

SOCIAL MEDIA AND EDUCATION: PERCEPTIONS AND NEED FOR SUPPORT

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ABSTRACT

Social media has become a way of life. Society has become very connected, yet the classroom still remains quite isolated, from other teachers, students, experts, parents, the community, and a host of others who could potentially enhance learning. There are a number of different ways by which schools and teachers could open their classrooms to the rest of the world, and social media constitutes one of those ways. This study sought to examine one of those ways through the implementation of a Facebook Group in a high school social studies course to determine student and instructor perceptions, as well as to better understand how social media could be implemented in the educative process. The results of this study indicate that, there may be a potential for social media use in the teaching and learning process, but only if the innovation is supported throughout its implementation.

Keywords: Perceptions, Social Media, Support

INTRODUCTION

Social media and social networking sites are often used interchangeably with each having different meanings. Anderson (2005) defined social media as being quite broad, including everything from email to SMS text messages. Shirky (2003) defined it as a software that can support group interaction. Social media works by allowing communication and networking between people and groups, where group members are kept updated on group activities and have the ability to share resources and information (Minocha, 2009). Although over time many types of social media have evolved, they all have one common thread, that social media amplifies or expands our social capabilities (Shirky, 2003). While this evolution has taken place in the public forum, social media has the potential to be quite valuable for education. Anderson defined educational social media as "networked tools that support and encourage individuals to learn together while retaining individual control over their time, space, presence, activity, identity, and relationship" (Anderson, 2005, pg. 4). For this study, social media is defined as including all forms of social media, social networking sites, social networking software and Web 2.0 websites.

Young people today appear to be very capable with social media and technology. Generation is defined as individuals born between the early 1980s and the late 1990s (DeBard, 2004; Vie, 2008). This group is characterized as fascinated by and highly comfortable with technology (Vie, 2008), and approximately 70% of teenagers are active users of social media (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickuhr, 2010; National School Boards Association, 2007). Yet, this does not mean they have developed the capacity to leverage it to learn (Chen & Breyer, 2012), although it is a place where they do ask questions about school related material (National School Boards Association, 2007).

Social media use has also started to penetrate educational institutions. A common use has been the implementation of You Tube videos and podcasts into the learning experience, either during class or asynchronously outside the physical classroom (Moran, Seaman & Tinti-Kane, 2011). This has changed the nature of the learning environment, as communication is no longer only an activity between students and faculty within the course, but also with experts beyond the classroom. This has occurred through a variety of social media, including: Twitter, Skype,

and blogs (Chen & Breyer, 2012; Davis, 2010; George & Dellasega, 2011), and has led to the development of ad-hoc networks, where students create spaces within social media to collaborate and share knowledge around course topics (George & Dellasega, 2011). Implementing social media into the learning process requires that not only students receive assistance in developing their abilities to learn with and through social media and technology, but also development for faculty. Development should restructure the learning experiences in faculty courses to allow for more collaboration, communication and content sharing (Chen & Breyer, 2012), which should be ongoing once the implementation is underway (Berends, 2000). Paramount beyond ability, is the perception of both faculty and students having social media in education, and will now be discussed.

For most people, awareness of social media has been limited to being seen as only an entertainment technology used outside the learning environment (Chen & Breyer, 2012). However, the line between personal entertainment and professional and classroom use is blurred as more and more educators use technology for non-personal, non-entertainment purposes. Moran et al. (2011) explained that for most contemporary social media, many educators are aware of and use these sites personally, professionally, and to varying degrees within the learning process. Yet not all social media are created equal.

Moran et al. (2011) found that different types of social media are used at greater rates than others. They found that, almost all faculty use video based social media like YouTube, but very few use Facebook and Twitter, which are two of the most used social media by Generation M (eMarketer, 2013). An earlier study by Kleiner, Thomas, Lewis, & Greene (2007) found that time, training, and interest are the barriers faculty encounter when it comes to the general use of educational technologies, which presumably extends to social media use in the educative process. According to Moran et al., "a large proportion of faculty say Facebook (53%) and Twitter (46%) have a 'negative' value for use in class" (p. 16). This is not the case for students however, where multiple studies have indicated that students are much more interested in the use of social

media, as well as other educational technologies (George & Dellasega, 2011; Kleiner et al., 2007). It is incumbent, then, to find ways for educators to leverage social media in the classroom in pedagogically purposive ways as opposed to using social media for its own sake (McLoughlin & Lee, 2010). According to McLoughlin and Lee, this purposive user equires the creation of personalized learning experiences where students develop their knowledge independently as they interact as part of a community, which is a keystone of social constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978).

The question then is, Why do faculty hold these negative perceptions of certain social media? Is there anything that can be done to change these perceptions to make them more favorable? In addition to these questions that the author has wrestled with for some time, Aydin (2012) has indicated that this is an area where further research should be conducted and is the basis of the study that took place at a Mid western secondary high school in the United States, which will now be described.

