

Food For Thought: Can Social Media be a Potential 'Learning Tool' for Universities?

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Abstract

Teaching tools are crucial for an effective learning for students. Since the birth of the concept of teaching and learning, the methods and tools involved in teaching have evolved gradually according to the need to the time. From the lecturing to written documents and now to the use of indigenous technologies like videos and smart boards, tools have been evolved along with the society and need of the audience. Today's world is surrounded by technology. Libraries have been replaced from Google, everything is in a reach of the tip of one's finger. Social media has reduced the distances between people in a literal term and at a global scale. Students/Lecturers are using social media as part of their daily routine and keeping this in mind, a question is being raised in this paper, can social media be used as one of the learning tools in today's education sector and what possible learning outcomes be achieved through its use? This paper tries to answer the question raised which could act as a 'food for thought' for lecturers/educators to consider, as a part of their curriculum design to create a more interactive, engaging and personalized tutor-centric learning environment.

Highlight

- Lack of innovation in teaching methods.
- Instigate debate on Technology enabled Vs Traditional Teaching/Learning.
- Use of social media as tool for learning.

Keywords: Social Media, Education, Learning, Technology, University, students, Web 2.0, e-learning

In the last five decades with the onset of technologically advanced software's; devices (like the mobile phones, handheld PDA's, tablets) have come into existence (Brown, 2000; Garrison et al., 2003). Such emergence of technologies and convenient ways to, carry out normal day to day activities with the help and support of these technologies has been mind-numbing. They have enabled us to communicate with each other (example: Skype, chat rooms etc) , share with each other(example : Google docs, Dropbox etc) and collectively work on common themes to create new contents/ source of information(example : Wikipedia, Blogs etc) all these features are powered by Web 2.0. Most of us would agree, that these platforms have become very integral to our daily routine. Gone are the days , when people used to be in the Library searching for

books, today Google(the search engine) has become synonymous with the word 'search' itself.

The potential role of technology like social media as a tool for learning is the centre thought of this paper. On one hand there is tremendous growth in the field of computing technologies and on the other hand we have the Universities which for centuries have always been the source of information, knowledge and learning (Apple, 2008). So can technology complement the traditional classroom based learning and knowledge dissemination or is it a supplement/competitor-like making the traditional college/ University model obsolete? It would be right to say here that historically technology supported learning has always been full of

promises and frustrations, every time that new media emerged - like radio, television, video - some people believed that they could use it as a solution to provide self-directed learning and even replace the teacher (Almpanis, 2009) but ironically it has went nowhere.

Interaction of Universities with Technology and Technology enabled Students

The Universities/colleges have been the centre of higher education. The conception of Universities has been based on the people around, their competencies, their cognition and their socio-cultural inclinations. For example, in the Roman era, people would sit around under a tree and listen to Socrates who would be sharing his experience gained from his travels which could be argued as the birth of the concept of lecturing, as in those days not many people could read or write. Later on during the renaissance period writing became dominant, which has attributed to various subject wide literature, which we have today. From lecturing to writing to painting to experimenting has been collectively attributing to what we say Universities, which has adapted itself to changing people behavior around the world. A change in the teaching style and the style of knowledge dissemination is very much evident. It would be useful to use the style and tool which are in coherence with the audience, to make an affect on the students and ensuring an impactful authentic learning (Herrington, 2006).

Youngsters today are way ahead when it comes to using technology comfortably and confidently than any of their elders. They live with smart phones, internet, google and social media everyday. They are more receptive to the news on Facebook than on any other media. Slowly smart boards are replacing chalk based black boards in classrooms, can social media and internet be incorporated and contribute to the classroom based learning?

Universities today seldom use and appreciate what students use/interact with when it comes to learning (formally/informally). At Universities we still have classroom based lectures seen as a source to gain information/knowledge/feedback but technology has made it so easy to get the same things online within minutes. The use of traditional methods of learning and teaching creates a distance between the students and the classroom environment. Hence when students come to Universities they feel they are sitting in a cockpit shut down from the digital world of which they are all a part of (Jones et al., 2004; Escobar-Rodriguez et al., 2012; Krumm, 2009), which is true as, when students enter the lecture room they are asked to switch off their mobile phones or any digital devices for the duration of the class. This restriction deters them from blending with the classroom environment and gives them a feeling of a parallel world which is very different from the world outside University where they are always engrossed in the technology and social media. Web 2.0 has made us all a part of the digital world and one element of Web 2.0 which has played a dominant role is 'social media'

