

Social Media Engagement and High-Impact Immersion Experiences: An Examination of Facebook as a Platform for Assessment in Higher Education



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ABSTRACT

This study is a continuation of research conducted last year and it analyzes the extent to which social media engagement on Facebook enhances high-impact immersion trip experiences. Dumford and Miller (2018) examined students' use of social media as an assessment of student learning outcomes and found it is efficient and convenient. While there is research in the literature related to the advantages of using social media as an assessment of student learning outcomes, there is a paucity of studies pertaining to social media as an assessment tool for immersion programs. The purpose of this study was to contribute to existing literature with a focus on social media usage to assess students who participated in the *Civil Rights Pilgrimage* (CRP) at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire. Data was collected via a closed (by invitation only) Facebook group of students registered for the winter *Civil Rights Pilgrimage*. Students were instructed to create posts in response to daily prompts related to what they did throughout the trip. Data was analyzed via content analysis with thematic analysis as a secondary form of examining data. Results revealed that most students enjoyed using Facebook as a means of achieving the liberal education outcomes associated with the trip.

INTRODUCTION

- The CRP is a UWEC immersion experience supported by Domestic Intercultural Immersion (DII) funding.
- The CRP assesses the "Knowledge Outcome 2" (K2) (Use knowledge, theories, methods, and historical perspectives appropriate to the social sciences to explain and evaluate human behavior and social institutions) and "Responsibility Outcome 1" (R1) (Use critical and analytical skills to evaluate assumptions and challenge existing structures in ways that respect diversity and foster equity and inclusivity) liberal education outcomes.
- The research conducted before this study was pursued in an effort to find a meaningful and transformative reflection component that students were motivated to engage with in order to earn the liberal education credit associated with their UWEC immersion experience.
- Social media, and specifically Facebook, was the reflection component used to assess students on the immersion experience that was the focus of the previous study: the *Something New Alternative Spring Break Trip*.
- This study, in turn, continued to experiment with using Facebook as a way to assess students for K2 and R1 throughout the CRP.

LITERATURE & CONCEPTS

Assessing through social media

Dumford and Miller (2018) studied advantages and disadvantages of social media to assess student learning, finding that such "offer[s] efficient and convenient ways to achieve learning goals" (p. 453). The study also revealed that "more recent research indicates trends for the importance of incorporating social media into the classroom" (Dumford & Miller, p. 453). Social media platforms, such as Facebook, serve as mainstream communication tools that resonate with the Millennial generation, which is poignantly representative of the students on this trip. Chen and Behm-Morawitz (2017) found that members of the Millennial generational cohort have "a proclivity for the creation and consumption of digital content" (p. 1493) and are often defined by their experiences with digital cultural activities.

Facebook as a platform for assessment

The choice to use Facebook stems from research conducted by Shane-Simpson, Manago, Gaggi, and Gillespie-Lynch (2018), which has provided evidence that "Facebook has remained the most popular social media site in the United States" (p. 276) since 2005. The authors also stated that "Facebook provides the largest array of functions, including text-based posts, photo sharing, and sophisticated privacy settings that allow one to curate specifically who can view each post" (Shane-Simpson, Manago, Gaggi, & Gillespie-Lynch, p. 277). The variety of functions that students can use to create their posts and the enhanced privacy setting options that can be implemented are characteristics of Facebook that were important for this study. The diverse array of functions in Facebook provided students with a plethora of options for demonstrating liberal education competencies and reflecting on their experiences throughout the trip.

Diffusion of Innovations Theory

The concept of creating a new idea and exploring the ways in which the new idea is accepted is attributed to the diffusion of innovations theory. Srivastava and Moreland (2012) explored Everett Rogers' diffusion of innovations framework and found it is used "to study the acceptance and spread of all sorts of ideas and practices throughout the world" (p. 296). With this study examining Facebook as a platform of assessment throughout the CRP trip, a new approach to evaluating the K2 and R1 liberal education requirements was implemented. Facebook allowed this study to explore a new approach to assessment throughout the CRP and evaluated the acceptance of this approach.

