

***Exploring Methodological and  
Ethical Issues in Researching  
Teachers' Informal Learning on  
a Social Networking Site***

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## **Exploring Methodological and Ethical Issues in Researching Teachers' Informal Learning on a Social Networking Site**

### **Abstract**

Internet-based research, especially that which focuses on social networking sites (SNS), is a relatively new and growing field that presents a number of methodological and ethical challenges. In light of a study examining Malaysian English language teachers' informal learning on Facebook, the methodological and ethical concerns surrounding SNS-based qualitative research are discussed. This paper begins with some contextual background about the study and issues surrounding teachers' informal learning, followed by a discussion of methods of data generation. The methodological and ethical decision-making as informed by existing discussions and guidelines in internet-based research is then presented. This paper concludes that the challenging methodological issues in researching SNS require cautious consideration throughout the research process. It recommends that new ethics guidelines be developed by ethics board members for the reference of researchers who embark on research in this area.

Keywords: Internet, Social Networking Site, SNS, English Language Teacher, Informal Learning, Malaysia.

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## **Introduction**

Teacher learning is an important issue that needs to be focused on in this fast-changing era. This is to ensure that teachers will have knowledge and skills which are up-to-date to meet the current demands of society. Many efforts continue to be made by the Malaysian government to encourage teacher learning so that they will develop their professionalism. This is mostly done through professional development programmes in which specific knowledge and skills are introduced to teachers by experts during workshops and seminars, after which the teachers are then expected to apply the knowledge and skills in schools.

Besides the formal professional development programmes, informal learning, which is 'the activity involving the pursuit of understanding, knowledge or skill which occurs without the presence of externally imposed curricular criteria' (Livingstone, 2001: 4) in teachers' daily lives should not be ignored. This is because teachers learn more through informal learning in their workplaces rather than in professional, initial teacher education programmes (Freeman and Johnson, 1998). Moreover, learning is 'social, situated in physical and social contexts, and distributed across persons, tools and activities' (Johnson, 2009: 5) thus teacher professional development needs to go beyond 'visible' development activities (coursework, workshops, seminars etc.) and should include teachers' informal social and professional networks.

Unfortunately, teachers' informal learning is often unheard because it is undocumented (Kabilan and Embi, 2004). This is because researchers may be reticent to embark on research in this area since it is difficult to gather 'empirically grounded valid evidence' (Straka, 2004:2). A literature review reveals that most studies of teachers' informal learning rely on interview as the main instrument for data collection, which Plauborg (2007) argues is ineffective for ascertaining teachers' learning. Realising this gap, and having some personal experience of teachers' use of SNS, I have decided to explore the use of SNS to

gather evidence of teachers' engagement in informal learning in addition to the use of interviews and questionnaires. This paper considers the novel methodological and ethical issues raised by using SNS to generate data; in this case about teachers' informal learning.

In the section that follows, Facebook terms used in this paper will be discussed in order to avoid confusion since Facebook constantly introduces new features and changes.

### **Facebook Terminology**

Throughout the course of this paper, reference often will be made to terminology that has its genesis in the research literature. In order to provide an advanced organiser for the sections that follow, a discussion of each of the following Facebook terms is now presented:

**Block:** A setting on Facebook to prevent a particular user(s) from viewing one's Facebook Profile, sending Messages or Friend requests.

**Chat:** Instant messages on Facebook to enable users to interact with each other.

**Friend:** Facebook users that are connected to each other. Befriending each other on Facebook enables them to share content and updates. A Facebook user can send Friend requests to other Facebook members. The user can also receive Friend requests from other members which he or she can choose to accept, decline or ignore.

**Group:** A space on Facebook to gather smaller groups of people to discuss specific topic(s) of interest. It can be created by any Facebook member who can then pass the responsibility of administrating the Group to any other Group member.

**Like:** A Link that is clicked by users to indicate that they like what is shared or written on Facebook. When they Like something, the action appears as an update on their Timeline.

**Messages:** Facebook Messages are similar to private email messages. They appear in users' Facebook Inboxes and can include text messages, chat, emails and mobile messages from Facebook Friends.

**News Feed:** The recurrently-appended feed of Status updates that appears on the Facebook Profile home page. It shows the latest activities of Friends as well as Facebook Pages followed by the users.

**Notifications:** The setting on Facebook Profile which enables users to receive email, mobile or onsite updates when certain activities happen on Facebook. For instance, users will be notified if their Friend requests are accepted.

**Page:** A space on Facebook to promote brands, businesses, organisations, and entertainers. Unlike Groups that have privacy settings, Pages are always public.

**Profile:** The complete picture and story on Facebook. This includes the Profile pictures, photo albums, biography, personal information, etc. Profiles can be public or private depending on the setting chosen by the users.

**Timeline:** A section on Facebook Profile that shows all the Facebook updates and activities in reverse-chronological order. It was previously known as a 'Wall'.

**Status:** An update feature which allows users to discuss their thoughts, their location, or important information with their Friends. Unlike Tweets on Twitter, Statuses on Facebook have no limitation on characters. Nonetheless, Status updates are usually short. When a Status is updated, it posts on the users' Timeline as well as in the News



Feed of their Friends. Statuses can be updated through a web browser, mobile site, or text message.

**Subscribe:** A feature to enable users to keep track of posts and updates from other Facebook members even though they are not Friends with them.

(adapted from Gunelius, 2011)

In the section that follows, the study summary, which includes the purposes of the study, information on the research site, and the three phases of the data generation process will be presented.

