Student's Perspectives Concerning the Use of Social Media as Communication and Educational Tools in a Tertiary Environment

Uwe Terton[1], Irene Visser[1], Cindy Davis[1], Karen Sutherland[1], Alix Stubbs[1] and Maureen O'Neil[2]

[1]*Arts Research in the Creative Humanities, University of the Sunshine Coast, Maroochydore, Australia*
[2]*Faculty of Education and Research, Australian Catholic University, Banyo, Australia*

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Abstract: Social media is currently being used to effectively engage and communicate with students in universities across the globe. As Beidelman (2015, p.1) acknowledges, "*Social media is a tool that teachers can use to make their classroom more engaging, relevant and culturally diverse*". This action research project is entitled "*Increasing student engagement and community via the integration of social media technologies to enhance/inform blended learning at University*", and was funded by a University Exploratory and Enhancement Learning and Teaching Grant. This paper focuses on the first phase of a two-phase project. The overall purpose of the project was to explore whether a blended learning approach, that combines the University's existing Learning Management System (LMS) with social media applications, strengthens the quality of teaching, and therefore enhances the level of student learning, engagement and community. The first research phase constituted an online survey, distributed to 647 students within six University disciplines and investigates university students' perspectives and attitudes in relation to the use of social media as a pedagogical tool. Respondents reported varying views on the issue. The overarching positive themes were: communication, connection and engagement. Neutral themes included: the win/lose situation and social media being a supplement to teaching. Negative themes comprised: distraction, poor use of time and face-to-face being a more appropriate form of learning. A small proportion of respondents reported having no opinion on the matter and one student raised the need for students to increase their social media usage in the higher education setting.

1 INTRODUCTION & BACKGROUND

Over the last decade, there has been significant growth in the use of social media tools within all levels of the blended learning and teaching realm (Beidelman, 2015). There appears to be a climate of enthusiasm to utilse social media technologies that have the potential to improve communication and facilitate student learning (Blankenship, 2010).

Millea, Green and Putland (2005) describe the current cohort of students as 'Digital Backpackers', who carry a multitude of convergent devices that keep them continually connected. There is also an acknowledgement among educators that 'Net Geners' (the Internet Generation) interact and learn differently from their predecessors in that they have distinctive methods of thinking, interacting, communicating and engaging with course content,

and with each other (Bosch, 2009; Cao & Hong, 2011). It is therefore in the best interests of higher education to uncover ways in which technology can be "*utilised to take advantage of existing student skills and preferences*" (Velliaris et al., 2012, p.25).

There is also strong evidence to support how social media can facilitate the creation of Personal Learning Environments (PLEs) which help learners aggregate and share their learning achievements, participate in collective knowledge generation and manage the development of meaning from their studies (Dabbaghi, & Kitsantas, 2010). Despite this, some academics have raised concerns relating to privacy issues and the integrity of teaching content delivered to students (Moran, 2011; Ishizuka, 2010). Overall, the literature suggests that social media is increasingly being used as a tool to develop both formal and informal learning spaces and experiences, that begin as an individual learning

platform or PLE and enable individual knowledge management and construction. Subsequently social media is also evolving into a learning platform where knowledge is socially mediated (Dabbaghi & Kitsantas, 2010; Jones, 2002; Cych, 2006) and communication is enhanced (Frand, 2000).

After reviewing the literature, it became apparent there is a scarcity of research that explores university students' perceptions and attitudes regarding the use of social media as a pedagogical tool. This knowledge gap led to the development of the following research question:

RQ1. *How do university students feel about using social media as part of their university course?*

2 METHODOLOGY

This paper focuses on the first phase of a two-phase action research project undertaken in a university in Queensland, Australia. The purpose of the overall project was to explore whether a blended learning approach that combines the University's existing Learning Management System (LMS), Blackboard, with social media applications, would strengthen the quality of teaching and therefore, enhance the level of student learning, engagement and community.

In order to improve the transformation of research knowledge to everyday educational practices within tertiary education, a pilot action research project was undertaken that embedded social media into real-life teaching settings.

The project was executed in iterative research cycles, leading to continuous improvements; this also ensured that the research team was able to react flexibly to new or changed requirements.

An online survey was used to gather data regarding students' perceptions and attitudes about the use of social media within their courses, as well as other information regarding how students access and use social media and the platforms they use.

This paper predominantly focuses on the responses to question six from the survey *(How do you feel about using social media as part of a university course?)* because it directly addresses the research question. This approach was adopted because the authors felt it was imperative to gauge the impact, on students, of using social media in the classroom prior to recommending its use to other academics across the wider institution.

The survey collected both quantitative and qualitative data.

