Digital education: VKontakte social network as a means of organizing the educational process

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Abstract. The article reveals the topic of the place and role of the VKontakte social network in the organization of the educational process, the relevance of which was confirmed during the Covid-19 pandemic. The object of the research is digital education at Russian universities. The subject of the research is the VKontakte social network as a means of organizing the educational process. The authors share the experience of using social networks, accumulated in the process of teaching social disciplines at the Timiryazev Academy. The data proving the popularity of this network among students in Russia are presented. The main scientific result: not only the high efficiency of using the VKontakte social network for organizing the educational process has been proven, but also a proposal is formulated to consider digital literacy and knowledge of modern digital technologies as one of the qualification requirements for higher school teachers.

1. Introduction

Digitalization has become one of the challenges for the Russian higher education system in the 21st century - the use of digital technologies in the educational process. And if general education schools have made a decisive step forward in this regard, Russian universities are experiencing serious problems here. The Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted some of these problems, once again showing the importance of learning by teachers various digital technologies and modern communication channels; social media is one of them. This article is the next stage in the cycle of works conceived by the scientists of the Timiryazev Academy on the digitalization of the educational process [1].

In the early 2000s, digitalization in higher educational institutions manifested itself in the computerization of the educational process and the introduction of such a method for assessing students' knowledge and abilities as testing. A special place was given to testing in the process of accreditation of specialties. So, for the successful completion of this procedure, universities were asked to test students three times on their own or to pass it at a time during a weekly accreditation cycle in the presence of a testologist - an expert from the Supervisory body (Rosobrnadzor). The most innovative universities began to use testing even in state exams [2]. And only 5-10 years ago, depending on the university and the region, the teachers of higher educational institutions appreciated the potential that social networks have. And if earlier a smartphone in the hands of a student was considered as an act of distracting him from the classroom and was strictly suppressed, now the progressive part of the teaching community has a desire not to prohibit, but to direct the energy of students in the right direction, to coordinate their interest.
Nowadays it is no secret to anyone that social networks are not only a means for entertainment and organization of leisure, but also a powerful tool for establishing communications, including science and education. The first publications have appeared on this point. It is good that the majority of Russian authors see the serious potential of using social networks in the teaching of various academic disciplines [3, 4, 5].

The agenda includes the issue of organizing courses for teachers to train the skills of work in social networks; for this purpose, special experimental sites are being created [6]. The opinion is expressed that “in order to produce qualified personnel who will keep pace with the development of digital technologies and the digital economy as a whole, it is necessary to develop these hard skills and soft skills, starting from the school age” [7].

The idea of using social networks by universities is also supported abroad. The study on the use of the Telegram network in the educational process is an example of this [8]. The publication on the impact of social networks Facebook and YouTube on the academic achievement of students in computer programming laboratories [9] is also interesting.

2. The main results of the study
In our time, the worldwide web has several hundred social networks of various orientations and content. A special place among them is occupied by VKontakte, which has become the most popular among Russian student youth. As of September 2020, the number of accounts of this network is 500 million and it is included in the list of the 30 largest social networks. A sociological survey conducted in September 2020 among freshmen at the Timiryazev Academy showed that 99% have accounts in it. It is characteristic that in 2019 the same indicator was 97%. The overwhelming majority of them have several years of user experience, which speaks of its unlimited potential as a tool for career guidance work [10].

The Timiryazev Academy experimental platform for the use of social networks in the educational process was created on the basis of the Department of History in 2015. It was headed by the head of the Department A.B. Orishev. The heads of student scientific communities - the Club of Historical Tourism and the Club of Russian History Lovers have become the main bloggers. The experiment covered the teaching of such disciplines as "Patriotic History", "History", "History of World Civilizations", "Culturology", "Sociology" and "Philosophy". The experiment involved full-time students of the 1st and 2nd courses. All bachelor’s programmes, implemented at the Faculty of Humanities and Pedagogy, were presented: "Municipal Administration", "Technology and Organization of Excursion Services", "Economics and Management", "Advertising and Public Relations in the Agro-Industrial Complex". The total number of participants in the experiment reached 800 people. And these are only direct participants in the project, because students and teachers from other Russian universities joined the discussion of the topics to be discussed.

The personal page of the head of the Department of History was the main platform for training. The concept "personal" should be considered conditionally, since it was created exclusively for scientific and educational purposes and for all the years of its existence this direction has been clearly maintained in it. The choice of this page was due to the desire to avoid monitoring by bureaucratic structures and the pressure. They could have appeared if the information had been located on the official page of the university or faculty. At the same time, some messages for students were posted on the page of the Department of History, as well as on the pages of the Club of Historical Tourism and the Club of Russian History Lovers, i.e. on resources that provide authors with relative academic freedom.

