

**Social media for learning : a framework to inspire innovation**

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# **Social media for learning**

## **— a framework to inspire innovation**

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*Andrew Middleton and Sue Beckingham*

### **Introduction**

The Social Media for Learning (SM4L) framework has been constructed to demonstrate how social media can be used by students and academics to promote learning. The framework supports innovation through curriculum design and has also been used in staff development activities to clarify how social media provide academics with a powerful and dynamic context in which to foster active student engagement.

This chapter introduces the seven elements in the framework, each of which present a design principle associated with a theory for effective learner engagement. Each of these principles will be introduced and then illustrated with an example for how it informs effective and imaginative curriculum design incorporating the use of social media. The SM4L framework follows the *Viewpoints* approach to mediating collaborative design activities (O'Donnell, Galley & Ross, 2012).

In sum, the framework is a structured set of principles which can be used separately or in combination to inspire the design of effective social-media enhanced pedagogy.

### **Background — social media**

Social media are websites and applications that enable users to create and share content or to participate in social networking (Mao, 2012). The concept echoes O'Reilly's idea of Web 2.0 (2005) which describes a changed digital environment where the Web is a platform for harnessing collective intelligence; where data is dynamic and abundant; where software is in perpetual beta and attitude is more important than technology. It is a social,

creative and collaborative space in which “small pieces are loosely joined.” The emergence of Web 2.0 predated the common usage of the term social media but contains all the essential ideas. The conceptualisation signals a paradigm shift in the way we now communicate and engage with ideas as both users and producers. This technical restructuring of the Web has subsequently matured into a personal and social movement which has claimed the platform for interpersonal connectivity. This ‘social web’ now spreads beyond PCs to the connected devices we wear and carry, therefore personalising O’Reilly’s articulation of ‘the Web as platform’, a space for harnessing collective intelligence, thriving on shared data and forever improving. Its tools are lightweight, intended to be simple and functional, and span devices to create a rich user experience.

What does this mean for education?

The Web, as we know it now, is pervasive; it is no longer a resolute, impermeable and immobile repository of information. Its strength is found in the things people do and say together - just as education’s strength is in the things people say and do together. This Web has moved from its original static incarnation in the 1990s, through a dynamic phase in the 2000s, to what now is best described as a thriving phase as represented by PennyStock’s *Internet in Real Time*. The advent of smart devices ensures that this thriving web, and the teaching and learning it supports, is also unbounded.

Voss and Kumar’s (2012) analysis of the literature examining the use of social media, albeit in American universities, found that it addressed the themes of visibility, listening, engagement, relationships, trust, authenticity, and branding. In relation to our student-centred framework the ideas of listening, engagement, relationships and authenticity stand out as being most relevant to learning. Visibility, in terms of managing one’s digital presence, is also important in relation to employability.

### **The Social Media for Learning Framework**

The framework emerged by bringing together thinking which had begun separately for each of the authors into a collaborative focus. By comparing our perceptions of social media, why it was important to higher education learning (and sometimes why it is not), the framework emerged quickly. It cannot be definitive, but its purpose is to be useful as a mechanism to stimulate conversation.

In this section each element of the framework is introduced as it would be set out in a design workshop. A short discussion about the principle and some ideas that illustrate how it can be interpreted and applied follow each element.

### Socially inclusive

- ▶ supporting and validating learning through mutually beneficial, jointly enterprising and communally constructive communities of practice;
- ▶ fostering a sense of belonging, being and becoming;
- ▶ promoting collegiality.

The Socially Inclusive element begins by describing inclusion in terms of Communities of Practice (Wenger, 1998), seeing social media as something that brings people together for mutual benefit and purpose. It acknowledges the importance to learning of identity and of being part of something, a sense of belonging; thus, social media values an ontological view of learning in this sense.

Latterly we have raised questions about the access to learning that social media may promote or hinder (see Denise Turner's chapter in this edition).

#### *Example of media being used in a socially inclusive way*

We use 'inclusivity' in the broadest sense and intend, by doing so, to unproblematised it; especially its narrower connotation and association with 'disability': if we learn to design inclusively we should habitually develop a positive consideration for all users.

The use of Padlet to collate ideas from a virtual brainstorm describes why this element is helpful. Padlet is a web-based tool which can be accessed from browsers on fixed or mobile devices to post succinct responses to a question, problem or scenario. All participants have the right to add notes, in various media, to what is in effect a virtual corkboard and all participants are able to see and review the postings as they are made. The idea of 'virtual brainstorm' indicates that all participants do not need be present in the same physical space. The use of a virtual tool in any case, has reduced the significance of co-location for the learning activity. The use of a 'board' metaphor dispenses with a hierarchical presentation structure, thereby removing ideas about valuing one idea against any other and this promotes equity in the collective thinking activity.

