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Engagement or distraction : the use of social media for learning in higher education

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Viewpoint

Engagement or Distraction: The use of Social Media for Learning in Higher Education

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> Alison Purvis (Head of Learning, Teaching and Assessment in the Faculty of Health and Wellbeing), Helen Rodger (Senior Lecturer in Academic Development) and Sue Beckingham (Senior Lecturer in Computing) have recently been working on supporting staff and students considering their use of social media at Sheffield Hallam University. In this viewpoint, they offer their thoughts on the role of social media in learning in higher education.

Introduction

Ten years ago we would have told our students to switch off their mobile phones as they came into class. Now we might tell them to their devices on and access social media or other online services. Active use of social media in taught sessions might not yet be commonplace, but it is growing, and feelings of the staff and students involved are mixed (Blankenship, 2010). It is not only academics who are struggling with the impact of social media in an academic context, students are often uncertain about how and when they should be using social media services in this area too (Dabbagh and Kitsantas, 2012).

Throughout the academic year 2012-13, repeated requests were received from colleagues for 'the social media policy' and 'guidance for students using social media'. We didn't have anything that met the need for guidance in a learning and teaching context. We had social media guidance that was staff focused written by the marketing department to cover how staff represent the university but not how to use it in learning and teaching. It was helpful, but only for certain users and certain types of uses. We embarked on meeting that immediate need and produced student-facing guidance for

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using social media responsibly and strategically to support learning (Sheffield Hallam University, 2014).

Now that we have student-facing guidance in place, colleagues have reported increased confidence in what they can advise students, but in answering one question we have raised many more. New questions range from those about practical approaches and 'how tos' but others are more fundamental and question the effective use of social media tools to really engage students in learning or even question the ethical use of profit-making online tools (ongoing unpublished research). The most frequent question is, "Is social media actually useful for supporting learning effectively or is it just a distraction?"

Social media originated in the desire for the expression of individual identity and maintaining an online social life, not one of education or supporting learning. Despite this original purpose, social media can now provide the educational context with tools that support the building of communities of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991). The development of a learning community alone may bring about significant positive influences on a student's learning experience without the need for specific and discrete social media learning experiences (Dabbagh and Kitsantas, 2012). Social media can provide connections between formal and informal learning (Dabbagh and Kitsantas 2012), enabling autonomous student led interactions to take place within their various communities. Such communities may be formed from the course they are taking, with those they are living with whilst at university, or indeed peers from their own social networks (Lenning and Ebber, 1999). These communities are effective when they are student centred, focussed on a common goal, enable shared knowledge, shared knowing and shared responsibility (Tinto, 2003). Communities to allow such activities to take place can be initiated by the tutor for example by introducing group work activities, seminar or tutorial groups or informal social activities. Using social media allows for both synchronous and asynchronous activity to take place. Students will also self-form groupings, and there is evidence that this process can begin prior to even starting university through social media; Facebook is the most common forum due to the number of students already engaging in this social space (Prescott, 2014).

There is of course no single answer, simply a range of factors that may influence the value of using social media. We present a selection of these factors and invite readers to consider how social media may influence student engagement with learning.

Social media absorbs valuable time

Time taken engaging with social media for the design and execution of a learning activity can be a significant factor in the perception of the value of social media for learning. Investment in time is required to be able to familiarise oneself with the social media technology, starting with the simple 'how to' of where to click and other simple functions and then moving to more complex interactions and objectives. Each

individual must make a personal decision about the right level of effective engagement in line with what they want to achieve. It can be labour intensive to ensure that all factors have been considered or controlled, such as security, fairness, openness, making it fit within the university frameworks and overall evaluation of successful implementation.

When designing a learning activity, tutors expect students to spend a certain amount of time engaged with learning activities. Indeed, one of Chickering and Gamson's (1987) seven principles of good practice in undergraduate education is the emphasis of the time spent on task. The inclusion of social media as a learning tool may optimise that time-on-task by more effectively engaging learners and meet the premise put forward by Chickering and Gamson (1987) that "time plus energy equals learning". Twitter use in teaching and learning activities has been shown to increase broad engagement in all types of learning activities online and face-to-face with increased engagement resulting in higher student achievement (Junco et al., 2010).

Social media is a superficial distraction

Social media is often seen as a distraction, a platform which has so much content linked to so many different connections that it quickly distracts users away from their original purpose of visiting or taking the user into a number of unfruitful channels. Tutors are concerned that as soon as students are asked to open these online services they will rapidly get hooked into following the latest 'trending' topic and be distracted away from their learning activities. Ensuring the students stay 'on task' when online is seen as much more difficult and without consideration and planning it can be (Andersson et al., 2013). Social media has similarly been criticised as providing only superficial interaction and engagement; indeed social media services such as Twitter are fast moving and characterised by a restrictive character limit. However, brevity does not necessarily mean superficiality and challenging students to think about how to communicate concisely and rapidly can allow for development of strong information processing skills. Social media is not just a fad, it is here to stay and is already changing the way we communicate and share information; socially, in our working lives and for personal learning (NMC, 2014). Including learning activities in the social media arena allows our students to learn digital communication skills and capabilities in a supported environment. Support can be both tutor and peer led.

In order to prepare our students for employability they need to develop a variety of skills (Beetham and Sharpe 2013) and consideration should be given the literacy of digital skills (NMC, 2015). Jisc (2014) define digital literacies as "the capabilities which fit someone for living, learning and working in a digital society". One of the seven elements identified by Jisc (2014) refers to communication and collaboration, and participation in digital networks for learning and research. Providing students with opportunities and guidance to develop skills to participate responsibly and professionally within social media spaces is therefore a positive activity. Leading by

example and demonstrating as academics how these spaces can be used in a professional and scholarly context supports this.

Conclusion

Social media websites are seen by some as positive educational tools that provide students with opportunities to develop their digital capability. Indeed social media has been seen as a major driver for change in higher education in the 2014 New Media Consortium Horizons report (NMC, 2014) and improvement of digital literacy skills has been reported as a major challenge in the 2015 report (NMC, 2015). Conversely, social media tools are seen as distractions that pull learners away from true engagement in learning (Andersson *et al.*, 2013; Selwyn, 2011). The varied viewpoints demonstrate the tensions between the personal origins of social networking and its developing use in the professional context of learning (Blankenship, 2010). Digital exclusion is also a concern as some become more confident and adept, the digital divide may remain or even widen; providing scope for further research. Clearly there are many aspects to social media in the context of higher education and it is not realistic to have a single viewpoint. As with any approach to learning design, a potential tool can be ineffective or it can be a powerful pedagogical approach.

It is our contention that the current evidence strongly supports the use of social media as a strong driving force for change in higher education and we need to positively support our students to develop the necessary digital capabilities to keep pace.

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