Studying and Researching with Social Media

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Why use Social Media in your Studies and Research?

OVERVIEW

This chapter charts the rise of social media since the early 2000s and outlines why social media are important to twenty-first-century life and learning. It provides a brief overview of the educational theory that is relevant to social media and education as a way of helping you understand why lecturers might be using social media in teaching and learning. The chapter also describes the benefits of using social media for research, paying particular attention to the value of communicating with peers, keeping up with the latest research, improving efficiency and productivity, promoting your academic career, and disseminating your work. Issues around competency and 'digital natives' are also explored, as is the role of the VLE (Virtual Learning Environment) in the modern higher education context.

The focus of the chapter is on how social media can support effective learning and research, but it also aims to put less 'tech-savvy' readers at ease by explaining that, to use social media tech and tools, you don't need to have any special knowledge (for example, how to write html) and you don't need access to specialised hardware (for example, servers). Instead, it shows that using social media is easy and that anyone can teach themselves to use online digital technologies effectively to support their study and research.

WHAT IS 'SOCIAL MEDIA'?

Social media are simply those digital technologies that allow users to easily create and share material with others via the internet. The internet hasn't

always been used in this way. In the early days, people needed access to special knowledge (such as how to write html code) and special equipment (such as servers) in order to make the internet 'work', meaning that web-based communication via the internet was largely uni-directional. By 2005, however, internet technology had developed to such a point that it became possible for ordinary people to have their own websites or, perhaps more accurately, their own web 'presences'. These days, we use sites and services such as blogs, wikis, Facebook, Skype, Twitter, and many others to publish our own material on the internet without giving a second thought to what makes it all happen.

What is the difference between the web and the internet?

The distinction is fine but important. Basically, the internet provides the underlying architecture or structure that supports the digital transfer of information. On top of this architecture sits the web, which is simply a platform used to deliver content via the structure of the internet. Taking it a step further, we can see that the apps that you have on your smartphone aren't websites but they still use the internet to transfer and present data.

The role of social media in twenty-first-century communication

The growth of social media in recent years is having quite profound impacts on how information and knowledge are created and distributed in modern culture. Whereas traditional broadcast media have been characterised by the 'one-to-many' control of information flows (through books, magazines, newspapers, television, etc.), social media are characterised by 'many-to-many' information sharing. Social media, then, are networked media and they allow for the instant and simultaneous sharing of material on the internet.

Clarifying terms

There are many different terms that get thrown around when people talk about social media. There are often used interchangeably, but we can, in fact, distinguish between them:

- *IT (Information Technology)*. Describes the 'inner' workings of digital technologies – that is, things that relate to Computer Science, coding, programming, software development, hardware development, scripting, etc.
- *ICT (Information and Communication(s) Technology/-ies)*. Refers to technologies that facilitate the social elements of digital life and to anything that funnels the flow of communications between *people.* The key term, here, is 'communication'.

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- *Social media.* Signifies digital technologies that allow users to easily create and share material with others via the internet.
- *Web 2.0.* Describes the 'shift' or 'evolution' in internet technologies that occurred around 2005 when a 'second generation' of websites and services became available, allowing people to easily publish their own material on the web. Web 2.0 is thus closely associated with the growth of social media and is sometimes also called the 'read-write' web: that is, we don't just have to read it, we can also 'write' it.

Why does any of this matter to you as student and/or researcher? Well, quite simply, social media are providing us with new platforms for communication and, inasmuch as communication is one of the chief activities of both study and research, social media have the potential not just to provide new *tools* for communication but also to *change the nature* of communicative practices themselves. We are seeing this already in the diversity of writing 'genres' that are developing through people's use of internet-based services such as Facebook and Twitter.

As you move through this book, you will learn more about what constitutes appropriate 'genre' and communication practice on various social media platforms, but for the moment we can say that communication via social media is all about

- Participation
- Collaboration
- Interactivity
- Community building
- Sharing
- Networking
- Creativity
- Distribution
- Flexibility
- Customisation.

