

**eSTeEM PROJECT  
FINAL REPORT**

**Online presence for learning and employability:  
students' use of profiles in social networking environments**

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## Executive Summary

The widespread use of social network sites means that 'online presence' is becoming increasingly important for social, educational and employment purposes. The most obvious examples of users' online presence can be found in the personal profiles on sites such as Facebook and LinkedIn. Personal profiles are also available in educational online environments such as Moodle. The literature on online learning advocates the use of personal profiles and photos to help participants in online communities learn something about each other and feel more connected. This project investigated the extent to which personal profiles were used and valued by Open University learners.

Data were gathered from two tutor groups on the Level 1 Computing and IT module *My Digital Life* (TU100). The methods used were: an online survey; online focus groups via web conferencing; and observation of students' Moodle profiles at two points during the module presentation. The findings suggest that personal profiles and photos in Moodle forums helped some students to feel in touch with each other. Others, however, did not feel the need for these facilities, had privacy concerns or preferred to focus on the forum postings. Students also had privacy concerns in relation to social network sites, although their concerns were allayed somewhat after studying material on social networking in TU100.

These findings are in line with literature which suggests that forum participants may not find it helpful to share personal details via profiles, as they might on a social network site (Tanis & Postmes, 2007; Schwammlein & Wodzicki, 2012). The project highlights the need to find other ways to increase participants' sense of community in online environments, particularly those used for distance learning.

## Aims and scope of the project

An important aspect of social networking is the user's personal profile: an area where the user can share information about themselves, and add photographs or other media elements (boyd & Ellison, 2008). The profile forms a central role in public social networking environments such as LinkedIn and Facebook, and it is claimed to be important for building community in online learning environments (Barab et al., 2003). Profiles enable participants to demonstrate their interests and personality, and to learn about each other (Ellison et al., 2007). In the world of work, the profile enables people to communicate their skills and experience to potential employers and to colleagues.

Even though many young people are familiar with online networking in their social lives, it is important that they can use it effectively for learning and employment (Jones et al., 2010). For example, students need to learn how to present themselves via user profiles in online environments where there are different kinds of relationships between people: social, educational and professional.

Many OU modules use Moodle based forums to enable students to communicate with each other and with their tutors. Moodle includes the facility to create a profile: including a photo/image and other personal data. Since the forums are secure, private to the OU

community and moderated, they provide an ideal environment for learning and experimenting with user profiles.

The aims of the project were to:

- investigate whether and how user profiles contribute to online identity and community in an OU context
- discover how students use the profile facility in OU online forums, and whether they find it helpful
- consider how students can be supported in developing their online presence.

## Activities

The project took place within the OU module *My Digital Life* (TU100). Using two of the tutor groups, the project investigated students' use of profiles within Moodle forums. Moodle provides a personal profile facility which enables forum participants to add information about themselves, and to upload a photo or image. This image is shown beside each of the participant's forum postings. The personal profile itself is accessible by clicking on the participant's name.

The data gathering for the research focused on the TU100 tutor groups of Associate Lecturers Frances Chetwynd and Helen Jefferis (who were co-researchers on the project): a total of 29 students. Permission was gained from the Student Research Project Panel (SRPP) and the Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) to carry out the project and gather data from these tutor groups. SRPP, together with eSTeEM, reviewed and approved the data gathering approaches and instruments.

Data was gathered using the following methods.

- Observations of students' profiles near the start of the module and near the end. This was to see what kind of images and information students added to their profiles, and whether this changed during the module, as the students learned more about social networking and online identity.
- An online survey part way through the module. This was to investigate students' use of, and views on: profiles in Moodle; social network sites.
- Online focus groups towards the end of the module. This was to seek students' perspectives on the use and value of profiles and other aspects of online social networking.

## Observations of student profiles

The Moodle personal profiles of students in the two tutor groups were captured at the start of the module and again at the end. The intention was to investigate what kinds of images and textual content students added to their profiles (if any), and to see whether students modified their profiles during the module.

Students were asked to complete consent forms, giving permission for their profiles to be analysed. Unfortunately only 18 of the 29 students did this, so this element of the data gathering for the project was limited in scope.

## **Online survey**

The survey was anonymous, contained both closed and open questions and was implemented using SurveyMonkey. About three months after the start of the module, the survey was opened to students in the two tutor groups.

