Social media use in community building for collaboration: How do university teacher educators and pre-service teachers measure up?

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Abstract

This paper investigates the social media use of university teacher educators and pre-service teachers with respect to community building in times of diversity and changing information societies. It looks at the questions: a) To what extent do teacher pre-service education programs utilise social media with their students and for what purposes; b) To what extent do pre-service teachers utilise social media both privately and with respect to their studies; and c) To what extent do these efforts lend themselves to collaboration and community building? Fifty pre-service teacher education students at three universities in three European countries participating in the study were surveyed.

Keywords: social media, diversity, community building, teacher education, pre-service

Introduction

Competencies for the information society

Living in times of diversity as well as in changing information societies new methods of social interaction via social media venue influence the central notions in teaching, learning, as well as the conceptions of citizenship and community building. Digital citizenship is as much of a reality in the world we live in as is the diversity which is all around us and of which we are a fundamental part.

As teachers need to become both familiar and competent with issues of diversity so do they have a need to acquire the competences required in a changing information society but doing so does not equal a 'quick fix' (Rowan & Bigum, 2012). The way in which someone teaches, their idea of teaching, is generally formed based on one's own experiences as learners (Lortie, 1975 as cited by Kennedy, 1999: 55). Given that they are prone to using the competencies they have acquired through observation of their own teachers, they may not see how these new competencies can benefit their teaching. As such, it is important to both understand if and how new competencies are utilized as well as to consider how to provide opportunities for pre-service teachers to maximize the new methods of social interaction and provide them with opportunities to experience learning in innovative learning environments.

Kennedy (1999: 55) argues that "teacher learning consists of three parts. First, teachers learn what the task of teaching is through their apprenticeship of observation, then they learn their subject matter through their liberal arts courses in college, and then they develop their own technique and style through their own teaching experiences. Into this mix is injected the reality that in a rapidly changing information society we need to find means in which to maximize the technology which in many ways defines it to help pre-service teachers exploit social media in a positive and productive fashion to benefit their future students. The way in which someone teaches, their idea of teaching, is generally formed based on one's own experiences as learners.

Teacher education programs need to not be standing on the sidelines but to take full advantage of these new methods in their efforts to make teachers public agents of change. Researchers have however argued that teacher education programs are isolated from a society and clientele in which technology and social media are part of the common parlance and practice. A fundamental question to be considered prior to looking at how teacher education programs utilize social media is how pre-service teachers employ it.

Social Media use research

Looking into the phenomenon of social media applications it becomes clear that they are increasingly used to exchange information in education. This in turn has been found to enable learning, collaboration and community building to take place within the sphere of education (e.g. Reuben, 2008; Ulrich, Borau, Luo et al, 2008; Grodecka, Wild, Kieslinger, 2008). According to Alvarez (2006:13), a collaborative learning environment is defined as "a number of people collaborate to develop a joint understanding of the situation…[and] requires intense interaction between their members…[and] intense interaction is required for the members to develop identification with the community, develop a common ground, and for sharing and creating common meaning". Thus, allowing us to look at it from the view point of citizenship and its impact.

There are a number of factors that research has identified as influencing the use of social media. For example with respect to age the work of Madden and Savage (2000) established that with regard to age there was in fact an opposite relationship when examined in relation to how much the Internet was used. We see similar age related findings found in line with who is more likely to embrace specific Internet–related technologies such as Webcasting as well as online chat rooms (Peter, et al., 2006; Lin, 2004).

While information seeking and entertainment are critical gratifications sought from the Internet in general (Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000), individual Internet services show differences in the relevance of gratifications sought.

Social Media and collaboration is a growing reality. The various types of social media and web 2.0 applications (blogs and feedback, wikis, Google calendar, Google docs) are used as collaborative tools in the field of higher learning. These tools can be used to form collaborative teams, who can share common objectives that are different from personal networking objectives. Learning comes from the process of collaboration, interaction and reflection on how a given task should be approached. We see that this facet plays a role in a new trend whereby students appear to have begun using social media sites not only to 'connect' for personal and extraneous to education uses but also for collaboration with other students on class projects or notes (Parry & White, 2011).

