Extended review

Book review: Educating Educators with Social Media, Charles Wankel

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Abstract
Purpose – This viewpoint paper aims to review the book Educating Educators with Social Media, Charles Wankel (Emerald Group Publishing).
Design/methodology/approach – The paper provides an overview of the book, key messages and implications for the future.
Findings – Social media is already being used in higher education and its almost ubiquitous use in the social environment means academics and other staff involved in learning activities will need to consider how and when to integrate social media into those activities.
Practical implications – The book provides an excellent starting point for anyone interested in social media and learning to find out what has been done to date, what has been learned, and what is possible in the future.
Originality/value – The value of this book rests with the wide range of social media tools it covers, and the willingness of authors to share their learnings from their experiences with social media.
Keywords Learning, Social media, Higher education academics
Paper type Literature review

Introduction
Education and social media are increasingly intersecting. The use of tools such as blogs, Facebook, Twitter, virtual worlds and wikis to support learning activities no longer happens only on the edges of the learning landscape, but nor are they yet mainstream educational tools. Since a large percentage of current and future higher education students use social media tools in their personal lives, and increasingly their working lives, it makes sense to identify how, and in what ways, social media can be used to enhance learning. So a collection on ‘educating educators with social media’ is timely, and suggests that the use of these networking and collaboration tools continues to move into the learning mainstream.

The book
We are promised “a sauna to get your creative juices flowing” (Wankel, p. 3) in the introduction to this book, which is an edited collection of case studies on integrating social media into learning settings. The authors are predominantly from North America, but also from Germany, the UK and Portugal. Essentially what we have are reports from the social media sand box on practice, experience and learning, which contribute to our growing collective understanding of how and where social media fits into the education landscape, today and into the future.
Chapters include reviews and reports on using a range of social media tools and issues, from Facebook and Twitter to blogs, wikis, mapping and visualisation, Flickr, digital storytelling, social bookmarking, social annotation, learning management systems, media literacy, google maps, and google docs, all of which are being used to engage the current generation of students with their learning.

What is driving this trend to use social media in learning settings? Gammon and White (p. 344) describe it as follows:

Most contemporary students live in an information rich world where access to media and communication technologies is ever-present. This cultural climate is increasingly defined by the collaborative and networked technologies of the Internet and social web. This new context demands increased recognition from educators about the skills and strategies that students need in order to become responsible and engaged citizens.

These information and communication technologies are characterised by a blending of the physical and digital worlds in ways that allow people to move between both "realities" in an increasingly seamless way. Social media tools are not going to go away in students' social lives, nor will their usage decrease in business. Integrating social media into learning therefore, is not only needed for good citizenship, but also to ensure students are "work-ready", and know how to use social media in the most appropriate ways for a range of settings.

The book is divided into five sections:

1. varieties of social media: platform, technology, spatial;
2. processes in learning and instruction with social media;
3. design of instruction with social media;
4. delivery of instruction with social media; and
5. evaluating instruction that uses social media skills.

Part 1 includes an introduction to/overview of the book, case studies on the use of Twitter and Facebook, and a discussion of social media for higher education in developing countries.

Part 2 provides us with a discussion about social media usage in higher education, including challenges and an overview of social media tools, and case studies on using social media in graduate programs.

Part 3 opens with a chapter on designing a course using social media, a case study of an online community of current teachers and student teachers, another on using wikis and the role of the tutor, a case study on using social bookmarking and an exploration of using learning management systems in a social mediated environment.

Part 4 includes a discussion about digital literacy based on two case studies, another discussion on the use of social annotation tools in learning, case study on the use of social networking to improve college completion and one on how social media can be used to enhance in-class participation.

Part 5 opens with a chapter on redefining media literacy to suit educational contexts, one on social media and the learning management system, with the final chapter being one on the use of Twitter in education.

Messages from the book

Each of the chapters is worth reading in its own right. I particularly liked Tardos' chapter on "A social media approach to higher education" (pp. 83-105) because it provided a clear overview of social media in education and challenges to be faced in implementation. The chapter by Heinze and Reinhardt, "Future social learning networks at universities: an exploratory seminar setting" likewise provides a clear overview of social constructivist learning theories and goals. Rhine and Bailey's chapter on "Enhancing in-class participation..."
in a Web 2.0 world” discusses the ways in which participation can be enhanced when participation is viewed as social construction of knowledge. Because I am a Twitter user, the chapter on “Twitter in higher education” by Chamberlin and Lehmann was welcome. It includes an explanation and history of Twitter, how it can be used in the classroom, as well as some resources to support using Twitter, and would be an effective starting point for anyone wanting to use Twitter in their classes.

Indeed, what characterises all the chapters in this book is the willingness of the authors to share what they have learned, both benefits and challenges, and to provide “how to” guidelines. Nearly every chapter describes steps to take to start using social media in learning contexts, reflecting the broad principles of collaboration, participation and sharing of social media itself.

Reading across all chapters left me with some key messages.

- Social constructive theories of learning provide a framework for understanding and applying social media in learning environments. “Constructive concepts of learning assume that knowledge is individually constructed by a person...knowledge cannot be transmitted; it is constructed in a social context fostered by communication and collaboration with peers and during the solution of real problems” (Heinze and Reinhardt, pp. 161-162).

