Dear Tutor, I have many questions».

Regarding the actions implemented by the e-moderator (Figure 4), in 22 cases they were answers to a question posted by the students. The Tutor responds in a timely way, especially to issues that the other members of the group cannot respond to, reassuring the students. Otherwise the Tutor waits for the group to mobilize. He puts “Like” on students’ posts that he replies to and tags the message recipient to indicate the question is being answered. The recipients of the response generally post their thanks or raise further questions.

When the Tutor posts links of information about services and University news (deadlines for curriculum, conferences, open enrollment for workshops...), always accompanied by an informational message that acts as a descriptive label, students rarely like or comment on.

![Figure 4. The Moderator’s activities.](image)

All the posts entered are relevant: they are on topic with the objectives of the group and there were no spam incidents. In 15% of the cases, however, the initial message fits with different questions, which shifted the focus on other issues.

Noted that some themes were recurring in the photo area has been structured by activating several “key themes”, each related to a subject. To ensure that each topic was immediately available at the opening of the gallery, the title of the threads was placed in the center of the photo.
This modality was agreed upon with the students and in the first weeks the Tutor has removed the messages posted on the wall, pasting them as comments on the photos, tagging the authors so as not to lose track of the messages (Figure 5).

The choice was appreciated by the students: in Figure 6, we can see the large number of comments to the photo-subjects (average 61 comments). There were only 8 other posts, created by the Tutor or by the students themselves that received between 16 and 49 comments.

Currently, the group is still regularly used: without a Tutor who arranges the communication, students have restarted to systematically post on the wall, thus creating “islands of communication” (Rivoltella, 2003) of posts, addressing to the same issue. Many post are added via mobile phone. The file area, set up by the e-Tutor, is still in use and full of documents uploaded (25) and created by the internal editor (5).
Final remarks

From this case study, the centrality of the e-Tutor in groups created in 2.0 environments has emerged. Being an e-Tutor in Facebook, an application that does not have the purpose of moderation, like a discussion board, requires complex skills as is clear from the interviews and the analysis of the posts. The e-Tutor has a fundamental role in that:

- he proposes a model of moderation (creating files, creating images through discussions, sharing of netiquette, reorganization of communication);
- he provides useful and reliable answers (acting as a liaison between students and the University). The Tutor faded and left lots of space for free discussion.

The results show how the Facebook group has been mainly used as a tool, as a place to get information, even before they provide it. This is not surprising in a community made up of students who have common plans (Wenger, 1998) to graduate and pass their exams.

Therefore, it could be argued that Facebook groups can be a good environment for developing University communities because they are well suited for quick information exchanges, where reflection is not as important as satisfying needs linked to the hic et nunc.

References


Strumenti. Milano: Vita e Pensiero.