

Use of Social Media in Graduate Education: An Exploratory Review for Breaking New Ground

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The evolution of social media has been rapid and is expanding at a dizzying pace. This paper examines the use of social media in graduate education and is an exploratory review of how it is and can be used within the field. Social media are beginning to be used in various educational settings; however, the literature is lacking in terms of rigorous research conducted. An overview is provided of social media “tools” and identifies potential applications in graduate education. A framework is proposed for conducting qualitative research to further explore the potential uses/applications of the variety of social media tools.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to examine the use of social media in graduate education. The approach to the paper will be an exploratory review of social media and how it can be leveraged to break new ground within the field of graduate education. Social media and social networks continue to expand exponentially and at the same time are transforming itself and its users at a dizzying pace.

Within this context, the researchers will discuss how social media and social networks can play a vital role in graduate education. This role will be explored from a wide variety of perspectives, in terms of student learning, student community building, program awareness, and discipline sharing of expertise and ideas.

Background Purpose of Social Media Websites

The evolution of the social media, or social networking, websites has been rapid. In the late 1990s as the Internet became more available at higher speeds, the social media website as we know it today was in its most rudimentary version. Many believe these websites started in the online dating world, where people were matched with strangers. These websites were unilateral in that people would enter information about themselves, only to be matched to what were believed to be “friends”, or some version of “that”. Shortly after the spread of online dating, websites like Friendster.com and MySpace.com came into existence for networking. These websites weren’t the first, but they were the first ones to gain cultural popularity on the web.

How Are the Social Media Websites Currently Being Used?

While the original purpose of these dating, or “networking”, websites was to help people find significant others, it has now become a way to meet new friends and establish ties with current and old friends. This has evolved into the business world as a way to promote products, services, or even people. Today, the most popular social media websites are used as business tools, in addition to a way to learn more about your best friend from third grade’s new baby. As such, there are literally hundreds of social media websites, each trying to find their own networking niche.

Use of these social media websites vary by age, occupation, gender, race, religion, and any other demographic, psychographic, or geographic reason you can imagine. For example, Facebook, the world’s most popular social media website, aside from simple social networking is being used for advertising and recruiting in several universities. In addition, several units within a university will have Facebook pages to disperse information about events, curriculum, and even course materials. Facebook lends itself well as a very powerful learning management tool for content sharing. Given Facebook’s educational anarchist beginnings, it is somewhat ironic that universities have embraced it as a positive tool.

BRIEF REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

While much has been written about various forms of social media and various social media websites (see *The Zen of Social Media Marketing* by Shama Hyder Kabani, *33Million People in the Room* by Juliette Powell, and *Inbound Marketing: Get Found Using Google, Social Media, and Blogs* by Brian Halligan and Dharmesh Shah), the preponderance of literature has been in the popular press and there has been very little research published in academic and or professional journals. What follows is a brief overview of research related to the use of social networks and social media.

Lenox and Coleman (2010) identified the use of social networks in Libraries. The authors describe how social networks are increasingly being used to form linkages about professional library staff. Both live and virtual social networks are being used to allow sharing of ideas and collaboration on a variety of library projects. A key aspect to this usage is the opportunity to find a sense of community. Another important dimension to the use of the social networks centers around staff development and training. Libraries are at the forefront of using social media to create robust learning communities.

Another area that is leading the way in leveraging the potential of social media is the United States Air Force (Meerman Scott, 2009). The Air Force Public Affairs Agency is embracing the use of such social media tools as Blogging, Counterblogging, Twitter, and Facebook. A key leader in the effort, Capt. David Faggard (chief of emerging technology), stated that while there has been resistance to the use of such social media tools, the leadership is recognizing the power of the tools and realizes that we are on the verge of an information revolution. The reluctance to fully embrace the use of social media is not unique to the Air Force.

Dorrell (2010) in *The Times Educational Supplement*, cites an international study that found that language teachers are not utilizing social networking and see such technology as a threat to their classroom teaching. One concern is that the information available via the various sites does not reflect best practice. This is a valid concern as the proliferation of social media tools continues and users attempt to sift through what is most valuable and useful. This potential application of social media to classroom learning also has been applied to work place learning.

The connection between social media and work-place learning was discussed by Patel (2010) in *Training and Development*. The article focused on a study on the rise of social media and how the use of social media can boost organizational learning and productivity. Organizations that leverage these tools will grow as a learning organization. Also, because of the growing percentage of workers who are from the Millennial generation, organizations that embrace and exploit social media will be seen as more attractive places to work and more likely will be considered as employers of choice.

This study found that the most commonly used social media tool was a “shared workspace”. The next most common was “social networks” followed closely by “wikis”.

In another article, Bernoff and Schadler (2010) discuss the potential use of social media to empower employees and leverage the creativity and problem solving and knowledge generation potential of all employees. The authors state that rather than trying to prevent employees from accessing social media sites at work, organizational leaders need to recognize that employees have easy access to technology and that this technology power needs to be harnessed as a strategic force to power the organization.