- Classrooms, whether online or physical, are social constructions, and therefore each has their own sets of norms and beliefs about behavior, including participation (Rhine and Bailey, p. 305). For a number of reasons, it may be that participation for students in a digital classroom is easier than in a physical classroom. Nadolny (p. 174) writes about the need to “overcome the isolation of the classroom in favor of a connected learning model”. The future classroom is likely to be more digital, more connected, more social and more personalised that we can imagine today.

- Any tool used to enhance learning outcomes and processes must be assessed for authenticity and relevance to particular context, and applied in ways that are authentic to that context. When social media is involved in learning activities, however, that context includes not only the classroom but any space where the student is located. Our ideas and beliefs about “the classroom” are under challenge from social media.

- Culture and values must be taken into account if technology in general, and social media in particular, is to be accepted in the learning environment, since often unquestioned assumptions about technology and its application will affect its introduction, use and acceptance in any institution and in any country (Ahmed, p. 67).

- Many people still do not “get” social media, and have a perception that the tools are recreational and produce inane forms of communication. Overcoming this perception will probably only occur if those people are willing to move beyond their comfort zones and immerse themselves in social media. The likelihood of that happening depends on their willingness to challenge their own thinking about learning and how it should be “done”: “Ultimately, attitudes towards Facebook in the classroom must change before student and faculty overwhelmingly support social networks sites’ potential use in education” (Towner and Munoz, p. 51).

- The role of the academic is changing from the instructor transferring information to the learner “to a more collegial approach that emphasizes an exchange of information between and among peers” (Corbeil and Corbeil, p. 29). This is in keeping with the social constructivist approach highlighted above.

- Social media has the potential to improve the quality of relationships between faculty and students in terms of personalization of communication: “its greatest strength is to facilitate education related communication between students, offering new opportunities to collaborate and learn outside of the classroom” (Towner and Munoz, p. 53).

- Digital literacy is important in an social media enhanced learning environment, both in terms of bringing information literacy out of the library and into the classroom using Web
2.0 tools, and to ensure that all students are equipped with skills that allow them to interrogate and use information in a critical way (Gammon and White, p. 330).

Finally, right now, we cannot assume that all students today have the same levels of skills when it comes to digital literacy and using social media, since it is only through usage that these skills emerge. However, this may not be true for the next generation.

Concluding comments

The challenge most individuals and institutions face with using social media is assessing whether or not it is a legitimate set of educational tools that will add value to the learning experience. Authors in this collection are among the converted:

The importance of engaging students in new and emerging technologies in education cannot be overestimated. Using social media creates a more engaging and innovative classroom experience...that engages students in the process of their own learning rather than making them knowledge databases or receptacles (p. 84).

The use of social media in education also reflects the reality of the life of students outside the classroom:

Learners now have new needs and expectations concerning their learning process and are used to new ways of interacting with other people and with information and knowledge, all of which required new modes of facilitating and supporting their learning (p. 137).

The question then, is not so much “should social media be used in learning?” but “how can it be used?” As Wankel (p. 5) summarises:

[...] digital natives will transform the landscape of higher education in the future, so long as the educators of today can begin to embrace the proper use of social media in their courses...resistance to change is unacceptable, and dogmatically using traditional methods is an unsustainable alternative: the implications of moving towards social media are vast and rewarding in many ways.

And which Tardos (p102) reinforces:

Resistance to change is an unacceptable and...using traditional methods is unsustainable...Together, we are all in a learning phase that will determine the future of teaching...

However, as Sarachan and Reinson (p228) point out:

Academia has been either slow to adapt to new media or has imposed the same closed system to its digital delivery via course management systems. College and university instructors whose pedagogy has been shaped in traditional educational environments are facing an emerging generation of students with mobile devices in their hands and search engines at their fingertips. More importantly, these students are less inclined to value an instructor's unique expertise if...the Internet can readily deliver the same content.

Using social media tools has the potential to influence higher education institutions to adapt the still dominant nineteenth century, industrial era education model to suit the learning needs of students, business and society in the twenty-first century. It may also allow higher education to be delivered in more cost effective ways, particularly in terms of infrastructure (Corbeil and Corbeil, p. 29), although we will need to see social media used in learning in a more systemic ways for a judgement about cost savings to be made.

It is important to remember, too, that people implement learning tools, and the extent to which an individual views a particular tool or set of tools as legitimate for use in the classroom depends on a range of factors including their capacity for change and their ability to see beyond the short term to connect their decisions today with potential learning environments of the future. Using social media is no different, so as well as demonstrating how social media can be used in learning contexts, we probably now need a book on ways to change attitudes and engage staff in testing and experimenting with social media, in ways that are
non-threatening, and which promote a shift to a more social, open, participatory and connected learning approach.

In these relatively early days of the use of social media, it is important to understand that the impact and value of social media emerges with use and reflection on that use. This is why collections such as this one are important, because they provide case studies on what worked, what was less successful, what challenges were faced and what lessons were learned.

More research on the use of social media in education needs to be undertaken. As Towner and Munoz (p38) point out in their chapter on using Facebook in education:

The dearth of education research and instructor experience using Facebook for education, ultimately, may be the biggest hindrance blocking Facebook’s educational application.

This collection represents a significant body of work, yet it is but a beginning in the process of understanding the introduction, use, impact and potential of social media in learning.

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