## **Study Summary**

### **Purpose of the Study**

This research aims to provide a thick description of Malaysian English language teachers' engagement in informal learning for their professional development using SNS technology. Particular interest lies in the investigation of the effectiveness of SNS as an instrument to gather evidence for teachers' informal learning.

There are three central questions in this research. The first one is: 'How do teachers contribute to each others' professional development in their working environment when using SNS technology?' This overarching question is guided by several sub-questions, which are:

- i) Do teachers interact and consequently engage in reflective thinking and learning?
- ii) What kinds of knowledge are emphasised by the teachers in this informal learning environment?
- iii) What learning process (cognitive/affective/reflective) are the teachers engaged in?

The second central question is: 'How do teachers view the use of SNS technology for their professional development?' This central question is guided by the following sub questions:

- i) Do teachers find SNS technology a useful tool for their informal learning?
- ii) Do they face any challenges in using SNS technology for knowledge-sharing and reflection?

The third central question is: 'How effective is SNS as an instrument to gather evidence for teachers' engagement in informal learning?' This research explores the novel approach of using SNS to gather evidence of teachers' learning in response to Plauborg (2007) and Straka (2004) who argue that the current instruments are ineffective. In this research, data gained from the social media platform are used to triangulate questionnaire and interview data.

### **Research Site**

This section introduces the research site and reviews its commonly-used features. Facebook has been chosen as the research site since it is the most popular SNS in Malaysia. In May 2013, there were 13.3 million Facebook users which equaled 45.5 per cent of the country's population (Mahadi, 2013). A total of 53 per cent of the users were male and 47 per cent were female. In terms of age distribution, 34 per cent were between 18 and 24 years of age, 28 per cent were between 25 and 34 years of age and 11 per cent were between 35 and 44 years of age (Socialbakers, 2013). The growth in the number of Facebook users reflects that Facebook is becoming an important alternative medium for Malaysians to get connected to each other.

Facebook is a relatively conventional social-networking online environment which enables users to present themselves to others by having their own Profiles (Selwyn, 2007). To access the Profiles, users

need to sign in using their registered email address and password (see Figure 1.1). Once logged in, users can update their Status and add photos or videos to their Timeline (see Figure 1.2). Updating a Status is a form of asynchronous online chatting in which users exchange answers to the default question 'What's on your mind?' set by Facebook. Depending on the privacy setting chosen by the users, the status can be read by the Public, Friends or 'Only Me' (see Figure 1.2). They can also use the Custom function to make their status accessible only to particular users (see Figure 1.3). Users who have access to the Status can choose to Like, leave a Comment and/or Share the Status. Unlike Twitter that limits its messages up to 140 characters, Facebook sets no word limit for Status updates, and is not only text-based, as users can also attach photos.

On the right-hand side of the Facebook homepage, there is a synchronous chat function which enables users to interact with their Friends (see Figure 1.4). A round green symbol beside the name indicates that the Friends are online. Users can choose either to have one-to-one chat or group chat. All the messages exchanged during the chat are automatically saved in the Inbox. This enables users to have an asynchronous chat if the Friends are not online since the Friends can read and reply to the messages when they check their Inbox.

Besides updating their Statuses and chatting with Friends, users can also send private Messages to each other, Create and Like Pages as well as Create and Join Groups. By clicking the Like link on a Page, users will be able to receive a Notification for any update on that Page. Unlike Pages that are available to the public by default, Groups have a privacy control. To make it private, Group Administrator(s) can choose the 'Closed Group' option instead of 'Open Group'. Open Groups can be accessed by the public whilst Closed Groups require permission from the Group Administrator(s). It is only when the Administrator(s) accepts the request to Join the Group that the users can have access to a Closed Group.

Based on the Facebook features reviewed above, it is discernible that privacy is an important issue on Facebook. It gives autonomy to its users to control their privacy settings in the sense that they decide what is public and what is private as well as who can have access to their activities on Facebook. Hence, researchers interested in using Facebook as a research site need to be very careful so as not to violate the users' privacy.

### **Data Generation Procedure**

Data generation in this study was undertaken for six months from December 2012 to May 2013. It can be divided into three phases. Even though the three phases are presented in sequence in this section, it is actually not a linear process, but rather a recursive one throughout the entire data generation period.

#### **Phase 1**

In this phase, a private Facebook Message that contained an information sheet (see Appendix A) and a consent form (see Appendix B) as attachments was sent to five English language teachers. Professional connections with the teachers were established prior to the research and they were already in the researcher's Friend list on Facebook. They were purposively chosen as they often posted and commented on teaching-related issues on their Timeline.

Upon receiving the teachers' consent, their Timelines were observed. All teaching-related posts and comments were gathered and recorded in the raw data sheet to be further scrutinized during the data analysis stage. To reach more teachers, a snowball technique was employed, in which the recruited teachers were asked to recommend Friends who could help in giving insights into the phenomenon being studied. In reaching the Friends of the recruited teachers, the teachers were asked

to inform them that he/she had recommended them to be the participants in the study.

It was only after the Friends had agreed to be contacted by the researcher that the information sheet and the consent form were sent to their Facebook inbox using the private Message function. A Friend request was then sent to those who had agreed to take part in the study so that their Timeline could be accessed. These steps were taken in order to avoid the teachers feeling uncomfortable about being contacted directly by a stranger to take part in a study.

Altogether, 56 teachers who actively posted and commented about teaching-related issues on Facebook were identified, of whom 29 gave consent for their Timeline to be observed. The majority of the teachers who refused to take part in this study did not give any specific reason, as it was stated clearly in the information sheet that their participation in this study was on a voluntarily basis, and that they did not have to give reason if they decided not to take part. The 29 observations carried out had yielded rich data in understanding the phenomenon being investigated.