Methodology

The genesis of this project came as part of a discussion with a secondary social studies teacher who was struggling to have students complete their homework. The teacher had reached the point of frustration and was willing to try new methods of reaching students. In his capacity as technology director, the author suggested the use of social media, specifically the use of a Facebook Group where homework assignments and reminders could be shared with students. Approximately 16 of 25 students indicated they were already using Facebook, so the teacher decided to give it a try.

Hypothesis

The teacher and author met to discuss how to integrate the Facebook Group into her course? No restrictions were placed concerning the use of the Facebook Group and the teacher was given full discretion on how much and in what ways the teacher wanted to use this medium? As a result of this initial discussion, the teacher determined that due to the unknown nature of using a Facebook Group, the events feature of the group appeared to work the best as a homework reminder tool. The teacher wanted to try using

the group with 5 Questions completed weekly. This was typically an assignment that had low completion, approximately 30-40%, and according to the teacher, was due on a high student absentee day, averaging four to ten absent students on any given Friday.

A semi-structured focus group was conducted with students prior to the use of the Facebook Group. They were asked to describe their perception of their homework habits and using a Facebook Group within the course. Then the Facebook Group was implemented over the next 12 weeks. Data was collected during this time using online observations of the Facebook Group by the author. Then at the end of the study period, a teacher reflection form and a student questionnaire focusing on the use of the Facebook Group were completed. Quantitative and qualitative data were analyzed using Descriptive Statistics and Open Coding.

Results

Facebook Use

During the project period of 12 weeks, the teacher posted seven events, each for a different assignment. The teacher also posted one status update to the wall of the Facebook Group, which also corresponded to an assignment. The Facebook Group was used less than anticipated. After about a month, the posting of events began to wane. In the teacher reflection, the teacher reported that time became an issue due to competing lesson plan policy initiative at the school.

During one of the first events created to remind students of a homework assignment, students began using the events to share information. Students indicated completion of the assignment, or made suggestions for another film to watch. One student said that the student was glad the event was posted on Facebook or she would have failed to complete the assignment. While some students used the wall feature of the event, by-and-large there was very little communication present within the Facebook Group other than homework events. To glean additional insight from students, a follow-up question was asked about the use of social media in the student questionnaire.

When students were asked how they would like to see social media integrated into their classes more, the

overwhelming response was that they would welcome it if the content was more interesting and engaging. One concern was some students expressed during the pre-project focus group that they did not want to spend time trying to learn a new technology. They believed the content was difficult enough without having to learn an unfamiliar technology at the same time. Students also indicated in the pre-project focus group that approximately two thirds of students were current Facebook users.

Inconsistency

As the project period progressed, monitoring use through online observations identified inconsistent use of the Facebook Group. This lack of use also emerged through the teacher's comments in her reflection, as well as in the student questionnaire. Students responded to what they did not like about the Facebook Group. Approximately 40% of students disliked the teacher's lack of Facebook Group use. Approximately, 67% of students indicated they wanted to have more interactions using Facebook. In particular, students mentioned that they wanted to have all their assignments for the course posted to the Facebook Group and more reminders about due dates sent to them, in addition to the event reminder that appeared on the Facebook home page. When asked if the Facebook Group was helpful as students completed their homework, most indicated it was not, primarily due to lack of use.

Perceptions

The teacher's reflection addressed the potential of using the Facebook Group. The teacher indicated that she felt the Facebook Group would make a difference if she posted to the group everyday. The teacher thought it provided a better avenue for informing students of assignments and deadlines than did the district's current lesson plan initiative. However, the teacher explained that current district policy required the use of the district's lesson plan website making it difficult to use the Facebook Group, since the teacher had to double enter all assignments.

The teacher also described in her reflection how she changed as a result of this project, by becoming more confident by using Facebook in her courses. During initial discussions, she expressed uncertainty about using the Facebook Group due to lack of knowledge and how it

would work with her students. Then, in her reflection, the teacher reiterated that feeling of uncertainty along with fear. The teacher explained that the more events she completed the more confident and adept she was at using the Facebook Group. She felt and could see the benefits of using the Facebook Group with her students if she used it everyday. Students also saw the potential in using Facebook in their courses. In the student questionnaire, the majority of students (79%) indicated that they thought Facebook was a useful classroom tool.

Discussion

The lack of consistency in the use of the Facebook Group precipitated two key findings in this project. These include: student and faculty perceptions of social media as a useful educational tool and the need for faculty support during implementation.

Student and Faculty Perceptions

As per the data, a majority of students in this course, and their instructor, thought Facebook could be a useful tool. At the beginning of this study, most students indicated that they used Facebook on a regular basis and that they did not like learning new technologies while learning new content. These data points are of specific interest, because if students are already users of a technology, then the learning curve for them is much lower. This should allow students to focus more on learning, as opposed to trying to navigate to an unfamiliar setting in addition to the subject-matter under study. Therefore, it is probable that students would be mostly willing to engage in the Facebook Group had it been used more consistently. Consistency of teacher's use of social media was also identified important within student feedback.

