

The Use of Social Media in Higher Education

Tim Foster, Mana Farshid, Sadia Juena, and Åsa Wallström

Abstract

The use of social media in the university classroom is growing in popularity and is transforming learning and teaching in significant ways (Li and Pitts 2009; Tess 2013). According to Lee and McLoughlin (2008), social networking sites have become educational tools onto themselves. However, while students have both developed and embraced the use of social media in their personal lives, little research has been done into the mix of social media used by teachers and students in their traditional courses (Li and Pitts 2009). Instead, most research to date is social media specific. Mödritscher (2010) states that both educators and learners need to rethink the way they teach and learn. Li and Pitts (2009) discuss that there is much to learn about the use of web-based communication tools and the impact they have on traditional measures of students' success in higher education. Yet research has not explored the effects of the characteristics of social networks used primarily by students (Mazer et al. 2007), and more empirical research is needed (Barcayk 2013; Tess 2013).

Four forms of social media were tested within a traditional business/marketing course at a university in Sweden, over a 2-year period. The four forms of social media included: a *Facebook group page* to connect the stakeholders in the course; *YouTube/Ted.com* to invite "guest lecturers" into the classroom and provide content to the other social media; *Twitter* to provide additional content; and *Skype* to make the instructor more accessible. The students were provided two occasions during the term the marketing courses were given to provide feedback on the instructor's use of social media in the classroom, including via an open-ended essay question on a reading quiz during the middle of the course, as well as at the end of the course via the course evaluation. Leximancer was used to analyze the data of all of these responses. Leximancer is a data-mining tool modeled on content analysis that provides a platform for the qualitative interpretation of concepts. It enables researchers

T. Foster (✉) • M. Farshid • S. Juena • Å. Wallström
Luleå University of Technology, Luleå, Sweden
e-mail: tim.foster@ltu.se; mana.farshid@ltu.se; ena1324@gmail.com; asa.wallstrom@ltu.se

to analyze large quantities of complex textual data (Smith 2003; Smith and Humphreys 2006).

Results indicate that there are both *primary* social media and *secondary* social media to consider using in higher education. “Primary” social media are labeled as such due to there being more benefits being recognized by students and teachers, as well as these social media being used by most of the students in the course. “Secondary” social media are more focused on fewer benefits and/or are used by much fewer students. Facebook (“group”) is by far the most dominant social media preferred by students when using social media in the classroom. For this course, a Facebook group page was used, providing a more dynamic, “just-in-time” form of communication for the students that actually acted more like an “app” for the course, as most students connected to their Facebook account (and the course) via their smartphones or tablets. This use of Facebook allows for communication not only between teacher and student, but student-teacher and student-student. Another “primary” social media included the use of YouTube.com and Ted.com, providing “guest lecturers” to the students, something they greatly appreciated, as it allowed them to see that the “theory” they were learning had actual “practical” use for their future careers.

Other social media (Twitter and Skype) are not as important, mainly because only a limited number of students actually use these (compared to their use of Facebook and YouTube). Therefore, these are considered “secondary” social media—a kind of “value-added” service with those students who chose to connect to the course in this way. This is perhaps not a bad thing, as too many social media and other information sources for any given course can kill the use of all of them. This of course deserves further research, as all social media are dynamic and ever-changing, and new social media appear every year.

References available upon request.