These qualities are exactly those that make social media so useful in education and research.

SOCIAL MEDIA IN STUDY AND RESEARCH

Social media are having large impacts on the way we conduct our scholarly enterprise. In particular, social media are not only helping us apply better pedagogies to our teaching and learning activities, but they are also proving

beneficial at all stages of the research cycle. We will see how this works in more detail as we go through the chapters of this book; for now, though, we'll take a more conceptual look at how social media are influencing the study and research process.

Social media and a theory of education and learning

It may seem strange to include a section on educational theory in a study and research skills textbook, but having a basic knowledge of the kinds of teaching, learning, and scholarship that are best supported by social media will help you to make the most of social media in your academic endeavours.

Although there are various theories about how people learn – and how they learn best – the one that has most currency in social media environments is called 'social constructivism'. Social constructivism holds that learning is a collaborative, participatory process in which the creation of knowledge and meaning occurs through social interaction. In other words, we learn best in interaction with or when working with others. Based on this notion, it should be easy to see how social media, which so readily support collaboration and interactivity, can be harnessed to benefit not just the ways in which we learn (study), but also the ways in which we build on, interrogate, and share what we already know (research). Thus, both study and research benefit from activities that involve collaboration, participation, interaction, dissemination, sharing, connecting, networking, building, and creating – activities that can be easily achieved through the use of social media.

All of this is in contrast to approaches to scholarship that focus on the monolithic, individual learner or researcher, that is, someone who operates in isolation from others and who is either the 'receiver' (learner) or 'transmitter' (researcher) of knowledge. Whilst there can be some value in such approaches, they are nevertheless quite static and tend to limit the opportunities that both students and researchers have for constructing and sharing our knowledge of the world and our place in it.

Why lecturers use social media in teaching and learning

Social media tools are nimble, flexible, easy to use and often very powerful, allowing students to easily create their own content, websites, and learning spaces. In theory, this should lead to the types of socially constructivist learning approaches (mentioned above) that are student- and class-focused, rather than teacher-driven. John Dewey recognised the importance of such approaches a century ago when he stated that there should be 'more opportunity for conjoint activities in which those instructed take part, so that they

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may acquire a social sense of their own powers and of the materials and appliances used' (2004 [1916]: 39, emphasis removed). We can now readily create such opportunities for students because social media platforms can be used to put education at the centre – not the teacher – and thus allow students to take part more actively and creatively in their own education.

Not all lecturers, of course, use social media as part of their everyday teaching and assessment practice – in fact, most probably *don't*. The use of social media in university teaching and learning is still in its early days, leading many to be cynical or sceptical, others evangelistic, and perhaps most simply uninformed or indifferent. Nevertheless, as a student, you may increasingly find yourself taking courses in which the use of social media forms part of your assessment or part of the 'delivery' platform for basic course content. To this end, lecturers use social media for three main reasons:

1. *Education.* Lecturers who use social media in their teaching typically want you to share, communicate, collaborate, participate, interact, network, connect, build community, be creative, and distribute your work/findings/discoveries in a socially constructivist learning environment (see above). Tools such as blogs, wikis, social networks, and others are excellent for such activities. Lecturers might also want you to develop some of the technical and communication skills that will be of use to you when you leave university and enter the workforce (in fact, these skills might form part of your university's 'graduate outcomes') and using social media can help with that.

2. *Assessment.* Many lecturers are finding social media tools more and more useful and appropriate when it comes to assessing student work. Lecturers are still discovering their way a bit in this area, but those who are working within the social constructivist models of teaching and learning described above are developing forms of assessment that combine both formative ('as you go') and summative ('at the end') assignments. It's important to remember that lecturers working in this way are often those who have an interest in educational theory to begin with, which means that they are basing their teaching on informed pedagogy and not just on 'what has come before' or 'what has always been done'. This is important for improving student learning, but if you feel that you're not sure what it is that you have to do in order to complete your assessment, then don't be afraid to ask your lecturer for clarification.

