BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES OF SOCIAL MEDIA UTILISATION FOR ACADEMIC PURPOSES: FACULTY PERSPECTIVE

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Olga Almabekova
Assoc. Prof. Dr. Irina Bagdasarian
Prof. Dr. Zoya Vasilyeva
Prof. Dr. Alena A. Stupina
Siberian Federal University, **Russia**

ABSTRACT

Social media have created zones for information sharing, collaboration, community formation and development, but despite their widespread use, little is known about the benefits or challenges of social media technology (SMT) use for academic purposes.

Some publications declare that social media can make a good tool to blend pedagogy and technology in education, thus enhancing involvement of students who regard social networks as an inseparable part of their life.

Furthermore, SMT is regarded useful to add to the repertoire of learning resources providing opportunities to make learning more individualized and flexible, developing student and faculty autonomy and self-management.

One of the revealed concerns is regarding SMT potentially disruptive, able to divert students' attention from classroom participation tempting them to go to entertainment sites and put assignments aside. Organizational challenges include additional workload for faculty and students, especially for teachers who are not technologically savvy and have difficulty in adapting available tools.

The purpose of this article is to explore the benefits and challenges of using SMT for education purposes by analyzing publications and the results of the survey conducted in one of the largest universities in Russia - Siberian Federal University in Krasnoyarsk.

The results revealed mostly positive attitude of the faculty to SMT use in training students of Economics, Marketing and Management, the major benefits for students being motivation and better self-management in individual work. As for teachers, they reported enriched learning experiences and availability of resources for self and teacher development.

Among major challenges are faculty and students' heavy workloads and not good and safe enough technology infrastructure.

To conclude, there are numerous opportunities for researchers and educators to continue the research on SMT integration in educational environments and determining the ways to limit the challenges of social media used for academic purposes.

Key words: social media technologies, SMT, higher education, faculty use of SMT, integration of SMT in education.

INTRODUCTION

The World Wide Web has changed its role of a storage of information and a collection of websites to a social environment where "users are not only passive

receivers or active harvesters of information, but also creators of content" Bruns [3 p. 22]. Both foreign and Russian social surveys confirm active involvement of internet users in social networking. According to *Romir* scientific holding [10], by late 2012, 8 out of 10 internet users of 18 years or older have at least one account in a social network.

Davis, Deil-Amen, Rios-Aguilar, & Gonzalez Canche [3] define the term *social media technology (SMT)* as "web-based and mobile applications that allow individuals and organizations to create, engage, and share new user-generated or existing content, in digital environments through multi-way communication" [3, p. 6].

Social media have created zones for information sharing, collaboration, community formation and development [2] . These technologies now include media (audio, photo, video, text) sharing tools, networking platforms, blogs, wikis, and virtual worlds.

Thus, *SMT* is used as an umbrella term for all social media and computer-mediated communication, including but not limited to Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and Myspace, as well as social networking sites of Cyworld, Bebo and Friendster. Every country has its own SM using a native language, in Russia, for example, these are VKontakte, Odnoklassniki, my.mail.ru, etc.

Most SMT are aimed at social interaction support and according to the survey made in 2012 in Moscow, 1000 adult respondent reported of 93% using them for communication with peers, while only 18 % - for other purposes, including educational and occupational. These affect the site content, mostly being of entertainment character.

But SMT can have a professional or occupational orientation, like sites for professional associations, e.g. *SPELTA (*Saint Petersburg associations for English language teachers); *Nasha set'* (Our Net) for educators of all levels; *Dnevnik.ru*   - integral network for parents and schoolchildren and teachers, including distance learning portal, document flow circulation; *4portfolio.ru* – social media for creating and storage of e-portfolio, achievement results in digital format in texts, graphic and audio files, videos [8] .

 Also, there is a number of SMT being educational learning and content management systems, such as Blackboard, eLearning Suite, WebCT, Desire2Learn. These educational platforms serve specific instructional purposes framed by institutions and are not designed to support user-generated content as the primary purpose of exchanges and interactions on the platform. Moreover, they remain inaccessible to the general public who are neither university personnel nor enrolled students.

