The use and added value of digital resources and social media in supporting formal learning and teaching at HE level

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**Introduction & Rationale for Focus**

This research/analysis is based upon the acknowledgment that social media is a significant part of life in 21st Century society impacting upon how people communicate, engage, share ideas and indeed learn. The particular relevance of social media to learning is that it offers a ‘permanent record’ of information, ideas or ‘chat’ and information exchanges can be immediate, taking place in real-time despite an individual’s geographical location and the medium offers access to multiple ‘users’ at any given time. Higher Education seeks to stimulate analysis, critical thinking and discussion in seeking deeper learning of themes, topics and issues. As a result social media can be a useful forum to offer additional material to stimulate discussion and hopefully enhance the learning experience.

Clearly there are some caveats within this area of study, social media such as Twitter, MySpace and Facebook offer informal communication, sharing achievements, activities, opinions and photographic evidence of events, however the ‘downside’ of this is that there is blurring between the personal and private within user’s lives with potentially risky outcomes, for example; criticising an employer through social media can lead to disciplinary action, comments can be taken out of context and there is the potential for exploitation of vulnerable users. Additionally the ‘social’ element of social media has meant that there has been a different emphasis placed upon its use plus the very limited restrictions placed upon users by social media operators have led to offensive and disturbing material being shared.

That being said, it is essential to seek opportunities to harness the potential of social media as an ‘added value’ tool to student learning though effective communication and collaborative engagement. As Joosten suggests; “Researchers have been highlighting the importance of interactivity on student outcomes (e.g. learning, retention, satisfaction) for decades (Joosten 2012 p3) As a result social media could be one key tool to such ‘interactivity’.

**Rationale**

Descriptors found within the University Modular Framework staff handbook (UMF) offers the following in support of a very strong distinction grade: ‘....demonstrating sustained ability to analyse, synthesise, evaluate and interpret concepts, principles and data within the field of study....This will form the basis for the development of sound arguments and judgements appropriate to the field of study...’ (UMF staff handbook appendix 1). In essence the framework is suggesting the ability to apply critical thinking or informed analysis to a problem solving issue is a key to successful outcomes; within University this is a ‘good’ grade on an assignment whilst for Social Work students hoping to become successful practitioners this is also key to addressing social welfare crises within society. How, therefore, do students ‘test’ such developing abilities; one route may be via peer interaction utilising social media (and other resources) where students can ‘safely’ investigate, discuss and analyse research material or engage in discussion regarding a specific learning topic.

Additionally Social Work students, when on placement or ultimately in practice, will be engaging with member of public who actively use social media for information gathering, social networking and support. It will be therefore essential that students have a good understanding of ‘safe practice’ when utilising social media, particularly with regard to sharing personal material that may be exploited by others; this is very relevant when working with vulnerable adults or children. Additionally Social Work students need to be aware of appropriate online behaviour and be aware of professional boundaries when using social media particularly when the role consists of managing high levels of confidential personal data.

The relevance to teaching is also highlighted by the online habits of people; “71% of online adults and 92% of traditional college-aged students reported watching videos on a video-sharing site e.g. YouTube...” (Moore, 2011, cited in Joosten 2012 p5), highlighting the high level of social media usage and familiarity students have with accessing online materials. Therefore utilising social media to support teaching and hopefully enhance learning outcomes should not be a ‘leap of faith’, more a rational use of appropriate familiar resources.

In a society where increasingly information and services are offered in a ‘digital’ format rather than telephone or in-person contact, the value of accessibility and flexibility to carrying out functions such as applying for a road fund licence lead people to potentially begin at web-based online searches before considering any other process. Indeed as a Social Work professional the ability to ‘Google’ policy, legislation or case law has long been established as ‘good practice’ in ensuring appropriate and lawful case work.

**Relevance to Practice and lecturing role**

As a supporter of online resources and information sharing, my experience of assimilating information and facilitating understanding with junior members of staff have pointed strongly towards use of digital material and an acknowledgement that the flexibility and accessibility of material is key to effective practice and assistance to those in need. Additionally, understanding and analysing the use of social media in society offers insight into how people communicate engage and develop understanding of new/alternative views or experiences.