## **Phase 2**

In phase 2, a Closed Facebook Group named 'English Language Teachers' was examined. 20 out of the 29 teachers who gave consent for their Facebook Timeline to be observed were members of this Group. The other nine teachers did not belong to any Facebook Group.

'English Language Teachers' is a Closed Group that gathers English language teachers from all over Malaysia on a voluntary basis. Being a Closed Group, anyone interested in joining the Group needs to be invited by one of the existing members of the Group. It is an informal Group which was created in March 2012 by an English language teacher who is now the Group Administrator. At the time when

observation was taking place, it had 583 members that consisted of English language teachers teaching in primary and secondary schools.

My intention to contact the Group Administrator regarding this study was conveyed to the Group Administer by one of the recruited participants. After the Group Administrator had agreed to be contacted, a letter (see Appendix C) that expressed the researcher's intention to be in the Group was sent using the private Message function on Facebook. The participant information sheet was also attached in the Message for the Group Administrator's reference.

The Facebook Group was observed upon obtaining consent from the Group Administrator who responded through private Message and invited the researcher to Join the Group. The Facebook Group was visited on a daily basis throughout the data generation period to identify teaching-related posts and comments, which were then recorded on the raw data sheet.

### **Phase 3**

Phase 3 involved the use of questionnaires and face-to-face semi-structured interviews for data generation. It began in early March and lasted up to the end of May 2013. The data generation using the questionnaires and the semi-structured interviews occurred simultaneously. The questionnaire was distributed to the teachers and they were given ample time of around 10 to 15 minutes to complete the questionnaire prior to the interview.

The questionnaires were in the form of a Likert-type scale (Vagias, 2006) in which the teachers were presented with various strategies for informal learning and they had to indicate how frequent they employed each strategy (Never / Less than Once a Month / Once a month / Two to Four Times a Month / More than Four Times a Month). In the interviews, the teachers were asked to talk about their experience of engaging in informal learning using SNS. In order to overcome geographical constraints, the questionnaires were sent through email

and the private Message function on Facebook to those participants who were unable to attend face-to-face meetings. The return rate for the online questionnaires was 100 per cent, which reflected the teachers' enthusiasm to take part in the study.

The other 34 teachers who taught in the schools located in the accessible areas were handed the questionnaires and were interviewed face-to-face. The initial plan was to conduct group interviews by inviting the teachers to gather at the nearest state library. However, the teachers preferred to be interviewed individually at their school during their own free time such as during recess time or when they were in charge of curriculum activities in the afternoon or at the weekend. Therefore, it was impossible for the group interviews to be conducted since different teachers had different free times. Hence, the initial plan was abandoned and replaced with one-to-one semi-structured interviews which lasted for about 20 to 30 minutes for each participant.

Although the majority of teachers wanted to be interviewed individually, there were three groups of teachers teaching at the same schools who sat together for group interviews. One group consisted of four teachers and the other two groups consisted of three and two teachers. The group interview that involved four teachers lasted for about two hours whilst the group with three teachers and two teachers lasted for about one and half hours and one hour respectively.

### **Discussion: Methodological and Ethical Issues in Researching Teachers' Informal Learning on a Social Networking site**

In this section, methodology and ethics are examined separately, but the underlying assumption is that regardless of how they are conceptualised, they are not entirely separable from each other. This is because every methodological decision is bounded by ethical choices

(Battles, 2010). Methodological issues are discussed first, followed by the ethical issues.

### **Methodological Issues**

The first issue was the question of presence that arose in the process of deciding how to be an effective participant observer in this research. Being an effective participant observer is central to an ethnographic study as it enables researchers to fully understand the perspectives of people being studied (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). However, the notion of a 'participant observer' itself was problematic when applied to the context of this research which is a virtual ethnographic study. This is because in addition to the original conceptualisation of a participant observer as someone who takes part and interacts with the people being researched, the act of reading online content, or 'lurking', is also considered to be a form of participant observation (Gatson, 2011). Reading the online content itself is a form of interaction and when we read online content, 'we are already "in", in a real way because most online content is read (interpreted), and not necessarily interacted with by adding the reader's own post' (ibid: 251–252). Consequently, careful considerations were required in deciding the researcher's role regarding whether to be an active participant observer as employed by classic ethnographers or being a participant observer in the form of a lurker.

The idea of being a lurker is interesting as it provides an opportunity to access the community unobtrusively (Hine, 2008). Therefore, the participant observation was initially carried out by the researcher acting as a lurker, and it was hoped that this position would reduce the over-reactivity from the community members who might post and comment on Facebook just to please the researcher. However, being a lurker raised another issue related to the ethics principles especially regarding the informed consent that will be discussed in detail in the next section.



Furthermore, it was found that being a lurker was not an effective way of gaining a full understanding of the phenomenon being researched. There were many interesting posts that were not fully comprehended as they were contextually bounded and related to the teachers' offline setting activities. Often the posts were 'partial' or 'incomplete' in the sense that reflections of incidents encountered in their daily lives were briefly written without fully describing the incidents that triggered the reflections. For instance, a teacher wrote that she '[felt] like having a spy camera at [her] brooch -James Bond's style- to record the way students talk to their teachers' (Teacher A, FT1).

It was difficult to ascertain what had happened that made the teacher want to record the way her students talked to teachers. Most of the teachers that responded to this post gave encouragement for the teacher to bring the spy camera. None of the teachers asked what had actually happened. To fully understand the post, one needed to know what had happened in the offline setting, and this required a more active participation from the observer to ask for more information related to the posts.

