Case Study

Social Media as a Professional Medium: an equilibrium of enthusiasm and protection for student teachers

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Abstract

This paper is based on a case study of practice which explores the use of social media within a blended mode of study. Specifically, it aims to consider the professional use of online social contexts to support teaching and encourage collaboration between learners. It will illustrate some factors intended to protect their digital identities, confidence and online well-being. This paper draws upon the recent report within the University of Glasgow - Analysis of digital media: supporting university-wide online learning via Moodle (Dunn et al, 2015). This case study is also based upon similar international works, for your reference; (Carpenter and Krutka, 2014: Honeycutt and Herring, 2009: Kassen-Noor, 2012: Junco et al, 2010).

Keywords

Technology Enhanced Learning, Blended, Collaboration, Online Well-Being, Safety, Digital Identity, Twitter, Blogging

Introduction

In 2014/15, The University of Glasgow School of Education established a new blended learning course at undergraduate level 1 (initial teacher education). It was the overall aim of the course to expose students to an eclectic mix of exciting ideas within education. The course is designed to challenge their thinking within their first semester of study by asking big questions within

education. Delivered through the Moodle virtual learning environment (VLE), students and teaching staff are expected to engage in professional dialogue by blogging and participating in discussion through social networking platforms such as Twitter (see: Hashtag #MEduc14 and #MEduc15). The course aims to enable students to demonstrate an understanding of the foundational content and values of education and to be able to articulate a personal stance towards the discipline. It aims to enable them to engage with conventional and new modes of communication as well as facilitating personal confidence and collaborative styles of working through new and emerging online technologies. As part of their assessment, students must evidence their online collaboration through the production of both verbal and visual media e.g. YouTube, Wordpress, Instagram etc. The exact nature of their collaboration is at the discretion of the student, however staff model good practice via Twitter as a professional medium. The course takes a pragmatic look on the use of social media for learning and teaching and seeks to protect the newly created digital identities of the students as they begin their career as primary school teachers. Crucially, this paper makes a series of suggestions, which other educators may wish to consider when encouraging their own students to create online learning networks and digital media for teaching, learning and collaboration.

Course Architecture and Theoretical Framework

The course is open for Semester 1 (September to December). It consists of 11 (weekly) taught sessions. Three weeks are given to located learning sessions and the remainder are delivered as online components. Located and online learning has been defined by Dunn as those sessions that are delivered within a physical face-to-face environment and those which are studied virtually through the VLE, at any given time and within any geographical location. Together, both components of study contribute toward a blended style of learning (2016:29).

Figure 1 illustrates the course structure and layout, which is based on theories of connectivism, whereby the focus is on the nodes used to access learning, the presented subject matter and the mode of learning. These in turn are related to personal conditioning, socially distributed knowledge and new knowledge acquisition (Siemans, 2005:Younie and Leask, 2013).

The course was structured as follows:

- Week 1 was a located lecture. This was used to set out expectations to students, to discuss the assessment and to explore theories of online collaboration. Background context under the auspices of learning and teaching was used to structure the lecture

into a format that allowed the students to link prior experiences to their programme of studies.

- Week 2 was a located (small group) seminar. This was used to focus students on how to succeed with online study (recognising that many of them had come directly from school), to answer any arising questions and to allow students an opportunity to speak with their peers for the first time.

- Weeks 3,4, 5 6 and 7 were delivered online. Students were able to engage with this material at their own pace and in the own time. Resources were designed to provide a rich 'overview' of the type of media that teachers could use to support their agency with learners. That is, we wanted to model effective pedagogy to stimulate their thinking.

- Week 8 was a located (small group) seminar. This was used as an anchor point to re-focus students towards the summative assessment. At this stage, we included additional (optional) support sessions to show students how to use technology to support their teaching e.g. Powerpoint, YouTube, Prezi, Storify etc. This also allowed them to make the connection between the types of resources that they had been using to study to the types of resources that were available for the production of their group artefact.

