An Experiment in Using Twitter in Teaching a Student Affairs Practicum Course

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Abstract

Social media and related Web 2.0 technologies provide the opportunity to rethink our practice and how we engage college students in the learning process. This article reviews an experiment using Twitter to engage Higher Education Master's degree students in a supervised practicum course. Background information, research, guiding goals, implications for practice, and suggestions for future implementations are shared.

Introduction

Social media applications and their usage by and effect on students are changing the nature of the learning environment in colleges and universities. In the spring of 2011, I experimented with the use of Twitter in a Higher Education supervised practicum course I teach. In attempting to engage with the students differently and encourage their own development in the use of social media in professional settings, I created a requirement for Twitter usage as a portion of their participation grade. In the following article, I will outline my experiences and perceptions throughout this process. Although this experiment was not a formal empirical study, it nevertheless may provide a guide for others in their attempts to integrate social media in formal training and classroom settings.

Review of Literature

As college student educators seek to improve their teaching practice, the use of social media is becoming an increasingly important means of student engagement. The Higher Education Research Institute (2007) reports that 94% of first year students in U.S. colleges use social media at least weekly. Additionally, in her 2010 work, *DIY U: Edupunks, Edupeneurs, and the Coming Transformation of Higher Education*, Anya Kamenetz argues that students' increasing use of online technologies, such as social media, are changing the way students engage in the learning process. College and university faculty, in order to become more effective in their teaching, need to face the reality that social media presents a unique and promising opportunity for fostering a more engaged learning process.

The use of social media in the classroom has become increasingly common and of greater interest to faculty in higher education (Committee of Inquiry into the Changing Learner Experience, 2009; Junco, Heiberger, & Loken, 2011). A recent Pearson research report indicated that 38.8% of college and university faculty reported using social media in the classroom (Moran, Seaman, Tinti-Kane, 2012). Although social media use by faculty presents many opportunities, there are still a number of perceived and real barriers to its integration in the classroom. Concerns about these barriers, however, have decreased over time. The top 5 concerns faculty cited in the 2012 Pearson study were (a) the integrity of student submissions, (b) concerns about privacy, (c) separate course and personal accounts (d) grading and assessment, and (e) the

inability to measure effectiveness (Moran, Seaman, Tinti-Kane, 2012).

In choosing to conduct my social media experiment, I confronted many of these challenges, but also encountered growing research on the benefits of using social media in the classroom. Research has documented heavy use of social media by undergraduate students (Higher Education Research Institute, 2007) and my higher education graduate students repeatedly express a desire to learn more about the technology and how it can be applied to their work with their own students. In examining their needs and in choosing which social media technology best fit the course, I decided to use Twitter, the second most popular social media site on both desktop and mobile platforms in the United States (NM Incite & Nielsen, 2012). Additionally, there is a growing body of research regarding Twitter's importance as a tool in classroom settings. In a 2011 article, Junco, Heiberger, and Loken demonstrated that Twitter usage increased faculty-student interactions, promoted collaboration amongst the students, developed interpersonal relationships, allowed for prompt feedback, and promoted active student learning. With these benefits and best practices in mind, I constructed the course.

The Course

I currently teach the Advanced Field Experience course in the Boston College Higher Education Master's degree program. Advanced Field Experience is a supervised practice course, similar to those in many higher education and student affairs programs, where students participate in a fellowship or internship outside the classroom with accompanying course content that encourages reflective practice and discussion around common issues found in the workplace. At Boston College, Advanced Field Experience is a spring semester course that is a continuation of the supervised practicum course in the fall. Because of the timing of the course, much of the course content is focused on preparing the students for their job search. The course is 1 credit hour and meets five times for three-hour sessions over the course of the semester. The majority of the course sessions are front-loaded in the semester to occur before the start of the main student affairs job placement services: ACPA—College Student Educators International's Career Central at Convention (C3) and The Placement Exchange (TPE).

The Motivation

My decision to experiment with social media, specifically Twitter, in this course was motivated by a number of factors. Silius, Kailanto, and Tevakari (2011) note that, in general, students report that the use of social media should "provide clear added value" to the course if it is being used (p.25). In addition to the general benefits of using social media in the classroom, I specifically chose to use Twitter in this course for the following reasons:

1. Professional associations and hiring departments are increasingly using social media as a means for job search communication (Brotherton, 2012; Hunt, 2010). The two main student affairs placement services tweet under the

handles of @ACPAJobs and @TPEcanserv. Additionally, many individuals and organizations also post to the hashtags #sasearch and #sajobs. For the purposes of this course, I wanted to ensure my students were exposed to it and proficient in its use.