The choice of the personal page of the head of the department as the main communication platform was also due to the fact that the project involved not only students who directly studied the discipline, but also students of other courses. Bearing in mind that the number of subscribers at the beginning of the experiment (January 2015) was 680 (in September 2020, this figure increased up to 2000), it was decided to use these contacts as well. In other words, several hundred network users - university graduates, teachers, representatives of creative professions, scientists periodically acted as experts, taking part in discussions and evaluating students' comments. The latter, understanding the largeness of
The work of students in social networks was integrated into the point-rating system for assessing the level of development of competencies by students, adopted at the K.A. Timiryazev Russian State Agrarian University of Agriculture. Moreover, without a point-rating system, which involves the awarding of points for all meaningful actions in a social network (comment, solution of an intellectual problem, repost, voting, etc.), student performance would be noticeably lower. All the standards for scoring were brought to the attention of students at the first lesson, and everyone had a clear idea of how many points should be scored in order to receive an "excellent", "good" and "satisfactory" grade.

Also, at the first lesson, according to the rules of the social network, contacts were established: students applied to be "friends", who were immediately met by the teacher. Some of the students applied for joining the groups "Department of History of the RSAU-Moscow Agricultural Academy", "Club of Historical Tourism" and "Club of Fatherland History Lovers". At the same time, the problem of student identification was solved. As you know, a small part of student youth are registered in the network not under their names. From that day on, all the assignments and messages posted by the teacher immediately appeared in the students' "feed". A clear system was established: all tasks were laid out in the interval from Friday evening to Sunday. General informational messages could appear on other days. The period from Monday to Friday is the time for completing the next tasks. Scoring for each of them was carried out in practical classes with a detailed analysis. Thus, a symbiosis of distance and traditional classroom education was created. There was a rule: points are awarded only with the personal participation of the student; correspondence points were not allowed. If a student missed a practical lesson for any reason, then this procedure was carried out at the next lesson. This system also worked in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, when interpersonal communication was transferred from the classroom to Zoom.

In most cases the tasks were given in the form of notes ("posts"). Students were to leave an appropriate comment, the quality of which was assessed not only by the teacher, but also by other students. If the teacher scored points for each comment, assessing its quality and depth of thought, then students most often recorded their approval by so-called "likes" - a variation of non-verbal communication. When leaving a comment, there was a rule: before leaving your comment, i.e. to answer the teacher's question, the student was supposed to carefully read all the comments of his colleagues, previously posted on the "feed". As a result, a discussion started, students expressed their opinions, sometimes opposite about certain historical topics. Take for example a few tasks that have sparked a heated discussion in the student environment:

- The Kaluga region in June 2019 submitted to the State Duma a bill on the celebration of the overthrow of the Horde yoke. It is about establishing a new All-Russian memorable date - the day of the end of the Great Stand on the Ugra River. Should we support this initiative? (communication dated November 12, 2019)
- Peter I was learning a lot from the Dutch, setting this people as an example. And what can you learn from the Dutch in our time? Or is it not relevant now? (message dated October 20, 2018)

Much attention was paid to the development of forecasting skills and the capacity to formulate practical recommendations, while relying on the knowledge of history: “In recent years, the world press wrote a lot about the end of the unity of Spain. Catalonia is being separated from it. How likely is this scenario? And what position should Russia take on this issue? " (September 22, 2018)
The tasks in other social disciplines distinguished were also various. In the tasks on philosophy, students were asked to leave a comment on the popular quotations of famous philosophers (Socrates, Descartes, Nietzsche, etc.). In a number of cases, students were asked to put themselves in the shoes of thinkers, i.e. to "live" this or that situation. Thus, an existential effect arose, and students developed the skills of non-standard thinking. As for the tasks in sociology, all the cases were taken from the real-life situations. The most popular topics of that time were brought up for discussion: raising the retirement age, deviant actions of "stars" of sports and show business, reform of higher education, etc.

VKontakte has become a platform for the presentation of new educational and scientific literature. Here, for the first time, information about the textbook "History from Ancient Civilizations to the End of the 20th Century" was given. This book was published in 2020 by the publishing holding INFRA-M. It is written by the teachers of the Timiryazev Academy and fully complies with the requirements of the Federal State Educational Standard of Higher Education 3 ++. There was also a presentation of other books offered to students as basic and additional literature.