METHOD & PARTICIPANTS

- 44 students who went on the CRP consented to have their Facebook posts analyzed for the purpose of this study.
- 35 of those consenting students regularly posted their responses to the prompts in the closed Facebook group throughout the trip.
- The CRP was 11 days long. Starting on the second day of the trip, nine prompts were posted throughout the preceding days of the trip until the second-to-last-day of the experience.
- Each of the nine prompts correlated with the elements of the UWEC K2 and R1 rubrics, directing students to reflect on a variety of historical perspectives, human behaviors, social institutions, and identities.
- Students were required to create one post in response to the daily prompts and reply to two other students' posts each day within the closed Facebook group.
- In the previous study, students were required to include text and one additional social media tool into their main Facebook post each day. However, for this year's study, the researchers specified that the additional social media tool would be an image that the students either took themselves or found from another source.

DATA COLLECTION

- The nine prompts that correlated with elements of the UWEC's K2 and R1 rubrics were posted each day in the closed Facebook group.

DATA ANALYSIS

Qualitative

- The textual elements of students' Facebook posts were analyzed through content and thematic analysis in order to find common themes.
- 36 students who went on the CRP completed a survey after they returned from the immersion trip, and content and thematic analysis were also used to find common themes in their responses to the short answer questions in the survey.
- In this phase of the research, program trip coordinator feedback and data was also collected about using Facebook as an assessment and reflection platform.

Quantitative

- In the survey that was distributed to students when they returned from the CRP, there were four Likert scale questions and two yes or no questions.
- Students' responses to these questions were then quantified to understand their ranging perspectives on using Facebook for assessment throughout the trip.

RESULTS

Second Prompt: Share an image today that shows your deepening understanding of the depth and breadth of the US Civil Rights Movement of the 50s and 60s. Reflect on the impact of knowing more about just how many people were agents for change. Does this knowledge make you more inspired to be an agent for change today?

Themes: Unity in churches and "the power of many" in the movement

- Many students said they learned how religion and churches impacted the Civil Rights Movement by serving as places for people to gather, meet, plan, and speak.

"Knowing about all the people who used their faith to create change inspires me to use my own faith to create change in today's world."

- Students also recognized that anyone can make a difference and that many people of various ages and occupations participated in the movement.

"Having this knowledge definitely inspires me to be an agent for change today because many were individuals just like myself, such as some of the college students at sit-ins. These are the individuals that paved the way and proved that others can follow suit, including our generation."

Seventh Prompt: Today we will learn about the history and importance of Historically Black Colleges and Universities, the unequal media representation of stories and news about Black people, and the Mississippi Civil Rights Movement. Select one image from one of our sites that provided new insight to you. Share what you learned and how you will use what you learned in your own life.