3. *Administration.* Inasmuch as social media are geared towards the distribution of content, they provide excellent platforms for the delivery of course materials, meaning that they can be used to take the place of a traditional VLE (Virtual Learning Environment – see below). Your lecturer may prefer to employ just one system or service, such as a blog, to host everything course-related, or they may work with a 'hub and spokes' model in which case a variety of social media tools and services (for example, Twitter, Flickr, and newsfeeds) are fed into a central platform, such as a wiki.

Precisely how specific social media tools are used for these purposes is explored in the chapters that follow.

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Benefits of using social media for your research

So far, we've looked at how social media can be used to support the educational activities of lecturers. But to the extent that education is a communicative practice, then so too is research. There is no point in conducting research if we can't disseminate it and build communities of scholars who share and critique ideas. Procter et al. (2010: 4040) define scholarly communications as:

conducting research, developing ideas and informal communications;

preparing, shaping and communicating what will become formal research outputs;

the dissemination of formal products;

managing personal careers and research teams and research programmes; and

communicating scholarly ideas to broader communities.

Social media support all these scholarly activities.

Conducting research, developing ideas, and informal communications

Social media can most obviously be used in social science disciplines that conduct research amongst *people*, that is, social media can be used – with ethics clearance, naturally – to gather data on human behaviour, thoughts, social interactions, etc. But social media can also be used as platforms for *search*. Twitter, blogs, and social bookmarking sites can all be checked for the latest articles, discoveries, and ideas in your field – you don't only have to rely on the databases in your library catalogue (or Google Scholar) to find scholarly material. You can use social media to work on joint-writing projects, to keep in touch with fieldworkers and research participants, and even to develop and share ideas via online mindmaps. See Chapter 8 for more detail.

Preparing, shaping, and communicating what will become formal research outputs

Research is often messy and keeping track of it, even messier. Social media allow you to host research material online (publicly or privately) and to access it from anywhere. You can keep notes, save and tag bookmarks and favourites, and manage references all using social media. Blogging allows you to present ideas and get feedback, whilst subscriptions (see 'RSS' in Chapter 2) feed the latest research and report updates directly to your online location. Social media can thus help you gain control over information channels at the same time as using those channels for getting pre-publication responses to your work. Again, see Chapter 8 for more information.

The dissemination of formal products

Most formal scholarly work is still disseminated in traditional formats such as those found in peer-reviewed journal articles and books. Nevertheless, many publishing houses are advertising and promoting the latest research publications via social media. Further, you can publicise your own articles and books using social media. Of course, you need to be careful that you don't upload entire works without your publisher's permission, but most publishers are more than happy for you to use social media to promote your own material, both pre- and post-publication.

Managing personal careers, research teams, and research programs

Perhaps one of the most powerful uses of social media for researchers is for the promotion of your own academic career. This may sound somewhat selfish and self-serving, but the reality of academe in the twenty-first century is that it is a competitive business: you are competing for grants, jobs, publication, funding, position, students. What's more, you are expected to have a set of career goals and to periodically apply for – and receive – promotion. Establishing and maintaining an online profile, and building credibility, reputation, and awareness, can greatly increase your chances of finding and retaining a position in the modern university system. In addition to this, however, social media can be very effectively mobilised to manage research teams and programs: you can keep in touch, share data, debate ideas, and collaborate on grants using various forms of social media. Chapter 7 looks at building your online profile in more detail.

Communicating scholarly ideas to broader communities

Finally, social media are being used to communicate what we do beyond the traditional bounds of the academy. No longer is research – in any of its forms or stages – obtainable only by those with special access to journals, people, institutions, and the like. Rather, with so much now available on the internet in so many different ways, links to the broader community can be fostered and our research disseminated to a much wider audience. This allows us not only to share discoveries and get feedback, but also to initiate 'citizen science' projects, develop outreach services, and to engage more publicly with industry, government, and policy makers and implementers.

Social media have become such an integral part of the ways in which we communicate that, simply by default, they are also becoming integral to the ways in which we conduct our study and research.