Sometimes VKontakte was used as a navigator to find important educational materials on external resources. For this, a link to the text of interest with a compulsory comment was placed on the page. As an example, we will cite the entry dated November 29, 2019: “Paul I is the idol of his people. We read and discuss an article about the Russian emperor! ” And there was also a hyperlink to the electronic scientific journal “History. Historians. Sources ". Two more examples:

- The journal “History: facts and symbols "(magazine from the list of the SAC (State Commission for Academic Degrees and Titles) ) there was an article" Abwehr-3 and the secret field police: principles and methods of work of the Wehrmacht counterintelligence "... Enjoy reading, friends!" (entry dated June 19, 2019)
- “We are reading the interview of our colleague in the Department of Agricultural Tourism Vitaly Nikolaevich Tarasenko. Journalists love sensations and the title of the material is shocking, but also causes a desire to debate. For a serious immersion in the topic, we read the book "The Everyday Life of Soviet People in the Era of NEP" (entry dated December 30, 2018)

VKontakte has served as an effective tool for visualizing the classroom sessions. Placement of photo reports on the conducted classes - business games like "Norman theory: pros and cons", "Horde yoke or the union of two powers", "Historical trial of Peter I", etc. caused a wide resonance among students who reacted to such messages with numerous "likes" and "reposts".

The possibilities of VKontakte were widely used for conducting sociological surveys. All polls were conducted on condition of complete anonymity, which allows us to speak about more or less objective results. With the help of the sociological survey, it was decided to choose the title of a well-known book devoted to "black communications" - a new term in political science. Later it was published by Direct Media. A sociological survey, as a rule, ended each semester, when students were asked to evaluate the effectiveness of the point-rating system and make their proposals for improving it.

VKontakte has become an effective platform for posting various other messages accompanying the educational process: from the publication of requirements for writing abstracts to the announcement of issues of magazines, scientific and practical conferences, forums and seminars. At the same time, the site made it possible to determine the number of users who read this or that information. In addition to the actual text visualized messages, video materials were also posted. The learning content was posted directly in the teacher's "tape" and always aroused increased interest, which is easy to track by the number of views. The last such video, created with the participation of students of the Faculty of Humanities and Pedagogy, was posted on September 4, 2020 and was a review of textbooks and manuals of the publishing holding INFRA-M. The teachers of the RSAU-Moscow Agricultural Academy were the authors of these books.

The results of examination sessions proved the effectiveness of using such a tool as social networks in combination with a point-rating system. In all groups in which this methodology was applied, the
indicator of academic achievement was 100%, and the indicator of the quality of knowledge was 88-95%.

A serious problem is the conservatism of some teachers, a stubborn unwillingness to work in social networks. Part of the teaching staff still perceives social networks with distrust, consider working in them frivolous. There are also those who have experience of participating in social networks, but they are not on VKontakte. The first category of these teachers are adherents of the Odnoklassniki social network and they look at all other networks through the prism of this network. For them, any social network is an opportunity to communicate with someone who studied in the same class 30-40 years ago and no more. They have no understanding that the functionality of many social networks has stepped far forward. Another category is the "advanced" members of social networks such as Facebook. Here we see a reverse reflection: they look down on VKontakte as a network of teen-agers where “professionals have no place”. As a rule, these are marketing and advertising teachers. And as a result, no more than 50% of the teaching staff of Russian universities have their own pages in these social networks, in this case we are talking about VKontakte. Meanwhile, the lack of information about the teacher in a social network close to the student not only alienates one or another associate professor or professor from the main object of the educational process - the student, but also lowers the teaching status in the eyes of students, reduces his charisma. A teacher who does not have a bright, rich page in a social network has every chance of turning into a meaningless "no-name" for students. And this is the objective reality of our time. The solution to the issue in this case is seen in the following: the teacher's activity in social networks should become one part of his portfolio, along with the indicators of publication activity, and the knowledge of digital technologies Zoom, Skype, etc. It should become one of the qualification requirements.

3. Conclusions
The study allows us to conclude that the introduction of social networks into the educational process, and above all the VKontakte social network, is timely and effective, which was once again confirmed by the Covid-19 epidemic. Not only numerous sociological polls show that, but also the results of examination sessions. However, the wider dissemination of this technology is hindered by the conservatism of some of the teaching staff and the unwillingness to overcome stereotypes. At the same time, it should be said that the use of social networks, like any other type of distance work, is far from being a panacea. Social networks are not an alternative, but an effective addition to the traditional educational process, when a close interaction between a teacher and a student is established in the classroom, when all participants in the educational process, being in one place and at the same time, create an intellectual product in a single burst.

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