A series of closed questions asked students:

- whether they had posted any information into their Moodle profile (if so, when, and what kind of information?)
- whether they had uploaded a photo or image (if so, when, and what kind of image?)
- whether they had looked at other students' profiles (if so, when?)
- whether they used any public social network sites (if so, which and how often).

Open text areas for several of the questions invited students to add further comments.

Specific open questions asked students:

- why they did, or did not, upload a photo or image
- why they did, or did not, enter information into their profile
- why they did, or did not, look at other students' profiles.

Further details of the survey can be found in Appendix A.

Students' responses to the open questions were analysed thematically by two researchers working independently. The emergent themes from the two analyses were then drawn together.

## **Focus groups**

Towards the end of the module, two online focus group were held using Elluminate: one for each tutor group. In each case the focus group was facilitated by the students' tutor (Frances Chetwynd / Helen Jefferis). The objective was to explore students' views and experiences of profiles and other aspects of social networking.

The focus group questions covered:

- Whether students had changed their profile image or information during the module
- How students felt about presenting themselves online via a profile
- Whether they presented themselves the same way in different online contexts
- Whether they read other students' profile information
- What role other students' profile images played for them during the module
- Whether they used social network sites in their professional life (and whether they had any concerns about this)

- Whether the TU100 module materials had influenced their views on social network sites.

Unfortunately only 7 students in total took part in the focus groups, so the data available from this method was very limited.

Further details of the focus group questions can be found in Appendix B.

## Findings

### Findings from observations of student profiles

Only 18 students gave permission for their profiles to be used as data for the project. It seems unlikely that the remaining 11 students were all actively withholding their consent; nevertheless the findings are reported only from the set of students who returned consent forms. The findings from the two sets of profile analyses are summarised below.

Eleven students (61%) uploaded a profile image at the start of the module, and one added an image during the module. Seven of the images (38%) were simply a head shot, one was an upper body shot, one of a student on their bike, one with a pet and one had pixelated their head shot (since it was a digital course).

Three students (17%) added information about themselves to their profile, two mentioning employment information and two mentioning their interests in the current module. One subsequently updated his information, to say that he had completed the module. Four students (22%), including one who had added information about himself, added contact information (MSN or Skype), and 2 of these students updated their contact information during the module.

At the start of the module, 5 students (28%) hid their email addresses. A further 6 subsequently hid their email addresses, and one revealed his. By the end of the module 10 students (55%) had hidden email addresses.

### Findings from the survey

The survey was completed by 23 of the 29 students (79%), though not all students answered every question. The findings from the quantitative and qualitative data are summarised, respectively, in the two sections below.

#### **Quantitative survey data**

11 of the 23 respondents (48%) reported entering some information into their profile, with 6 of these doing so before the module began. The responses to a closed question asking what kind of information students entered are shown in Table 1 (respondents could select more than one option).

**Table 1: Types of profile information (10 respondents to this question)**

<i>Type of information added</i>	<i>Number of respondents</i>
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Information about studies	8
Information about hobbies or interests	4
Information about employment	3
Information about family	1

These survey results show a wider range of information than was discovered from observation of the profiles, and have more emphasis on information about the students' studies.

Sixteen of the 23 respondents (70%) reported uploading a photo, with 8 of these doing so before the module began. In response to a closed question asking what kind of photo/image they used, 14 respondents selected 'a photo of me, on my own'. These survey findings are very similar to the results from the profile observations.

Students were asked whether they had looked at the information in other students' profiles. Of the 22 respondents to this question, 11 (50%) said that they had.

When asked about their use of social network sites, 15 out of 22 respondents (68%) said that they had a Facebook account; 12 (55%) reported that they had a Twitter account; 5 (23%) had a LinkedIn account; and 3 (14%) had accounts on other social network sites. Five students (23%) said that they had no social networking accounts.

### **Qualitative survey data**

The main themes that emerged from analysis of the qualitative data were:

- community
- convention
- putting a face to a name
- privacy.

When those who had entered some profile information were asked what prompted them to do so (10 responses), responses mainly focused on community:

*"Community spirit – share some carefully chosen info with other students for friendliness"*

Other comments suggested that filling in a profile was a convention:

*"Just seemed appropriate."*

When respondents who had not entered any profile information were asked whether there was any particular reason (11 responses), several respondents said that they did not see the need. There were also several comments suggesting privacy concerns; for example:

*"I have no wish to share private information on this forum."*

When those who had uploaded a photo/image were asked what prompted them to do so (15 responses), most comments again related to community, and putting a face to a name:

*"I think it makes it more personal when you can see someones face over the internet, and makes it easier to talk to them, instead of them being this 'anonymous' stranger behind a computer. I like to be approachable."*

Again, the concept of a convention or norm arose:

*"I just normally do when I'm on a forum. It seemed the convention."*

When those who had not uploaded a photo/image were asked whether there was any particular reason (7 responses), some respondents said that there was no reason, while others were concerned about privacy.