SOCIAL MEDIA IN THE UNIVERSITY ENVIRONMENT

Certain peculiarities of the university environment mean that the use of social media in higher education is not always straightforward. Firstly, there

are social and demographic factors that impact on the assumptions we make about people's use of social media. And then there is the role that the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) plays in delivering, controlling, and distributing electronic content. You need to understand this environment if you are to successfully use social media to support your study and research practices.

The 'digital natives' debate: Assumptions around your use of social media

The term 'digital native' was first coined by Marc Prensky in 2001 to describe those people who have grown up in digital environments and whose brains, as a result, exhibit certain physical characteristics that are different from those of 'digital immigrants', that is, those who have *not* grown up in digital environments (Prensky, 2001a, b). Prensky's paper sparked much debate – debate that continues today – about whether or not young people are, indeed, 'digital natives' or whether Prensky's claims are overstated. In some ways, Prensky has been both misinterpreted and misrepresented (Poore, 2012: 164), because he wasn't arguing that people born after a certain date suddenly demonstrated a spontaneous evolutionary shift in the structure of the human brain. Rather, he was saying that some people, as a result of growing up in digital environments, 'think and process information fundamentally differently from their predecessors' (Prensky, 2001a: 1, emphasis removed).

All of this is important because these debates and discourses aren't just theoretical or academic – they can actually lead to certain assumptions about what people 'know' about learning with social media. To this end, how others *think* about how certain groups use social media may directly impact *you* when you use social media in your studies and research. The remainder of this section applies largely to students, but you may also find that similar issues arise in the research environment.

Assumptions around competence

You probably use only a few websites and social media services on a daily basis: Facebook, YouTube, Google, Twitter, and Wikipedia are clearly the chief contenders. This is generally fine, but the problem is that we normally use only one or two main functions on each service and ignore the rest. For example, most people will watch YouTube clips, fewer will actually upload them, and fewer still will make their own videos for sharing. Similarly, we'll visit Wikipedia to get some quick information about a subject, but not many of us will actually edit an entry and add our own knowledge to the topic. By the same token, we tend to be quite familiar with one or two digital devices and are accustomed to how they work and how they are set up. As a result,

we become competent in the use of a few things but can feel quite lost when asked to apply ourselves to something different. (In fact, services such as Facebook don't do you any favours in terms of teaching you how to add hyperlinks, embed videos using embed code, or complete similar actions because all these things are done automatically for you.) In the study context, you might be asked to create a blog, contribute to a wiki, produce your own podcast, or tag and share your bookmarks – things that you may have never done before.

It helps, here, to think about where you sit in the 'conscious-competence' learning cycle (Figure 1.1) as regards your skilled (or otherwise) use of social media in particular and digital technologies in general. The cycle works like this:

- *Unconscious incompetence.* You have no awareness of a certain area of expertise or set of skills – in other words, 'you don't know what you don't know'. You may never have heard of social bookmarking (see Chapter 7), for example, so it doesn't impact you.
- *Conscious incompetence.* You become aware of an area or skill leading you to 'know what you don't know'. For example, your lecturer might ask you to use social bookmarking for an assignment and suddenly you realise that there is a whole digital domain about which you know nothing. This is what I describe to students as the 'freak-out' stage because it can be quite stressful wondering how on earth you will manage what is being asked of you.
- *Conscious competence.* You start to gain skill or expertise in an area and you can perform at a reliable level. Continuing our example, you have set up a social bookmarking account and you can save bookmarks and tag them up (see Chapter 2 for information on tags) if you think about what you are doing.
- *Unconscious competence.* You can now perform the skill or operate in the area of expertise without thinking about it: it has become 'second nature'.