### Lifewide and lifelong

- ▶ connecting formal, non-formal and informal learning progression;
- ▶ developing online presence;
- ▶ developing digital literacies.

This element emphasises the learner's life as being an intrinsic dimension of their formal engagement with their course and emphasises ideas found in constructivist theory about building on what already exists. It challenges, therefore, the tendency for learners and their tutors to rely on extrinsic factors for motivation. By having a lifewide appreciation of learning, the academic is able to think more broadly about the learner's environment and how each student is able to arrive at significant learning points in their own way *and* within the context of their formal course.

This element also encourages us to think about a lifelong digital presence and commitment to learning and so points us towards conceiving of digital literacies as capabilities that both empower us and safeguard our futures.

#### *Example of media being used in the context of lifewide and lifelong learning*

The professional networking tool LinkedIn provides a good illustration of this. For example: *Encourage students to establish a LinkedIn presence for their employability.* But it is also worth thinking about the concept of life blogging: the act of systematically recording everything you do, see or think as a way of developing capabilities as a reflective and critical thinker. This latter activity is extreme and ultimately obsessive sounding when intentional, but increasingly many of us leave traces of our actions, views and thoughts in myriad places. We all need to learn to manage our digital presence wisely and one way of learning to do this is to establish one's professional self methodically by using techniques like academic blogging for intelligent, reflective thinking. Reflective blogging assignments, therefore, demonstrate an important academic use of social media.

### Media neutral

- ▶ learning across and through rich, multiple media.

The Digital Age is not bound by the constraints of previous eras in which thinking and ideas were inevitably the preserve of an elite selected to navigate their ways through long-standing academic paths ritualised by the conventions described by the written word!

While it is unnecessary perhaps to deride our academic tradition, it becomes clear how we now have the opportunity to expand and democratise the learning environments we use for higher thinking. It is now important for academia to recognise that different media promote different thinking by different people and that this is valuable. Knowledge, as a commodity, is no longer as important as it was (Siemens, 2005) and this frees higher education from obsessing on knowledge to do more of what it should be good at: supporting the creative mind so that it is able to fluently and critically play with and contribute to knowledge and the development of those that use it.

Media neutrality can be found in Kress's ideas (2003) about the inseparability of form and meaning, for example, which alert us to the importance of coming to know multiple media, whether that understanding is predominantly about format, technology, or context.

The proposition of media neutrality could have been expressed as media fluency, though that may have over-emphasised a sense of technical competence. It is more about the capability to use the right medium or media for the right job.

*Example of media being used to demonstrate media neutrality*

The posting of Concept Clips (screencast or video explanations) to YouTube is something that is gaining ground as appreciation of techniques such as the 'flipped classroom' and media intervention grows. The attraction of YouTube itself, especially because it is populated by an abundance of 'naive' footage, has contributed to more academics realising that making their own clips is possible and that it is something their students are likely to be able to do (see Rushton *et al*'s chapter for an example of rich media being used to change student's approaches to learning).

#### Learner-centred

- ▶ promoting self-regulation, self-expression, self-efficacy and confidence;
- ▶ accommodating niche interests and activities, the 'long tail' of education.

The Digital Age, as already noted, comes out of a previous era in which teaching and learning has largely been defined by its constraints. This is most notable in the dependence upon the lecture theatre, a technology seen in ancient civilisations, but which came to serve academia reasonably well from the setting up of the first universities in the late 14th century (Peter & Deimann, 2013). Learner-centredness challenges the academic to be more

creative in considering use of learning space, whether that is formal, informal, physical or virtual.

*Example of media being used to foster learner-centred pedagogy*

Social media immediately finds a natural home in this area and the examples are immediate and abundant when thinking about its relationship to project-based learning, problem-based learning and enquiry-based learning for example. Using a problem-based approach, a group co-production task can be underpinned by structured activity in Google Docs in which students work collaboratively, drawing on their complementary strengths to analyse and resolve the assigned problem and present the results of their work coherently.

### Co-operative

- ▶ promotes working together productively and critically with peers (co-creation) in self-organising, robust networks that are scalable, loosely structured, self-validating, and knowledge-forming.

Peer co-operation is a well-established principle of good teaching in undergraduate education (Chickering & Gamson, 1987) and is evident in most effective university-level courses. Informally, it captures the rationale of learning at university: the idea of finding value in being together as opposed to being purely satisfied with using books in isolation to acquire knowledge for example. Formally it is found in collaborative methods such as group work. Laurillard's notion of a Conversational Framework (2002) reflects the co-operative interchange and progression of thinking underpinning learning at university. Fundamentally it comes back to mutuality and valuing each other.