Finally, we need to note that, albeit limited in our review, the scope of research in the area of social media use is robust and ever increasing.

What are the questions being asked?

For the purposes of this paper, we highlight both the broader questions that our research sought to look at as well as some more specific ones. The primary questions were 1) To what extent do university students use the social media for the purposes of meeting their education needs; and 2) To what extent can differences be found in terms of social media use in European higher education institutions? More specifically by focusing on education students, where we attempted to look at to what extent: a) teacher education pre-service programs utilize social media with their students and for what purposes; b) pre-service teachers utilize social media privately and with respect to their studies; and c) do these efforts lend themselves to collaboration and community building? We were also take a first look at certain factors might hold difference, such as when they started using the Internet, mobile phones and social media.

Sample & Research Protocol

The study's population was undergraduate teacher education students at three universities in different European countries, two with EU membership status (Greece and Finland) and one in negotiation for full accession status (Turkey). Our sample was made up of 50 undergraduate pre-service education students in each of the sampled universities. The questionnaires were adapted from Onyebuchi (2009). The adapted questionnaire originally developed in English was translated into Greek, Finnish and Turkish and back translated to assess the degree of reliability and validity. The questionnaires were administered in the spring of 2012 to students attending courses in their respective universities teacher education programs. Participation was voluntary.

The completed questionnaire responses were codified and entered into statistical analysis program SPSS 12. Our statistical analysis was predicated on a descriptive analysis looking at frequencies and variable percentages for all three countries to identify differences between

them and which would allow us to present and discuss some of the findings. Later analysis will focus on inferential statistics to identify how separate factors influence the student's stance and perception of the utility of social media use in higher education and community building.

Finding highlights

The analysis of our data identified that there were response differences between the three universities. A majority of the student's surveyed started their computer, internet and cell phone use as early as 9 years of age and as late as 20/25 starting between the ages of 13-15 (GR & TR) and 10-13 (FI) (see Table 1).

Table 1: Age first using social media

	GREECE	TURKEY	FINLAND
Age using mobile phone	13-15, (60%)	14-16 (65%)	10-13 (60%)
Age using Internet	14-16 (58%)	14-16 (53%)	11-13 (56%)

As to the time they appear to use the web, this too varies with the most time use being identified by the Finnish students but for general purposes. When we look at university use and for educational purposes, here the Greek students make greater use closely followed by the Finnish (see Tables 2, 3 and 4), whereas the Turkish students respond that they rarely/never use it.

Table 2: Regularity of access to the internet

GREECE	TURKEY	FINLAND
Several times a day (60%)	Several times a day (58.8%)	Several times a day (83%)

Table 3: Use of internet in university

GREECE	TURKEY	FINLAND
REGULARLY (52%)	RARELY/NEVER (51%)	REGULARLY (43%)

Table 4: Social media and education

	GREECE	TURKEY	FINLAND
Use of media for education	Weekly (40%)	Once a month (33%)	Weekly (38.3%)
Use media for educational activities	Weekly/daily (60%)	Weekly (46%)	Weekly (63.8%)

The students across the three universities were familiar with various social media programs and applications. They appear to be evenly divided though in their use websites, blogs, wikis, and others (see Table 5), while the applications they appear to want use also differ (see Table 6).

Table 5: Most frequent use of social media applications

	GREECE	TURKEY	FINLAND
Webcasts	20%	7.8%	19.1%
Podcasts	6%	0%	6.4%
E-portfolios	18%	0%	8.5%
Instant messaging	52%	11.8%	21.3%
Wikis	66%	0%	48.9%
You Tube	98%	13.7%	61.7%
Social Networks (Facebook)	100%	66.7%	91.5%

Table 6: Web applications you would most like to learn through

	GREECE	TURKEY	FINLAND
Contributing to websites, bogs, wikis	52%	17.6%	57.4%
Creating/listening to podcasts, webcasts	26%	2%	29.8%
Programs that I can control	50%	21.6%	4.3%
Running internet searches	72%	51%	27.7 %
Text based conversations (i.e. email)	56%	7.8%	21.3

As to their reasons for using these, we found that while they use them for a variety of purposes, there appears to be high use of social networking sites for communicating with their instructors by the Greek and Finnish students and significantly less by the Turkish students (see Table 7).

