

Developing a professional online presence and effective network

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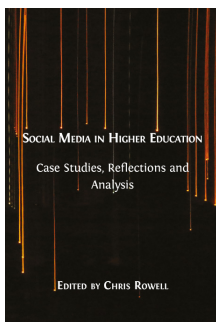
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PART TWO

PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE



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5. Developing a Professional Online Presence and Effective Network

#Identity #Beginner #LinkedIn #Twitter

Sue Beckingham

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Introduction

This chapter considers the significance and value of students and educators using social media to develop an online presence. Such a presence can allow both groups to showcase their professional and academic achievements and provide an opportunity to demonstrate both student learning gain and teaching excellence. There are a variety of different ways to present academic work; social media can be used in a professional context to maximise reach and engagement, thus contributing to the success of this work. This chapter explores how an online presence can be utilised to network with others and how this can open ‘virtual doors’ to CPD and informal learning, potential scholarly collaborations, new job opportunities or work experience. Furthermore, a framework is introduced to illustrate the important areas on which to focus when developing an online presence.

Social Media

Over the last decade there has been seismic change in the way we communicate socially and professionally. In addition to mastering face-to-face communication and email, we have had to grapple with the use of social media, which has pervaded our lives and provided a new medium to navigate. Social media has empowered individuals to

communicators and collaborators, conversationalists and critics (Beckingham, 2013). Within these social spaces individuals share not only information, but also their social identities.

Through participating openly in online activities, individuals develop an online presence. This is also referred to as a 'digital footprint' as contributions leave a trail that can be seen by others. Understanding what this looks like, and how to make it personally valuable, can be beneficial to educators, students and future graduates alike.

However, despite the general popularity of social media, some have not embraced its use in a professional context: that is, they have not purposefully developed a work-related online presence and an effective network. Whilst the categories are not black and white, we can consider three types of social media users: the advocates, the dabblers and the unengaged. It may be argued that there is a transition between the first two, if the user has a social media profile but initially might not interact in this space very often. It is also possible to be an advocate in one social space, a dabbler in another and totally unengaged or even unaware of other social spaces.

- Advocates: well developed profile; active user; connected; sharing and collaborating.
- Dabblers: sporadic visits; low contribution; profile may only be partially set up.
- Unengaged: unaware of potential; not using social media.

It is important to note that once an individual creates an online profile, this forms part of their online presence, irrespective of whether they go on to use the social media space or not.

What is a Professional Online Presence?

Taking a step back, it may be helpful to define what is meant by an online presence. Simply put, this is the collective existence online of any individual (or organisation). This may be as a result of having a presence on a website, social networking site or other digital space; having a profile within that space; or interacting with the online presence of others.

professional context, and also gives consideration to conducting oneself professionally within any online space. Having a negative or improper online personal presence can have a damaging effect on one's professional reputation and digital identity.

How Do Others Perceive Your Online Presence?

Bozkurt and Chic-Hsiung (2016) refer to the conscious awareness of being present within digital environments as an important part of identity formation. Being aware of what your online presence portrays is therefore important. Yet, for some, the following may still come as a surprise. Just as you use Google (or any other search engine) to find out a vast array of information, so people could be searching to find out more about you. Whilst your name in isolation may bring up multiple entries, few of which are related to you (unless you have an uncommon name), when it is coupled with your institution the number of entries which refer directly to you is significantly increased. Potentially this search will not only locate your institution profile page, but may also find any open social media profiles you have, for example your LinkedIn profile. For most people this shouldn't trigger any warning bells; however, if you have vague memories of a profile you created on the fly and you can't remember when you last revisited it, then this is your prompt to do so now. Just because you are not monitoring your social profiles, doesn't mean to say that others aren't looking at them. Whoever is searching for you (this could include current and prospective students, their parents and your peers) will click on the link to your profile. As we know, first impressions count, so it is important to understand how others perceive you. At a basic level, an incomplete profile left without having been proofread can look unprofessional. However a profile showcasing your practice and research has the potential to shine a bright light on your achievements.

Other social media profiles may also come up in this search. Keeping abreast of changes in security settings can ensure that your 'social' Facebook feed is kept for the eyes of your immediate network of friends and family. If you use Twitter, the search will not only bring

the latest few tweets you have posted within the Google search.

A further consideration is that unless you are presenting a clear identity there is a danger that you could be mistaken for someone else who happens to share your name. As the online presence of your digital doppelgänger could be misconstrued as your own, it is a good idea to use a professional photo in your profile to replace the standard avatar, as it will help to verify who you are.

Blurring of the Boundaries

Considering what persona you wish to present, as well as understanding what you are *actually* presenting, are key steps the development of a professional online identity. Seargeant and Tagg (2014) suggest that ‘Identity is not a stable, pre-determined property of an individual, but rather a set of resources which people draw upon in presenting and expressing themselves via interaction with others’. An individual may construct and re-construct different aspects of their self, thereby potentially sharing multiple facets of their identity and personality. This may include aspects from both their social and professional lives.

