

Teaching In higher Education: Can Social Media Enhance the Learning Experience?

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Higher Education (HE) teaching practices have evolved over the last twenty years, with more emphasis on student-centered pedagogy. There is an increased expectation placed onto the role that technology can play to harness effective learning. However, one could argue that there remains disconnect between our ambition for interactive learning through technology and the realities of our practice (Roblyer et al, 2010). This study explores the concept of interactive learning by focusing upon a specific use of mobile and portable technology. The role of social media may offer a new construct to enhance the learning experience. Greenhow and Gleason (2012) explore the use of Twitter as a new literacy practice. They suggest that when used in higher education, it may lead to increased engagement and better interaction between students and teachers. This view is also shared by Fusch (2011), who argues that the tools of the trade are as important as the learning objectives, and that tools are needed which promote social presence, create a more interactive learning environment and foster collaborative study. Dunn (2012) realises that more emphasis must be placed on learning with technology. The default setting for many academics remains on teaching with technology. The two perspectives, when not aligned, can create very different experiences for students. Laird and Kuh (2005) support this argument. They argue that active learning and deep interaction between students and their teachers requires an extended degree of technological engagement. How the technology is used and how it is integrated into the learning process is important. Zepke and Leach (2010) suggest that motivation and student dispositions will influence their ability to engage in interactive learning, where the line between online learning and socialization is becoming blurred.



Fig.1 Social media can be accessed via smart phones and other portable devices within lectures, seminars and tutorials.

Rationale

A synthesis of recent literature and a study carried out within The College demonstrates some of the advantages and challenges associated with social networking. Crucially, the internal study illustrates the perceptions and expectations on social media interaction within lectures and seminars Fig.1.

The study is important to lecturing and teaching staff and to our students. Intrinsically, it is also important to emerging pedagogy. The research placed emphasis on interaction between the student and the course material, lecturer and learning. Interactive learning through technology is the primary theme of this particular study; serving as a potential vehicle to deliver a richer and more enhanced learning experience for our students.

Methods

The study was designed to address three questions which were central to the perception and expectations of our students:

1. How do our students currently use social media?
2. Do they want to use social media to support learning?
3. Do they believe that social media can enhance their learning experience?

An online survey was opened and students from across The College were invited to respond. The survey did not account for individual competency in using the technology, or in the level of access that the student has, but rather the student's habit of social networking. A total of 213 viable responses were recorded, indexed and then coded as to identify emerging patterns and themes. The data was then analyzed in an iterative manner and translated into useable information. A separate study was carried out with a smaller, experimental group - exposed to social networking as a means of communicating collaboratively with peers and academic staff. The purpose was to support triangulation using a focus group to capture more qualitative information.

Results

Results from the college – wide survey indicate that 92% of students use some kind of social media. Undergraduates are 30% more likely to engage in social media interaction than postgraduates (65% compared to 35% respectively).

Facebook remains the most popular social network (86%), followed by Twitter (41%) and Google+ (24%). Other networks, such as LinkedIn and Instagram, featured within responses, Fig.2.

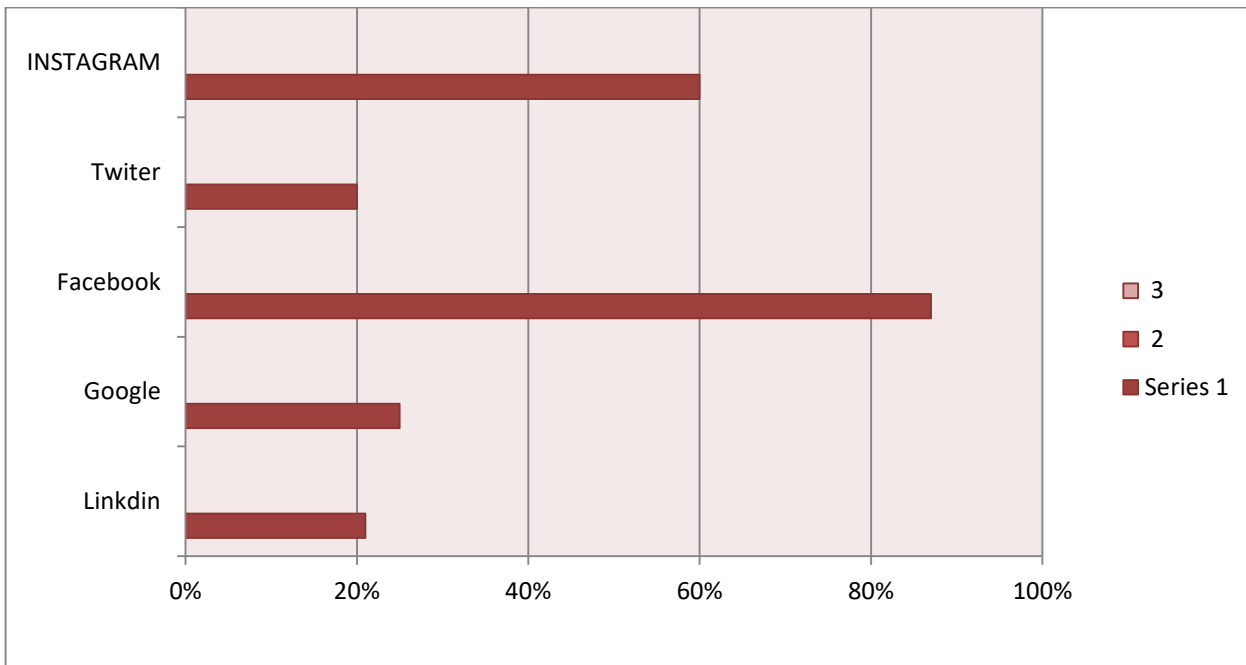


Fig.2 Students were asked “Which social media do you use?”

