

Teaching in an Age of Ubiquitous Social Media: An Informal Ethnographic Survey

Mark A.M. Kramer, University of Salzburg
Alexander Meschtscherjakov, University of Salzburg
Manfred Tscheligi, University of Salzburg

Abstract

Social media is widely used and accepted by students and professors/lecturers of higher education and has become a central part of their lives in and out of the university classroom. Social media has altered the practice of “e-learning” and “mobile learning” and has influenced the development of new hybrid cultures of learning which are enhanced by ubiquitous and pervasive technologies of mass communication and collaboration. This paper provides first hand accounts and experiences with applying the use of social media and related technology enhanced learning methods within higher-education settings that serve a diverse International demographic. Furthermore, this paper goes beyond state of the art in research on teaching and learning with technology by providing insights into emerging and future technology enhanced learning scenarios between students of varied cultural backgrounds and techno-cultures.

1. Introduction

Education is an experience which is almost entirely conducted through communication. Traditionally, university classrooms (within a Western context and setting) places emphasis on face-to-face lectures and seminars in which knowledge is imparted (or broadcasted) towards the students. At present, the ways and means of communication with in educational settings are are still heavily influenced by face-to-face communication with consideration to the university classroom. However, observations have been made by many researchers (Kramer & Mirlacher, 2007; Ling, 2004; Rheingold) that the the one of the most popular means of communication amongst university students is made through mobile technologies and related services. Mobile communications technologies are providing the infrastructure for more pervasive and ubiquitous forms communication amongst students, hence making a string impact and influence on the education experience. This “ubiquitous” and inherently more “pervasive” form of education through mobile communication can best be observed and epitomized through the use of social media. Social media usage is a reality within the university classroom and is becoming more universally accepted by students and professors/lecturers of higher education, whereby becoming a central part of their lives in and out of the university classroom (Tess, 2013a). It can be argued that social media has altered the practice of “e-learning” and “mobile learning” and is influencing the development of new hybrid cultures of learning. These “hybrid cultures” of “ubiquitous & pervasive learning” are directly a result of the usage of technologies of mass communication and collaboration in which social media is the colloquial description thereof.

This paper is a work in progress and provides the observations and preliminary results of a qualitative, unstructured research. The singular question to be answered within the confines of this paper is the following: How is social media changing the way university lecturers / professors teach in the classroom? The preliminary answered to this question and the results of first hand accounts (self-reported observations) of applying social media and related technology enhanced learning methods are presented. This research does not focus on traditional “cross-cultural” themes, rather it highlights and shares observations related to the emerging culture of social media communication and exchange information inside and outside the university classroom.

1.1 Placing Social Media in Context:

The officially sanctioned use of technology within most universities is primarily through the use of an e-learning platform which is deployed as a Learning Management System (LMS) which the university maintains and encourages usage thereof. Although faculty and students are the primary users of learning management systems, “all too often it is the administrators and university IT experts which select the learning management system” that is used. (Clayton R. Wright, Valerie Lopes, T. Craig Montgomerie, 2014). In contrast to officially sanctioned LMS use, social media [is normally unsanctioned by universities] and is chosen and accepted by students and professors/lecturers, thus becoming “a central part of their lives in and out of the university classroom” (Tess 2013). According to research conducted by J. Rodrigues, “the use of social media in higher education classrooms is on the rise as faculty employ a variety of software tools and free web applications to enhance learning, communication, and engagement.” (Rodrigues)

As “unofficial” use of social-media usage increases and becomes more prevalent within higher education, it can be argued that social media is quietly displacing officially sanctioned eLearning protocols (and LMS platforms) established by universities. This displacement, coupled with the rise of adoption and acceptance of mobile technologies (smartphones, tablets, etc.) is giving rise to the emergence of new hybrid cultures of learning. These “new cultures” of learning are described by many as “mobile learning” (REFS) and is influencing the development of what this researcher describes as a “hybrid” learning cultures which are ubiquitous in practice and pervasive in their own nature. These “hybrid cultures” of learning are directly a result of the usage of mobile, networked technologies of mass communication and collaboration in which social media is the colloquial description thereof. In this paper, when the term “social-media” is used it refers to the forms of media which people [users] create, produce and consume on any network enabled device, anywhere and at anytime. The use of social media in this paper refers to the means of interactions with among people in which they create, share, and/or exchange information and ideas in virtual communities and networks

Research is plentiful with regards to the use of social media within the university classroom. “Facebook and other social media have been hailed as delivering the promise of new, socially engaged educational experiences for university students (Friesen & Lowe, 2012a). And it has been argued by many scholars for the purposeful integration of social media as an educational tool (Friesen & Lowe, 2012b; Gikas & Grant, 2013; Kramer & Mirlacher, 2007; Rodriguez, 2011; Tess, 2013a). Paul A. Tess describes the ubiquity of social media within the university classroom and highlights the fact “that empirical evidence of social media use in higher education is lacking” (Tess, 2013b). It is noteworthy to emphasize that this paper is attempting to make a minor contribution in providing more evidence of social media usage within the context of higher education by sharing self-reported evidence and first hand accounts of teaching with social media within (outside) the university classroom.