It is therefore important to reflect on your current identity and reputation. How do others perceive you? Do you need to better emphasise your professional skills and values in the eyes of the world? Once you clearly identify these you can start planning for your future reputation — who you want to be known as. Socrates is reputed to have said, ‘The way to gain a good reputation is to endeavour to be what you desire to appear’. I’d argue that presenting an authentic representation of yourself is important, but don’t undersell yourself. Writing and talking about your own achievements can be difficult; however, nothing is gained from hiding under a bushel!

When developing and optimising your professional identity, consider the following:

1. *Identity — who you are*

When thinking more deeply about your identity as a professional, you may wish to reflect on what it is that you do within your role, the skills you have, what you value about your career, and what it is that others might value.

Your strong ties (immediate friends and colleagues) are part of your everyday network, and in the main provide a source of readily accessible knowledge. There are also benefits to developing weak ties through networking, as they can both connect you to new ideas and help others to find you.

3. *Knowledge — what you know*

Demonstrating your knowledge may start with details of your education and qualifications. Also include concrete outcomes of your work, such as projects, publications, awards or successful funding bids. Being clear about what the focus of your specialism or research is will help others discover this experience.

Professional Social Networks

LinkedIn (originally to be named ‘Colleaguester’) was one of the earliest social networking sites created in 2002, and whilst not adopted at the rate Facebook was (launched two years later in 2004), it has gone on to be considered as the leading *professional* social network. Having now surpassed over 562 million members in over 200 countries, and boasting that two new members join every minute (LinkedIn 2018), it may be useful for professionals and students in higher education to revisit the affordances this site offers.

Knowledge sharing	Knowledge finding
Answering questions	Raising questions
Networking	Recommendations
Feedback	Discussions
People search	Company search
Job opportunities	Recruitment opportunities

Fig. 3.1 Sue Beckingham, Affordances within LinkedIn (2018), CC BY 4.0

In addition to LinkedIn, there are other social media that can be used in a professional context. These include blogs (WordPress, Blogger, Tumblr), microblogging (Twitter), social bookmarking (Diigo, Mendeley) and social networks (Facebook — and specifically intended

for academics — ResearchGate and [Academia.edu](https://www.academia.edu)). Multimedia may

(YouTube, Vimeo), audio (SoundCloud, AudioBoom) and images (Flickr, Instagram). All of these contain powerful search functions and the opportunity to activate comments.

The Value of Sharing

Kramer (2016) argues that ‘We share for many reasons — some self-serving and some not — but I firmly believe that our need to share is based on a human instinct not only to survive, but to thrive’. Sharing is enhanced by: visibility in social spaces, an informative profile, social connectedness, mutual interests, active listening, interactive dialogue and a dash of serendipity. When these elements are in place and you become an active sharer, reciprocity tends to follow. Others not only start to share your work, but interact with you, opening opportunities for informal learning, discussion and feedback.

In an academic context, Veletsianos and Kimmons (2012) refer to networked participatory scholarship, and describe this as the ‘emergent practice of scholars’ use of participatory technologies and online social networks to share, reflect upon, critique, improve, validate and further their scholarship’. Not only does this practice help to convey our professional identity, the process opens opportunities for social learning and personal development. In this context users are not simply consumers of information, they are adopting the technology that allows them to participate with others in dialogues about their scholarship. Pasquini et al. (2014) reinforce this by outlining the benefits of using social academic tools to share their online presence and professional profile, links to research, and also opportunities for collaboration.

As previously mentioned, reflecting on your digital footprint is an important exercise, one that needs revisiting over time. Boyd (2011) raises four important points in relation to the affordances created by self-expression and interactions between people online:

- online expressions are automatically recorded and archived;
- content made out of bits can be duplicated;
- the potential visibility of content in networked publics is great;
- content in networked publics can be accessed through

positively, a glib comment could be taken out of context and perceived negatively if care is not taken.

Working Out Loud

A further useful approach to help you develop both a professional identity and a network is ‘working out loud’, coined by John Stepper (2014; 2015). He describes this as follows:

Working Out Loud starts with making your work visible in such a way that it might help others. When you do that — when you work in a more open, connected way — you can build a purposeful network that makes you more effective and provides access to more opportunities.

In 2016 Stepper revisited the five elements of working out loud as: relationships, generosity, visible work, purposeful discovery, and a growth mindset. These are presented as a sketchnote in Figure 3.2.



Fig. 3.2 Tanmay Vora, *Five Elements of Working Out Loud* (2017), <http://qaspire.com/2017/01/26/5-elements-of-working-out-loud-by-johnstepper/>

Providing visibility for your work might include developing your professional profile, a website or blog, and sharing outputs using Twitter, LinkedIn or SlideShare. In addition to presenting polished

your network develops there is scope to receive feedback, for others to ask questions, and ultimately the means to develop and improve. Equally you can provide value, help and support by reaching out to others who are working out loud. This process can lead to meaningful discussion both online and face to face.