The researchers point out that contrary to popular beliefs, businesses use social applications more than individuals. For businesses, 95% utilize social media, while 76% of individuals use social media.

The authors describe several real organizations, such as Best Buy, Black and Decker, Aflac, and Vail Resorts, who are creatively leveraging social media to drive their organizations forward. The efforts include working with customers/resolving customer issues, training and knowledge transfer, and creative marketing. One key to successfully utilizing social media is to ensure the organization has both management support and IT backing.

While the research literature is just beginning to grow concerning the use of social media, the articles reviewed point out their growing impact and the growing use and potential impact within a variety of organizational settings, including potential uses that are relevant to graduate education.

TOOLS

A very difficult step towards developing a social media presence is gaining an understanding of the various tools available and how they work. It appears a successful social media policy considers several different tools that complement each other to establish a broad presence. Another consideration for education is to gauge how these tools impact the use of learning management systems and other software used by most educational institutions. This section will provide a brief review of a few of the most popular social media websites and address the interaction of these tools with current use of learning management systems and other educational software programs.

Facebook

Facebook is the most popular social networking website with over 500 million subscribers worldwide. Originally developed for students at Harvard, the creator has positioned and developed this once simple website into a pop culture icon. Facebook gives people the opportunity to link with other friends who have pages on the website. On these pages, members post their likes, dislikes, pictures, thoughts, or whatever else they wish. Over the years, Facebook has increased the level of security on the website, thus protecting vast amounts of personal data.

MySpace

MySpace is the second most popular social networking website in the world (Facebook is number one). The interface on MySpace is different than Facebook, but similar in purpose. Over the past couple years as Facebook passed MySpace in membership, MySpace changed their appearance and features to be more like Facebook.

Twitter

Twitter is a highly popular social networking website that is somewhat of a “microblog”. Twitter users post their thoughts, feelings, locations, actions, or whatever they desire in messages called “tweets”. These “tweets” are limited to a maximum 140 characters. Twitter differs from more comprehensive social networking sites, like Facebook or MySpace, in that Twitter is more of an ongoing conversation, rather than a repository for personal data.

LinkedIn

LinkedIn is a social networking site focused on professional business networking. The website is designed for people to use their “connections” to find new employment or provide support for current

careers. Members of LinkedIn typically maintain a professional appearance on their personal page, almost treating it as an online resume.

YouTube

YouTube, owned by Google, is a social media website where users share videos streaming on the internet. While YouTube is not necessarily what we now know as a traditional social networking website, it thrives on user created content. Users create accounts to share video content they create (in some way).

FOAF

A new technology that could eventually link these tools is called Friend of a Friend (FOAF). Google is using FOAF, and other programming languages, to develop a Social Graph Application Programming Interface (API) that will allow people to search for other people using the public information available on social media websites. Facebook has a similar search feature, but it only searches within Facebook. This new technology will enable greater networking power by users without having to join multiple networks. Such technology is another step towards a semantic web where the computers will be able to execute searches without human command. There are already plugins for integration between Moodle and Facebook and twitter.

Classroom Tools

Graduate Junction

This social networking website was developed by two graduate researchers in the United Kingdom in 2008. The purpose of the website is to link researchers in graduate school with other researchers in similar topics, industry, and other areas of interest. There are currently around 13,000 users of this website.

Wikis

Wikis are websites that allow users to create and develop content to be reviewed by others on the website. These websites are not necessarily social media by definition, but they are a tool being used within units to collaborate and share ideas electronically. Wikis are replacing Learning Management Systems, such as Blackboard and Moodle, in some universities and high schools. Though there are tools Wikis do not have that these systems traditionally offer, users see the benefits of the Wiki's collaborative nature far outweighing the lack of traditional tools.

IMPACT ON LEARNING MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS

Social media websites seem to be slowly creeping in to the traditional markets that employ such learning management systems, such as Blackboard or Moodle. There are several reasons for this. First, social media is, in essence, free. People can login to a social media site without having to pay for a membership or access to a school's page. Second, social media offers a greater level of collaboration in that the format is typically relatively free flowing. Third,

It is possible that social media websites could overtake Blackboard or Moodle, much in the way video rental services, such as Netflix and RedBox has overtaken Blockbuster. How these learning management systems evolve to embrace social media will determine long-term success as the social media outlets become more feature packed. Given the open source nature of learning management systems such as Moodle, there are codes being written for Moodle to work with Facebook, Twitter, and other popular social media websites.

POTENTIAL APPLICATIONS IN GRADUATE EDUCATION

The potential applications of the growing variety of social media tools/websites to graduate education continues to evolve and grow. What follows is a short overview of how these tools/websites can be used in the context of graduate education.

Classroom Tool

One of the main uses of social media is to give students access to curriculum. This is in the form of content knowledge, videos, slide presentations, and lectures. This can be from a wide range of sources.