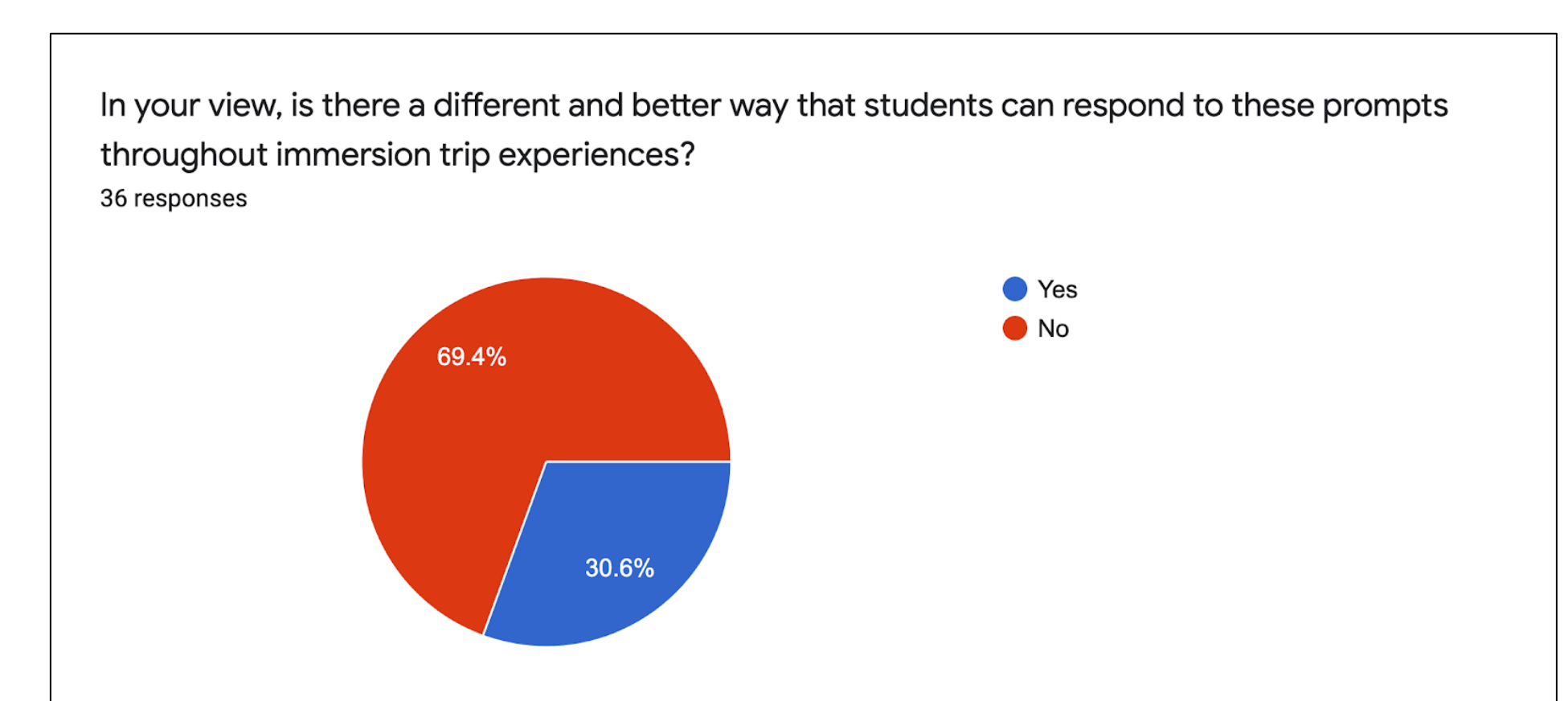
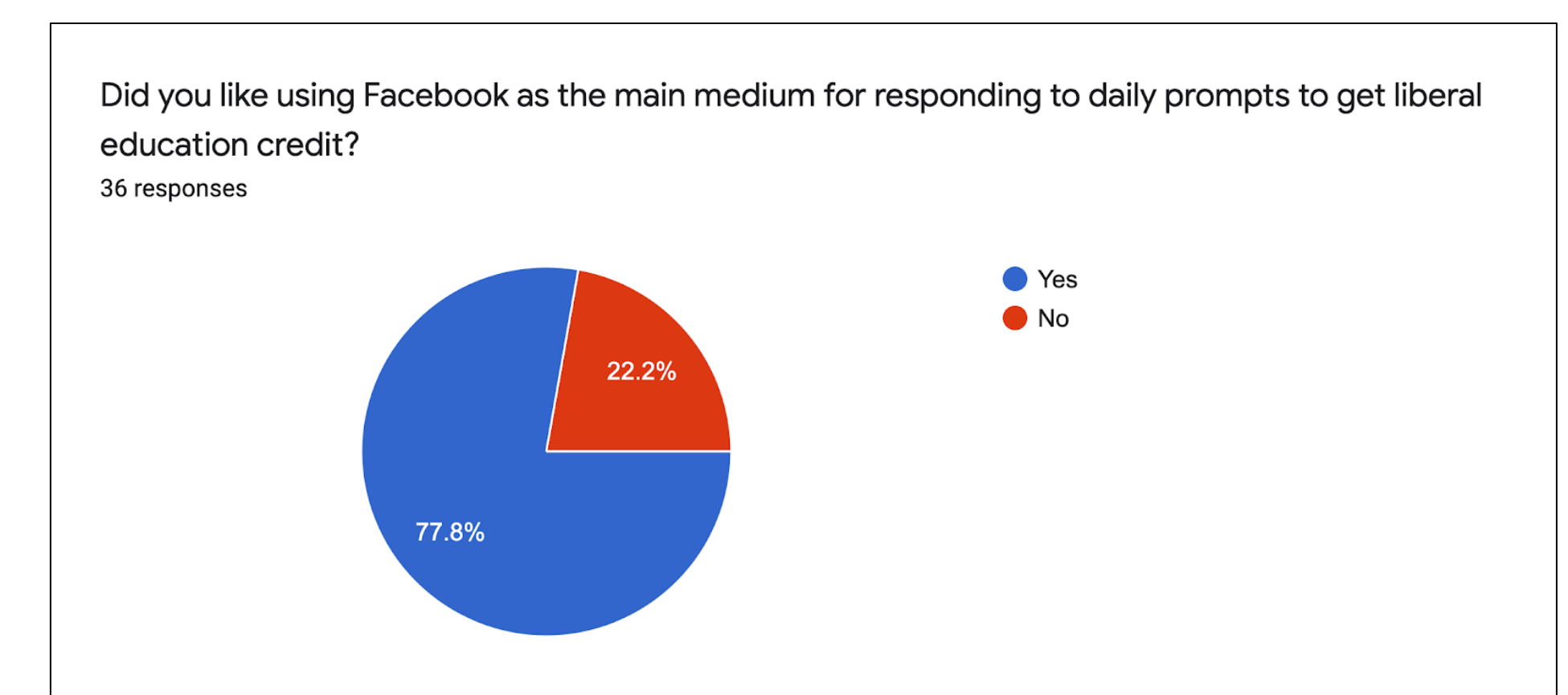
Themes: The right to vote and lack of media coverage on the Jackson State killings