Despite the widespread use of SMT, little is known about the benefits of its use in universities and colleges. Some publications [1, 5] argue that in education, social media technologies are becoming a useful tool to add to the repertoire of learning resources, thus enhancing student's engagement and motivation. Another perspective is using social media tools in combination with distance education providing new approaches to teaching and learning that blend pedagogy and technology. It is critical to begin to examine if and how higher education institutions are incorporating the use of SMT. In particular, to what extent are they using it to facilitate faculty?

The purpose of this article is to explore best practices of using social media in higher education by faculty in both traditional and distance learning formats. The authors analyse the benefits and challenges of using SMT for education purposes, basing on publications and research results based on one of the largest universities in Russia - Siberian Federal University in Krasnoyarsk.

SMT in Teaching and Learning

The growing interest in social dimensions of learning has led educators and curriculum designers to the need to explore the integration of social media in both traditional and distance learning environments; the use of social media for education in formal and informal learning settings; the use of social media by students and faculty and a variety of ways to use SMT that include: sharing of resources, collaborative learning, problem based learning and reflective practice.

Social Media and Faculty

Despite the worldwide growth of social media for personal use, educators have been slow to use SMT for education. This can be evidenced by the results of both Russian and American surveys. The Faculty Survey of Student Engagement (FSSE, 2010) surveyed 4,600 faculty members from 50 U.S. colleges and universities and discovered that over 80% of the faculty had never used SMT such as blogs, wikis, Google docs, video conferencing, video games, or virtual worlds. Through telephone interviews, 57 faculty members from 28 universities across the United States indicated 100% use of social media either for personal, academic, research, or professional purposes, with the majority using Facebook for personal communication and LinkedIn for professional connections. At the same time, according to recent publications (2013, 2014) in educational journals in Russia, many university professors are still skeptical about educational value of SMT.

An interesting research was conducted by Murphy and Ch. Simmonds who managed to reveal a direct positive relation between psychological climate in a university classroom and a teacher's activity in Facebook. All three hypotheses about positive affect of a teacher self- realization through a SMT on students' motivation to learning, level of their grades, and their attitude to the discipline taught proved to be true [4 p 59].

As documented in the research conducted by Pew Research Center's Internet and American Life Project in 2010, only a low percentage of users are applying SM resources for education. Mostly they are involved in content creation activities, like *sharing* content such as photos, videos, and artwork, often self created; *remixing* material such as images to demonstrate their artistic abilities; and *blogging* to inform, update, or notify peers about specific events or topics, and professional connections.

Surveys have identified main trends in using SMT by educators for academic purposes.

The easiest way is to employ SMT as a collection of readymade learning tasks and resources, which many professional sites offer for both teachers and students.

Many university professors see SMT as a tool for self and professional development. With not much financing, especially in crises times for taking retraining courses conducted in prominent universities, webinars, carried out by famous experts in the field and on-line courses organized by edX, Coursera and similar educational platforms can serve an indispensable source of new knowledge and skills. Sites of professional associations are places for networking, where such SMT tools as forums, blogs, and storages of valuable activities in text, audio and video formats are used. But, unfortunately, most teachers, being passive or too busy for communication with peers in forums, are subscribed to professional sites and after a disclaimer   visit the site collection of resources ti pick up a useful text or task.

 For the faculty being advanced in IT, a useful way is to apply social media as an instructional medium to blend informal learning into formal learning environments,

SMT thus becoming a tool for enhancing student motivation and involvement, as well as providing opportunities for self-expression, self-reflection, and social interaction in both traditional and distance learning environments.

SMT in Traditional Learning

In traditional learning environment SMT are used as a means to maintain contacts with students, e.g. through a course site, where learning materials can be stored in a comfortable electronic format and there are tools to inform students, provide them with home tasks and conduct assessment like test taking. Twitter, for example, can be used for various types of academic and co-curricular discussions, class and campus event reminders, faculty and student connections, providing academic and personal support, and organizing service learning projects and study groups.

Moreover, a variety of social media tools can serve as means to provide participants with content in an easified format: through anecdotes and examples, thus, strengthening student motivation by making learning more informal and considering Multiple Intelligence theory, making students involvement individualized [5] .

Faculty also use SMT for building students' reflective competence through self-management and self-evaluation activities based on individual and independent reading beyond the course obligatory literature, experimenting with Google alerts, enhancing student participation in subject competitions and online quizzes.

SMT in Distance Learning

For distance learning, faculty can use course sites as a place for sharing and discussing course related topics and for fostering collaborative connections across content areas. The networking site is used as a core technological component in the fully online course and as a supplement component in the blended courses.