87% use at least one of these networks for personal use, which is not surprising given the original concept of social networking. However, 33% indicated that they also use their accounts to network specifically with other professionals and 24% use it to aide their research and studies Fig.3

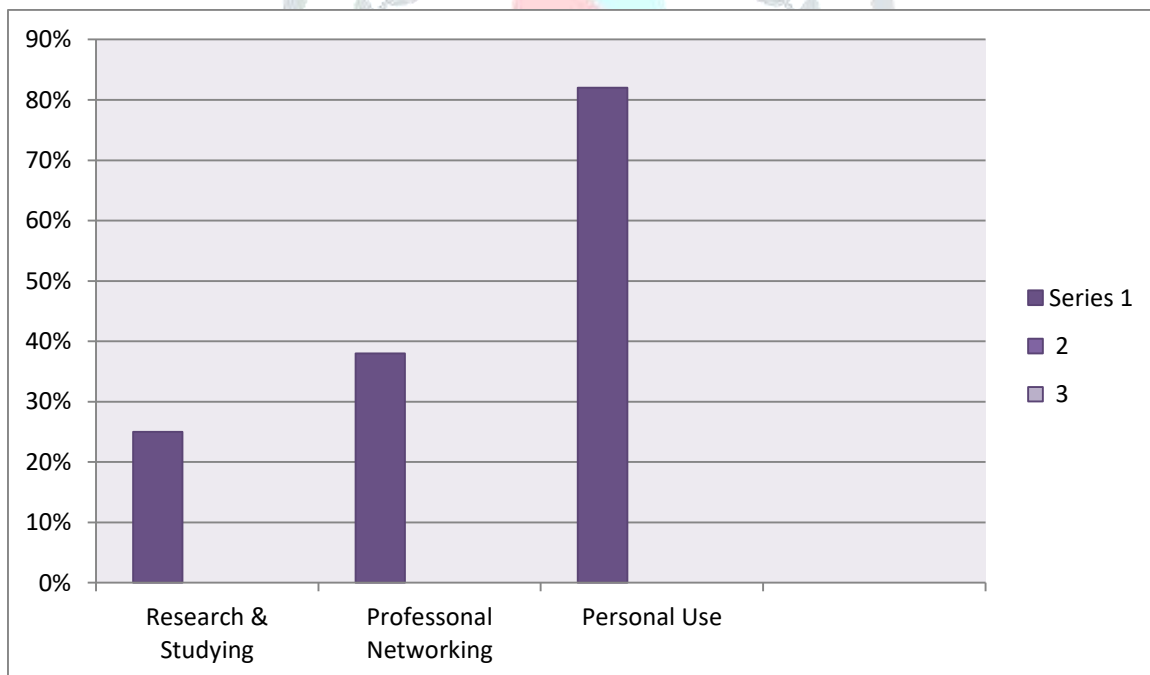


Fig.3 Students were asked “What do you use social media for?”

When asked where they would like to use social media, 21% indicated that they would use it within labs and tutorials, 19% within seminars and 17% in lectures. Nearly half (47%) would not use it in these situations, though 41% did state that they would like to engage with staff out with normal contact time via social media.

Results

The experimental group (28 undergraduate students) used a closed Facebook group to share ideas, thoughts and resources for a period of 6 weeks. 16 of them provided feedback for this study. They all posted a status update or engaged with peer comments. 81% also engaged with a member of staff, to ask questions or to raise issues connected to the course. 75% indicated that they found the social network very helpful, 18% indicated that it was helpful and 7% indicated that it was a little helpful. None of the participants described the experience as not helpful or unsure.

They all thought that student to teacher interaction had increased. When asked if the use of social media had improved their learning experience, 15 said yes and 1 remained neutral.

Some of the students provided valuable comments throughout the study:

“It's a convenient way to interact with specific people and get the feedback quickly and, also a more attractive approach which is welcomed by young people who live in the age of IT.”

“Yes, Social media especially twitter is a valuable tool to use within Higher Education. It can enhance learning as students can be connected to tutors, peers etc 24/7. The hierarchies are broken down and everyone can share ideas.”

“No, I do not think that social media is a useful way in which to learn. It provides only superficial contact with peers/staff and can detract from essential skills which should be developed in Higher Education such as formal academic writing, verbal communication, self -awareness and reflection on the learning experience.”

Conclusion

The college - wide survey indicated that 68% thought social media could enhance their learning experience. 22% indicated that it would not add any value or would cause distraction, whilst 10% were unsure. The evidence points towards the need for further research. The question is not if we should use social media to enhance learning, but how it should be used effectively. The qualitative data suggests that it is a personal disposition, as previously mentioned by Zepke and Leach (2010).

The literature describes the invaluable opportunities offered by social networking, but equally there are many challenges working to thwart the most enthusiastic teacher. Privacy issues and opportunities for misunderstanding and miscommunication are high, as the normal conventions of face to face interaction do not apply on social networking sites. This concern was raised by many students. The formal and informal nature of such practice needs to be included within the planning stages, otherwise it may lead to difficulty (Zaidieh, 2012).

The time is ripe to take managed risk and explore creative methods of learning and teaching. The learner's journey and their experiences along the way must meet student expectations and offer a more dynamic and appropriate pedagogy.

To summarize, the benefits highlighted within the study can be explained as:

Increasing student motivation and engagement with course

- Material; increasing student-to-student collaboration;
- Enhanced interaction between the student and the lecturer/
- Teacher; Accelerated data and information sharing;
- Removes barriers to self-expression and contribution;
- Provides students with 21st Century skills which could aide their employability and increase levels of satisfaction.

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