Chapter 2
The Role of Social Media as a Tool for Learning

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ABSTRACT

The use of Web 2.0 social media such as Wikipedia, YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and virtual worlds is rapidly increasing and transformational modes of communication are emerging (Greenhow, Robelia & Hughes, 2009; Godwin, 2008; O'Reilly, 2005). Public and private sector organizations are faced with the challenges of adapting their communication practices to the rapidly changing demands of the social media environment that present risks to both information security and privacy, changes to long-established policies and organizational culture, and the rewards of deeper involvement and collaboration with users. As social media transforms communication within all organizations, its potential to transform learning is also becoming apparent. This chapter promotes a better understanding of the effects social media has on learning and the importance to learners and the learning process, with special emphasis on its effect when combining face-to-face and distance learning. The subtopic for this chapter, HCI for the Web 2.0 environment seen through a corporate training lens, is emphasized with education and training examples from corporate, K-12, university and government sectors.

INTRODUCTION

While logos of Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, and YouTube are increasing on corporate, government and educational institution websites, the strategy guiding these initial implementations limits social media's full impact. Social media are utilized as just another channel to disseminate news briefs and provide links to draw the reader to the main website for more information, rather than providing a conduit of interactivity between the reader and the content (Gordon-Murnane, 2010). By fully

enabling the interactive aspects of social media that will enhance learning, this invites a radical degree of open information-sharing with the public, and legal and regulatory risks that accompany such changes to long established communication practices. Even when the benefits of openness and transparency are weighed and risks accounted for, implementation of social media is difficult because it calls for not only new practices and policies, but new corporate and institutional culture. Kundra (2009) states that the full implications of social media use by government will change the nature of government information-sharing to and with the public and will require a massive transformation of practices to ensure that authorities can deal with this new reality.

The arrival of social media on the front pages of private and public sector education and corporate training websites indicates the earliest stage of this new reality of public information sharing, and the effects are beginning to be recognized. Social media are opening new dimensions of public communications and accelerating change. The role social media played and continues to play in the political upheavals in Tunisia, Egypt, and other countries in the 'Arab Spring' of 2011 demonstrates that it is becoming the political pamphlet of the 21st century, capable of accelerating and spreading protest and even revolution (Gustin, 2011). The effect social media has on other forms of communication is less dramatic but no less potent. Educators and trainers are facing the new reality that social media poses to disrupt the traditional learning paradigm, by experimenting with different social media to supplement traditional face-to-face learning to test the suitability of social media as a formal tool for workplace learning (Losey, 2010; Lipowicz, 2010). As with information-sharing practices and policies, implementing social media for educating and training requires a transformation of institutional pedagogy and culture. For learning, social media represents a radically new paradigm of literacy and collaboration, changing the normative

relationship between learners and instructors to the open collaboration found in Web 2.0 environments (Greenhow et al., 2009).

What is required to make this reality is a new educational philosophy and pedagogy that will tame social media by "bringing its public, fragmented and slippery form ... within the constrained and relatively rigid framework of formal assessment practice" (Hemmi, Bayne & Land, 2009, p. 25).

Emerging research on the potential of social media for distance learning is being applied in theoretical models and new normative contexts of use. In different settings, experimental stand-alone social-media-integrated courses and models blending social media with live instructor support are being tried, measured, and evaluated against traditional face-to-face (F2F) instruction (Väljataga & Fiedler, 2009; So & Brush, 2009; Bagley & Chou, 2007). Advocates of social media in learning are applying this new knowledge in producing learning and training courses integrated with social media.

This chapter will further describe and provide the theoretical basis for social media effects on the learner, particularly emphasizing: social presence; transactional distance; and community/socio-cultural context of knowledge. The effect of social media on the learning process will also be described and supported: feedback and interactivity; cognitive load; human-computer interaction (HCI); and instructional design. Examples of social media use and solutions for dealing with issues and controversies will be provided from multiple learning sectors including K-12 education, university, corporate and government.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The potential of social media for learning is increasing as a greater understanding of the technologies and emerging patterns of use is explored and justified. Social media integration into K-12

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