*Example of media being used to foster co-operation*

The Bring Your Own Devices for Learning open learning experience (see the chapter by Chrissi Nerantzi & Sue Beckingham in this edition) explains how the tweetchat method brought participants together each evening, full of energy, engaging each other frenetically with a set of five questions over an hour. The nature of this activity, which takes place around a common hashtag in Twitter (i.e. #BYOD4LChat), is that five questions are posed through the hour that allow diverse participants to respond with their own answers, further questions and examples so that the body of learners, by working together, formulate a deep and rich understanding of a given topic.

## Open and accessible

- ▶ supporting spatial openness (without physical division);
- ▶ supporting temporal openness i.e. synchronously and asynchronously;
- ▶ supporting social openness i.e. democratic, inclusive;
- ▶ supporting open engagement i.e. in terms of being: geographically extended, inclusive, controlled by the learner, gratis, open market, unconstrained freedom, access to content (Anderson, 2013);
- ▶ being open to ideas.

Openness is a very open set of ideas! As the framework highlights, it can refer to space, time, or social interaction amongst other conceptualisations, and attitudes. Openness is a useful concept to explore both in curriculum design and staff development, whatever your take on it. Any discussion usually serves to highlight how closed down we are and often this is through habit and lacking the confidence or resource to do other than what we have known; our collective tendency is often for closed thinking. As discussed in the previous chapter, *Thinking about Smart Learning*, developing an appreciation of openness requires adventurous thinking and hypothesising about what smart learning might come to mean. For today's student, however, it immediately challenges many of the assumptions we may have about learning spaces, how we relate to learning, how we use time, and how we might work together.

### *Example of media being used in an open way*

An obvious example might be about using Open Educational Resources (OERs) or what used to be known as Reusable Learning Objects. However, while these ideas may be desirable in an ideal world, they often lead us to think about a particular understanding of 'content': something that can be packaged. Good teachers know that *conversation*, not *content*, is king. Conversation establishes the *context* for learning.

While OERs and the practice of using them, Open Educational Practice (OEP), is a rich and profitable area to explore more deeply, in this chapter a different example is offered; one that describes autonomous learning in which the students have a sense of being unbounded and responsible to each other. For example, the academic openly discusses how important it is that learning happens outside the classroom and listens for examples from the students about how, where and when they do something connected with "uni". The academic may refer to the practice of former students and how they have benefited from self-organised Facebook Groups or Google



Hangouts, or just forming informal support networks to keep each other organised. The academic's role, here, is to value social interaction and seed autonomous interaction with social media. This presents challenges for the tutor: how is openness actually enacted and supported? How should social media be managed in an open learning environment? What is the real driver for openness in a given situation? Is it to make the experience richer, more authentic or to provide the learner with more room for creatively engaging?

#### Authentically situated

- ▶ making connections across learning, social and professional networks;
- ▶ scholarly;
- ▶ establishing professional online presence and digital identity.

Social media helps us to make strong connections with the world around us and, whatever our discipline, the world establishes the ultimate context for our learning and scholarship. This externalised conceptualisation of learning can enhance the meaning of both being at university and in learning, and of situating and understanding the subject matter itself.

Rule (2006) suggests that authentic learning actively engages the learner in the real world problems of professionals, open-ended inquiry and metacognition, and discourse amongst a community of learners, whilst empowering the learner to direct their own learning. Herrington and Oliver (2000) propose nine critical characteristics for authentic learning that include active learner engagement in a real life context, the modelling of processes and access to roles, collaboration, reflection, learner articulation, scaffolding and meaningful assessment.

#### *Example of media being used to harness authentic situations*

Authenticity is evident in many educational podcasting applications and is found in the variety of voices, the connections that can be made to the real world, and the open-ended activity it promotes and supports. For example, invite 'experts' (people who know the external context) to speak to or with your students via Skype or in a Google Hangout. Running and recording conversations like this can generate a rich, long-lasting resource base.

#### **Developing the framework**

The framework has so far served its purpose well: to stimulate creative thinking about academic practice and the curriculum. Making it 'better' is

problematic: it is important that it is open-ended and not assumed to be complete. In the same way, it has been important in this chapter to avoid listing examples in detail because, as we have said, *conversation* is king and to be overly prescriptive would be self-defeating.

The framework will develop now by the way you draw upon it or apply it. For example, you can develop your own examples with academics as a workshop activity.

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