Thinking about competence is important for two main reasons. Firstly, your lecturer, perhaps working off certain ideas about 'digital natives' described above, might assume that you have full competence in any and all areas of
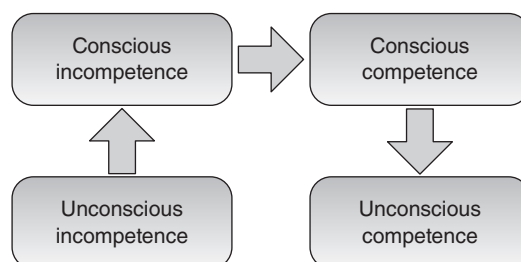

FIGURE 1.1   The 'conscious competence' learning cycle

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digital media use. The result can be believing that you can easily transfer skills learnt from Facebook to the new medium and underestimating the support you really need to succeed in class. This is assuming 'conscious competence' on your part, when you might be at the 'conscious incompetence' stage and feeling quite anxious. Secondly, you, yourself, might overestimate your competence because you have gained confidence in using your regular sites, services, and devices on a daily basis. Further, you might often feel frustrated with others' 'slowness' when sitting next to them on a computer or looking over their shoulder as you try to help them make sense of their mobile phone. Be careful not to mistake your *confidence* in particular online and digital environments with *competence* in all such environments. In my experience, students who are, for example, quite used to working within Facebook can have initial difficulties when asked to find an embed code to display a video on a blog they've created on their own. Both you and your lecturer need to bear these things in mind.

Activity   Social media competency quiz

Complete the following quiz to see where you sit on the 'conscious competence' learning cycle in relation to social media.

1 Computers

   a) Can be broken ☐
   b) Are a means to an end ☐
   c) Are 'old skool'. I use my phone for everything ☐

2 I learn by

   a) Guessing and hoping ☐
   b) Reading or taking a class ☐
   c) Doing ☐

3 When I come across a new application or online tool, I

   a) Dread having to learn something completely new ☐
   b) Think about other tools I know and try to figure out how the current one might fit a pattern ☐
   c) Get in there and play around and see what happens knowing that I can't break it ☐

4 When I can't figure out how to do something in a social media environment, I

   a) Sit there thinking either 'I'm so dumb' or 'Computers are stupid' ☐
   b) Try the help function and, when that doesn't work, I email the helpdesk ☐
   c) Google an answer, knowing that someone, somewhere in the world has solved this problem before and has posted their answer in a discussion forum or similar ☐

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5 When a dialogue box pops up in the middle of doing something, I

    a) Click and hope, not really knowing what the options mean ☐

    b) Read it very, very carefully and then decide which option I want to click on, knowing that I've definitely made the right choice ☐

    c) Read it quickly, guess which option is most likely and then click, knowing that I've probably made the right choice but it doesn't matter because there's little chance I'll make the wrong one, anyway ☐

6 Problem solving

    a) Is too hard. I'm not sure how to do it on the internet ☐

    b) Is a good way of working through issues, but I don't have the time ☐

    c) Is how I make things work ☐

7 Social media is

    a) Intimidating ☐

    b) Important for work, study and research ☐

    c) Just there – I use it but tend not to think about it ☐

8 The pace of change

    a) Makes me wonder how I will ever keep up ☐

    b) Is to be expected in today's world. I'll manage ☐

    c) I don't actually notice any 'pace of change' ☐

9 When it comes to integrating social media into my work, uni and personal lives, I

    a) Must know it all before I can start ☐

    b) Should learn stuff now, while I have some spare time ☐

    c) Will learn it when I need to and be comfortable with that ☐

If you answered mainly 'a', then see the section on 'Attitude' in Chapter 2 for a discussion on how to adjust your perspective on social media – and how to deal with perfectionism and feeling overwhelmed – to help you move into the conscious competence stage. If you answered mainly 'b', then each chapter of this book will be helpful in giving you a greater understanding of how social media work in the university environment. If you answered mainly 'c', then the chances are that most of what is covered in this book will simply be 'revision' for you; however, take a look at the chapters in the final part of the text, as there might still be some skilling up you need to do as regards the more legal or ethical elements of using social media.