- Weeks 8, 9, 10 and 11 were delivered online. There was significant input from the Professoriate given that we were able to record them talking about their areas of expertise at a time that was convenient to them. This level of input is important for the development and ambition of our undergraduate students and they were encouraged to connect with senior academics via Twitter as well as their course tutors.

- Week 12 was a non-teaching week. At this point, students had to upload two submissions via Moodle – the individual written assessment and the group artefact. Additional uploads were allowed e.g. covering notes.
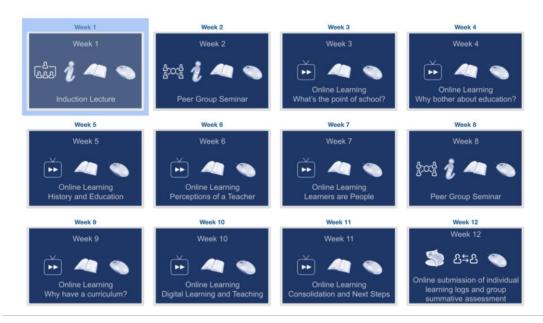
Fig. 1 Screen capture from the Moodle VLE: Course appearance and layout.

Online Discussion and Collaboration

Throughout the course, all students are encouraged to use social media as a resource for learning and discussion. They are pointed towards existing professional networks such as @Pedagoo and @GUEducation. To enable and drive systemic change in how they study, one learning outcome is assigned to collaboration through online technology and this must be evidenced in the summative assessment. The student can decide which social media they wish to use. Most choose Twitter, as this is modelled by staff, however others choose media such as Facebook and YouTube for sharing content, resources and ideas. Early studies show that the choice and use of social media is a personal disposition and can be affected by culture as well as attitude (Dunn, 2013). This course did include Erasmus students on exchange from Asia, where the social media landscape is very different. To accommodate them (it was felt that we could not force students to use Twitter), we set up a monitoring website which allowed students and staff to track the conversation without the need to create an account. Instead, these students were expected to collaborate through the forums and chat rooms on the VLE. We later used Storify to collate and describe conversations.

The summative assessment is divided into two categories where students are assessed individually (60% weighted component) but also in groups (40% weighted component). This year (2016) there were 15 working groups of around 4-6 students per group. They were assigned at the start of the course where selection was random and students had no say in where they were placed. Each working group was put into a seminar group, so for example, student A may find

themselves allocated to Group 1 (their working group) and Red Dragons (their seminar group). The group was tasked with producing an artefact, a resource that demonstrates their skills in collating relevant content and placing it online. This could be a blog, a streaming media clip (audio and/or visual), an interactive poster or something else entirely. Embedded into the artefact is a rationale for the selected mode of submission and a description of how the group has collaborated. This is where most students place images and screen captures of working online or even face-to-face.

In addition, they also upload via the VLE a description of any reference material, a covering note and also a signed document to illustrate whom has contributed towards each aspect of the group work. To aide the initial cognitive processes of using these technologies (some for the first time) staff provided additional lectures and seminars to support students where required. It was felt that this was one way in which we could instil the skills needed for digital learning and teaching for student teachers e.g. these were the skills that they will need when teaching children and young people in schools.

The individual mode of submission is assessed as a 1000 word written paper, which details a stance towards a particular theme of the course. In true keeping with the ethos of the course, feedback is provided to the students as a recorded screen capture using Camtasia. This provides the students with a richer level of feedback where the link between commentary and the actual submission is much clearer.

Digital Identity

Safeguarding the digital identity of students and staff is a high priority for any School. Teachers use social media for learning and teaching and it is widely recognised that is is also a powerful tool for professional update, knowledge exchange and collaboration. Teachers also use social media for personal communication and recreation. The line between the two can often be thin, blurred and difficult to navigate (Dunn, 2013). To support this, the course also acts as a catalyst to inform students about best practices and to enable equilibrium between enthusiasm and protection.

