With social media becoming an everyday communication method for individuals and organizations, it's logical to incorporate its use into instructional approaches.

Using Social Media to Enhance Students' Learning Experiences

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Abstract

Current business students are digital technology natives with great sophistication in the uses and potential of social media. This is good because businesses and other organizations are expecting today's graduates to be highly proficient in these technologies.[1] Social media tools radically alter the way people view and use communication. The task of knowledge construction is thus being shared among the instructor, students, and other individuals who share an interest for the subject.[2]

This article focuses on continuing efforts using social media to enhance undergraduate business students' learning experiences. My college makes an online course management system (CMS) and training available to instructors, but leaves its use to the instructor for traditional courses. I use the CMS's features such as bulletin boards, wikis, and online meetings and also incorporate other tools like blogs, podcasts, really simple syndication (RSS), and Twitter. Although incorporating social media into a course requires considerable time and effort, the results to date have exceeded expectations.

Introduction

Social media tools are rapidly changing the communications landscape. Their emergence has impacted significantly how students learn and the way instructors teach. In today higher education settings, instructors, students, and others collaborate on the tasks of knowledge construction.[2]

The influence of social media on learning and teaching environments is growing more each year. Social media applications can reinforce class material and positively influence discussions,

collaborative work, and authoring. Educators and researchers are constantly experimenting with social media technologies hoping to stimulate critical thinking skills, collaboration, and knowledge construction.

Social media technologies offer the capability to both receive and create content with the hope that a collective intelligence emerges. The goal is to improve students' learning experiences to prepare them to enter a workforce that is not geographically constrained and expects them to have highly developed online collaboration skills. The pursuit of such benefits drives academics to incorporate new technological approaches in their teaching methodology.[3]

The new technologies that are changing the way instructors teach and students learn include the following:

- *Weblogs*. Weblogs or blogs, as they are known, are easily created and updateable websites that allow authors to publish to the Internet instantly, thus allowing instructors and students to communicate easily.

- *Wikis*. A wiki is a collaborative web space where anyone can add or edit content that has already been published.

- *Really simple syndication (RSS)*. RSS allows users to subscribe to news feeds originating either from blogs or more traditional web spaces like newspapers and magazines. The content comes to the reader instead of the reader having to retrieve the content.

- *Social bookmarking*. Bookmarking sites allow users to save and archive entire web pages. This enables users to produce a searchable, personalized Internet.

- *Online photograph galleries (OPG)*. OPGs allow the posting of photographs that support sharing of ideas and experiences.

- *Audio/video casting (AVC)*. AVC makes it easy to produce digital voice and video files and publish and distribute them over the Internet. It also supports basic, live-streaming television online.

- *Twitter*. Twitter is a powerful tool for connecting with others and sharing content easily.

- *Social networking sites (SNS)*. In addition to supporting wide area communication in both audio and video formats, SNSs help teach the network literacy that is required to navigate these new connections.[4]

Approach

Incorporating social media into a business course can allow a diverse group of interested individuals to engage in creating and developing content and to gather online to share knowledge, information, and opinions.[5] In my business 3010: Production Systems Management traditional semester course, this group included the students in the course, adjunct faculty who teach other sections of the course, myself, as well as members of local sections of professional societies like the American Society for Quality (ASQ) and APICS, the Association for Operations Management. I am an active member of both professional societies.

It was necessary to switch from the traditional lecture and questions/answers approach to better use the various social media tools to meet students' needs and expectations. These needs include increased access to the instructor and fellow students as well as course-related project data and information. For example, I redesigned his production systems management course to incorporate blogs for use by students to support closer collaboration on team projects. The teams were also encouraged to use and monitor RSSs containing course topic information and utilize social bookmarking. Individual wikis were created as homework help lines where I posted some answers and hints for completing homework assignments. Wikis were also used for polling students about changes in assignments and presentations' dates, and for class meeting make-up dates. Twitter was used along with e-mail for one-to-one communication. Students were also required to give a brief lecture using audio/video casting.

Student Experience

A survey conducted in the first class meeting found only 3 of eighteen (~17%) students had used either wikis or a social networking site in a college course previously, and none had used Twitter. By the end of the course all students had used wikis, social networking sites, RSS, social bookmarking, and Twitter as part of the course. In addition, each project team incorporated the use of online photograph galleries and audio/video casting techniques in their course research presentations.