Realising that lurking would not lead to full understanding of teachers' posts and comments, a shift in the researcher's role to an active participant observer was undertaken. However, the participation was minimal, in which comments were only made if the post initiated by the teachers required further clarification. This was mainly to reduce the teachers' consciousness that they were being interrogated by a researcher as this could affect their naturally occurring behaviours on Facebook. Hence, in this research, careful consideration had been taken to balance the dual roles of being a teacher and a researcher.

Another issue that arose in this study related to the question of authenticity, which is whether the Profiles really belonged to Malaysian English language teachers. The identity portrayed online, especially on SNS like Facebook, might not be authentic (Jin *et al.*, 2011). For instance, an Indonesian can easily pretend to be a Malaysian and an

unemployed person can easily pretend to be an English language teacher. It was important to select the Profiles cautiously as not to end up observing fake Profiles of Malaysian English language teachers. Thus simply browsing Facebook Profiles to search for English language teachers was considered ineffective, as it was difficult to ascertain that they were real teachers.

The concern for authenticity influenced the sampling technique which led to the usage of the snowball technique in recruiting the participants. The recruitment process began by recruiting five English language teachers with whom a professional connection in an offline setting had been established prior to the research, and thus their identity as an English language teacher was assured. After that, they were asked to recommend their Friends who were also English language teachers. By using the snowball technique, the risk of observing fake Profiles, which might have affected the findings of the study, had been reduced.

## **Ethical Issues**

### **Informed Consent**

The main ethical dilemma faced was whether to obtain informed consent from potential participants at the start of the research, or retrospectively. There are few established ethical guidelines in the literature involving research that incorporate SNS. This is mainly because of the subtle line that separates what is public, what is semi-public and what is private in the online space (Bruckman *et al.*, 2010). Facebook, for instance, could be a public or private space depending on how one views it.

The ambiguity of privacy on Facebook is mainly due to the different settings available. At first glance, Facebook can be considered as a private space as a password is required to log on. However, once it has been logged onto, Friends' Profiles can be browsed without having

to key in their password. Hence, the ambiguity arises in deciding whether the Friends' Profiles are public or private. To some extent, these profiles can be considered public, as the Profile owners do not set the privacy settings to 'Only Me', thus making their profiles accessible to 'Friends of Friends'. If the Profile owners want to make their posts private, they would have to set their privacy settings to 'Only Me', so that no one except the Profile owner can see the posts. Another setting that contributes to the ambiguity of privacy is the 'Friend Only' option. Applying this setting makes the Profiles less public compared to the Profiles which are set to be seen by 'Friends of Friends'. However, to what extent the Profiles are public or private is ambiguous since all the Friends can see the posts without having to key in the Profile owners' password. It is the vague boundary that separates what is private and what is public on Facebook that makes the process of deciding whether to gain informed consent from the research participants problematic.

The distinction between 'private', 'semi-public' and 'public' is crucial as it will determine whether informed consent should be obtained from the participants. This is because 'the greater the acknowledged publicity of the venue, the less obligation there may be to protect individual privacy, confidentiality, right to informed consent, etc.' (Association of Internet Researchers, 2002: 5). Hence, when the line is subtle, many researchers are presented with a dilemma about whether to obtain informed consent from the potential participants.

For this research project, the dilemma came to an end with the examination of the Statements of Rights and Responsibilities of Facebook which states that:

If you collect information from users, you will: obtain their consent, make it clear you (and not Facebook) are the one collecting their information, and post a privacy policy explaining what information you collect and how you will use it. (Facebook, 2012a)

Based on the Statement of Rights and Responsibilities highlighted above, it is clear that informed consent needs to be obtained from Facebook users. Having decided to obtain the consent raised, another dilemma, which was 'how to obtain their consent?'. There were two options for doing this. The first one was to approach them electronically via Facebook Message, and the second one was to approach them in a more traditional way using hardcopies of the information sheet and the consent form which could be posted or handed to them. The first choice was chosen as it was less time-consuming compared to the second choice, which required travelling to distribute the information sheet. Besides that, return rate might have been low if the participants were approached in this traditional way (Stern, 2004; Hearn, 2012).

Approaching teachers who set their privacy settings to only receive Messages from their Friends was problematic. The question of morality arose as it could be viewed as immoral to send a 'Friend Request' on Facebook only to fulfil the needs of the research. This is because the teachers might feel cheated, and think that they were manipulated into a fake friendship just to take part in a research study. This is a serious ethical problem as it might affect them emotionally, and might create fear regarding approving Friend requests in the future. Taking these issues into consideration, it was decided that Friend requests would only be sent after they had read the information sheet and had given their informed consent.

Since potential participants could set their Facebook settings to not receive any Messages or Friend requests from other users who were not yet in their Friend list, there was an issue regarding how the information sheet and the informed consent form could be given to them. To overcome this problem, the existing participants were asked to contact those that they had recommended as potential participants, and to forward a Message informing them that a researcher wanted to get in touch with them. After the potential participants had agreed to be contacted, the succinct information statement as well as the information sheet and the informed consent form were sent as attachments to an email. Upon receiving their consent, the Friend

requests were sent so that their Timelines could be accessed. These steps were taken to reduce the risk of the participants thinking that they were being manipulated into a fake friendship.