Facebook is regarded as the SMT providing possibility of blending a traditional, face-to-face course with online training. It can be used as a platform for group discussions and chat, out-of-class activities, uploading documents, and sharing information by posting texts, videos, pictures, and links. Facebook can also serve as the host site to facilitate interaction through online forums and for submitting assignments. The evaluation process can involve pre- and post-semester questionnaires, weekly feedback from students and project-specific reflections. The findings of a number of experiments with using Facebook in distance learning suggest that "students were able to develop academic relationships freed from the challenges of the classroom and gradually online discussions evolved from formal academic critiques to informal social interactions" [9 p. 732].

Elgg, an open source framework that involves such SM tools as blogs, social bookmarks, collaborative document authoring, and microblogging is another good example of SMT of high educational value. The study conducted at a large public university in the United States presented the framework of the interpretive research paradigm in which the case study method was employed [11]. Course requirements included watching and listened to video resources shared by the instructor and responding to self-reflective questions and comments on blogs and social bookmarks. Additionally, students created personal profiles and "friend" lists, posted status updates, followed activity streams, and subscribed to be notified of other users' actions within the environment.

To sum up, the bank of ways to apply SMT in education is very reach and the variety of ideas by creative instructors is incredible. The authors came across the article, which outlines up to 100 ways of using SMT for academic purposes [13]. But, for many university professors the question – to use or not to use SMT is still open.

Social Media Use for Education – Benefits and Challenges

There is an ongoing debate on the integration of social media in education in general and university education in particular.

Advocates of social media usage focus on the benefits of using social media for education while critics are calling for regulations and/or the removal of such online technologies in the classroom. Finding the golden mean is not easy.

Benefits

Advocates argue that now college students consider social media as an inseparable part of the world; thereby, as an educational tool, social media enriches the learning experience by allowing students and faculty to exchange ideas, enhance collaboration and communication, and engage and interact using such social platforms when added to the bank of the faculty instructional tools [5] .

We agree with Lederer [6] who outlines several benefits to using social media in education.

First, social media is an effective way to enhance student engagement and build communication skills by allowing students to feel more comfortable expressing themselves in a less intimidating environment.

Secondly, social media can facilitate university professors in improving communication between students and faculty, and provide opportunity and place for the faculty to answer students' questions, post homework assignments and lesson plans, send messages and updates, schedule or announce upcoming events, and share Web sites and multimedia content [11]. Finally, SMT have a potential as an employment post for faculty or students to find a vacancy by establishing a professional Web presence, posting a resume, and researching potential employers.

We have identified another important benefit for the faculty. SMT can serve as a tool of personal and professional development via sites of professional associations for networking, taking part in webinars (in most cases for free), participating in TD courses conducted distantly by based on educational platforms like edX, Coursera, Ellison, etc. with additional value of taking TD courses in English-speaking environment thus developing English proficiency alongside with instructional and methodical competences.

Other SMT benefits mentioned both by faculty and students in a number of surveys are the following:

- Independence from time and space constraints.
- Making learning and teaching more informal and comfortable.
- Opportunity to utilize a variety of sources and most topical information.
- Opportunity to individualize learning by arranging an individual learning trajectory, especially in distance learning.
- Economizing on time and money resources.

Taking benefits from relational resources via collaboration with peers, sharing resources with other institutions sometimes from another part of the world.

Challenges

Despite the mentioned above benefits, critics argue that there are serious risks to using social media in the classroom. Furthermore, educators and curricular designers regard social media technologies as not always appropriate nor successful tools for teaching and learning activities [12].

The challenges with SMT use can be classified as psychological, technological, methodical organizational and information safety.

The first concern mentioned by many teachers is seeing Facebook and Twitter disruptive to the learning process as they can divert students' attention from classroom participation. Going into the internet, students may be tempted to go to entertainment sites and put aside doing assignments, thus wasting time.

Another psychological concern is that social media can discourage face-to-face communication, that is, "while real-time digital stream may create a safe harbor for students who are uncomfortable expressing themselves, students are missing valuable lessons in real-life social skills" [6 p. 2].

One more problem is seen in a low motivation to use SMT for education on the part of both students and faculty, which is connected with organizational issues.