When students were asked what prompted them to look at other students' profiles (13 responses), most comments revolved around curiosity, sometimes aroused by forum postings:

*"Just being noseey or was interested in what they were saying and wanted to find out more about them."*

There was also a connection between interacting with other students, either face-to-face or online, and reading their profiles:

*"Wanted to put faces to names and remind myself who I had met during tutorial get-togethers."*

When those who had not looked at other students' profile information were asked whether there was any particular reason (17 responses), responses suggested that some students consider the social and educational aspects of forums to be separate:

*"I use the forums mainly for educational purposes and in that context most of the profile information isn't very useful – for social purposes I prefer to meet people in person."*

## **Findings from the focus groups**

Two online focus groups were held towards the end of the module, but unfortunately only 7 students attended:

- Helen Jefferis' focus group consisted of two females aged 53 and 61, and one male aged 45.
- Frances Chetwynd's focus group consisted of 4 males aged 36, 40, 44 and 87.

This age range is rather older than the ages of typical TU100 students.

Some similar themes emerged from the focus group discussions as had emerged from the qualitative data in the survey. These were:

- Community (but this time, a *lack* of community)
- Privacy
- Putting a face to a name.

When the students were asked about adding or changing their profile image, several said that they had not added an image, or had not changed it, because they saw no need to. Some students explained that they did not feel part of an OU community, so:

*"I didn't feel the need to project myself."*

Other students had privacy concerns:

*"Not very comfortable with putting too much personal stuff."*

*"I didn't know the other members of the tutor group."*

When the students were asked how they felt about presenting themselves online via a profile, privacy was again mentioned:

*"It still gives me some concerns about how much data is there." [e.g. on LinkedIn]*

However, some students were reassured about privacy when they were in a closed OU environment:

*"didn't have a problem as could keep it within the OU."*

The issue of lack of community also arose again:

*"As far as the OU is concerned, I don't really feel part of a community, you don't know who you are addressing."*

When asked about looking at other people's profiles, some students said that they weren't interested. For example, one student commented:

*"Found out about people by the posts that they made, but the profiles have made no impact at all."*

But other students liked to discover something about others:

*"Looked at moderators' profiles, and other students to see what they are up to and why they are studying."*

*"I have looked but only in the café [forum], when perhaps someone has put something on to do with something technical, and I want to see what their background was."*

Although some students found it useful to read other' profiles, this did not necessarily encourage them to post information to their own. In some cases, this was partly due to concerns about privacy. One student characterised this by saying that he was:

*"nosey and cagey at the same time".*

Some students expressed a view that a photo in a profile was helpful, and was perhaps enough – for example to identify someone at a tutorial. One student reported that he read profile information only if there wasn't a photo. Generally a photo helped him:

*“to get a feeling for who they are.”*

When asked about using social networking in connection with employment, some students said that they didn't see any need for this. But several students reported that, though they were not doing this at present, they were thinking about it:

*“because I know there are groups on there that I could access that would help me for work.”*

One student, who worked as a consultant, said:

*“Since I gain from it I'm prepared to put effort into it.”*

Several of the students said that the TU100 teaching material had influenced their views on social networking. One student reported that he was:

*“less prejudiced about social network sites now.”*

Another expressed a similar view, although this student still had some concerns:

*“It's made me think about it a bit more coldly – previously I was more emotional. I'm still wary about it though.”*

Students also commented that, when working in the IT industry, there was an expectation that you should have an online presence:

*“People expect to be able to find you online by Googling.”*

*“I think you need to have an online presence. As a consultant, without it people may look on you with a bit of suspicion.”*

## **Overview of findings**

### ***Students' use of profiles***

The survey responses indicated that about half the respondents wrote some information in their user profile, and about half looked at other students' profiles. Students added information about their studies, their hobbies/interests and their employment. These categories of profile information are in line with categories identified in investigations of public social network sites, particularly those used by students (Lampe et al., 2007; Berlanga et al., 2011).

Students' choice of profile image was typically 'a photo of me on my own'. This is consistent with findings by other researchers: Ellison et al. (2007) reported that just over 80% of students included 'a photo of just me' in their Facebook profile, while just over 70% included 'a photo with me and others'.