Phase One – an online survey was distributed to 647 students undertaking the following courses:
Authors Public Relations: Contemporary Perspectives

Authors (Graphic Design)

Authors (3D Design)

Authors Current Directions in Psychology

Authors Applied Psychology in health Care

Authors International (Current Directions in Psychology)

322 (49%) students responded to our question (Question 6).

Phase One results provided both a good indication of how students feel about using social media as part of a university course and a view of how they use it in their daily lives. The study also identified students' knowledge of, and most preferred, social media platforms; this information was used to inform Phase Two of the study. The total timeframe for the study was 24 months in total.

3 RESULTS

Thematic analysis was conducted on the qualitative data, obtained from the survey, to identify themes. NVivo 10 word queries were also used to analyse some of the qualitative data, with resulting images displayed in the form of word tags.

The quantitative data obtained via the online survey was analysed using Survey Monkey frequencies and descriptive statistics.

3.1 Overall Results

322 survey responses were received, an overall response rate of 49%.

Demographic information:

71.76% of the respondents were female.
73.85% were aged 16-25 years.
88% of respondents used social media to keep in contact with friends and family.
20% use social media as an academic tool.

The most frequently used social media tools were:

1. Facebook
2. Snapchat
3. Instagram

4. YouTube
5. Google+
6. Pinterest
7. Tumblr
8. Twitter
9. LinkedIn
10. Flikr
11. Reddit

The majority of respondents indicated YouTube and Facebook were the most effective social media tools for use within the university; Flikr, Tumblr and Reddit were considered the least useful.

3.2 Question 6 Results

Students were asked: *How do you feel about using social media as part of a university course?*

An overwhelming majority of 80.6% (n= 724.6) sees social media as part of their courses as something positive that helps them to stay c*onnected, informed, engaged & supported; 8.3% stayed neutral,* whereas just 11.1% believes that social media in their courses are *distracting, overwhelming, uncomfortable & annoying, invades privacy and is not for teaching.*

Students could select more than one answer from Table 1 below, hence the high response rate of 899.

Table 1: Question 6: *How do you feel about using social media as part of a university course?*

Connected to the university	147
"Social Media Platforms at university should only be used casually as an optional extra to aid students. Social media platforms such as Facebook can be used as a form of communication outreach for students, as most students have Facebook integrated into their everyday lives."	
Informed	146
"I've noticed some lectures have Twitter accounts, in which they occasionally post course relevant information or helpful hints. This is great as many students have Twitter feeds, allowing easy accessibility to the various types of info posted. Though to have this information released solely to Twitter users (obviously unintentional) is a practice that should not be used, and is	
in the universities responsibility to control."	
Connected to fellow students	131
"Would be good to have a page each dedicated to your course so people could ask questions etc without having to message people individually. It also allows students to connect with other people in their course."	
Connected to the university community	127
"I use this to enhance my cultural life at uni and for textbook second hand shopping."	
Engaged	95
Supported	79
Neutral	74
"Unsure."	
Distracted	30
"'Can be a distraction."	
"Blackboard seems to have adequate networking and info. Social media can often be a barrage of mindless drivel with a few golden nuggets, ultimately a time waster that can be prone to misinterpretation and can reduce people's ability to engage in real conversations with real people."	
Social media not for education	24
"While using social media is great for keep updated on OTHER people, I find that using Twitter for university education a little unnecessary as we do keep up to date with ALL updates via Blackboard. There is a phone app for Blackboard and even emails for larger messages where your limit on Twitter is only 160(?) letters. The enthusiasm towards teaching your students and helping them understand the field they are about to undertake is encouraging but it is brought back when that excitement is about Twitter."	
"I would prefer it being used on a more commonly used social media like Facebook as for example I don't have	

twitter. I did have Twitter once but found it uninteresting and boring. Although I feel social media is more for entertainment and down time for yourself.”	
Uncomfortable & Annoyed *“Not happy to use a media I wouldn't normally just for education purposes.”*	20
Overwhelmed *“Worried I might need to use social media more often.”*	19
Privacy invaded *“Doesn't bother me that much, everything I have on my social media accounts is private and I rarely post anything.”*	6
Total:	899

Positive: 725 = 80.6%
Neutral: 75 = 8.3%
Negative: 99 = 11.1%

Total: 899=100%

4 DISCUSSION

The quantitative results indicated that the majority of students (80.6%, 725) felt positively about the use of social media in their university course. However, it must be noted that nearly 100 students in the sample perceived the use of social media, as a pedagogical tool, to be negative. This suggests that to be inclusive, educators must consider those students who prefer not to use social media technology and ensure that a range communication channels are used, rather than relying purely on social media to reach students.

In total, 15 qualitative comments were received regarding Question 6: *How do you feel about using social media as part of a university course?*

5 (33%) comments were favorable regarding the use of social media within courses, 6 (40%) were neutral/unsure, and 4 (27%) of the comments expressed a rejection towards social media use in the university teaching context.