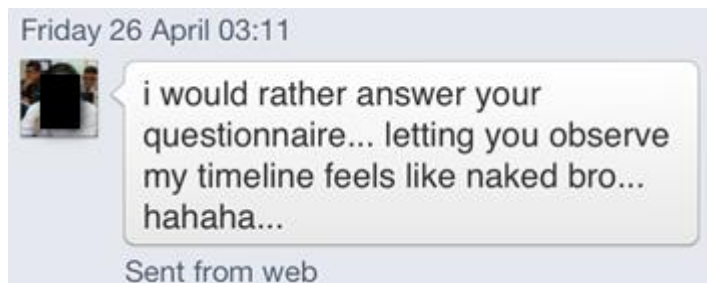
Another issue arose after access to participants' Timelines had been gained. On the Timelines, there were posts and comments made by the participants' Friends. Can the Friends' posts and comments be included as part of the data without having to obtain their informed consent? If informed consent must be obtained from all the people who had posted something on Timelines, the idea of using Facebook might have had to be abandoned as there would be just too many people from whom to obtain consent.

In fact, if researchers needed to obtain informed consent from every potential data source, many aspects of the SNS could not be reasonably researched due to time and energy constraints (Esposito, 2012; Bruckman *et al.*, 2010). One possible solution was to have a 'public notice' (Esposito, 2012) on participants' Timelines, informing the other users that the Timeline was being studied and they should not post or comments on the Timeline if they did not want to be included in the study. However, a 'public notice' could be intrusive. Moreover, it was not ethical enough as the 'public notice' could be easily 'buried' in the Timeline as new posts appeared, making people unaware of the notice.

Another possible solution was to regard Facebook as a piece of fenced land. When permission to enter the land had been obtained from the land owner, one would be free to explore the land. Since permission to observe the Facebook Timeline had been obtained, it could be justified to generate data from every potential source on the Timeline. Despite this justification, gaining individual consent was still pursued in this research to conform to appropriate ethical standards. Nonetheless, informed consent was only obtained from the participants' Friends when their posts and comments were valuable in yielding insights into the phenomenon being studied and that they would be included as part

of the data. The procedure for approaching the Friends was similar to the procedure for recruiting other participants in which a succinct information statement together with the information sheet and the informed consent were sent to their Facebook Message inbox.

Obtaining consent from each individual involved in this study was the right decision. This was because it was found that not all teachers were happy for a researcher to observe their Timeline. Out of the 56 teachers who completed the questionnaire, only 29 gave consent for the Timeline observation. For instance, a teacher wrote:



(Teacher B, PM1)

Based on the feedback from Teacher B, it is discernible that whether an online space is public or private depends very much on the individual. There are Facebook users who perceive their posts on Timeline as strictly private even though the posts can be read by their Friends and sometimes by the Friends of their Friends. Hence, I recommend that those who want to generate data from SNS like Facebook obtain consent from the participants, as they are the ones who decide whether their activities on Facebook are public or private.

### **Protection of Participants**

Protection of participants was another issue which required careful consideration. This is because there are growing numbers of cases in which teachers are being forced to resign just because of their posts on Facebook. For instance, in the USA, there are two cases of teachers being punished for their posts on Facebook. In 2011, Jennifer O'Brien,

who was a first-grade teacher at a school in New Jersey, had been ruled by an Administrative Law Judge, Ellen Bass, to lose her tenured job for updating her Status on Facebook in which she posted 'I'm not a teacher—I'm a warden for future criminals!' (Protalinski, 2011). In 2012, a Brooklyn teacher faced a two year-suspension without pay for her Facebook Comments suggesting her misbehaving students should drown (Edelman, 2012). The two cases highlighted here are not isolated, as there are many more newspaper reports about Facebook users that have been penalised because of their posts and comments.

In Malaysia, there has been one case in which a male teacher was arrested by police for his posts on Facebook. Unlike the two cases in the USA, the teacher was arrested not because of his teaching-related posts, but because his post insulted police officers by condemning the strategies they employed in fighting intruders (Isa, 2013). This incident shows that posting on Facebook can be a sensitive issue, and, thus, careful consideration is needed for protecting the participants.

It is the responsibility of the researcher to take care at all times to protect the participants from physical and mental harm. Therefore, cautious consideration was employed regarding issues of confidentiality and anonymity which will be discussed in greater detail in the following section.

### **Confidentiality and Anonymity**

It is the responsibility of the researcher to conform with data protection legislation and to ensure that information obtained from the participants is kept confidential. However, there is a limit to this confidentiality due to the nature of reporting in qualitative research which requires verbatim extracts as evidence (Nottingham Trent University, 2012). Therefore, to protect the privacy of the participants, careful steps were undertaken in anonymising the data. This includes changing not only names but also any details that might make the

person easily identifiable. In the current study, this was done as early as the transcription stage. The data was transcribed by the researcher instead of hiring others to do the transcription so that no one except the researcher had access to the personal data.

There is an issue regarding the anonymity of data obtained online that participants can be easily traceable (see Charlotte & Lindsay, 2002; Snee, 2008). This is mainly due to verbatim extracts which can be easily indexed by search engines thus making it difficult to protect the privacy of the participants. This is only true for the data obtained from other online spaces such as forum discussion boards, blogs, and Twitter but not Facebook. This is because what is posted within Facebook cannot be indexed by a search engine except for the posts made on Facebook Pages which are set to be 'public' by default (Facebook, 2012b). Thus, this issue is not relevant to this study as data were not generated from Facebook Pages.

### **Personal security**

Personal security was another issue which required careful consideration. Befriending the participants on Facebook enabled them to browse through the researcher's Facebook account. Because of this, the personal details on the researcher's account, such as home address, phone number and employer information were deleted prior to the beginning of the research. This is important in order to ensure that the researcher's personal information would not be misused by the participants. As well as that, the words used when contacting the potential participants were also given attention so as not to annoy them, as wrong choice of words might lead to the researcher being 'Unfriended' or 'Blocked'.