2. Professional development for student affairs educators is increasingly becoming available online. Junco et al.'s (2010) study of the #sachat online community discusses the benefits and the nature of the community that professionals are building online. Additionally, more professional conferences are establishing Twitter hashtags or backchannels so even those not physically present at events can engage in the conversation.

3. Because the Field Experience course only meets intermittently throughout the semester, Twitter provides a means of engaging students continuously between course meetings. The ability to engage in asynchronous communication throughout the semester allowed myself, as the instructor, to remain aware of the students' experiences.

The Experience

Junco, Elavsky, and Heiberger (2012) outline three best practices for Twitter integration in a college course: make it required, make it purposive and relevant, and ensure the teaching faculty member is actively engaged. Since this was my first semester teaching with required social media usage, I decided to make Twitter use required, but low stakes and with a loose structure. To ensure participation, it was included as a portion of the students' class participation score, which was 10% of the overall course grade. The following is how it was described in the syllabus:

> We will be experimenting with using Twitter to stay in communication over the course of the semester. An overview of Twitter will be provided during our first class meeting. Students may use a current Twitter account they may have or create a special one for use in this course. Students are expected to post to Twitter at least once a week with the hashtag #bcfieldexp. Students may use their posting to share articles, job postings, advice, support and questions for their peers. Please remember that these tweets are public! (Brown, 2012, p. 3)

During the first session of the course, I explained Twitter, how it worked, and my goals for using it in the course. Approximately half of the students in the class already had Twitter accounts, and for the others it was an entirely new experience. Some students expressed moderate concerns about using Twitter, many of which were similar to those that faculty members expressed about using social media in the classroom including concerns about privacy and maintaining separate personal and professional accounts (Moran, Seaman, Tinti-Kane, 2012). All students, however, participated in the Twitter experiment.

Results

Overall, I found a moderate level of success with using Twitter. Because this was my first experiment using Twitter in the classroom, I attempted to leave its use open to organically evolve as the course progressed. This allowed the students and me to learn together. Through course evaluations, informal feedback, and my own reflections, I found the following:

1. Students who had not previously used Twitter reported that they found it useful to learn a new social media tool. Those who attended the ACPA and NASPA national conventions found this particularly useful given the frequent use of Twitter in those settings.

2. Students desired a higher degree of structure around how Twitter was used and how to integrate it into their daily routines. Without providing enough structure I believe this hindered our ability to achieve some of the desired outcomes for the experiment. For instance, I had hoped for more interactions between classmates, but many of the posts to Twitter were one-way communications sharing interesting articles about the job search process or postings of job opportunities. Very few students posed questions for their peers to answer. Students utilized a more professional tone in their posts and did not use Twitter to encourage each other or engage in more interpersonal conversations about their job search process. Since this was the first time I was using Twitter in the classroom, however, I would still stand by my decision to use a loosely structured, low stakes approach. In subsequent semesters, if I continue to use Twitter, I will build in more structure (requirements) and integrate it more tightly with the course content. Alternative methods, such as using blogs and other technologies, could also prove useful.

3. A sizeable minority of students had privacy concerns about using social media. For those using social media in their courses, I would think about alternative ways one could keep students engaged but still respect their desires for privacy. Students can also be encouraged to create course-specific accounts that can be easily canceled afterwards. Other ideas may include using more private or closed communication sites, such as through the use of a Facebook group.

4. Students appreciated the idea of "doing something different." By presenting this as a learning opportunity for all of us, it allowed me to create a flatter classroom hierarchy and to encourage student exploration. It also allowed me to engage with my students in a more personal way between course sessions. This was particularly useful in a practicum course that centers on the job search process. Each student's search is unique and personal. Developing strong interpersonal relationships with the students is a key to success and Twitter helped facilitate this.

