University Faculty and Student Use of Social Media in Higher Education

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INTRODUCTION

This article examines the ever-growing popularity of social media in the academic environment. The intent of this research project was to examine the levels of usage among university/college faculty and students with three popular social media applications: Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. In addition, this study examined the use and applications of these social media in college/university courses. Students' willingness to take, or not take, a university professor's course based on the level(s) of social media inclusion was also examined. Students selected for this study were a combination of academic levels—freshmen through doctoral. The results indicated that all levels of students had a high degree of interaction with Facebook, a moderate level of interaction with YouTube, and minimal interaction with Twitter in their personal lives. However, the results also indicated little transfer of this level of usage to their college and university course activities and assignments. University faculty indicated a rather high level of personal usage of these social media, but faculty did not always consider integration of these media into courses and instruction. The majority of students surveyed indicated the level of social media used, or not used, in a course by a professor had little or no influence on their decision to schedule those courses.

BACKGROUND

In developing this article, three of the most popular social media applications—Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter—and their utilization by higher education faculty and students were examined. This research did not distinguish between online, hybrid, and traditional classroom learning environments but examined the personal usage and integration of social media into an instructor's course requirements. By now most higher education faculty realize that this generation of students, sometimes called "Millennial" or "Net" use the Internet differently and may even learn differently than previous generations (Willingham, 22010). Today's students seem to have different styles of information processing. This is not to judge if this new style of learning is better or worse, just that it is different. It is evident from the results of this study that social media is widely used by college students and faculty, but the transfer of this usage to classroom learning and course implementation doesn't appear to be at the same high levels. It is also evident that college students at all levels, freshmen through doctoral, are on a continuous search for newer and better social media formats to supplement and support their academic learning.

One of the challenges of this type of research was to accurately define the term, "social media." Most educators who use social media in their personal lives or in their work or studies would consider it to be more of a bottom-up rather than a top-down format. We jump in at a certain level and build up from there; new friends, contacts and sources of information develop over time. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) defined social media as a collection of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 and allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content (p. 61). Included within social media are collaborative projects such as Wikipedia, Facebook, and MySpace; blogs such as Twitter; and content communities such as YouTube. According to Matt Silverman (2012), schools are on a short list of organizations that have been notoriously slow to adopt emerging technology. But within the last few years, as social media becomes more integral to student lives, educational institutions are finally catching on and catching up. Pearson and the Babson Survey Research Group (2012) released the results of their latest survey of how higher-education faculty use social media. The

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results indicated that almost 34 percent of the faculty sampled used some form of social media (defined as blogs/wikis, Facebook, LinkedIn, podcasts, or Twitter) for teaching purposes. A study by Reynol (2012) reported that faculty are becoming more comfortable incorporating social media into the classroom. In this study, results indicated that Facebook is used more for teaching purposes than Twitter. The study also indicated that a barrier to using social media in the classroom is "concerns about privacy" primarily related to Facebook and Twitter as they tend to be more public. There is an obvious high level of awareness of social media among those in higher education. Faculty members in particular are familiar with social media with over 90 percent reporting they are aware of such sites as MySpace, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and blogs. The awareness level drops somewhat for other sites, with over 80 percent saying that they know of wikis, LinkedIn, and Flickr SlideShare (Moran. M., Seaman. Jeff., Tinti-Kane., Hester, 2011).

In her article on the social media revolution, Dubose (2011) suggested that integrating social media into the virtual classroom is attractive on several levels: it appears to enhance student learning and satisfaction as well as lower overall instructional cost. However, very few empirical studies to date have been done in this arena, and this certainly limits what conclusions may be drawn about the future of social media as an effective instructional tool. In any event, it is becoming increasingly obvious that social media is becoming a large part of university teaching and learning. Weiskopf (2012) asserted that social media is now part of daily behavior and predicts that social media will become the leading avenue for business communication. Results from a survey released in 2011 from Arbitron Inc. indicated that 48 percent of people twelve years and older have profiles on social networking sites. Thirty percent of these also use these sites several times a day (Weiskopf, 2012, p. 4). She noted that in 2011, Facebook had 750 million users and Twitter had 200 million users with one-billion-plus *tweets* a week. Of the most visited websites in the United States, 40 percent were social-media sites.

If social media can be said to be a feature of everyone's life (Bauerlein, 2012), and its use continues to grow in all areas of mainstream society (Dubose, 2011; Weiskopf, 2012), we can safely assume that social media used by students in online, blended, or traditional courses will also expand. In her study of Facebook use to enhance teaching and learning, Bosch (2009) reviewed how students and instructors at one university might use technology, specifically social networking, to improve instruction and facilitate learning, arguably resulting in increased levels of satisfaction with both teaching and learning. Social media has even affected spelling in online learning but not always in a good way. Jack Bovill, chair of the English Spelling Society stated: "Accurate spelling is of the utmost importance, but from a recent survey we can conclude that the unprecedented reach and scale of the Internet has given rise to new social practices and is now an agent in spelling change" (Bovill, 2010).

MAIN FOCUS OF THE ARTICLE

For the purposes of this study, data was gathered on the three most popular forms of social media: Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. Mark Zuckerberg founded Facebook with his college roommates and fellow Harvard University students in 2004. As of September 2012, Facebook has over one billion active users with an estimated 41.6 percent of the US population having a Facebook account (Social Media Today, 2010). Twitter is a social-networking and micro-blogging service developed in San Francisco and first launched in October 2006. Twitter posts, or tweets, can be no longer than 140 characters in length and can include hyperlinks. In addition, Twitter users can make use of *hashtags*, which are powerful tools that allow users to track what other people are reporting or thinking about a particular topic or event. YouTube is a company founded by Chad Hurley, Steve Chen, and Jawed Karim. YouTube was launched in June 2005 and is now owned by Google. With YouTube, users can create and upload digital video content, which is watched by audiences around the world.

To advance research on the impact of social media on learning, this study asked students a series of questions on how much they use social media in their day-to-day lives and in their college/university level courses. In addition, their use of social media to enhance learning through involvement with course activities and assignments was examined. The survey also sought information on how the use of social media by an