## **Conclusion**

This paper has examined a number of methodological and ethical issues raised during a research project on Malaysian English language teachers' informal learning on Facebook. To recap, a shift in the researcher's role from a lurker to an active participant observer was undertaken in order to better understand the phenomenon being studied. In addition, the concern for authentic Facebook Profiles influenced the use of the snowball technique to recruit the participants.

In terms of ethical issues, deciding whether to obtain informed consent was problematic due to the blurred boundaries of what is public and what is private in an online space like Facebook. The issues of confidentiality and anonymity to protect the participants from any harm were also crucial as teachers' posts on Facebook can be perceived as inappropriate by higher authorities. It was because of the concern to protect the participants that data generation in this study excluded Facebook Pages which could be indexed by search engines, disabling the participants to be traced by others. Personal security was ensured by deleting personal information on the researcher's Facebook Profile.

Since there are very limited guidelines for SNS-based research available in the literature, I strongly recommend that new guidelines in researching this online space be developed by ethics board members. Without having clear guidelines on ethical rules and principles, many SNS users are exposed to harm, especially when they are recruited without their consent due to the ambiguity in interpreting what is public and what is private in an online space. Through this paper, I hope that I have added my experience and exploration to the existing literature of online research, and have provided some guidance for future research in terms of issues to consider.

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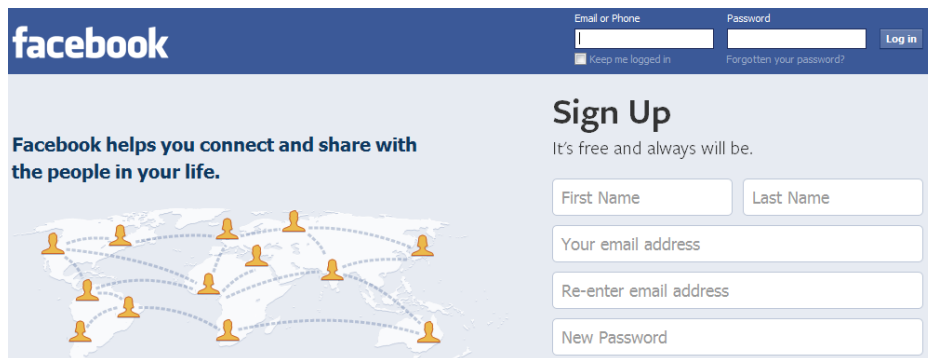
**Figures**

Figure 1.1: Registered email address and password are required to log in.

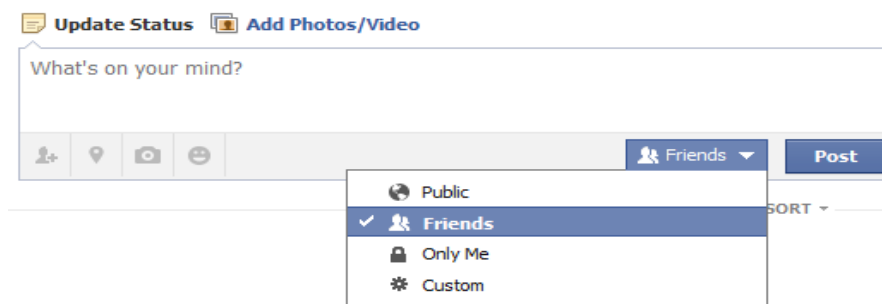


Figure 1.2: A Status update and its privacy options.

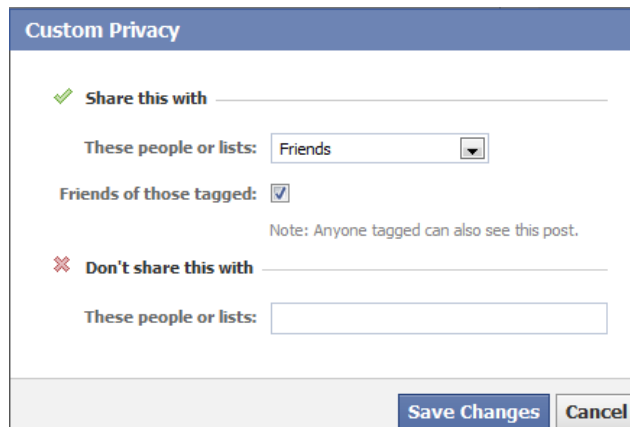


Figure 1.3: Custom privacy of a Status update.

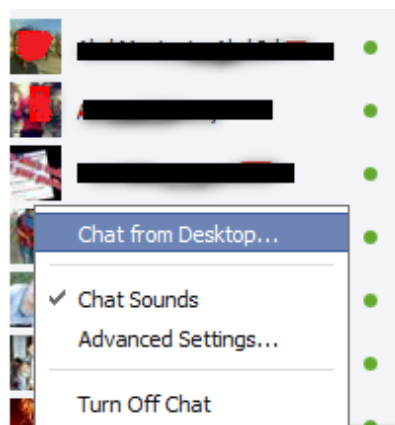


Figure 1.4: Synchronous chat feature on Facebook.

## **Appendix A: The Information Sheets**

### **INFORMATION SHEET (Teachers)**

Dear Sir/Madam,

I am researching the English language teachers' use of Facebook. The research is in fulfilment of the requirements for my PhD studies at the University of Nottingham, UK. I hope to be able to make a meaningful contribution to teacher professional development programmes in the Malaysian context. Your participation in this research will enable you to share your views on the use of social networking technology for getting connected to other teachers outside the workplace.