(example: Facebook, twitter, Instagram etc.). But one might ask, what is the potential of and benefit of using social media especially in learning at the University, considering the skepticism and criticisms surrounding the use of social media as a part of the learning curriculum and how it could be seen by many as a distraction for students hampering their cognitive skills (Junco et al., 2012; Ismail, 2002; Hiltz, 1990; Herrington et al., 2005; Garrett et al., 2004; Junco, 2012; Escobar-Rodriguez, 2012; Moskaliuk et al., 2012; Davies, 2012; Shieh, 2012).

It could be argued that it is criticism of social media being distractive is true to some extent, but it also provides a lot of opportunities which could be explored. Social media has the potential to enhance the learning capability and provide a platform for students to interact with their peers, tutors and people around the world. In the last decade, students globally (global + local) have been actively engaged with various social media platforms very enthusiastically. But this enthusiasm has not been transcended onto the technologies which are used within Universities through the virtual learning environment (VLE) in place for both in-house and distance learning. At Universities, these VLE's act as data repositories (Nair, 2013; Dickson, 2004; Garrett et al., 2004; Jenkins 2005) and, are not as dynamic, interactive and engaging as other social media platforms available on the World Wide Web are. There is a lot of reluctance surrounding the use of social media, broadly any technology as a part of the learning design at Universities much of this could be attributed towards the teacher-belief towards these systems, amount of time to be spent preparing course materials, keeping oneself updated with the changing technological wave and many more (Bain, 2006; Becher et al., 2001; Kember, 1997; Samuelowicz et al., 1997; Samuelowicz et al., 2001). But some of the features provided by the social media are essential to enhance the learning process of any students, enabling them to create, collate, collaborate, communicate (4C's) anytime anywhere with not only their peers but peers and experts around the world in a self-directed, self-paced manner (Kearsley, 2000; DeRouin et al., 2005).

In this digital age, students are born to live with technology as a part of them and their identity (Jones et al., 2004). So when they come to class with that identity they are opposed by the traditional classroom constructs causing the students to feel disconnected, disengaged and demotivated (DeRouin et al., 2005; Ryan et al., 2000). If the technologies used by these younger students are embedded into the classroom, they could actually be re-engineering the notion of traditional classrooms itself and the way it functions. Today these students see the world in a much different way than the students three decades back. These students as they grow up are constantly finding new ways to interact and adapt with the world around, finding bridges to narrow down the digital divide through different tools powered by Social Media or devices which power social media. Using the same tools Universities could support students by laying a foundation on which they could

actively engage at their own pace, collaborate with people around the world, personalize their own learning experience all in to create a holistic learning environment wherein learning something new, creating new curiosities becomes an implicit part of their day to day activity (Siragusa *et al.*, 2007). Social media has the potential to be an active member of the curriculum design team, even in the midst of the speculations about the strengths and weakness surrounding it. In the following, are some of the key learning elements which could be adopted into attaining the desired learning outcome at Universities and also to overcome some of the initial fears around its usage.

Learning elements supported by Social Media

Connectivity : Social media was conceived for connecting people in a community (NCTI, 2007). And that includes students who uses these platforms to connect with the global community they live in, where in they share their daily experiences by either writing on wall (Facebook), tweeting about it (twitter), sharing videos (YouTube), sharing moments captured in pictures (Instagram) and many more. Sharing one's experience could be argued from a learning theory point of view as Kolb (1984)'s experiential learning. These daily experience through reading, writing, watching could enhance student competencies, that forms the crux of a students learning process (formal/informal). Apart from sharing, students own experience, student could use these social media platforms to create their own community of learning (Welsh *et al.*, 2003; Alonso *et al.*, 2005) for working on a particular assignment or a project with their peers in class/outside class, they could also use platforms like LinkedIn to secure expert advice on certain issues as a part of their learning curriculum. And looking from a learning theory viewpoint this process enables collaborative learning (Gunasekaran, 2002; Siragusa, 2007; Bennett *et al.*, 2012; Junco, 2012; Michailidou *et al.*, 2003; Moskaliuk *et al.*, 2012) among students. This way using social media, they could be connected with everyone including the Tutors/peers/experts around the world thereby creating a much wider circle of learning communities.