Organizational challenges arising when using social media in education include additional workload for faculty and students, especially for teachers who are not technologically savvy and have difficulty in adapting available tools.

Technology infrastructure can also pose security challenges for using social media to engage students. Third-party Web-based innovations are a major concern for most universities because the information is stored outside secure campus servers, while the development of a social networking site may be too expensive [7].

Other challenges concern methodical issues, i.e. suitability and appropriate integration of social media technologies into curriculum. For successful integration, social media technologies should become a seamless part of the curriculum, including specific teaching and assessment tools and not just an additional means of communication.

And, finally, a specific challenge for Russian professors is low English language proficiency, limiting the learning environment to SMT with Russian language interface.

To sum up, major challenges to further use of social media for education are time constraints and faculty workloads, information security and privacy issues, the lack of innovative practice in training and assessment.

While the debate continues regarding the pros and cons of using social media for education, no one can argue the influence that social networking has on today's education.

Conclusion: The growing interest in social media has led educators to examine its potential use for academic purposes.

The reviewed literature and surveys suggest that social media have a high potential in training and education. Many of the studies reported a willingness of faculty to utilize SMT not only to enhance student engagement, but also to provide course content in a more active and interactive way.

With respect to the traditional classroom environment, faculty and curriculum designers have successfully utilized social media technologies for various types of academic activities that include collaborative learning, inquiry-based learning and reflective learning.

Based on students' and faculty responses, it is evident that using social media in distance learning environments allowed for increased collaboration, communication, and interaction through blogging, document sharing, networking.

Despite its popularity, there is an ongoing debate concerning the role of social media in education. Advocates point to enhanced student engagement, enriched learning experiences, and increased communications as reasons to incorporate social technologies in the learning environment, while critics mention faculty and student workloads, and technology infrastructure and safety problems as well as psychological concerns as reasons to limit using social media in education.

There are numerous opportunities for researchers and educators to continue the research on determining the usefulness of social media for educational purposes.

REFERENCES

[1] Bekchtereva L.G., Margolis N.Yu., Nikitenko V.A., Opportunities to Use Social Media in Modern Higher Education'.Molodoy ucheny' (Young scientist), 6, pp 575-578, 2015.

[2] Bruns A., Blogs, Wikipedia, Second Life, and beyond: From production to prod usag,. New York, NY: Lang. 2008

[3] Regina Deil-Amen, Cecilia Rios-Aguilar, Charles H.F. Davis III, Manuel Sacramento Gonzalez Canche, Social Media in Higher Education: A literature review and research directions, 2012. Available at: http://works.bepress.com/hfdavis/2

[4] Efimov E. G., Dulina N. V., 'Social media use in educational process under federal state educational standards of the RF (survey of foreign publications)' // Izvestia of the Volgograd State Technical University 10, № 13 (116), 58–61, 2013.

[5] Guy Retta, The Use of Social Media for Education: A Review of Literature, Kentucky Journal of Higher Education Policy and Practice, vol. 1: Iss. 2, Article 7, 2012, available from: http://uknowledge.uky.edu/kjhepp/vol1/iss2/7

[6] Lederer K., Pros and cons of social media in the classroom. Campus Technology, 25(5), pp 1-2, 2012.

[7] Lester J. & Perini, M. Potential of social networking sites for distance education student engagement. New Direction for Community Colleges, 2010, pp 50, 67-77.

[8] Lun'kova E.Yu., 'The opportunities of employing informational and educational environment in training students in Psychology'. Culture and education (Kultura I obrazopvanie) 1, 2013. Available from: http://vestnik-rzi.ru/2013/09/822

[9] McCarthy J., Utilising Facebook: Immersing Generation-Y students into first year university. Ergo, 1(2), 2009, pp 39-49.

[10] Social Web. Sociologic research conducted by Romir holding available at http://www.romir.ru/studies/431_1360008000/

[11] Veletsianos G. & Navarrete C., Online social networks as forming learning environments: learner experiences and activities, The International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning, 13(1), pp 144-166, 2012.

[12] Waycott J., Bennett S., Kennedy G., Dalgamo, B. & Gray, K., Digital divides? Student and staff perceptions of information and communication technologies. Computers &Education, 54, pp 1202-1211, 2010.

[13] 100 Inspiring Ways to Use Social Media in the Classroom, 2010. Available from: http://www.onlineuniversities.com/about