If you engage in any teaching-related conversations with your Facebook Friends/Group and I think that the conversation gives insights into teaching issues, I will seek consent from you and your friends to include your conversations as part of my research. I may also invite you to take part in a group interview if you wish to attend, and to complete a short questionnaire.

The Facebook examination will be taking place beginning from 1st December 2012 up to 30th<sup>th</sup> May 2013. The group interview which will last no longer than two hours will be audio-recorded and this will be taking place between April to May 2013.

All data obtained from you will be kept secure and confidential. However, there is a limit to confidentiality due to the nature of reporting in qualitative research which requires me to include verbatim extracts as evidence. Therefore, to protect your privacy, I will only report the data in anonymous form by changing your name and any identifying information such your school, age, Facebook profile, etcetera.

You have the right to withdraw from this research by informing me no later than 30<sup>th</sup> of June 2013. If you decide to withdraw, your data will be expunged.



Your words may be quoted in my PhD thesis, future publications and other research outputs. Other genuine researchers can have access to this anonymised research data and use your words in any research output provided that the researchers agree to preserve the confidentiality of the information. These research data will be fully destroyed seven years after the research completes.

Your participation in this research is of your own free will and if you are interested in taking part or would like to have more information, then please do not hesitate to contact me using my contact details listed below. You also have the right to contact me for any further information about the results obtained and to see the final report. Together with this letter, I attach a consent form indicating your rights as a research participant.

Please copy and paste the Agreement Statement in the consent form to my Facebook Message using your Facebook account in order to indicate your consent to being part of this research.

I look forward to working with you should you consent to participating in the research. Thank you for your kind consideration.

Yours sincerely,

Radzuwan Ab Rashid

University of Nottingham,

School of Education, Jubilee campus, Wollaton Road, NG8 1BB

Mobile: +44747326466 Email: ttxra12@nottingham.ac.uk

**Supervisor 1:** Dr Mary Bailey. Tel: +441159514539.

Email: mary.bailey@nottingham.ac.uk

**Supervisor 2:** Dr Jane Evison. Tel: +441159514516

Email: jane.evison@nottingham.ac.uk

**School of Education Research Ethics Coordinator:**

Professor John Morgan. Tel: +44 (0)115 951 4486.

School of Education,

University of Nottingham,

Jubilee Campus, Wollaton Road, NG8 1BB.

### **INFORMATION SHEET (Non-Teaching Participant)**

Dear Sir/Madam,

I am researching the English language teachers' use of Facebook. The research is in fulfilment of the requirements for my PhD studies at the University of Nottingham, UK. I hope to be able to make a meaningful contribution to teacher professional development programmes in the Malaysian context.

For your information, I have recruited teachers who actively engage in informal learning on Facebook and found that some of them have had conversations with you on their Timeline/Group. I found that the conversations are very valuable in yielding insights into the phenomenon being studied. If you consent to take part in this study I will include your posts and comments as part of my data.

I examine the teachers' Facebook beginning from 1st December 2012 up to 30th May 2013. All data obtained from you will be kept secure and confidential. However, there is a limit to confidentiality due to the nature of reporting in qualitative research which requires me to include verbatim extracts as evidence. Therefore, to protect your privacy, I will only report the data in anonymous form by changing your name and any identifying information such your school, age, Facebook profile, etcetera.

You have the right to withdraw from this research by informing me no later than 30th of June 2013. If you decide to withdraw, your data will be expunged.

Your words may be quoted in my PhD thesis, future publications and other research outputs. Other genuine researchers can have access to this research data and use your words in any research output provided that the researchers agree to preserve the confidentiality of the information. These research data will be fully destroyed seven years after the research completes.

Your participation in this research is of your own free will and if you are interested in taking part or would like to have more information, then please do not hesitate to contact me using my contact details listed below. You also have the right to contact me for any further information about the results obtained and to see the final report. Together with this letter, I attach a consent form indicating your rights as a research participant.

Please copy and paste the Agreement Statement in the consent form to my Facebook Message using your Facebook account in order to indicate your consent to being part of this research.

I look forward to working with you should you consent to participating in the research. Thank you for your kind consideration.

Yours sincerely,

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## **Appendix B: Participant Consent Forms**

### **PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM (Teachers)**

**Project title:** Teachers' Informal Learning on a Social Networking Site

**Researcher's Name:** Mr Radzuwan Bin Ab Rashid

**(Supervisor 1) Name:** Dr Mary Bailey

**(Supervisor 2) Name:** Dr Jane Evison

- I have read the Participant Information Sheet and the nature and purpose of the research project has been explained to me. I understand and agree to take part.
- I understand the purpose of the research project and my involvement in it.
- I understand that I may withdraw from the research project by informing the researcher my intention to do so before 30<sup>th</sup> of June 2013 and that this will not affect my status now or in the future.
- I understand that while information gained during the study may be published, I will not be identified and my personal results will remain confidential. I also understand that there are some limits in this confidentiality as highlighted in the Participant Information Sheet.
- I understand that I will be audio recorded during the group interview, if I participate in this.
- I understand that data will be stored in the safe place. This data will be treated confidentially and will only be reported in anonymous form.
- I understand that other researchers can have access to anonymised research data and use my words in any research output provided that the researchers agree to preserve the confidentiality of the information.

- I understand that I may contact the researcher or supervisors if I require further information about the research, and that I may contact the Research Ethics Coordinator of the School of Education, University of Nottingham, if I wish to make a complaint relating to my involvement in the research.
- I understand that by sending the Agreement Statement in the box below to the researcher's Facebook Message using my Facebook account, I indicate my consent to take part in this study

### **Agreement Statement**

I have read and understand the Participant Information Sheet and Informed Consent Form and I agree to take part in this study. The unique identifier\* to be attached to my data is **(write your unique identifier)**

\*anything such as pet's name or mother's maiden name to enable me identify your data to be expunged in case you decide to withdraw from the study.