Celebrating Student Learning Gain and Teaching Excellence through Online Networks

As educators in higher education, we can become important role models through using our online presence effectively. This might include adding projects, publications or awards to a LinkedIn profile; interacting in online discussions or writing a blog. Moreover, once you are actively present online, it becomes possible to engage with the information posted there. This can be done through simple acknowledgements, such as likes, shares or retweets. To add further value, adding a question or comment has the potential to open a dialogue or provide feedback. All of these avenues provide opportunities to actively recognise and celebrate the achievements of students and staff.

Taking Practical Steps

In order to build a network you can engage with, you need to take the practical steps of creating your online presence. Table 3.3 provides a summary of four key areas to focus on.

Developing a professional online presence

1. Creating an online presence	Choosing online spaces	There is clearly a wide variety to choose from and whilst multiple spaces can be beneficial, it is better to be active in one rather than not active in many. Examples might include
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form of a website or blog and Twitter to engage in conversations.

Your profile

Add a photo to all your profiles as this helps to identify who are, along with a concise bio. Brevity is key given the limited word or character allocation so focus on what you want others to know about you professionally

Interconnectedness

Link your profiles by adding the URL to other spaces you are using and want people to visit. For example your blog, website or university profile.

2. Maintaining an active online presence

Updating your profile

Keep your profile up to date and current. This includes role changes (promotions / secondments, placements / internships), but also adding projects, publications, presentations and other outputs that demonstrate personal achievements.

Working out loud

Consider sharing what you are doing — not just the

		reflections on the journey you have taken and what you have learned.
	Proactive interactions	To develop an effective network, your online contributions should include interacting with others. Share and comment on others' work.
3. Evaluating your online presence	Public view	Perform a regular Google search on your name. If you get limited results, add keywords people might use to locate you. Which social media profiles are visible on the first page? Do these results portray your professional self?
	Engagement	Responses to your online contributions such as likes, reposts and comments on what you share indicate interest. Question whether these interactions portray you in the best light.
	Analytics	Utilise the social media analytics offered by the space you are using to identify a more detailed summary. Track mentions of

4. Protecting
your online
presence

Security settings

up a Google Alert or
using [Mention.com](https://www.mention.com/)

Regularly check the
settings options and
adjust to meet your
needs. These vary
but range from a
public profile, shared
with names users, or
private only viewable
by yourself.

Fig. 3.3 Sue Beckingham, Developing a professional online presence
(2018),
CC BY 4.0

Motivations for Developing an Online Presence

Reaching out to my own network, I asked the following question of educators and students: ‘How have you used social media in a professional context where it has contributed positively to the development of your online presence and professional identity?’

What was clear from the extended conversations was that confidence, and a valued network, were not developed overnight, but through incremental steps and interactions, the participants benefited from richer opportunities in the longer term. The responses in Table 2.1.3 demonstrate that by using social media spaces to share content, the individuals have extended their network, and this has led to new opportunities they are unlikely to have experienced otherwise.

My LinkedIn profile allows me to display my work examples, which helps people to discover my online presence.

Using Twitter chats allows me to develop my online presence in terms of demonstrating my skills and knowledge when replying to questions.

Although I use other social media platforms I would say that Twitter has been the main area that has

My Flickr photo stream allows me to display my photographs and allows others to like and comment

significantly on my professional development and online identity.	people to my Flickr site and developing my online presence.
Social media helped in supporting my confidence in sharing ideas and practices from my teaching and learning.	I use LinkedIn posts, as well as blog posts and Twitter (in combo) to give my work greater exposure.
I have a WordPress blog that has helped me connect with others in my field as people have stumbled across my blog through the link on my Twitter profile.	Joining the #LTHEchat on Twitter for example has helped me to build a network with educators, enabling us to learn together and work together.
A colleague was approached by <i>The Guardian</i> a few years ago as a result of his Twitter presence as he was seen as a knowledgeable source in his field on the basis of his tweets.	Writing a blog gave me a space to demonstrate my knowledge. Creating YouTube videos and adding these how-to guides to posts was noticed by an employer, leading to a job interview.
Engaging with Twitter chats such as #LTHEchat and sharing my experience of social media use has led to engagement with a number of eminent individuals in learning and teaching. This has subsequently led to inclusion in the #SocMedHE17 conference and being asked to become a facilitator on the recent #BYOD4L course. My inclusion and activity in both of these events has enhanced my online presence and professional identify, opening up additional opportunities.	

Fig. 3.4 Sue Beckingham, Developing an online presence: contributing factors (2018), CC BY 4.0

Final Thoughts

Developing a professional online presence and an effective network is an iterative process. Both need to be tended as carefully as a garden:

information shared and nature of your connections. Taking the time to update your profile and interact with your network can pay dividends. However, the rewards are only as good as the effort you put in. This can be best managed by short but regular engagement with your networks and chosen professional social spaces.

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