Social Media in the Learning Setting: Opportunities and Challenges

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Introduction

The EDUCAUSE Center for Analysis and Research (ECAR) conducts an annual survey of over 250 institutions of higher education, including University of Washington, examining the technology experiences of undergraduates and faculty. The 2014 ECAR survey included a series of questions exploring faculty and student perceptions of and experiences with social media as an academic resource. The survey instrument loosely defined social media as commercially available social media tools, including Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, etc. While the ECAR findings raise more questions than they answer, there is significant evidence that UW faculty and students are interested in the potential utility of social media as a learning tool. Further research is needed to understand how the educational use of social media impacts student engagement and learning, and to identify best practice and guidelines for the use of social media in academic settings.

Findings

Opportunities

While its use in educational settings is fairly new, ever-present social media is gaining attention as a learning tool. Here we discuss some of the potential benefits of tapping into social media in the classroom, framing trends observed in the 2014 ECAR survey with current research on social media in the learning environment.

Students are using social media for educational purposes. As mobile device use and ownership increase at the UW, more students are gaining access to the means necessary to tap into their social media accounts in the classroom (Coffin & Lyle, 2014). In 2014, over 50% of UW students responding to the ECAR survey reported using social media for educational purposes in at least one class. Nearly half of these same students indicated that they get more actively involved in courses that use technology.

Students want to use social media to communicate with peers and instructors. When used effectively, social media promotes learning by facilitating communication and information sharing (Junco, 2012; Mcloughlin & Lee, 2010; Selwyn, 2010). UW students reflected on this practice in the ECAR survey. When asked to comment on how instructors can use technology to support academic success, UW students described instructors using social media to facilitate communication about course related matters outside of class. One student specifically stated that it is "very helpful" to have their instructor active on a class Facebook page. Another student reported using Facebook to form a closed group to share information and discuss course related matters. Research indicates that students use social media to contact their instructors, as well as to share information about co-curricular activities and academic resources with classmates (Junco, 2012).

Students want to use social media as a platform for discussion. Social media can support student engagement, collaboration, and self-managed learning by creating a platform for meaningful, natural discussion (Manca & Ranierit, 2013; Junco, 2012; Mcloughlin & Lee, 2010; Selwyn, 2010). When asked how instructors could better support student outcomes, UW students spoke to social media's potential to create a virtual community that facilitates discussion, praising instructors who used Facebook in place of the learning management system (LMS) discussion board. One student said that "Facebook groups are made to have discussion," while another favorably recalled an instructor who used Facebook comments to track participation and catalyze conversation outside of class. Research supports these findings. A 2012 study found that students preferred student-made Facebook groups over the course LMS discussion board (Hollyhead, Edwards & Holt). Another study found that the number of posts students made to Facebook were 400% greater than the number made to the LMS discussion board and their content covered more complex topics (Schroeder and Grainbowe, 2009).

Students are fluent in social media. Studies conducted between 2013 and 2014 on teen and adult internet usage found that 77% of internet users between the ages of 12 and 17 and 87% of internet users between the ages of 18 and 29 use Facebook (Madden et al, 2013; Duggan et al, 2014). UW students responding to the ECAR survey reflected this familiarity. When responding to a question about the educational technology they would like instructors to use, students suggested that the learning curve for social media as an educational tool would be minimal. One student pointed out that "almost all students use" social media, making it "an established method of communication," while another referred to it as a "more 'natural' way to talk to other students."

> "Facebook groups are made to have discussion."
>
> -UW Student

Students want instructors to hold virtual office hours. Faculty responding to the 2014 ECAR survey described seeing an increase in emails received from students, paired with a decrease in in-person visits during office hours. Comments from UW students confirmed this trend in behavior. Students noted that they can access their instructors more efficiently when they are online. When asked what the UW could do differently to improve student outcomes, students expressed interest in receiving real-time responses from instructors through social media. A 2013 study similarly found that students appreciate the opportunity to engage in virtual office hours as a means of supporting their learning and increasing flexible communication with faculty (Michael, 2013).

Challenges

As instructors and students are developing a sense for how social media fits into the learning environment, challenges emerge alongside opportunities. Here we take into consideration what the current literature says in conjunction with UW faculty and student impressions.

Students want separation between their online academic life and online social life. Students are increasingly interested in preserving privacy, maintaining a separation between their online social lives and their online academic lives (Wang et al, 2012; Jones et al, 2009). Just under half of UW students who responded to the ECAR survey in 2013 reported that they like to keep their online academic and social lives separate. In 2014, that percentage increased to 64% (p value <0.001). As a result, students may be uncomfortable using their personal accounts for academic purposes. The privacy issue highlights another challenge: How do FERPA regulations apply to the academic use of social media? While FERPA

regulations do not speak specifically to the use of social media as an educational tool, current guidelines indicate that as long as the social media platform in question is not maintained by UW, content posted is not considered an educational record, and is not protected under FERPA (Drake, 2014). However, there are circumstances when an instructor requiring a student to post to a certain social media platform would constitute a FERPA violation. For example, instructors may inadvertently reveal information about students, including grades, course enrollments, or class schedules, posing a FERPA violation. Clear guidance for faculty using a social media application as a learning tool is needed.