The General Teaching Council Scotland (GTCS) has provided a short guide which provides simple information and advice on how to safeguard digital identity (2011). As students sign a Fitness to Teach declaration with the GTCS, it was decided that this particular document would be used as the core component for safeguarding identities.

Students were directed to the guidelines and in addition, key aspects were broken down into an online lesson which was integrated into the course induction section (Figure 2). This allowed staff to track student participation and to make sure that they had all actually engaged with the content. Good practice was consistently placed at the centre of each weekly theme. For example, typical content would include some sort of streaming media, a core and supplementary reading, an activity and a few reflective questions. This provided students with a construct to discuss the theme via Twitter, whilst reminding them about maintaining a professional identity.
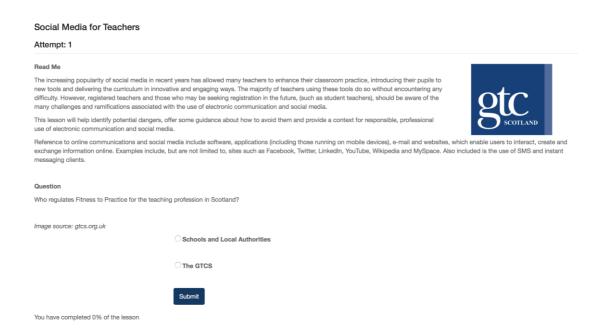

Fig. 2 Screen capture from the Moodle VLE: Online lesson on the professional use of social media.

Methodology

The case study draws upon an evidence-informed approach and presents data captured through the wider evaluation of the course to describe the use of social media, from the perspective of both the course tutors (n=4) and the students (n=70). The design and delivery of the course was based on an internal study where both qualitative and quantitative data was collated from a student focus group (n=5), interviews with teaching staff and a survey across the student cohort (response rate=84%). The survey was based on a typical Likert scale. Given that this was a new course, there was also intensive scrutiny from the Programme External Examiner. Questions were coded into two sections, the first explored the course design, VLE architecture, technological constructs (that is the type of media integration e.g. podcasts, streaming media) and the second explored the use of online technologies for collaboration. Data capture and publication was approved by the School of Education Ethics Forum.

Discussion of Key Findings

Overall, 86% of students agreed that the weekly learning content and mode of delivery was appropriate, stimulating and met their learning needs, with 85% also agreeing that the media content was of a high quality. Interestingly, only 64% stated that they thought the course was organised effectively. Now that it has been running for three years, with several changes made to the structure, content and delivery (based on student feedback), it would be essential to run the survey again to capture changing attitudes and opinions over time. During the evaluation process, we also asked our students how they felt about using social media to support their learning, in addition to asking them which social media they used the most (Table 1).

Table 1: The proportion of students using different social media/network platforms.

Social Media / Network	Proportional Use
Twitter	96%
Facebook	43%
Moodle Forum	89%
LinkedIn	43%
YouTube	99%
Other	23%

The majority (99%) of students told us that they used YouTube. This is not surprising given that some of the learning content is streamed via that platform. The scope of the survey did not allow us to differentiate between media production and sharing from simply watching content streamed by someone else. They did tell us that they preferred to watch meaningful and original media generated by their tutor, rather than stock media or media generated elsewhere e.g. from a university in the United States.

The second highest return came from Twitter, with 96% using it throughout the course. Again, this was not a surprise as this was the promoted platform used by course tutors. It becomes interesting to note, however, the large drop in proportional use with Facebook (43%) and LinkedIn (43%). Students using Facebook told us that they did not want to use it at all for learning and that it was seen more as a 'personal space' for family and friends. Today, there are more popular additions that could be included, with more and more undergraduate students now opting to use platforms such as Instagram and Snapchat.