- After learning about how the right to vote was historically denied to black people, students shared that they learned to appreciate their own right to vote.

"I will use this in my own life by not taking the right to vote for granted, and while also encouraging voting among others and working with others to prevent voter suppression."

- Students also said they had never learned about the Jackson State killings because of its lack of media coverage. They discussed why it is important to acknowledge similar stories today.

"I can use this information in my own life by remembering that there is always more to a story and I have to do my own searching to find more information sometimes because information is represented unequally."



DISCUSSIONS & CONCLUSIONS

- Program trip coordinator feedback and data revealed that students enjoyed using Facebook as a platform for assessment because they were engaged in writing and responding to posts. It also indicated that the students' reflections on Facebook seemed to enhance their overall learning.
- When asked if there is a different and better way that students can respond to these prompts throughout immersion trip experiences, program trip coordinator feedback revealed there is a desire to find a platform that all students are able to reflect on throughout the trip, since some students did not want to make a Facebook account.
- Students' responses to "Did you like using Facebook as the main medium for responding to daily prompts to get liberal education credit?" and "In your view, is there a different and better way that students can respond to these prompts throughout immersion trip experiences?" from the post-trip survey indicated that most students enjoyed using Facebook as a form of assessment.
- The majority of students, who said they liked using Facebook as an assessment for liberal education credit and could not think of a better way to reflect during the trip, commented that Facebook was an easy, convenient, and interactive method of assessment.
- The same students who enjoyed using Facebook as a platform for assessment and reflection also said they liked seeing other students' perspectives and how they transformed throughout the trip.
- Several trip participants did not have a Facebook account, so they either had to create an account specifically for the trip or use a friend's account to post their responses.
- The students who did not enjoy using Facebook said they would have preferred a different method of assessment and reflection, such as using a different social media platform or having in-person discussions, and several students found the closed Facebook group to be disorganized.
- Future research can explore how to best address social media-based assessment with students who do not have social media accounts.
- Future research can also explore the effectiveness of other social media platforms as avenues for assessment during immersion experiences, such as Instagram.

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