The volume of information students need to be exposed to far exceeds the modular structures and ‘contact hours’ stipulated by the Social Work programme, one answer to this is utilising online resources such as Panopto recordings (online video/information dissemination recorded by tutors allowing students to watch at their leisure) to utilise ‘reverse teaching’ i.e. the online materials are used to ‘set the scene’ and present facts/figures/data etc.. With the next face to face teaching session used to assess learning via electronic ‘polls’ or seminar work. This can offer insight into individual student learning/understanding and can serve to direct the focus of onward teaching aimed at deeper understanding and potentially further use of social media to engender peer discussion and debate. Hopefully such exercises will utilise elements of Kohlberg's theories regarding educational and cognitive development; focussing upon the progressive building blocks of understanding through exploration and enhanced cognitive skill.

University material is provided increasingly in electronic/digital formats; from online application, through to electronic journals and e-books (electronic books) and e-book readers such as Nook, Kindle etc.. and ultimately to digital submission of assignments. The internet has also effectively opened up access to digital resources such as media reporting, academic journals, policy papers right through to 'blogs' by well-respected authors.

Face to face teaching remains an expectation within a University environment; however it is clear through my limited experience that this must be enhanced by additional activities and resources to enrich the learning process. Use of multimedia resources is vital in developing understanding, therefore images, video, audio and links to internet sites are key to offering a diverse range of resources through a range of mediums hopefully meeting the pedagogic needs of students. Us of social media in teaching may also enhance the collaborative nature of learning; students can discuss/debate issues online and potentially this can include the lecturer, particularly when planning an activity or setting a task for students to complete as part of independent study or group work. This can also support effective reflective practice, as a 'thread' on a social media site can illustrate how the 'original' theme/discussion item has developed and ideas have 'evolved' offering effective feedback for reflection.

**Research Context & Literature Review**

**Preparatory work**

In preparing the proposal to be submitted the research project required consideration of ethical approval from the University’s ethics committee. The School of Health ethics approval form is included in Appendix 2. In discussion with my Mentor it was agreed that the project does not need ethical approval as consent will be gained through students putting themselves forward to participate and utilising the resources of digital and social media will not lead to any relevant ethical issues. The project involves adult, there will be no payment to those taking part and hopefully the outcome will serve to enhance learning upon the module

**Recruitment and Consent**

Within the introductory sessions for the module (autumn term 2013) I will seek to outline to students the proposed research activity. Students will be given the opportunity to participate in the research activity and relevant details outlining the activity will be made available to students who wish to participate; including the proposed aims and objectives of the research activity and the schedule of linked feedback activity. With regard to The British Educational Research Association (BERA) “The Association takes voluntary informed consent to be the condition in which participants understand and agree to their participation without duress, prior to the research getting under way....social networking and other on-line activities, including their video-based environments, present challenges for consideration of consent issues and the participants must be clearly informed that their participation and interactions are being monitored and analysed for research” (BERA Ethical Guidelines 2011 p5). This is clearly an interesting area of study and participants will also have the right to withdraw from the activity at any time.

**Size and structure of Group**

The cohort focus was upon level 5 Social Work Students engaging on an Adult Services 20 credit module. Out of a total 35 student in the group it was hoped that at least 20 would consider taking part, in the event 24 participated. I was also able to seek feedback from students who declined to participate, particularly with respect to their perceived value of digital/social media to learning.

**Methodology**

The project followed a broad qualitative methodology through a short questionnaire, which sought responses to 10 standard questions from which interpretive data could be sought and possible themes emerge. As Prior suggests; ”it is possible to move beyond the presence or absence of words and look at phrases, concepts, ideas and even themes..” Prior quoted in Silverman (2011 p96). A thematic approach was taken in analysing feedback offered through the questionnaires.

Literature Review and Pedagogic Research

There are a significant number of authors contributing to research into the value of e-learning and an acknowledgement of the changing face of peer to peer communication through social media and the relevance to teaching within Higher Education. For example Neil Selwyn offered an essay in 2012 focusing upon Social Media in Higher Education, which highlights the notion of people having a ‘networked self’ which characterizes the person’s identity via social media (Papacharissi 2010, cited in Selwyn 2012). The paper also highlights the value of Universities offering online networking facilities to develop peer learning and tutor interaction with students in a ‘familiar’ environment. Specifically the notion of ‘connectivism’ (Selwyn 2012) i.e the ability for students to connect via social media in the moment or when required rather than awaiting a lecture or seminar session is focused upon.

Another piece of research carried out in America by Mike Moran, Jeff Seaman and Hester Tinti-Kane in 2011, illustrates that many institutes already incorporate social media in their teaching, specifically to offer support/material for assignments. The paper suggests that online video is the most commonly used form of social media but sites used for social engagement such as Facebook and Twitter were rarely used to support coursework. This appears to stem from a blurring of the lines between privacy/personal social engagement and the academic values of utilizing social media to support learning/teaching; this is an important issue that will need to be a focus of my own project.