Assumptions around communication preferences

Some lecturers will assume that because you might regularly communicate with family and friends via mobile phone, text, Facebook, or chat, you will be quite comfortable with using these and similar technologies for study. Further, they may take for granted that you would prefer and/or can do without face-to-face

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contact with your lecturer and that you are quite happy to undertake your entire course online. In fact, the research shows quite the opposite in both cases, and has done so for some time (EDUCAUSE, 2012; JISC, 2007, 2008). Students want separate academic and private or social lives and prefer to use different communication formats for different audiences (EDUCAUSE, 2012: 25). Generally, text, Facebook, chat, and IM are preferred for friends and email for lecturers. Some lecturers may lose sight of this and assume that you are comfortable with – and have a 'natural' inclination for – interacting via what you see as more 'private' forms of communication. Similarly, in a recent study in the US 87 per cent of students said that face-to-face interaction with their teachers was very or extremely important (EDUCAUSE 2012: 26). Being aware of some of the assumptions that might exist around your communication preference can help you manage your course, and your own and your lecturer's expectations, when it comes to social media assignments.

Assumptions around using social media for learning

A final assumption that might arise out of digital native debates and discourses is the notion that you are 'OK with it'; that using social media is highly motivating for you because you use it in your social and everyday life and because you may have 'grown up' with it. You, on the other hand, might just feel confused and overwhelmed by what you are being asked to do and you can't see how using social media in your studies actually relates to or enhances your learning.

Although there may be a disconnect here, don't give up. Lecturers who use social media for student learning are normally highly skilled in its use at a functional level, but also understand and appreciate the benefits for education at a theoretical and practical level (see above). That doesn't mean, however, that all lecturers are equal when it comes to describing *how* to use social media for learning. In fact, studies show (EDUCAUSE, 2012; JISC, 2007, 2008) that students want more information on how to learn *with* social media and not on how to make things work in a technical sense (EDUCAUSE, 2012: 29).

If you aren't sure – or if your lecturer hasn't been entirely clear – about why and how their intended use of social media in your course will support your learning, then gently ask them

- Why are we using this tool over another, for example, a traditional lab report or essay?
- How will this help me learn what you want me to learn?
- How am I being assessed and under what criteria? Writing? Sharing? Critical engagement? Communication? Quality of group work? (See the individual chapters on blogs and wikis for examples of success criteria and marking rubrics.)
- What technical competencies can you or the university help me acquire? Will you or a central training department run workshops or am I expected to form a study group, perhaps?

Other questions, of course, will arise according to your specific context. Needless to say, don't be aggressive, defensive, or negative in your questioning (no matter how exasperated or panicked you might feel). If you ask respectfully – and only ask those questions either that you couldn't find your own answer to or that you really, really were unclear about – then your lecturer could well appreciate the opportunity to clarify what they are looking for in your assignments.

Always bear in mind that your lecturer has almost certainly chosen to do things this way for very good reasons; it's just that sometimes they might not communicate those reasons as neatly or as explicitly as students need them to. Remember that both you *and* your lecturer may still be feeling your way in the area of using social media in the classroom. How your lecturer gets skilled up in this is a matter for them and their professional development program. For your part, though, you need to start figuring out how to use these tools for *learning*, not just for social communication. And that is what this book hopes to guide you in.

The role of the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) in higher education

Until recently, almost all online teaching and learning was conducted via teacher-controlled, centralised Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs, also known as Learning Management Systems or LMSs). It is worth spending just a little time, here, on understanding the relationship between VLEs and your lecturer's use of social media, as it will help explain why your lecturer has chosen to use an externally hosted social media service as opposed to your university-supplied VLE. As such, this section is of most use to students, but teaching academics might also find some of the principles explored to be of interest.