In specific relation to Twitter, we wanted to know how they felt about using it as a professional medium. 43% enjoyed the experience, however 25% said that they would not use Twitter again as they did not see the purpose or value. These latter students said that they felt forced to use Twitter and that they did not like being told what to do. This perception is mirrored in other studies (Dunn, 2013) and is suggestive that the use of social media is very much a personal disposition. This presents a number of challenges to any teacher intent on integrating such a mode into their pedagogy. Dunn concludes that learning does not reside just in technology but in cognitive interpretations of information and in the agency between the teacher and the learner (2015). This would imply that teacher facilitation in the use of social media is a key success criterion in mediating the use of such technologies to enhance learning. Students told us that they would be more likely to engage in such activity in a professional capacity, if it was role modelled by staff in the first instance.

The following extract is an example of student feedback.

> "I really enjoyed the way the course ran. I liked having weekly tasks on Moodle which could be completed then discussed with peers on social media. I also enjoyed being assessed in groups where we had our own choice on how to present our work. I learned so much from this course, met so many new people and now have different perspectives on education - my favourite course so far!"

> Student comment on using Twitter (Dunn et al, 2015)

The External Examiner provided positive feedback about the course and the use of social media in particular.

> "The Twitter and blogging element of the module has allowed the module leader to discuss issues of e-safety and appropriate use of social media whilst at the same time modelling the use of Twitter as a tool for developing engagement with educational issues in line with the GTCS guidelines."

> External Examiner comment on using Twitter (Dunn et al, 2015)

Conclusion and Recommendations

In making recommendations to other teachers / academic staff interested in taking a similar approach, we have prepared several suggestions for consideration, based on experiences from delivering this course:

1. The initial induction of students is crucial. There needs to be clear expectations and the rationale for using social media must be made clear from the outset. It helps the students if they can see the benefits that it will have for them.

2. Teachers must recognise that not all students will want to use social media for learning and that those who are active on networks already may have dispositions towards specific platforms.

3. The 'network' that you establish needs to be nourished. It will not flourish by itself and if students see academic staff engaged in a similar way, they are more likely to follow suit. This does not mean that staff need to take the lead, but rather they only need to be visible.

4. Students must be given transparent information about using social media safely. For example, what are the opportunities and the challenges. We encouraged those who already had a Twitter account for personal use to establish a new one for professional use. That way, it is easier to separate the two and draw a distinct line.

5. Guidelines are essential for any professional degree programme. We used the GTCS advice – it is worthwhile searching for a similar context within your discipline. If you cannot find one, consider writing one based an examples.

6. For those students who do not engage with your network, you need to provide a back-up. We used a Moodle Forum for this, but also provided accessed to the conversation on Twitter. This worked well and student feedback was positive.

7. If the ethos of the course is to engage in the use of social media and if this is also linked to assessment, consider providing feedback to students that emulates that practice, e.g. recorded audio and visual feedback is a great way to support their future development.

8. Social Media does not always drive itself – the content needs to be rich and stimulating. Consider who will produce the content – does it already exist or will resources be needed. Analytics also help in providing an evidence base for future work and evaluation.

9. Be proactive – if you see something inappropriate, you need to act on it immediately. We defined procedures for our students so that they could point out any potential issues. This was never required but it does act as a safety net to mitigate any challenges later on.

10. Do not give up. It does take time and effort to get this right. We still need to work on our course and assessment and to look at how we integrate social media into these, but early evidence does suggest that social media can be beneficial in supporting the learning process within Higher Education.

Additional Information

This case study was presented at Sheffield Hallam University (December, 2015) during the inaugural conference on Social Media for Learning in Higher Education –
see #SocMedHE15 or the conference website at https://blogs.shu.ac.uk/socmedhe/
(last accessed 23.02.2016)

You can download the conference presentation from:
http://www.slideshare.net/socmedhe/social-media-as-a-professional-medium-an-equilibrium-of-enthusiasm-and-protection-for-student-teachers (last accessed 23.02.2016).

You can view examples of student collaboration via Storify at
https://storify.com/leeandrewdunn/meduc (last accessed 23.02.2016).

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