The ‘digital age’ i.e. a world where electronic resources/media are at the forefront of everyday life has long been discussed from science fiction writers through to producers of electronic media. However it has only been in the last 15 years that the dream has started to become a reality. As such the digital age is really in its ‘infancy’ and whilst there are a burgeoning number of authors writing about social media and specifically it’s use within teaching/learning we find ourselves perhaps focusing upon simple elements of technology against a background of concern for traditional teaching methodology. Beetham and Sharp point to the concern that digital media in teaching may or may not be of value, yet enthusiasts of such resources carry on regardless of the outcome on learning; they also highlight the ‘Pedagogy before technology’ (Beetham and Sharp 2007 p3) approach which suggests that digital media should be introduced into a framework of traditional models of teaching rather than utilized as a standalone resource.

When considering the use of digital resources one must be mindful of the great social change that has occurred within a relatively short period of time; the internet and social media have become part of everyday life for the majority of the UK population. This does have a ‘downside’ in that the immediacy of information is an expectation of users of digital resources, however when information is difficult to locate or software necessitates significant user input this can have a negative effect upon users and clearly within a learning environment this could impact upon educational outcomes.

Significantly though, as people routinely use digital resources such as social media and the internet to communicate and engage with others, this should have a resonance within a teaching environment, as Beetham and Sharp suggest; “Whether or not they use the ‘e-learning’ facilities provided by their institution, learners will use the communication and information tools they have around them to help manage their learning” (Beetham and Sharp 2007 p5). This indicates that familiarity with such resources engenders people to utilize them; however there is a responsibility on behalf of educators to ensure that guidance and support is offered to ensure equitable outcomes for students. Essentially utilizing digital resources and social media directs us to ‘understand and experiment with ways in which technology interacts with people’s minds - human cognition” John and Wheeler 2008 p3).

In addition to the notion of managing digital resources, it must also be understood that there are different interpretations of how such resources should/could be used, Salmon suggests; “One main difference is between those who see online as based on instruction and transmission, and those who see the learner’s experience as central to knowledge construction” (Salmon 2011 p5). This is a key concept and again responsibility to direct or manage this should come from the educator who seeks not only to transmit information but to achieve engagement based upon experience and understanding through relevant use of social media, for example in the form of peer to peer support online.

Interestingly there is also an additional issue that Salmon highlights; that of the inability to ‘switch off’ from the digital world; this is very true of social media, where people will ‘post’ a comment/thought and return or leave the media open waiting for a response, in terms of teaching Salmon quotes from Rowntree (1995); “I was struck by how I’m still in touch with the conference even when away from my computer and busy with other activities. Somewhere in my unconscious I continue to debate and new lines of argument keep occurring to mind unbidden. And it is always so tempting to take just one more peep at the screen to see if another participant has come up with something new or built upon the last message one posted oneself” (Rowntree 1995, cited in Salmon 2011 p17).

One of the key issues underlining this project is that online resources and social media should support the more ‘formal’ teaching process rather than replace it totally and the assumption is being made that all students are able to access and utilise online/social media opportunities effectively. Additionally there was an assumption that students would engage with the use of online resources and social media and that this would ultimately enhance understanding, analysis, critical discussion and inform practice.

Watling and Rogers (2012) highlight the social impact of the internet and the rapid shift in how people communicate or engage with each other in the ‘digital world’ rather than face to face. Life is intrinsically linked to online resources; Skype (online ‘free’ telephone calls which can incorporate ‘live’ video) was introduced in 2003, Facebook (which began as a college-based social network in America) began in 2004 and has become a global phenomenon, iTunes was launched by Apple in 2003 as a method for delivering digital entertainment media and has led to the sales of ‘physical’ media such as CD’s and DVD’s reducing significantly. “The majority of social media programs are free to download and many include a home page facility which can be customised by uploading pictures or selecting a design template. Readers interact through posting comments on other people’s content and many social networks enable users to ‘follow’ or become ‘friends’ with other users, creating the potential for building up large digital networks of family, friends, colleagues and even strangers” ( Watling & Rogers 2012 p13)

Joosten (2012) also points out that “Educators must make an effort and a commitment to become social media users....you will be better able to understand the media characteristics and the pedagogical potential in the classroom” (Joosten 2012 p16). Interestingly Joosten also suggests that it is essential when utilising social media to reflect human characteristics...”People who want to connect with users who share information about their interests, values, beliefs and passions” (Joosten 2012 p28), this is as a result of individuals or organisations utilising social media as a forum for public relations or to advertise products which can have a negative impact on engagement.