Virtual Learning Environments (such as WebCT, Moodle, Blackboard, Sakai, and others) are designed to provide stable, online class environments for both teachers and students. These systems excel in streamlining administrative and didactic tasks and are important for the management of course materials and information. However, VLEs tend to lack a degree of flexibility, usability, and functionality when it comes to helping develop rich, deep, and engaging learning experiences for students. In other words, VLEs are primarily *management* systems, not pedagogic ones, and they are often used to support didactic or transmission educative practices that push content at students (Fitzgerald and Steele, 2008: 27; Ullrich et al., 2008: 705). In this sense, they are sometimes used more or less as an 'advanced photocopier' that replicates old teaching practices based on mass communication, on processes of industrialisation, and on economies of scale (Attwell, 2007: 2–4).

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Because centralised VLEs are designed to do several things all at once, they also have a tendency to provide 'watered down' versions of only a few social media tools and applications. For example, some VLEs have wiki or blog functions attached to them, but those functions are often poor imitations of 'real' wikis and blogs available on the web. Moreover, as already mentioned, traditional, centralised VLEs are teacher-controlled and often make it difficult for students to upload or produce their own content. In other words, VLEs often do not easily allow for the type of student engagement and creativity that many social media platforms encourage and that lecturers want from you. All of this can have a restrictive effect on students' creative and active participation in learning and presents dilemmas for both university administrators and lecturers alike;

> ... the rise of [social media] applications has challenged the role of institutional LMSs which tend to be closed applications specific to an institution or jurisdiction, and challenge[s] the policies of organisations and systems as teachers test, trial and experiment with collaborative tools that are only available outside their learning organisation. (SICTAS, 2009: 77)

Today, then, some lecturers, rather than be restricted by what the class VLE offers in terms of functionality, are starting to explore powerful, flexible, externally provided social media tools that support a better pedagogy. Stephen Downes encourages this approach in saying that we need to 'move away from large, centralized applications and instead make use of a network of connected applications' (2008: 1). On a related note, Fitzgerald and Steele point out that '[t]here is no one tool that provides a social software solution to support learning and teaching, nor is it appropriate to use the one technique for all disciples or even throughout the teaching of a particular discipline' (Fitzgerald and Steele, 2008: 31).

At this point, I need to make it clear that I am not advocating an overthrow of university-supplied virtual learning environments. Many lecturers find the tools supplied in a university VLE adequate for their administrative and teaching requirements; indeed, traditional VLEs can provide an acceptable baseline for the distribution of information about a course (which, arguably, all courses should have) in the VLE. Furthermore, a VLE links into the university's student database, which aids administration of courses. However, many lecturers, aware of what constitutes good teaching practice, want to use the best tool for the job – whether that tool is inside or outside the VLE. On this point I agree with Fitzgerald and Steele who state that 'institutional ICT systems like the corporate learning management system must be developed in ways that can work with web services that sit outside the academy' (Fitzgerald and Steele, 2008: 31).

Clearly, this book does not focus on how to use VLEs for study, but bear in mind that much of what is covered here can be easily applied to your institution's Virtual Learning Environment. For example, if your lecturer is using your VLE to set a blog or a wiki task, then much of the advice provided in this book will pertain to that situation.

SUMMARY

- Social media are those digital technologies that allow users to easily create and share material with others via the internet.
- Social media are all about participation, collaboration, interactivity, community building, sharing, networking, creativity, distribution, flexibility, and customisation.
- Social constructivism is a theory of learning that holds that learning is a collaborative, participatory process in which the creation of knowledge and meaning occurs through social interaction: we learn best in interaction or when working with others. Social media can thus support good teaching and learning.
- Lecturers use social media for educational (pedagogical), assessment, and administrative purposes.
- Social media can be used to conduct research, develop ideas, prepare and get feedback on early draft materials, build your online profile, and communicate your work.
- Debates around 'digital natives' may impact on you because some people will make assumptions around your competence with social media, your communication preferences, and how you use social media for learning.
- Understanding the conscious-competence learning cycle will help you identify your skill levels as regards your use of social media and digital technologies.
- Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) provide largely didactic environments for the management of course materials and information, but they lack a degree of flexibility, usability, and functionality when it comes to helping develop rich, deep, and engaging learning experiences for students.

FURTHER READING

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