Chapter 1

Making Connections:
How Students Use Social Media to Create Personal Learning Networks

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In their personal lives, many students are using social media to create, communicate, and connect with others from around the world. Yet, the research suggests that students' use of these tools in an academic setting is often minimal, at best. This chapter examines the use of social media by students to extend the learning beyond the formal boundaries of one fully online course. Using a social media tool, the students were instructed to follow individuals affiliated with the topics covered with this course throughout the semester. The purpose of this activity was to provide students with informal learning opportunities and enable them to make connections with individuals in the field. While a small number of students initially expressed frustration with the tools, as well as the quality and quantity of the content, the majority stated that this activity led to a greater understanding of the course topic.

BACKGROUND

Today's students come to campus with more than just email; they come with a variety of technology devices and Internet-based accounts. For example, an EDUCAUSE Center for Applied Research (ECAR) study (Smith, Caruso, & Kim, 2010) reports

that the number of students using social networking sites continues to rise. In fact, 97% of the student participants responded that they use Facebook (p. 55). By 2014, the Millennial generation will make up about half of the workforce (Bingham & Conner, 2010). Most of these individuals embrace the digital world and are active technology users (Barnes & Tynan, 2007). At the same time, however, personal use of tools such as social media does not necessarily transfer to their learning activities. In fact, studies have shown that some students resent "invasions" into their personal online space by institutions (e.g., Towner & Muñoz, 2011).

TECHNOLOGY AND LEARNING NETWORKS

Social Media, Engagement, and Interactivity

Learning is not confined to the classroom and does not stop upon graduation. Instead, learning occurs while students are out in the world, and this continues throughout their lives. In an information technology world, a plethora of knowledge is accessible across people and networks. This access to information provides students the opportunity to take control of their learning and to acquire knowledge in a variety of different ways. Being able to locate information in this technology-rich era becomes more important than memorizing content.

In contrast to the traditional classroom setting, social media sites are driven by user created content, which make them dynamic and continuously updated (O'Reilly, 2005). This architecture of involvement allows for what Jenkins (2006) describes as a participatory culture—one where media spectatorship is no longer passive with users and producers in distinct roles. Instead, the user-producer relationship is more symbiotic and both sides interact and influence one another. In other words, social media users are able to do more than merely consume content; they are able to create, and share resources, as well.

Typically, the term blended learning (sometimes also referred to as hybrid learning) is an approach that combines face-to-face with online learning (Dziuban, Hartman, & Moskal, 2004). More recently, however, some scholars have argued that a different type of blended learning approach is needed—one that combines or mashes up formal and informal learning experiences and structures (Dron & Anderson, 2009; Wheeler, 2011). While the reports suggest that almost all college students are using social media for personal use (e.g., Smith, Caruso, & Kim, 2010; Towner & Muñoz, 2011), there is evidence to suggest that students may be open to using social media to support the classroom experience (e.g., Roblyer, McDaniel, Webb, Herman, & Witty, 2010). If this form of adoption takes place, informal activities using social media could be blended with the formal course structure.

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