### **Contact Details**

**Researcher:** Mr Radzuwan Bin Ab Rashid, PhD Researcher, School of Education, University of Nottingham.

Email: [txra12@nottingham.ac.uk](mailto:txra12@nottingham.ac.uk)

**Supervisor 1:** Dr Mary Bailey. Tel: 01159514539.

Fax: 01158466600

Email: [mary.bailey@nottingham.ac.uk](mailto:mary.bailey@nottingham.ac.uk)

**Supervisor 2:** Dr Jane Evison. Tel: 01159514516

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Email: [jane.evison@nottingham.ac.uk](mailto:jane.evison@nottingham.ac.uk)

**School of Education Research Ethics Coordinator:**

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Jubilee Campus, Wollaton Road, NG8 1BB



## **PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM (Non-Teaching Participants)**

**Project title:** Teachers' Informal Learning on a Social Networking Site

**Researcher's Name:** Mr Radzuwan Bin Ab Rashid

**(Supervisor 1) Name:** Dr. Mary Bailey

**(Supervisor 2) Name:** Dr. Jane Evison

- I have read the Participant Information Sheet and the nature and purpose of the research project has been explained to me. I understand and agree to take part.
- I understand the purpose of the research project and my involvement in it.
- I understand that I may withdraw from the research project by informing the researcher my intention to do so before 30th of June 2013 and that this will not affect my status now or in the future.
- I understand that while information gained during the study may be published, I will not be identified and my personal results will remain confidential. I also understand that there are some limits in this confidentiality as highlighted in Participant Information Sheet.
- I understand that data will be stored in the safe place. This data will be treated confidentially and will only be reported in anonymous form.
- I understand that other researchers can have access to this research data and use my words in any research output provided that the researchers agree to preserve the confidentiality of the information

- I understand that I may contact the researcher or supervisors if I require further information about the research, and that I may contact the Research Ethics Coordinator of the School of Education, University of Nottingham, if I wish to make a complaint relating to my involvement in the research.
- I understand that by sending the Agreement Statement in the box below to the researcher's Facebook Message using my Facebook account, I indicate my consent to take part in this study.

### **Agreement Statement**

I have read and understand the Participant Information Sheet and Informed Consent Form and I agree to take part in this study. The unique identifier\* to be attached to my data is **(write your unique identifier)**

\*anything such as pet's name or mother's maiden name to enable me identify your data to be expunged in case you decide to withdraw from the study.

### **Contact Details**

**Researcher:** Mr Radzuwan Bin Ab Rashid, PhD Researcher, School of Education, University of Nottingham.

Email: ttxra12@nottingham.ac.uk

**Supervisor 1:** Dr Mary Bailey. Tel: 01159514539.

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**Supervisor 2:** Dr Jane Evison. Tel: 01159514516

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**Appendix C: Letter to Facebook Administrator**

Mr Radzuwan Bin Ab Rashid

School of Education

University of Nottingham

Jubilee Campus

Wollaton Road, NG8 1BB.

Date: 20<sup>th</sup> March 2013.

Dear Sir/Madam,

Requesting Permission to Observe Facebook Group

I am a PhD researcher in the School of Education, University of Nottingham, UK. I am currently carrying out a study looking at English language teachers' use of Facebook. I am writing to ask whether you would be willing to give me access to the 'English Language Teachers' Facebook Group administrated by you. This is because the participant(s) that I have recruited for the study are members of the Facebook Group.

My study requires me to examine the participants' Facebook Timeline and any Facebook Group that they join for them to engage in informal learning. Since the participant(s) that I have recruited for this study have joined your Facebook Group, I need to gain access to the group to examine how they learn in that group. If the participants engaged in conversation with other group members who are not recruited as my participants, and I found that the

conversations are valuable in yielding insights into the phenomenon being studied, I will obtain their consent to include their words as part of my data. To protect the privacy of those involved in this study, all data collected will be treated in the strictest confidence and will only be reported in anonymous form in which I will use pseudonyms (false names) and change any identifying information.

I have provided study information sheet to the participant(s) in advance. It is also attached to this letter for you to read. Should you or the participants have any complaints, please do not hesitate to contact the School of Education Research Ethics Coordinator, University of Nottingham (Tel: +44 (0)115 951 4486).

If you allow me to access the Facebook Group, please send the Agreement Statement attached together with this letter to my email address using your email account. I will then send a request on Facebook to join the group or ask you to invite me to join the group depending on the connection setting of the group.

Many thanks in advance for your consideration of this project.

Yours sincerely,

Radzuwan Ab Rashid

[ttxra12@nottingham.ac.uk](mailto:ttxra12@nottingham.ac.uk)

**Supervisor 1:** Dr Mary Bailey. Tel: 01159514539.

Email: [mary.bailey@nottingham.ac.uk](mailto:mary.bailey@nottingham.ac.uk)

**Supervisor 2:** Dr Jane Evison. Tel: 01159514516

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**School of Education Research Ethics Coordinator:**

Professor John Morgan. Tel: +44 (0)115 951 4486.

School of Education,

University of Nottingham,

Jubilee Campus, Wollaton Road, NG8 1BB.

**Agreement Statement**

I have read your letter requesting my permission to access the Facebook Group which I administrate. I have also read the Participant Information Sheet for teachers and non-teaching participants as well as the consent forms attached together with the letter. I hereby agree to allow you access the Facebook Group to meet your research purpose.