Interestingly there is a significant amount of data regarding ‘one-click’ marketing using social and digital media; targeting groups/individuals to increase interest, engaging potential customers with online messages that ‘resonate’ with buyers etc.. This mirrors the notion proposed that digital media can enhance teaching and learning; the ‘one click’ (of a mouse button) notion is very real, as digital communication has become very simple and straight forward; Twitter for example (once an account has been set-up) offers the user 140 ‘characters’ (usually letters within the text) to ‘tweet’ their thoughts which with one click of the mouse is uploaded for ‘all’ to see (all-you do not have to accept ‘friends’ for them to see tweets). What this suggests is that any resources utilised to enhance teaching should be straight-forward in use and accessible to all to be used as a source of communication, emotional sharing, seeking knowledge and peer group development

**Outcomes**

Facebook has been a leader in social media over the last ten years with approximately 1.2 billion users registered as of the turn of 2014. Students are already very familiar with using the Facebook facilities and University of Northampton online access portal NILE (Northampton University Integrated Learning Environment) which uses the ‘Blackboard’ software platform. NILE does have the facility to set up ‘blogs’ or discussion boards’ which can offer similar access to learning materials and opportunities for discussion. However the decision to use Facebook as a platform, was an effort to shift the focus from purely academic ‘work’ to a more fluid discussion base beyond the confines of lectures and University based software. This is supported by research carried out by Madge, Meek, Wellens and Hooley (2009) where it was found that 84% of students in their study stated that ‘Facebook is part of my everyday activity/routine’ Madge, Meek, Wellens and Hooley (2009 p147). Additionally the Facebook software is more straightforward and accessible than NILE which has layer upon layer of sub-menus which can be rather off-putting in supporting engagement.

As a result a group was set up on Facebook: SWK2006 Discussion Group and students were invited at the start of the module in September 2013 to join and participate in discussion and engagement of issues raised and items posted (See Appendix 1 which illustrates the discussion of the Facebook Group). The module group consisted of 42 Level 5 Social Work Students. Of the module student body 31 students joined the group and engaged in a series of discussions based upon contemporary policy and news items linked to the module topic: direct work with adult service users. The Facebook site offered Tutor directed topics of conversation/debate linked to lecture material and relevant media reporting of current Social Work related news items. The site also afforded students the opportunity to engage in critical analysis with peers outside the lecture theatre environment and offer a record of discussion for others to read/engage with.

Topics for discussion ranged from changing the age of consent to sexual intercourse, Court of Protection decision making for people who may lack capacity, child and adult safeguarding, case studies on the right to die, discussion regarding the Channel 4 programme ‘Benefits Street’ and landmark Court Cases regarding Deprivation of Liberty Safeguards.

**Findings**

The Students were given a project evaluation at the end of the 12 week module (Appendix 2 has a copy of the form) and asked to offer their anonymous response to 10 questions. Of note in the evaluation was the question regarding student engagement and use of NILE and the question regarding use of other electronic teaching resources such as Panopto; a video and Powerpoint resource which was used for two main areas: additional material which could not be offered during lecture sessions and for the assignment briefing.

Firstly the focus will be upon those students who did not engage with the Facebook discussion page. All 10 stated that they did use online searches as a first stage in their research for assignments. Additionally 5 of this group stated they do not use Facebook; 1 stated this was because their friends did not discuss relevant topics (but the same student stated they did follow relevant people on Twitter) and another student stated they were considering using social media to engage with peers on future assignments. Of the 5 who do not use Facebook all use NILE and all but 1 of this small group accessed the Panopto material and found it useful. Suggesting that external resources are generally useful to enhancing study, however a ‘one size fits all’ approach may be unwise.

The remaining 5 of the group who did not engage with the Facebook discussion group all but 1 stated that using Facebook to engage with peers and other professionals in discussing or researching material relevant to study was helpful. Additionally 2 of this group stated that NILE was difficult to navigate and find information and all but 1 of this group had accessed Panopto material stating that they found it helpful in understanding additional material.