### ***Students' views on profiles***

The findings suggest that personal profiles and photos helped some students to feel in touch with each other when using online forums. However, other students did not feel the need for these facilities, did not understand them or preferred to focus on the forum

postings. The latter finding contradicts some of the literature about online learning, where the use of profiles is advocated in order to build community (Barab et al., 2003; Berlanga et al., 2011). On the other hand, this finding *is* in line with other literature which suggests that participants in forums may not find it helpful to share personal details, as they might on a social network site (Tanis & Postmes, 2007; Schwammlein & Wodzicki, 2012). A further finding is that many students had concerns about privacy - an increasingly important issue in online environments (Mesch & Beker, 2010; Chen & Marcus, 2012).

Some students preferred to learn about other people in a more natural way, from their online contributions, rather than from a profile. This view is consistent with findings by Haythornthwaite (2000) that students using educational forums gradually learn more about others from the content and style of their messages. As Kehrwald (2010, p.46) points out:

*'While there are explicit, situated demonstrations of particular perspectives in certain messages (e.g., in personal introductions or personal profiles), it is more common for individuals to build up a sense of others' current perspectives based on an increasing number of interactions.'*

## Impact

This project has demonstrated that personal profiles are seen as helpful by some students, but have little importance to others. Because of these individual differences, it is unlikely that profiles can play a primary role in building online community among students. Other approaches will therefore be needed if a strong sense of community is to be developed - perhaps by combining online and face-to-face interactions. Profiles can play a role here if they include a photo, as this helps students to 'put a face to a name', for example if they have met other students at a tutorial or induction event.

The project has highlighted the fact that many OU students experience little sense of community, and do not feel that they know their fellow learners. This means that they are wary of sharing information online, or do not see the need to do so. Students' concerns about privacy, also highlighted by this project, exacerbate the problem. The result can be considered as a vicious circle: lack of community leading to lack of engagement and to continued lack of community. If we believe that improving a sense of community is important for retention in distance learning, action of some kind is needed to break this circle. Module teams, tutors, staff tutors and forum moderators may all have a role to play here. Possibly the new Student Support Teams can consider what actions might be taken.

Students, particularly those working in Computing and IT, are aware of the increasing importance of an online presence for employability purposes. However, most have not yet taken the steps to develop their online presence. This project has shed some light on this issue. It has indicated that the teaching materials in TU100 can help students to develop awareness and understanding of social networking, hence increasing their confidence in this area.

The findings of this project have been shared through various networks and connections:

- A presentation was given at an HEA workshop on employability and online presence for Computing students.

- Presentations were given at two eSTEEeM conferences.
- A paper was presented at an OU conference on Information.
- A paper has been submitted to *Research in Learning Technology*, the journal of the Association for Learning Technology.
- A draft copy of the above journal paper was sent to Professor Mike Sharples (IET and FutureLearn) after discussions with him about the project findings, in relation to use of profiles in FutureLearn MOOCs.
- Discussion and data sharing has taken place with Dr Tim Hunt (LTS) relating to use of Moodle profiles by OU students. There are opportunities here for large-scale quantitative investigations and for consideration of usability improvements to the Moodle profile facility.

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Tanis, M. & Postmes, T. (2007) 'Two faces of anonymity: paradoxical effects of cues to identity in CMC', *Computers in Human Behavior*, 23, pp. 955-970.

## Appendices

Appendix A: The online survey

Appendix B: The focus group questions

## List of deliverables

Chetwynd, F., Kear, K., Jefferis, H. and Woodthorpe, J. (2012) 'Students' online profiles for employability and community', *HEA STEM: Enhancing the Employability of Computing Students through a Professional Online Presence*, 8 June 2012, Birmingham City University.

Jefferis, H. Chetwynd, F., Kear, K. and Woodthorpe, J. (2012) 'Putting a face to a name: students' use of profiles in Moodle VLE forums', *eSTeEM conference 2012*, The Open University.

Kear, K., Chetwynd, F., and Jefferis, H. (2013) 'Personal profiles in VLE forums: do students use them?', *eSTeEM conference 2013*, The Open University.

Kear, K., Chetwynd, F., and Jefferis, H. (2013) "To give a better understanding of who I am": the role of personal profiles in online learning. *The Difference that Makes a Difference*, 8-10 April 2013, The Open University, Milton Keynes.

