

Blended Learning@FEHD - Stories from the Frontline

ABSTRACT

Online social media has become an indispensable part of our daily life. This project aims to engage students in active learning and promote reflective learning through integrating a structured learning activity (i.e. writing a learning journal as an e-portfolio) with the daily use of the online social media. We expect that the project will enhance student's awareness about the relevance of the subject matter in their daily life and their ability to apply textbook theories for the analysis of real-life situations.

Description/Teaching Philosophy

One of the common challenges in pedagogical design is how to motivate students to be reflective learners and to link the classroom teaching with their daily experience. With the advance of information technology, teachers may start to wonder "Is blended learning a solution to this challenge?"

In the Web 2.0 era, people-to-people interaction is no longer limited to face-to-face meeting. Through online social media such as Facebook and WhatsApp, people can share what they found interesting and learn to analyze an issue from different perspectives through reading the comments and discussions. Online social media is so popular that students are now spending a large portion of their time in reading the posts and participating in the online discussions. From the teaching perspective, it seems that online social media may be a good way to engage students in their learning. Therefore, a number of education-based online social media and e-portfolio systems have been developed, including Mahara, Schoology and Edmodo. However, these education-based platforms usually have limited functions and a less intuitive interface than the most popular platforms such as Facebook. In addition, while most of the students do their reading (i.e. Facebook posts and WhatsApp messages) on their mobile phone, these education-based platform lack a mobile phone app version.

With the support from the SEC Teaching Development Seed Fund, a small scale project was conducted to explore the possibility of adopting one of the mature online social platforms as a media for students to develop their learning e-portfolio.

Sample Activities and Artefacts

In a MEd course that focuses on the social and emotional development of children with special educational needs, students were required to create a learning log using one of the online platforms: Mahara, Google+, Tumblr, or a Facebook fan page.

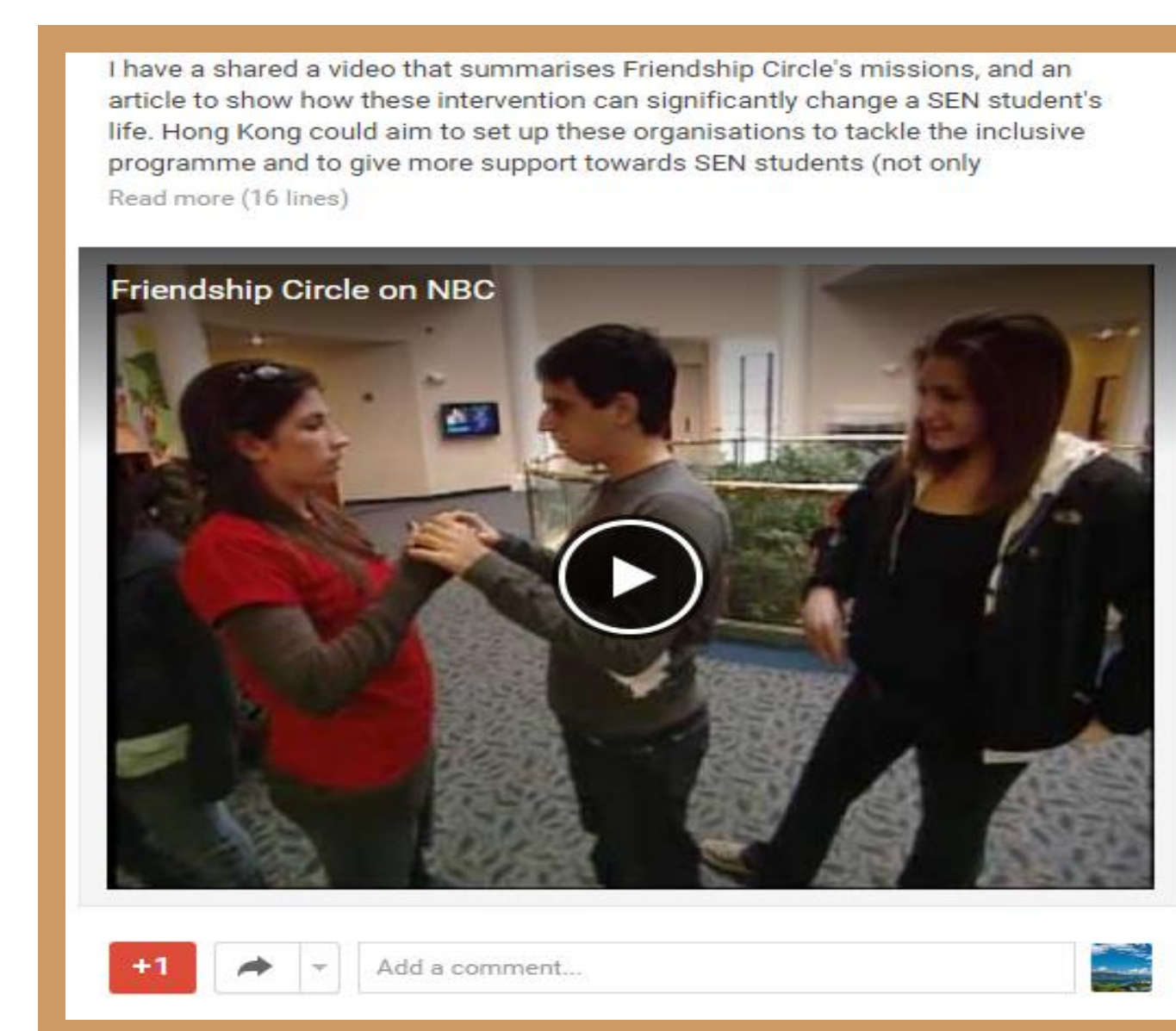


Students were required to update their online learning log at least twice a week. Each week, one of the posts had to be a reflection on the lecture. Another post could be a reflection or analysis of a news clipping, research article, or real-life incident related to the social, emotional, and behavioral difficulties (SEBD) of children. Each post had to be at least 50 words in length. A summary post could be included to summarize what students had learned in the course at the end of the semester.