Turning to the students who did engage with the Facebook discussion page, of the 24, 4 students stated they joined the page but merely observed and struggled to find time to participate. Of these 4 students, 3 stated that they use Facebook a lot to interact with peers, despite not fully engaging with the discussion page; this clearly may have been as a result of there being a degree of tutor direction in the discussion and the fear of ‘getting it wrong’ in any contribution. Of the 4 who did not fully participate, all stated that Panopto material is helpful in enhancing learning and all used NILE, although comments regarding inconsistency in the use of NILE sites by tutors were mentioned as a negative.

Of the 20 who actively engaged with the discussion page, 3 students stated that they do not use online searches as a first stage of researching material, suggesting that for the majority of students who did participate IT, social media and internet searches are a preferred methodology of academic research. This indicates the potential value of social media as a learning tool, but also highlights the potential pitfalls of insufficient academic rigour where facts may be overshadowed by personal views, attitudes or hearsay. Clearly this is where students need to develop an analytical ‘filter’ to material.

Of the 20 students who joined the discussion group 5 students reported that they either did not participate in discussions due to time constraints (2 students), 1 student stated that for them Facebook is a leisure activity not an education ‘resource’ and 2 students viewed discussions but felt it was not interactive enough or ‘stifled’ with too few people commenting upon discussion threads. This is an interesting point which is supported in research: “students thought the use of Facebook was most importantly for social reasons, not for formal teaching purposes” Madge, Meek, Wellens and Hooley (2009 p152). This is further supported by research carried out by Donlan in 2012, which identified resistance to utilising Facebook for academic work and there was a “reluctance to let tutors see their personal pages” (Donlan 2012, p7)

**Emerging Themes:**

The discussion pages material prompted discussion; however students clearly expected more ‘stimulation’ of material by the tutor, despite being informed that the discussion page sought to encourage peer debate and discussion. Students did however remark on the value of the discussion items and the comments left by peers, the ‘added value’ of the discussion material prompting debate and analysis of content linked to formal lecture topics plus the ‘challenging’ elements of the material; students remarked on how the material and discussion challenged their views and thoughts. This illustrates the overall pedagogic value of enhanced opportunities to offer material in varied and accessible ways in supporting student learning and engagement. Additionally when considering student satisfaction, the module evaluation reported a concurrent level of satisfaction in student expectation, engagement and learning outcomes.

Interestingly there were also a number of comments regarding the limitations of discussion; suggesting the discussion was ‘stifled’ or those individuals felt limited in offering their responses. This potentially offers insight into the challenge of a professional qualification programme offering students opportunities to engage in an ‘open’ social media forum; specifically the ‘fear’ of ‘getting it wrong’ or offering an ‘unpopular’ viewpoint or ‘uninformed’ discussion. 4 students reported such feeling/thoughts and clearly this is relevant feedback to reflect upon for future use of such discussion pages/boards to enhance learning.

**Reflection**

Clearly there is evidence that use of a range of ‘external’ resources i.e. those outside the formal teaching or seminar structure, add value to student understanding and learning. Social Media is clearly accessible and contains the ‘one click’ element that was discussed earlier, rather than the rather cumbersome NILE resources which has a high degree of ‘hidden’ menus and less than clear engagement pathways.

It may have been beneficial to have carried out some further follow up interviews with a selection of students, to seek more qualitative meaning to their responses and to clarify contextual information. Unfortunately the student group went out on 70 day placement at the end of the module and this was impractical to arrange.

The students who did not participate stated that time was a factor in not accessing the discussion page and clearly this was also true of my role as tutor in ‘stimulating’ discussion, as the project took place during a particularly heavy teaching period; this would have to be addressed in using such methods in the future; possible setting aside a specific time to have ‘live’ discussion, which students could engage directly with and after the ‘live’ session contribute or merely read the discussion dialogue. This could then be used as a ‘staring point’ in seminar sessions to make effective links between module teaching material and wider discussion/engagement.

The project also sought feedback regarding the use of Panopto (video/powerpoint) material to support learning. Generally there was a very positive response to the value of this, which again aims to take the teaching out of the formal lecture theatre/seminar session to an accessible and re-useable format. This suggests a mix of learning tools continues to be appropriate in meeting a diverse range of learning styles and whilst this is time-consuming to prepare, the value to learning and the potential enhanced quality in understanding and engagement with material appears worthwhile. Anecdotally, it appears that there may have been some impact upon academic achievement as the previous year cohort average module grade was C, whilst this year it was B-. Clearly there may be other factors involved in the improvement of student achievement, however the themes identified in this project suggest that additional resources offer tangible benefits to students.

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