Chapter 13
Social Media and Other Web 2.0 Technologies as Communication Channels in a Cross-Cultural, Web-Based Professional Communication Project

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, cross-national web-based teaching projects have become very popular in many fields. During such projects, participants from different countries work together on collaborative tasks. Communications among project participants take place over the Internet, including via social media. In this chapter, the author reports the results of social media use in one such project, which brought together students from the United States and Ukraine. A pre and post project survey taken by the participants demonstrate the main opportunities and challenges afforded by social media to educators. The reporting and analysis of the survey results are preceded by a review of relevant literature, which contextualizes our findings.

INTRODUCTION

With the globalization of not only the world economies but also of world educational systems (Vaira 2004), cross-cultural and cross-national collaborative learning and teaching using online tools has become more possible. Projects, which bring together faculty and students from different countries, not only enrich the cultural experiences and awareness of participants, but also give learners valuable professional skills and competencies. (Herrington 2010). Among such skills are the abilities to work in virtual distributed teams, to understand and interact with representatives of other cultures professionally, and to manage complex communication projects, which span nations, continents, and time zones. (Maznevski and Chudoba 2000).

In the field of professional communication, one viable method of teaching students based in different countries is through web-based projects during which learners work in virtual teams on writing, design, and other professional communication tasks. The availability of a wide array of online communication and collaboration tools, from wikis and other collaborative writing spaces to free audio and video-conferencing solutions, has allowed many professional communication instructors and students to participate in such projects.

Students need to be exposed to other cultures and the ways in which professionals function in other cultures, because of the globalized nature of today's workplace. University graduates will be increasingly expected to function in environments which combine global and local traits. (Maznevski and Chudoba 2000). Therefore, experiencing teamwork with locally and remotely based colleagues, among other things, is important for the achievement of students' cross-cultural competencies.

Social media and Web 2.0 communication technologies have lowered the barrier to the development and implementation of such projects by reducing or completely eliminating the cost associated with this work. Because many of the technological tools needed for the success of such projects are either free or very cheap, the burden of developing and carrying out these projects has shifted from the financial sphere to the areas of participant training in the most effective pedagogical approaches to such projects as well as in the use of the wide range of available web technologies. Coupled with an already high rate of social media use by young people (Lenhart et al, 2010), the low cost of social media makes them a natural fit for international and intercultural educational projects conducted over the Internet.

The purpose of this chapter is to provide our audience with theory-grounded but practical and usable ways of developing and implementing their own web-based learning projects. To accomplish this goal, we describe and analyze a collaborative web-based professional communication project, which we taught to a group of American and Ukrainian students in 2009. Specifically, we conduct a critical analysis of the use of social media and other web communication technologies during the project. Sound practice should be grounded in theory. Therefore, our analysis is preceded by a review of literature on the subject of cross-national and cross-cultural virtual teaching and learning in professional communication and related disciplines. It is followed by a set of research and teaching recommendations for educators and practicing professionals. In the chapter, we explore the following questions:

- To what extent do social media and other web 2.0 tools not only serve as communication tools for virtual projects but shape the learning and teaching which happens during those projects?

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