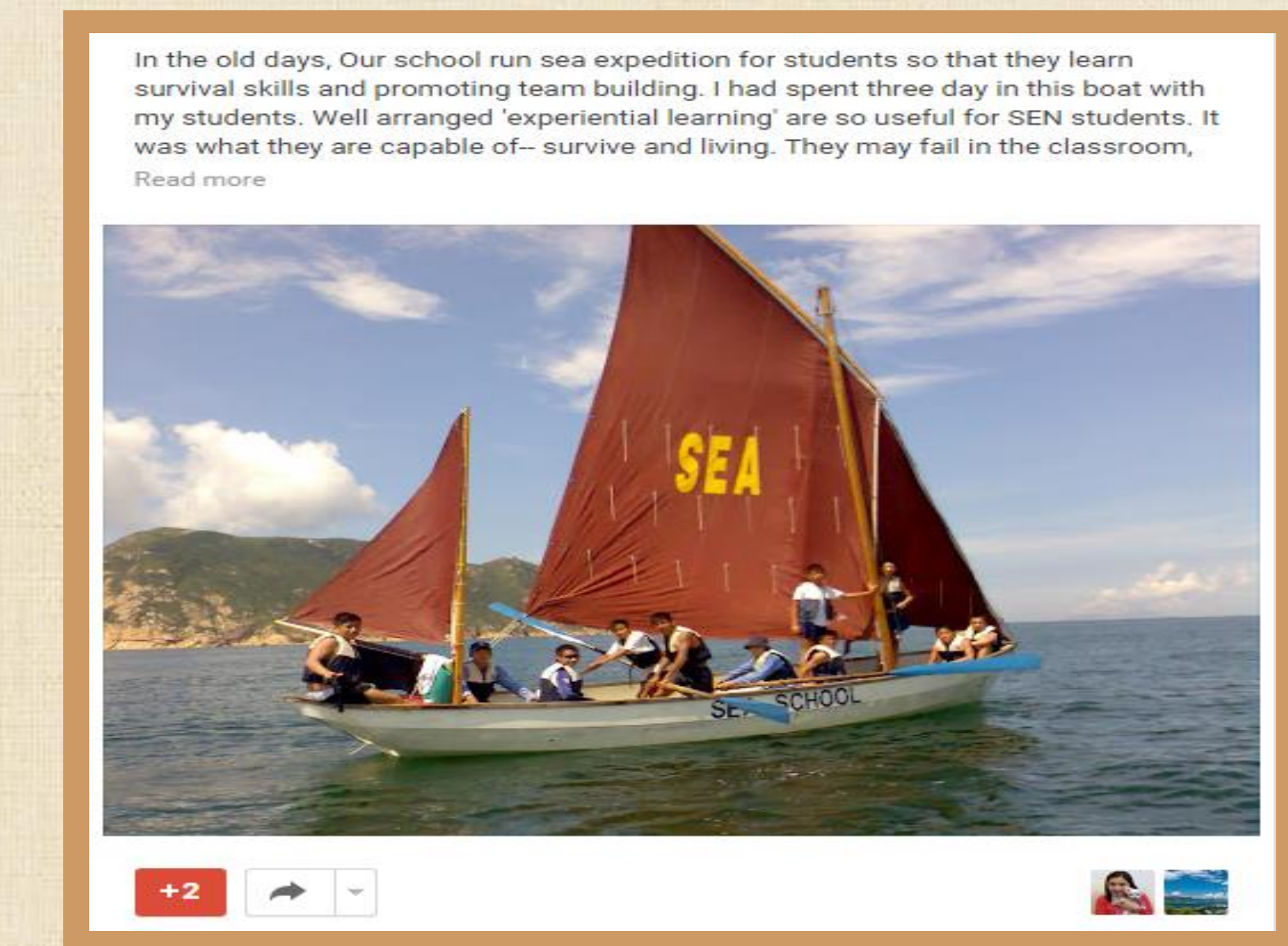
EXAMPLES OF STUDENTS' WORK

After an introduction to the various online social platforms, all the students decided to go for the Google+ platform. One of possible reasons is that Google+ comes with a mobile phone app which can be accessed easily with any smartphone. Also, students can create a Google+ page which can be separated completely from their personal Google+ profile, and thus maintain a higher level of privacy.

For most of the posts, students shared and commented on online videos and commentary articles related to various issues of SEBD.



Some students also shared their personal experience on how to interact with SEBD students and received feedback from other students.



STUDENT ENGAGEMENT AND OUTCOMES

Students found that it is not an easy task to create two posts per week. However, they also mentioned in the summary posts (which are not graded) that the online learning log helped them to digest the knowledge that they learned in the lectures and apply the course concepts in their daily life. Some students stated that they learned something new from the posts of other students, although they seldom replied or commented on others' posts.



ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

- Students would like to get comments on their posts from the instructor. However, it is a demanding task for the instructor to read and grade forty posts from twenty students each week.
- There was very limited interaction among the students. A handful of the posts received feedback from other students, but most of them were read by the instructor only.