Kear, K., Chetwynd, F., and Jefferis, H. (2013) 'Social presence in online learning communities: the role of personal profiles' (journal paper submitted to *Research in Learning Technology*; in second stage of review).

## Appendix A: The online survey

*Note that the SurveyMonkey software allows particular questions to be presented to respondents, or not, depending on their answers to earlier questions.*

1. Have you uploaded a photo or image to your OU forums profile? (If so, this image appears beside all messages from you.)

– Yes

- No

- I don't know / I can't remember

Please add any further comments:

2. When did you upload the photo or image?

- Before the TU100 module started

- During the first week of the module

- After the first week, but during the first month of the module

- More than a month after TU100 started

- I don't know / I can't remember

Please add any further comments:

3. What kind of photo or image did you upload? Please select all options that apply.

- A photo of me, on my own

- A photo of me with friends or family

- A photo/image of a place which means something to me

- A photo/image that I particularly like

- Other (please explain below)

Please add further comments about your choice of photo or image:

4. What prompted you to upload a photo or image?

Please comment:

5. Is there any particular reason why you have not uploaded a photo or image to your OU forums profile?

Please comment:

6. Have you entered any information into your OU forums profile?

- Yes
- No
- I don't know / I can't remember

Please add any further comments:

7. When did you enter information into your OU forums profile?

- Before the TU100 module started
- During the first week of the module
- After the first week, but during the first month of the module
- More than a month after TU100 started
- I don't know / I can't remember

Please add any further comments:

8. What kind of information did you enter into your OU forums profile? Select as many answers as relevant.

- Information about my studies
- Information about my employment
- Information about my hobbies or interests
- Information about my family
- Something to amuse other users
- Other (please explain below)

Please add further comments about how you decided on the information to include:

9. What prompted you to enter information into your OU forums profile?

Please comment:

10. Is there any particular reason why you have not entered any information into your OU forums profile?

Please comment:

11. Have you looked at the information in any other students' OU forums profiles (either in your tutor group forum or in other OU forums)?

- Yes, I have looked at several students' profiles (five or more)
- Yes, I have looked at a few students' profiles (up to four)
- No
- I don't know/ I can't remember

12. What prompted you to look at other students' profile information in OU forums?

Please comment:

13. Is there any particular reason why you have not looked at the profiles of other users on OU forums?

Please comment:

14. Do you have accounts on any social networking sites (such as Facebook, LinkedIn or Twitter?) Please select all the options that apply.

- I have a Facebook account
- I have a LinkedIn account
- I have a Twitter account
- I have account(s) on other social networking sites (please provide details below).
- I do not have accounts on any social networking sites

Please add any further comments:

15. For your Facebook, LinkedIn and/or Twitter accounts please select the choice below that best represents your frequency of use. If you have other social networking accounts please select the choice that is most representative of your usage, and add a comment with further details.

	Several times a day	About once a day	Several times a week	About once a week	Several times a month	Hardly ever	Never
Facebook							
LinkedIn							
Twitter							
Other social network account(s)							

Please add any further comments:

## **Appendix B: The focus group questions**

### **Your Profile**

Have you changed your OU forums profile image since the start of the module?

(Probes: If so, in what way, and why?)

Have you added to, or changed, the information in your OU forums profile since the start of the module?

(Probes: If so, what kind of information did you add or change, and why?)

How do you feel about presenting yourself online via a user profile?

(Probes: Do you feel confident? Do you have any concerns? Does it depend on the context?)

Do you present yourself (for example, via your profile) in the same way in all the online environments you use - or do you present yourself differently depending on the context?

(Probes: Do you use other OU forums (e.g. OUSA)? Are you comfortable having a single profile for all OU forums? If you use social networking sites such as Facebook or LinkedIn are your profiles similar or different?)

### **Other people's profiles**

Have you read any of the information in other people's profiles while studying TU100?

Probes: If so, when and why did you do this, and was it helpful? If not, was there any particular reason?)

What role do you think other students' profile images played during your TU100 studies?

(Probes: Did they contribute to enjoyment or interest of the module? Feeling part of the OU? Success in your studies?)

### **Social networking in professional life**

Do you use any social networking sites in connection with your work or career?

(Probes: If so, in what ways? Have you they have helped your work or career?)

Do you have any concerns about social network sites in relation to your professional life?

### **The TU100 materials on social networking**

Have the TU100 module materials helped you to understand or use social networking sites?

(Probes: Which materials were useful, and in what ways? Which were not useful?)