Some students (5) felt that social media was a good tool for connecting and sharing ideas/resources and to ‘*keep updated on OTHER people’*. Students viewed social media as an additional tool to ‘*keep up to date with ALL updates via blackboard’*. The choice of social media tools is deemed critical to the success of the teaching and learning experience:

‘*but it is brought back when that excitement is about Twitter’*
‘*I would prefer it being used on a more commonly used social media like Facebook as for example I don't have Twitter’*.

Clearly social media is valued as a way to connect students and staff:
‘*I use this to enhance my cultural life at uni.’*
‘*It also allows students to connect with other people in their course.’*
‘*Would be good to have a page each dedicated to your course so people could ask questions etc. without having to message people individually.’*

Respondents highlighted that social media makes information more accessible to students: ‘*allowing easy accessibility to the various types of info posted’,* however, cautioned that critical important information, of value to all students, should be kept as a ‘*core source on the university's website, blackboard, emails etc. and from there, it can be strung out to which ever social media sites chosen.’*

Some respondents (6) reported neutral/unsure views regarding social media used as an educational tool:
‘*Not sure until I try.’*
‘*Never Used.’*
‘*I haven't used it much yet, too early in semester’* (low level of experience suggested); another respondent expressed neutral feelings about the use of social media in his course ‘*Doesn't bother me that much.’*

Some respondents (4) voiced negative views regarding the use of social media, for example. ‘*Social media can often be a barrage of mindless drivel.’* This respondent also stressed that social media is prone to misinterpretations, possibly to delayed feedback from conversation partners. ‘*…a few golden nuggets, ultimately a time waster that can be prone to misinterpretation and can reduce people's ability to engage in real conversations with real people.’*

Three other respondents stated:
‘*not happy to use a media I wouldn't normally just for education purposes.’*
‘*Can be a distraction.’* (Highlighting the distractive nature of social media.)
‘*Worried I might need to use social media more often.’* (Concerned about being forced to use more social media more than would like.)

5 LIMITATIONS & FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Previous studies have shown that technology impacts on student performance as a fundamental antecedent of technology use and adoption (Kulik, 1994; Cradler, 2002; Olsen 2005; Luppicini, 2005). Although research suggests increasing efforts to adopt and utilise social media in tertiary education, we know little about whether students and academics perceive such tools as an improvement to their learning activities or as distracting, overly complicating the learning experience and an increase in workload.

The research findings contribute to the existing knowledge regarding using social media experience within the tertiary education context; it embeds social media tools into courses and investigates the perceptions of students using these tools during their studies.

Analysis of the results provides some indication of how social media is perceived in tertiary education, however, it is important to note some limitations and recommendations for future research.

The variables used were self-reported measures. The data is therefore subject to the errors and biases that commonly occur when respondents are asked to self-report, in this case regarding their perceptions of social-media use within the higher education setting.

Phase One of the study focused on students studying in Semester 1 and this cohort was not included in Phase Two of the research. This means that changes in perception are difficult to identify and track. It would also be useful to include academic staff in future studies to ascertain how they feel about utilising social media within tertiary education. For this reason, the project has been extended to address these issues in further phases of research.

The large sample invited to undertake the survey (647 students studying interdisciplinary programs) is viewed as representative of the general student population at the university. Unfortunately, only 322 students responded to Question 6, which is less than 50%, and cannot be considered as a representation of the overall university's student population.

6 CONCLUSION

The research findings show that the use of social media in tertiary education increases the levels of engagement between students, with teaching staff, and with the university. Students enjoy using simple and easily accessible social media tools, due to the enjoyable social connectedness and associated fun elements.

Social media is an effective communication tool that can enhance the learning process, especially as it enables engagement with tutors and course coordinators. It also assists with the easy distribution of information regarding lectures, courses and careers. Facebook in particular is favoured as a learning tool to interact with tutors and students and to facilitate group work.

However, teaching staff are advised to use caution to ensure the use of social media within the learning environment has a clear purpose and outcome and is not just be used for the sake of it.

The negative aspects of using social media are clearly a concern for some students: the addictive element, complexity and intruding nature. Therefore, due to these issues, the compulsory use of social media in the learning environment is discouraged. Teaching staff are encouraged to take great care when implementing social-media into their teaching practice, and should consider which tool would work best for a particular student cohort.

Research findings have been disseminated to educators at the university and beyond (via research papers and conference presentations etc.). Phase Three results will provide more insight into the topic and will include the views of teaching staff.

It is recommended that future research further investigates this topic by focusing on the differences in the way individuals use and value social media within the higher education setting. Studies that examine the introduction of social media policies within tertiary education are also encouraged.

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