Active online engagement : Apart from sharing pictures, messages, videos and seeking advice from peers/Tutors/experts through social media, students could actively engage with the shared message, by commenting on someone else's post (Facebook), re-tweeting or commenting (Twitter), commenting in general on pictures or videos, as a matter of fact even the factor of liking a comment could be considered as a sign of engaging with the shared messages on social media platforms. The enthusiasm/motivation built into these students during the process of using such systems carried out in their day to day activities could invoke active learning (Shuell, 1992; Alley *et al.*, 2001; Shieh, 2012) within these individuals by just commenting on someone else's comments/posts. This is very much useful if the students are working on group

projects to share their ideas and views on different parts of the projects worked on by different people of the group.

Knowledge gaining process : The WWW is loaded with information on different subject matter and it is not possible for everyone to know everything but social media enables users to streamline their information by working in community of groups, an example of this following a Facebook Page, following a twitter Hash tag, following hash tags on Instagram etc. Social media enables its users to share information among each other throughout the day at very rapid rate. The information transferred from person to another person could be about the same subject matter, something trivial, something informative or someone's experience which could be really helpful while working on your assignment or may be for just General Knowledge. But converting these information into valuable knowledge material based on the comments to some extent can help to appreciate their ability to assess, critically analyze, evaluate, give a feedback and retaining the knowledge gained (Gunasekaran *et al.*, 2002; Alexander, 2001; Weller, 2000).

Digital Literacy : Social media platforms enables students to be more confident of testing out new platform by making them digitally literate. In doing so social media has developed the competencies of the users to very large extent. As a result of which most of students are very comfortable using complex user interface enabling them to explore, create and test out their own ideas enabling them to be innovative, enabling creativity among them (Bennett *et al.*, 2012; Junco, 2012; Apple, 2008).

Developing new skills : Games like "Words with Friends" on Facebook not only develops one's English vocabulary but also makes them aware of new words, this plays a very important role for international students for whom English might not be the first language. Game simulations like World of Warcraft's enables students to work as a group and co-ordinate as a group thereby developing their project management skills to a very large extent and also allows to work with people whom they don't know (example: multi-player online games) (Richardson, 2012; Rheingold, 2012).

Many to One relationship: Social media has the potential to feature 'Many to One' relationship through human computer interaction (Weiser, 1993). Through this feature each student and Tutors in turn has the ability to interact with many people, using many platforms, using many softwares to learn and teach respectively through the space powered by Web 2.0. Students can interact with and create learning materials which are available in multiple formats (audio, video, text) that could be shared within their own community of learners/peers/friends. The same way teachers could make learning materials and the learning process much more interactive and engaging with the help of social media, that could be shared among their students or to a much wider audience through open access.

Personalised Learning : Every students has different learning styles and cognitive needs(Kember,1997;Baker et al.,1993). Traditionally in Universities ‘one size fits all’ approach has been used. But with the help of social media it is possible for tutors/lecturers to support personalised learning depending each students learning needs(Wong,2007), giving them their freedom to learn at their own pace along the direction provided by the teachers in order to achieve the desired learning outcome required by the University curriculum(Ally,2004).

Anti-Bias, Confidence Building Education : Every student has the right to learn irrespective of sex, religion, colour, caste, cultural background etc(Nelasco *et al.*, 2007). Social media has the potential to support students in an anti-bias manner. Social media could help students raise their voices if they have been subjected to any kind of discrimination to not only their Teachers but also to concerned people who are working towards eradicating such biases in education in a confidential manner. Social media could also help to build confidence among students who are afraid to raise their question or who are shy to answer within the classroom environment. Social media could help in supporting and equating cultural diversity among students and preaching students to learn from each other about different cultures(Brown,2011).

Conclusion

The students using these systems might not understand the significance and impact of their actions, but someone who was not born into the digital age will understand the magnitude of the situation. Some of the features of social media are clearly pointed out above. These features not only enhance the learning of the students but also develop their competencies, help them to be prepared to tackle the real world situations and making them realise that the world is lot smaller and there is so much to learn from each another. Through the use of social media at Universities there could be a bridge to narrow down the digital divide between the students/Tutors/Lecturers/Colleges(Apple,2008;Douglas et al.,2011).

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