

**Reflections on SocMedHE24: Fragmentation and the role of social media in higher education**

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# Reflections on SocMedHE24: Fragmentation and the Role of Social Media in Higher Education

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The 10th Social Media for Learning in Higher Education Conference #SocMedHE24 took place at Sheffield Hallam University on Thursday 19 December 2024. The conference began in 2015, led by Alison Purvis, Sue Beckingham and Helen Rodger. With the support of colleagues at Sheffield Hallam, the conference was held at the University for the first three years (2015, 2016 and 2017). In celebration of the conference origins, the 10th iteration returned to Sheffield Hallam University in 2024. The day began with a welcome address from Prof Liz Mossop, Vice Chancellor of Sheffield Hallam University. Liz reflected on the changes of social media and digital communication over the lifetime of the conference, and what digital learning and social media for learning can bring to the student experience. Conference organisers, Sue Beckingham and Alison Purvis, then shared our own reflections about the journey of the conference, the impact it has made to the international community and the impact it has made on us and our collaboration.

Prof Amanda Taylor-Beswick provided the thought-provoking keynote which set the tone and themes for exploration throughout the day. Amanda shared her thinking about the fragmentation of social media in the context of higher education, particularly following the first large-scale departure of users from Twitter in 2022, and the further significant shifts away X (formerly Twitter) in the latter part of 2024. The positive and negative evolutions of social media platforms in the 2020s has created both opportunities and challenges for the academic community.

Social media and digital communications have changed how knowledge is disseminated and how academic communities can interact. Platforms such as LinkedIn and emerging tools such as BlueSky have facilitated greater access to professional and discipline networks, resources, and collaborative opportunities. However, the proliferation of new microblogging platforms has resulted in a fragmentation of the community. The academic discourse has been scattered with a lack of a cohesive and unified space for learning and interaction. A recent surge of academics moving from X to Bluesky is a clear attempt to regain this single space, but there are new problems that are potentially encountered within that new space.

The adoption of social media in higher education requires a level of digital capability and confidence that is often overlooked or taken for granted by the digital and social media enthusiasts. New and emerging platforms offer new potential for collaboration and engagement, but they also demand a strategic and professional approach. Despite the digital demands of the COVID-19 pandemic, and our educational shift to online spaces, many academics still lack the digital confidence or skills, and many are actively turning their backs on their continued digital skill development.

The integration of social media into educational practice requires more than just basic technical proficiency; it demands critical thinking, digital ethics, and an understanding of the broader societal implications of online engagement. This set of skills and capabilities is complex and to incorporate into curricula, requires active development by academics. Without such skills being developed by staff, it leaves a gap in the what our students experience and they ultimately lack the confidence to be able to navigate the changing complexities of digital environments.

Conferences like SocMedHE have had a notable impact in addressing some of these challenges, providing a forum for the convergence of a previously disparate community of scholars, educational developers, learning developers, and digital practitioners. The immediate impact of SocMedHE was evident in 2015 by how the community was strengthened by facilitating new connections and creating new collaborations. Many of these connections are still active between SocMedHE delegates who attended the 10th conference in 2024. While social media provides the virtual space to connect a community around their shared interests, it is the interplay with the physical space that the conference provides and the opportunity for deeper, and potentially more nuanced engagement, which then strengthens future interactions in the online spaces.

The annual conference also provides a regular and timely opportunity for collective reflection. Amanda referred to the conference as a “dynamic space with dynamic people” and this energy is a crucial factor in the longevity of the conference and its impact within the online community. The conference space is not static; it evolves in response to the needs and contributions of the individuals. Amanda also described how this functions as a “connectography”, a mapping of connections and identities that helps shape the professional and intellectual landscape of SocMedHE and beyond. The identities formed within these spaces are not fixed; they are continuously shaped and reshaped by the individuals who participate. Perhaps underlying the SocMedHE experience is a desire for staying connected and avoiding the fragmentation experienced in the online spaces. If social media platforms and spaces are splintering, it becomes increasingly difficult for the SocMedHE community to maintain a sense of cohesiveness.

Criticality and ethics play a crucial role in this discussion. As the digital tools we have used become intertwined with politics and ethical considerations, it is essential that we, as educators, understand the implications of asking students to engage in online spaces, and role model how to engage with social media critically and ethically.

Finally, Amanda touched upon the barriers of “legacy thinking” as many institutions continue to cling to traditional models of education and communication, which are ineffective in the post-digital age. With a resistance to new technologies, or with failing to notice the changing nature of professional and academic engagement, we are not providing our students with the right environment to develop their skills and digital criticality. The themes raised in Amanda's keynote were echoed throughout the presentations, workshops, and lightning talks that took place in the parallel sessions.

In conclusion, the fragmentation of social media reflects challenges in the integration of digital tools for learning, maintaining digital skills in an ever moving set of tools, ensuring critical thinking, and in the context of community-building. While emerging platforms offer new possibilities for meaningful connection, they also highlight the ongoing need for critical engagement and a more thoughtful approach to digital learning. It is only with a consideration of the interplay between virtual and physical spaces, how to foster deep engagement, and addressing the ethical dimensions of social media use, that higher education can begin to bridge the fragmentation that characterizes the current digital landscape and build more cohesive, connected academic communities that really benefit our students.