# Pedagogy Forum

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## Interactive Collaboration Using Facebook
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### The issue
When I started teaching at Hopkins, Blackboard was offered as the course management system and most faculty seemed to be using it as their primary means of communication with students. Although Blackboard has some useful functions, I was looking for a different set of utilities – ideally, a class communication solution that students would find intuitive, easy to use, and interactive. Facebook is an application that most students are already quite familiar with and have incorporated into their daily lives. It became the obvious choice to help connect and engage my students outside of our formal in-class hours.

### Why does it matter
I wanted an online application that would facilitate communication and collaboration between faculty and students, allowing for interaction and the sharing of information beyond the confines of our formal classroom. It needed to be asynchronous so that students could easily access and use it at any time. I also wanted a way for students to reflect on the content learned in the classroom, as self-reflection is an important means of reinforcing learning. With Facebook, when one student offers an observation or posts an article, video or link, others can respond by commenting on the post. Although Blackboard offers a discussion board tool, Facebook has the advantage of being instantly familiar to students, and they have no hesitation using it. Its interface is also simpler and more intuitive.

### Faculty solution
To be more specific, I created Group pages in Facebook for the students in my fall courses, *Environmental Photojournalism & Filmmaking in the Era of New Media* and *Designing Sustainable Wellness*. Using a Group solved potential challenges that might immediately occur to faculty when considering using Facebook. You don't need to have a formal, online connection with students for them to access the site, thus ensuring their privacy and your own. But you can still keep course communications open only to students by adjusting the Group privacy settings and requiring students to "request to join." The faculty administrator then approves each request ensuring that none but registered students can access the Group content.

Facebook allows the creation of *Pages* and *Groups*, which at first glance may appear similar. *Pages* allow organizations, businesses, celebrities, and brands to communicate broadly and can be created only by official representatives. *Groups* provide a closed space for small groups of people to communicate about shared interests; they can be created by anyone. For my purposes, a group was the best solution. Groups include the following features:

- **Privacy**: In addition to an open setting, a group can be made closed or secret (not searchable). Making the group secret or closed will mean that student posts are visible only to you (the instructor) and to the other students in the group.

- **Audience**: Group members must be approved or added by the creator/administrator of the group. When a group reaches 250 members, some features, such as group messaging, are limited. The most useful groups will be ones you create with small numbers of students.

- **Communication**: In groups, members receive notifications by default when any member posts in the group. Group members can participate in chats, upload photos to shared albums, and collaborate on group documents.

As the creator of a group, you will be the administrator and can control who joins the group. You can invite students to join the group by clicking *Invite by Email* in the top right of your group settings or by selecting a unique, easy to remember web address that you then share with the class.

The Facebook groups allowed students in my classes to continue discussions that began in class and to initiate new ones outside of class. Students are able to post links, articles, and videos, and to comment on other students' postings. They can also upload and share their created content – in the case of my *Environmental Photojournalism & Filmmaking* class, their photo essays and video rough cuts – to receive preliminary or additional faculty and peer feedback before finalizing their work/projects.

At the beginning of the semester, I made students aware that their participation grade would not be based solely on attendance and making a prepared comment during each class session. Rather, their grades would reflect the degree to which they actively engage in well-informed discussions, both in the classroom and on Facebook. For Facebook activity, I take into account both the number of posts and the level of engagement and interaction with other students' posts in assessing a portion of each student's final participation grade.

## Results

So far, I have not experienced any significant disadvantages to using Facebook. Students in the two classes were actively engaged both in class and on Facebook. Of

Facebook provides detailed Help on setting up groups. To create a group:

1. After logging in, go to the Groups section on the left side menu and click Create Group.

2. A window will appear where you'll be able to add a group name, add members, and select the privacy setting for your group. Click Create when you're done.

3. Once the group is created, you'll be taken to the group. To get started, click the "gear" button at the top right of the group and select Edit Group Settings. From here you can add a group description, tags, set a group email address, add a group picture, and manage members.

course, it certainly helped that these classes were limited enrollment. In a larger class setting it could be challenging to track and assess students' participation in the group discussions. I have been fortunate that all of my students were Facebook users and did not object to using Facebook for academic purposes. In the future, if a student does not already have and does not want to open a Facebook account to join the group, an accommodation would be necessary.

Considering the high levels of participation, I believe students enjoyed using Facebook as an additional communication platform and found it useful during the course of the semester. In addition, many of the students continue to use the Facebook group and contribute to it periodically, even though the semester is long over and their course work is completed.

I don't believe my teaching has changed in any specific

or dramatic way – Facebook has simply added an additional space through which I can facilitate learning, engagement, reflection, and interaction beyond the classroom.
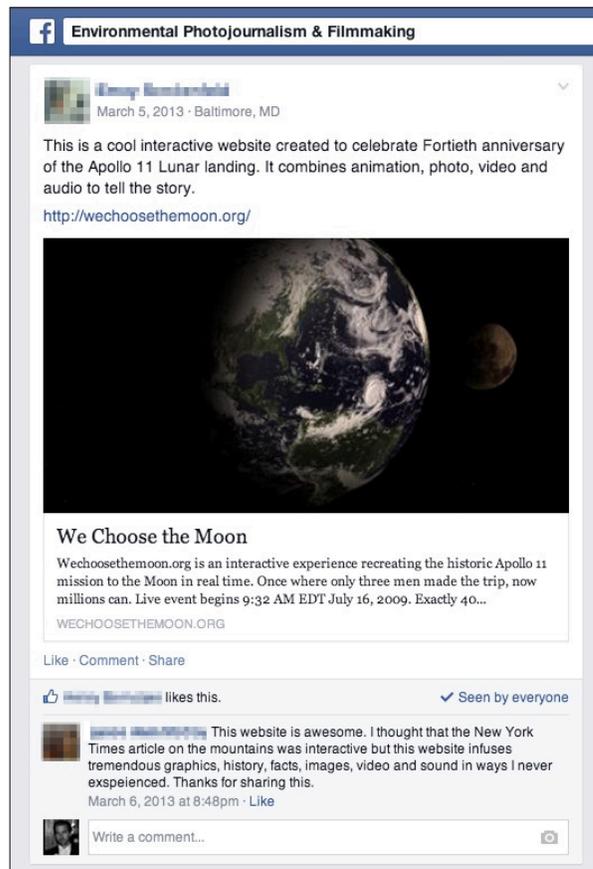


## Additional resources
- Groups in Facebook
  https://www.facebook.com/help/162866443847527

## Author's background

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Dr. Alexios Monopolis teaches in the Global Environmental Change & Sustainability (GECS) program at Johns Hopkins and serves as the program manager for JHU's Sustainability & Health doctoral program (currently being developed through the Provost's Ph.D. Innovation Initiative). Dr. Monopolis has completed 6 degrees in a variety of fields from Harvard University, Oxford University, Dartmouth College, and the University of California. His current research focuses on the psychological dimensions of sustainability. In addition to teaching Hopkins students, Dr. Monopolis serves as the strength and conditioning coach for the JHU Men's and Women's swim teams.