1.2. Overview of Research Conducted:

This paper presents the observations and experiences on the use of social media within a natural classroom setting. The research conducted is ethnographic in practice, employing several observation methods within a highly flexible, unstructured design. The methods include participatory observation and unobtrusive observation. Both methods were chosen to allow for the broadest collection of observations (data) without constraining or impacting the natural classroom environment. Participatory observation was conducted to gain an intimate, first hand familiarity with the usage of social media within the university classroom environment while observing its acceptance and practice. The application of the method of unobtrusive observation was employed primarily (by the professor/lecturer) through observing the social media exchanges among students, and recording anecdotal observations. The observations shared in this paper are a general survey of of the Winter semester 2015/16 conducted within 3 separate seminars held at the University of Applied Sciences - Upper Austria

2. Observations

The University of Applied Sciences in Upper Austria (FH-OÖ) hosts a diverse student body which creates a broad mix of ethnic and social-economic backgrounds. It is quite common for the the student body of the FH-OÖ to aggregate around students within the same area of studies and class of graduation, (for example, Global Sales and Marketing students who will graduate in 2016 are more likely to group together) developing their own communications channels and self-organized study groups. This self organization of these study-groups is supported and enhanced through the intensive use of social media, which is influencing the way in which the university classroom is structured at the FH-OÖ.

Each semester, as part of every seminar and lecture the FH-OÖ provides the ILIAS Learning Management System (LMS) for the professors (lecturers) as the official platform for supplementing the teaching and education experience [See Figure 1.] The ILIAS (Integriertes Lern-, Informations- und Arbeitskooperations-System [German for "Integrated Learning, Information and Work Cooperation System"]) is required for all official „classroom related” communications, including course email communication. The ILIAS LMS platform is a media which serves as the classroom repository for the reading materials and related course-work (such as the course syllabus, and related course content). While ILIAS is the official platform for classroom communication, it is all too often that other “unofficial” or “unsanctioned” forms of social media platforms are used in conjunction with ILIAS to create the “true” learning environment at the FH-OÖ.



Figure 1. **ILIAS** (Integriertes Lern-, Informations- und Arbeitskooperations-System [German for "Integrated Learning, Information and Work Cooperation System"])

In contrast to the use of the official ILIAS learning management system, the use of social-media within the classroom is quite prevalent at the FH-OÖ as a direct result of its culture of usage within the FH OÖ student body. In other words, the emerging pervasive usage of social media with the university classroom is a direct result of the ubiquity of social media which permeates the very core and essence of the FH-OÖ university student body. Case in point: Facebook groups were created to provide the learning environment for two seminars focused on on business marketing with new media [See Figure 2.]. These Facebook groups were actively used inside and outside the classroom to facilitate internal and external classroom discussion. The use of the Facebook group BMNM (Business Marketing New Media) was not required or mandated by the lecturer, rather it offered as a possibility in which the students had the choice to use or not. Needless to say that 100% of the students opted to use this social-media channel in conjunction with the official ILIAS LMS platform.



A survey conducted within the BMNM (Business Marketing New Media) Seminar reveals that 100% of students polled actively used Facebook for their educational experience in conjunction with other social media tools. Within the seminar Facebook Group an informal survey / poll was created to inquire the how social media influenced students [See Figure 3.] The following questions were posed to the students: How has social media influenced the way you approach your university studies and educational experience? In other words: Has social media impacted your education?



Figure 3. **Informal Survey / Poll** - Conducted within a Facebook Group for a Marketing Seminar.

It is noteworthy to highlight that in this informal survey / poll most of the students agree that social media makes it easier for them to access information and communicate. One student even wrote the following:

“I find that it is definitely easier to communicate and receive info quickly. Also, most programs have student groups where we share tips and notes and information...Also being able to upload and share files is very helpful, especially if there is a need of information from a few weeks or months ago ... Super easy to find and access.” – *FH OÖ – Global Sales and Marketing Student*

In contrast to the official learning management system of ILIAS, the student overwhelmingly shared that social media platforms such as Facebook Groups (when used for a seminar) as it was universally noted that Facebook was much easier to access information and communicate amongst students than using ILIAS. Furthermore, the Facebook group was primarily accessed and frequented through mobile devices such as laptops, tablets and smartphones, making the communication dynamics in the BMNM Facebook groups very dynamic. It is also noteworthy to share that the students did not use the ILIAS platform to communicate during the seminar, but rather used ILIAS as the platform to submit project assignments and to officially download the syllabus for the seminars involved in this study. When asked, the students shared that they considered ILIAS to be not very user friendly and cumbersome to use. It noted by many students that each and everyone of them uses Facebook within their daily lives anyway that it was only natural to incorporate it within their own university classes.