Posting of assignments is also a useful application. Students can post assignments, both individually and collaboratively. Likewise, assignment can be graded by the instructor in the same manner. The various sites also facilitate collaborative learning. Communicating across distances of time and space is also made possible through the various social media applications.

Student Networking

Building communities and gaining a sense of connectedness are facilitated through effective use of social media. Students can find common interests, share learning experiences and gain a sense of community through these online connections.

Job hunting and career networking are another dimension in which graduate students are leveraging the potential of social media. Students are able to share networking contacts and potential job openings. Students share successful and unsuccessful job hunting and career strategies.

Community Expertise (within discipline)

Faculty and students can gain access to community expertise, within one's own unique discipline, via social media. Access to subject matter experts, whether to access virtually or to establish a face-to-face relationship, is greatly enhanced via the connectivity of social media. Virtual guest speakers are also a possibility.

Professional mentors for students are able to be identified through social media tools. The mentoring relationship itself is further developed and enabled through the effective use of social media tools.

Geographic Networking

A real advantageous use for Graduate Schools, or any university entity, is the geographic networking potential for social media websites. While several major universities may have a strong identity within their geographic region, social media websites give the lesser known colleges and universities a powerful and visible voice without much expense. This is almost a grassroots campaign to bring visibility to lesser known universities without competing with major universities for mainstream media.

Mentoring

Linking students with professionals in desired fields and industries is made much more straightforward via social media. The ability to identify mentors and match them with particular students is critical and social media tools makes this process much more likely to be successful. The social media tools also facilitate the ongoing success of the mentor-mentee relationship.

Alumni Networking

Social media allows schools to connect with alumni and vice versa. The real potential however is social media's ability to connect alumni with other alumni.

Marketing/Recruitment

Social media tools/sites have tremendous potential for reaching prospective students. The social media sites can provide value added content. Highlighting student and faculty activities and achievements via social media helps to market a school's unique attributes. The use of social media also greatly expands the geographic reach of an institution's marketing and recruitment efforts.

Advisory Boards

Social media can connect advisory board members and serve as a value added component to volunteer service. Through social media, board members can not only contribute to the unit to which they are advising but can also connect with each other for idea and information sharing. One example of this is

a colleague who has set up a Wiki within a Moodle shell for advisory board members to share ideas and collaborate with one another.

CHALLENGES

As the social media websites evolve, educators seek new ways to connect with students in a positive and effective way. The open exchange offered by social media websites is very attractive to educators. Up until recently the old-school learning management systems, such as Blackboard or Moodle, did not offer the open exchange the social media websites offered. Today the traditional learning management system companies recognize the importance of this academic “freedom” and are looking at ways to implement social media into their systems. For example, Moodle has a Wiki option. In addition, given Moodle’s open source infrastructure, there are plug-ins written for integration with Facebook and Twitter.

As with every new technology, there has to be new policy. Given the open source nature of social media, to enact and enforce policy on its use seems somewhat of a contradiction of purpose. However, I think most would agree that a standard approach for the purpose of consistent communication makes sense. We ask one question to address this challenge: Who builds, maintains and updates the content?

Since the social media use has to start somewhere, this is an important question to ask. In graduate education professors and administrators are extremely busy with the task of running a quality product; however, these are the people with the most direct interest in what is said about the program. It seems obvious the professors and/or administrators should manage all content going onto a social media website, but this creates a problem. This often will result in a lack of input from the institutional marketing strategy, recruitment strategy, and image management strategy. As this will vary from university to university, it is important to address the academic and operational interests of the social media presence and designate an appropriate strategy for management. So, to answer the question of “who”, the answer is it depends.

CONSEQUENCES

Given the large number of social media websites available, selecting the appropriate ones to utilize is difficult. Additionally, with the advent of FOAF and other tools utilizing public information searches on the social media sites, it raises a question of longevity for the lesser known sites and recent start-ups. Considering this phenomenon is likely near the end of its growth period and entering maturity, great changes are likely to come. The nature of business is to start with only a few entities, grow into a large number of competitors, then settle into a maturity with a few competitors as long as the trend is technologically current. Regarding social media and the vast amount of information stored on the various social media sites, a funnel comes to mind. In other words, a large number of social media sites have been poured into a funnel, with only the most liquid and relevant social media sites coming out of the bottom in a single stream. While there may really never be a single stream, the social media sites will resemble a single stream with new programming codes encouraging social media public search and networking.

RESEARCH – WHAT NOW?

As part of this on-going investigation into the potential use of Social Media in graduate education, one of the next steps will be to conduct qualitative research to explore ideas around the following two questions:

1. How is it being used currently?
2. How could it be used going forward?

The researchers intend to hold focus groups and conduct interviews with students, alumni, faculty, and advisory boards. The information collected will further clarify the potential for the various social media tools to be used in graduate education, in a wide variety of settings.

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