Chapter 26
Social Media in Higher Education:
Enriching Graduate Students' Professional Growth Outside the Classroom

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ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses the current use of social media for professional growth, focusing on a case study that uses social media to increase instructional design graduate students' awareness and participation in professional growth opportunities. Social media metrics were analyzed from three social networking tools (Facebook Page, Twitter account, and/or Google+ community) that are used to communicate with the students in the program. Additional data was collected using an electronic questionnaire with open and closed-ended questions. The results show that graduate students' participation in the social media initiatives for professional growth provided awareness of self-directed, voluntary, and informal learning opportunities; engaged students in conversations with their peers and the instructors; and allowed the learners to expand their learning experience outside the traditional classroom format.

INTRODUCTION

As Internet capabilities and applications have evolved, the tools and technologies have become more sophisticated, increasingly interactive, highly accessible, affordable, and specialized (Tuten & Marks, 2012). This evolved state is referred to as Web 2.0. The Web 2.0 applications make it easy for users to participate and benefit from the value of the community who contributes in the form of content. Web 2.0 technologies emphasize the interaction, community, and openness between users (Riady, 2014). Lastly, Web 2.0 is a concept that made the evolution of social media possible. Social media is a means of communication, conveyance, and collaboration among interconnected and interdependent networks. These capabilities affect many areas of life, including businesses practices, individual's behavior, and how educators teach (Alvermann, Hutchins, & McDevitt, 2012; Tuten & Marks, 2012).

The use of social media has increased tremendously in the last decade (Benson & Morgan, 2013; C. Evans, 2014; Tuten & Marks, 2012). Since the emergence of the first social media networks two decades ago, social media has evolved to offer people around the world new and meaningful ways to engage (Al-zouebi & Isakovic, 2014). In 2015, social media continues to grow rapidly, becoming an integral part of our lives. Today, youth engage in interpersonal relationships through social media more than ever. Their relationships are often supported through participation in social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter and other social media channels (Allen & Nelson, 2013). There has been a shift in the demographic of social media usage, while the younger generation appears to dominate Facebook usage, nevertheless 46 percent of Facebook users are 45 years old and over (Benson & Morgan, 2013).

Public and private sector organizations use social media to establish effective communication channels with customers and stakeholders (Benson & Morgan, 2013). Similarly, hoping to meet student expectations and include popular communication channels, universities have incorporated social networking into their marketing as well as learning and teaching strategy (Benson & Morgan, 2013; Constantinides & Zinck Stagno, 2011). The 2010 – 2011 University of Massachusetts Dartmouth Center for Marketing Research survey of four-year colleges and universities found that all of the institutions surveyed used social media for recruitment and almost all had a Facebook Page (C. D. Wilson, 2013).

Nonetheless, higher education institutions and programs are still learning about the effectiveness and resources required to properly manage social media communication channels. How universities can best use the substantial growth of social media for teaching and learning is yet to be researched. This chapter addresses this lack of knowledge by studying the consequences of a social media initiative as a means to increase awareness of professional development and informal learning opportunities for graduate students in a master level program.

The chapter will provide a review of the literature on the current use of social media in higher education and the possibilities it provides for seamless professional growth for graduate students. The chapter will also discuss the theoretical framework for this investigation, transformative learning opportunities and how it applies to social media as a tool for professional development and information learning. Lastly, the chapter will provide a detail explanation of the case study including the participants, setting, data collection methods, quantitative and qualitative results, discussion, and recommendations based on the findings.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Defined as a group of internet-based applications for the creation and exchange of user-generated content, social media sites take on many forms such as blogs, wikis, and social networking sites (Constantinides & Zinck Stagno, 2011; C. Evans, 2014; Luo, Wang, & Han, 2013). These social media channels maximize exposure, build discussion groups and collaborative work, and build loyalty (Luo et al., 2013). Social networking sites, in particular, have become part of the daily routine of people with access to the Internet via a personal computer, tablet, or smartphone (Looi et al., 2010). It helps individuals stay connected to friends, family members, and colleagues (Aydin, 2012). Social networking sites also disseminate information among users. For example, Twitter is a microblogging platform, which allows users to send and read text-based messages called tweets (with up to 140 characters). Furthermore, Twitter enables one to link to blog posts and spread recent news (Balakrishnan, 2014; C. Evans, 2014). Users can also send

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