3. Conclusion

Research demonstrates that social media is widely used and accepted by students and professors/lecturers of higher education (especially at the FH-OÖ) and is rapidly becoming the primary means of communication within and outside of the university classroom. The institutionally sanctioned practice of “e-learning” is slowly being replaced with “unofficial” social media platforms (such as Facebook) causing the development of new hybrid cultures of teaching/learning which are enhanced by ubiquitous and pervasive technologies of mass communication and collaboration. Through this informal research it has been revealed that social media has altered the practice of officially sanctioned “e-learning” and is influencing the official channels of teaching and learning through the augmented use of social media platforms such as Facebook Groups. Social media by nature is pervasive amongst students at the FH OÖ. Social media is a technological tool which enhances the educational experience, and has the potential to disrupt and displace officially sanctioned learning management systems such as the ILIAS LMS.

With regards to answering the the research question posed: [How is social media changing the way university lecturers / professors teach in the classroom?]; the following preliminary observations are presented in an attempt to answer this question: As this paper provides primarily first hand accounts and experiences with applying the use of social media and related technology enhanced learning methods within higher-education settings, an answer to the research question is

inherently biased and subject to further research and academic debate. However, the impressions of the research involved is that social-media is making an impact on the way in which lectures and seminars are taught at university.

The colloquial saying [within communications and marketing parlance is] “go to where your audience is,” helps illustrate the shift observed within university campuses such as the FH-OÖ. The “audience” for lecturers and professors are those students who are already using social-media platforms such as Facebook for communicating and collaborating amongst their colleagues, friends and families. The teaching within the classroom is slowly shifting away from Learning Management Systems (such as ILIAS) towards social media platforms like Facebook groups because the usability and experience of using social media is more human-centric than standard LMSs. Many students at the FH-OÖ cite that Facebook is more intuitive and easier to use than the official “Integrated Learning, Information and Work Cooperation System” [ILIAS]. It is also noteworthy that among culturally diverse student bodies such as the FH-OÖ, that social media is an essential element within the education experience, allowing students to stay in touch with family and friends abroad (if they are international students visiting) while facilitating quick integration within a new student body and university campus.

In brief, social media is transforming the way university teach because its usage is so pervasive and ubiquitous amongst students, and to a lesser extent amongst faculty. The future of technology enhanced learning scenarios between students of varied cultural background can already be observed through the existing collaboration and interaction amongst faculty and students. The usage of social media for teaching is a reality and the era of learning management and “traditional” e-learning is slowly coming to an end. Go to where your students are! Social media is not a trend or a passing phase. The challenge for universities now is to examine how social media is re-shaping the educational experience they are delivering and proactively support the unofficial usage of social media for teaching by integrating social media into the classroom officially.

4. Bibliography

- Clayton R. Wright, Valerie Lopes, T. Craig Montgomerie, S. R. and S. S. (2014). Selecting a Learning Management System: Advice from an Academic Perspective. Retrieved February 2, 2016, from <http://er.educause.edu/articles/2014/4/selecting-a-learning-management-system-advice-from-an-academic-perspective>
- Friesen, N., & Lowe, S. (2012). The questionable promise of social media for education: connective learning and the commercial imperative. *Journal of Computer Assisted Learning*, 28(3), 183–194. <http://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2729.2011.00426.x>
- Gikas, J., & Grant, M. M. (2013). Mobile computing devices in higher education: Student perspectives on learning with cellphones, smartphones & social media. *The Internet and Higher Education*, 19, 18–26. <http://doi.org/10.1016/j.iheduc.2013.06.002>
- Kramer, M. A. M., & Mirlacher, T. (2007). Learning in the Age of Ubiquitous Computing: Exploring the Impact of Mobile Technologies on Individual and Collaborative Learning Practices. *Learning*, 1(4), 26–29.
- Ling, R. (2004). *The Mobile Connection: The Cell Phone's Impact on Society*. Morgan Kaufmann. Retrieved from <https://books.google.com/books?id=oSwCQ6y6wq8C&pgis=1>
- Rheingold, H. (1985). *Tools for Thought: The History and Future of Mind-expanding Technology*. MIT Press. Retrieved from <https://books.google.com/books?id=k6auljJ9hJUC&pgis=1>
- Rodriguez, J. E. (2011). Social Media Use in Higher Education : Key Areas to Consider for Educators. *Journal of Online Learning and Teaching*, 7(4), 539–550. Retrieved from http://jolt.merlot.org/vol7no4/rodriguez_1211.htm
- Tess, P. A. (2013). The role of social media in higher education classes (real and virtual) – A literature review. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 29(5), A60–A68. <http://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2012.12.032>