Faculty and students feel that social media is a distraction. The ECAR survey asked participants to reflect on how the UW can support student outcomes through the academic use of social media. Results reveal that students and instructors alike worry that social media is a distraction in the learning environment. One student stressed how important it is for instructors to enforce rules to ensure that "students aren't playing on their technology devices during class," because it "seriously detract[s]" from learning.

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-UW Faculty

UW instructors echoed these feelings. One instructor remarked that "technology is not a panacea and comes with its own problems." The instructor went on to explain that while they "allow computers in class for note-taking," students often check "Facebook and Reddit rather than paying attention to lecture...distract[ing] other students with their behavior." Another instructor stated, "[I] hate dealing with students' techno-distraction when they're in class…[it's] completely demoralizing." These comments suggest that UW faculty do not feel that students are able to remain on task when using mobile devices during class, and are therefore concerned that social media use may negatively impact student outcomes.

But research suggests it may be too soon to jump to this conclusion. A 2015 study found that social media actually plays a key role in helping students transition into collegiate life (Junco, 2015). This study found that freshmen used Facebook to the extent that it *did* negatively impact their GPA, but that as students continued in their college careers, they learned to self-regulate their social media use so that it ceased to negatively impact performance. More importantly, the *way* that freshmen used Facebook seemed to positively impact long-term student outcomes. The study concluded that Facebook and other social media platforms assisted freshman in connecting to their new community, a key variable that positively impacts retention rates and academic performance in the long run (Junco, 2015).

Students report that in-class technology use policies lack clarity. In an effort to take advantage of the positive effects while mitigating the negative, it is essential to establish clear and concise policies that govern in-class social media use (Junco, 2011). Yet policies at the UW may not be clearly understood in some cases. For example, in the 2014 ECAR data, 70% of UW students indicated that in-class use of smartphones is either banned or discouraged by their professors, while less than half of faculty respondents indicated that this was actually the case. This trend suggests that communication concerning in-class technology policies leaves room for improvement. It is likely that this lack of clear communication concerning the use of technology spills over to students' understanding of the role of social media in the classroom.

Faculty feel unprepared to integrate social media in the classroom. In 2014, over a third of UW faculty reported they would be a more effective instructor if better skilled at integrating social media as a learning tool. When asked to identify a professional development need, one instructor said they would "like to know how to use social media to get real-time feedback or commentary from students," while another wanted to learn "strategies for integrating social media content and online tools, relevant to my content area, into the classroom." Another faculty member said they would like to take "an introductory course on the use of social media," adding that they would like to see UW provide "regular updates on best practices of social media-facilitated courses."

But UW faculty want more than training--they also want evidence that students will benefit. When reflecting on professional development needs, one instructor requested an "overview of [the] modern digital classroom with specific reasons why each innovation is beneficial." They went on to explain that they are not convinced that "most classroom gadgetry actually leads to better student outcomes."

Recommendations

Considering the potential opportunities in using social media as an educational tool, as well as the accompanying challenges, steps need to be taken to ensure successful adoption. UW faculty need to understand best practices, guidelines, and appropriate expectations concerning social media use in the learning setting. Our recommendations address actions that can be taken by the UW as an institution, and by individual instructors.

Research how social media impacts UW student engagement and create best practice recommendations. The 2014 ECAR survey findings unveil a number of unanswered questions concerning the educational use of social media at the UW. While faculty and students alike see promise in its application in the academic setting, they are unsure about how to tap into this resource effectively. Additional research is needed to understand how social media is being used by UW faculty and students currently, how it functions as a tool for discussion and communication, and how it impacts student engagement and outcomes. The ultimate aim would be to identify examples of best practice, highlighting classroom conditions where the use of social media is advantageous to students and faculty. UW-IT should team with relevant campus groups to generate best-practice recommendations for incorporating social media as a learning tool.

Develop campus-wide guidelines for engaging with social media in the classroom. In an effort to remain proactive in addressing privacy concerns of students while ensuring in-class conduct is synonymous with best practice, we recommend that UW guidelines for the academic use of social media aim to ensure FERPA compliance. These guidelines should advise faculty and inform students about the appropriate use of social media in the classroom. Issues to address include:
- Encouraging faculty to set clear expectations for how social media will be used in courses they are teaching
- Providing faculty with guidance for avoiding FERPA violations
- Offering students options for resolving privacy concerns, including the use of an alias or a course specific user profile

Provide faculty training opportunities. Best practice and use guidelines should be disseminated through training and professional development opportunities offered to UW faculty. These trainings should provide solutions for privacy concerns, review evidence of how social media impacts students, and provide faculty with general ideas for integrating social media into their classrooms.