Considering both students and the teacher they indicated that social media was a useful tool for learning. Hence it is plausible that future research could explore the potential that social media has to improve student learning. The affordances of Facebook and other social media can help students not only receive reminders about their homework, but also to help them learn the subject-matter in ways that are more authentic and engaging, which is something students in this study indicated they would be interested in pursuing further. This is in addition to being in line with

McLoughlin and Lee's (2010) position that the use of social media should support personalized student learning within the context of social constructivist learning theory (Vygotsky, 1978).

Further support for the use of social media in education is present in the teacher's reflection. Even though the use of the Facebook Group was inconsistent, the teacher felt her confidence and ability to use the tool increased and the more the teacher used it, the better she could see how it could be of use in the classroom. This change in the teacher's perception is interesting because, if teachers approach an innovation (e.g., social media) and are able to see the relative advantage of using it in their courses, then it is more likely that instructors also will find ways to integrate it into the curriculum (Rogers, 2003). This includes taking the time to learn its use to ensure effective use with students. Having the time to learn and implement the Facebook Group was clearly an issue in this study, due to the district's requirement to use the lesson plan website and contributed to its inconsistent use, thus limiting any observable differences in student homework completion. The change in the teacher's perceived value of Facebook in the classroom, however, runs counter to what was found in the literature.

Many educators hold the perception that social media, similar to Facebook, have little to no value within the teaching and learning process (Moran et al., 2011). Yet the data presented here indicated otherwise that at least for this particular instructor who had access to someone with a high level of interest in using social media in education. Therefore, it is conceivable that there is potential for the Facebook generation of social media in education. This study, however, is unique in the context in which the instructor reached a more favorable perception of social media's use in the classroom. This is due in part to the problem faced within the course and the teacher's willingness to step outside her comfort zone to try different solutions. The opportunity to use this innovation to address an authentic problem likely had an impact on this particular teacher's change of heart. While it is possible the trigger for the divergent perception was due to having the opportunity to try Facebook in her class and getting to know

more about it before making a decision. Given the current data set, this is unknown and further research should be done in this area to confirm the results as well as deepen the level of inquiry. Specifically, questions for future inquiry could be arised as: What factors contributed to the perception change that occurred with this teacher and are those factors able to be found or replicated in a larger study?

Faculty Support

In addition to the perceptions of students and teachers, the data showed that the support teachers receive, both before and during the implementation, is likely a major contributor to the successful adoption of that innovation. A data point of interest from this study comes from the teacher reflection where she explained that it was difficult to post to both the Facebook Group and the district's lesson plan website. Due to district policy, the teacher was required to use a separate lesson planning website even though the teacher believed that the Facebook Group was more useful for her students. Barriers like these are problematic as new innovations emerge in schools. If teachers are expected to take risks to reach students, then additional flexibility is needed with regard to district policies.

Lack of knowledge about innovations, like the one implemented in this study, also proved to be a barrier. The teacher had expressed uncertainty and fear prior to implementing the Facebook Group in her courses. However, as a result of even a limited and inconsistent use of the Facebook Group, the teacher moved from being uncertain and fearing the tool to seeing it as a potential benefit after she used it in her course. While this is outside the scope of this study, it is logical to infer that if a teacher felt this way, then the administrators may also see social media use in the curriculum as being inappropriate or of little value. While innovations like social media become more wide spread across school populations, knowledge development needs to not only encompass the participating teachers, but also administrators and other educators in the school. This way, as barriers begin to emerge, teachers have additional support from those individuals, thus providing a better opportunity for success.

At a more practical level, when new innovations are being

implemented, the classroom teacher needs to be supported. It is not enough to provide information and expect the instructor to adopt and implement it in the classroom. A level of support must be available that not only develops knowledge about the innovation, but also knowledge about how to use the innovation within the curriculum. Sandholtz, Ringstaff, and Dwyer remind that, "Even with a high level of support, classroom change was slow and challenging" (1997, p. 178). Therefore, when support is absent, the teacher will likely develop dissonance with the innovation and may eventually discontinue its use (Rogers, 2003). Further research is needed to determine how best to overcome implementation barriers such as the one experienced in this study.

Conclusion

This study highlighted the implementation of social media in education by both ways, as it has been presented in the literature and through the implementation of a Facebook Group in a secondary social studies course. The data did indicate areas of interest, which include the discrepancy between the research presented in the literature in terms of the perceptions surrounding the Facebook genre social media, and the need for adequate support to implement educational innovations. Therefore, it is necessary for further research into the role social media has in education, especially social media like Facebook and Twitter, where there are mixed feelings about its value in the educational setting.

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