Implications and Recommendations for Future Practice

Although this experiment was limited in scope, it nevertheless highlighted some important thoughts and considerations one should take into account when using social media in a higher education and student affairs course. First, there are numerous benefits to using social media in the classroom. Asynchronous communication, or the ability to stay in contact with one's students intermittently between class meetings, allows the instructor to stay more actively engaged with his or her students. This is especially useful for a practicum course that may not meet regularly. It also allows the instructor to address or be aware of work issues or concerns as they arise. The ability to stay in contact with students this way also flattens the teacher-student dynamic allowing for more engaging and meaningful partnerships. The encouragement of sharing in social media most clearly facilitates the ability of both the teacher and the student to "define learning as mutually constructed meaning" and "share expertise and authority" (Baxter Magolda & King, 2004, p. 41).

In addition to the development of the teacher-student relationship, social media also has many direct benefits for the students themselves. As previously mentioned, social media use is near ubiquitous amongst undergraduate students in the United States. The use of social media and related technologies represents an important new competency area for emerging professionals in the student affairs field. Interest in this subject matter has sparked numerous innovative professional development opportunities including NASPA's Knowledge Community on Technology and the #NASPAtech: Student Affairs Technology Conference. In addition to learning how to engage their students with technology and social media, student affairs professionals are also turning to technology for their own professional development. Podcast series such as BreakDrink.com and the #sachat twitter stream are providing career advancement and education (Junco et al., 2010).

Although there are numerous benefits to social media usage, there remain some concerns regarding its implementation and its effectiveness. As cited from the Pearson report earlier, the most prevalent concerns are about privacy and the blurring of "personal" versus "professional" accounts online (Moran, Seaman, Tinti-Kane, 2012). As with any change to the teacher-student dynamic, social media challenges us to re-envision the nature and boundaries of this relationship. As social media tools and our savviness in using them have become more sophisticated, however, the ability to overcome these obstacles through specialized accounts and settings is mitigating some of these concerns. Nevertheless, social media will continue to challenge the way one constructs the learning process.

An additional concern about social media usage also relates to what the Pearson report identified as concerns about student submission integrity (Moran, Seaman, Tinti-Kane, 2012). The World Wide Web has consistently challenged the notions of intellectual property, authorship, and the boundaries of sharing and re-use. Entirely new schemes of copyright

protection such as Creative Commons licensing have been developed to promote the more open and liberal sharing of information online (Creative Commons, n.d.). Within the academic context, this can be more problematic when students are called upon to produce original work. As the Web evolves, our answers to these very fundamental questions will change. As a result, it requires students and teachers alike to continuously engage in discussions and understanding about what constitutes copyright, ownership and original work.

Lastly, the cited concern about student assessment and measuring the effectiveness of social media in the classroom remains difficult. As it relates to social media usage, the *way* an instructor uses technology in the classroom largely determines to what extent student evaluation is possible. Although within my own experiment I did not use social media as a formal means of assessment, these concerns become very real for those that attempt to do so. Social media, in many ways, is not just another tool in the classroom like an overhead projector or laptop. Social media is a platform that allows for rich communication. As such, it is better to conceptualize social media as a new *approach* to teaching as opposed to just another *tool* used in teaching. Therefore it seems likely that more effective assessments of social media should look at the learning process holistically. Student outcomes derived from social media use are more likely to be dispersed throughout the course rather than as discrete measurable outcomes in and of themselves.

Within my own context, the experiment of using of social media in the classroom was compelling enough for me to continue to experiment with its use in the future. Instead of focusing on Twitter over the course of the semester, however, I have decided to use a mixture of different social media and Web 2.0 technologies to engage my students and introduce them to new platforms. With a course that meets as few times as the one I teach, it was difficult to create a sustained Twitter presence. Instead, in the coming semester, I have developed a class session on professional branding and online engagement. Additionally, throughout the semester, the students will write and respond to blog posts, watch podcasts, develop their own professional website, and practice live tweeting during a panel presentation, much like one would during a conference. If I were to revise my outcomes for students, I would focus more on their introduction to new technologies while allowing them to choose how they wish to engage with them.

Conclusion

There is definitely a place for social media usage in the classrooms of higher education and student affairs programs. As social media becomes increasingly entrenched in undergraduate student culture and practice, it is imperative that social media engagement and technology be established as an important competency to teach in higher education and student affairs graduate programs. Through modeling its usage in the classroom, instructors have a unique opportunity to engage in co-constructed learning experiences with their students. One of the unique benefits of social media is its ability to blur and span boundaries. Much as student affairs work has traditionally attempted to bridge in and out of classroom learning, social media allows or a more organic and holistic learning experience. For those looking to enact these values in their teaching, experimenting with social media presents a compelling opportunity.

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