When surveyed at the last class meeting, student feedback included the following findings:

- Although most students had used social media such as Facebook and Twitter in their personal

lives, they needed instruction on how to use them safely in an educational setting. A social media usage agreement (see the sidebar, "Social Media Usage Agreement—Terms and Conditions") was quickly established to address basic safety practices.

- While some students quickly embraced the use of social media in the course, others initially questioned its value and the need to learn it in addition to the required course content.

- Over time, the majority of the students developed an appreciation for its use.

- Some students expected the use of social media to correct some of the traditional problems associated with group projects, namely, uneven participation. They learned they could use blogs and Twitter to keep all team members more fully engaged in the projects.

- Students felt the use of social media heightened their project presentations. In particular, they cited RSS and social bookmarking as helping them collect current information easily on their topics. Audio/video casting also allowed them to distribute their presentations via the Internet to interested members of the local sections of professional societies.

- Students felt the inclusion of the professionals as blogs and wikis members added real-world knowledge to their learning and the course in general.

- Students said that using and somewhat mastering a variety of social media approaches helped them better prepare for a career in business management.

- Students liked the inclusion of social media in the course and recommended using it in all higher-level business courses.

The overall favorable acceptance of using social media in this initial course has motivated me to incorporate it in an upcoming business capstone course that will be taught over a span of six weeks.

Faculty Experience

This early use of social media approaches in a traditional college course changed the classroom behavior of both the instructor and students. I noticed that my role evolved from primarily a presenter of knowledge to more of a facilitator and mentor. This role change was also accompanied by changes in the pedagogy followed in the course as

Social Media Usage Agreement— Terms and Conditions

- Students are expected to act safely by keeping personal information out of their posts.
- Students agree not to use their family name, password, school name and location, or any other information that could enable someone to locate and contact them.
- Students are to use social media as an academic resource only and therefore behave as in the classroom.
- Students should not respond to comments that make them uncomfortable. Instead, they should report these comments to the instructor immediately.

I had to learn how to set up and effectively use several social media approaches.[6] Equally important, students grew from being passive to active learners.

Lessons learned from these early attempts include the following:

- Instructors must design time and opportunities for the use of social media activities into their course syllabi. Though this may initially be viewed as taking time away from important course topics, these opportunities are alternative ways to cover these topics and even a means for introducing additional topics.

- Both instructors and students need to realize their roles in the course and behavior in the classroom will change significantly. The complexity and number of student questions rose significantly, resulting in a much more dynamic learning environment.

- Both instructors and students must be open to learning and using new social media classroom approaches that extend and enhance instructor-student interactions.

- Instructors must realize that not all students will embrace every element of all social media approaches. Some students will initially feel more comfortable using just one or two approaches and will need time to expand their skill set.

- Incorporating social media approaches allows guest lecturers to participate remotely if necessary. Also, it allows instructors to incorporate

many free weblogs, thus exposing students to new and different professional opinions.

- Student presentations distributed via the Internet can be viewed by a much wider audience on an on-demand basis.

- Incorporating social media approaches in the course contributed to extending student learning to outside the classroom, as it was especially easy for students to form study groups.

- Many ideas for group projects come from students having contact with members of local sections of professional societies like ASQ and APICS. This helps keep the group projects relevant to current issues and often provides welcoming venues for student presentations.

- Students have different academic strengths and skill sets, and working together allows students opportunities to develop them to their project's advantage.

- Smaller in size and/or scope group projects are best, as social media allows students to receive timely feedback from a number of sources. Students need to experience the beginning, middle, and end of a project.

- Class size needs to be limited to a reasonable number. If no graduate assistants are available, this experience suggests no more than 20 students in the course.

- Instructors must be prepared to allocate more time to supporting courses with social media components.

These findings support the argument that utilizing social media in business courses is critical because every person with access to the Internet has the ability to contribute ideas and experiences to the larger body of business knowledge.[7] Social learning is becoming an indispensable tool in the educating today's students.[8]

Conclusion

The use of social media approaches enhanced the learning experiences of undergraduate business students. Their use caused both the instructor and students to realize their roles in the course and behavior in the classroom had to change significantly. Although some may feel that incorporating social media approaches takes time away from important course topics, they should see these as alternative ways to cover topics and even as a means for introducing additional topics.

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