Table 7: Reasons for using social networking sites

	GREECE	TURKEY	FINLAND
Stay in touch w/friends	92%	33%	91.5%
Make new friends	40 %	2%	93,6
Find out about people	38 %	0%	34%
Find someone to date	26%	0%	4,3
Express my opinions & views	66%	2%	34%
Share photos, videos, music	92%	6%	74.5%
For professional activities	74%	3%	48.9%
Communicate w/ classmates about course	86%	6%	93.6%
Communicate w/instructors about course	82%	0%	25.5%
Participate in special groups	60%	6%	15%
Plan/invite people to events	52%	0%	72%
Respond to site advertisements	12%	0%	8.5%
Study for courses or exams	92%	5%	38.3%
Self-guided knowledge	70%	40%	63.8%

Interestingly, all three groups of students tend to be in agreement, to varying degrees, that it helps promote critical thinking but not necessarily problem solving while they also respond that it can make them a more effective group member.

Table 8: Perceived impact of social media applications to learning outcomes

	GREECE	TURKEY	FINLAND
I have acquired skills to use technology for learning	AGREE (68%)	STRONGLY AGREE/ AGREE (88%)	DISAGRRE/ STRONGLY DISAGREE (68%)
I have learned to get along with different students	AGREE (60%)	AGREE (50%)	UNCERTAIN/ DISAGREE (53%)
I acquire knowledge, skills relating to my subject area	AGREE (50%)	AGREE / STRONGLY AGREE (89%)	UNCERTAIN/ DISAGREE (75%)
I developed my	STRONGLY AGREE/	AGREE/	UNCERTAIN/

ability to think critically	AGREE (64%)	STRONGLY AGREE (85%)	DISAGREE (67%)
I apply knowledge to problem solving	UNCERTAIN/ DISAGREE (60%)	AGREE/STRONGLY AGREE (78%)	UNCERTAIN/ DISAGREE (75%)
I learned to think logically and analytically	AGREE/ UNCERTAIN (55%)	AGREE/STRONGLY AGREE (64%)	UNCERTAIN/ DISAGREE (64%)
It makes me become an effective group member	AGRERE/ UNCERTAIN (72%)	AGREE/STRONGLY AGREE (70%)	UNCERTAIN/ DISAGREE (69%)

The differences in their use of social media and technology may well be grounded in the use of the aforementioned by their university professors. The university attended by the Greek students has established in the last few years virtually all communication with the students to be available not only face-to-face but also online, with all course registration being done online and syllabi as well as course material also being online. This may well account for the high response rate registered by the Greek students. The Finnish students appear to use more for communication between themselves for educational purposes and less for communicating with their professors. With respect to the Turkish students their responses have definitely caused us to pause and reflect since the university in question has a strong commitment to maximizing the use of both social media and technology to assist students. As with the other two universities, they provide online support to the university students and the chance of finding solutions to their problems with the help of academic experts. In addition, students can access to course books anywhere, anytime they wish thanks to using e-books, with some courses actually being delivered online.

Finally, we looked at the degree to which Social Media was being utilized by the sampled students in their efforts to participate in activism or perhaps better stated, concern for and involvement in issues related to community needs. Here we found that all three sets of students sampled did in fact use social media for this purposes (see Table 9) with the highest percentage being identified by the Finnish students where more than half stated that they made occasional use of it. However, no single group stated that they used it frequently. With the information at our disposal we cannot argue that this is indicative of a either a general or specific trend, both because of the small size of our sample as well as the fact that our sample was not random. We posit that to fully explore this issue we will need to conduct targeted interviews to identify what means they use to participate in community involvement as well as which they favour the most.

Table 9: Use SM to participate in involvement for communities

	Percent % GR	Percent % FI	Percent % TR
NEVER	22,0	11,4	5,9
RARELY	38,0	18,2	33,3
OCCASIONALY	38,0	61,4	47,1
FREQUENTLY	2,0	9,1	13,7
Total	100,0	100,0	100,0

Conclusions

While social media use surrounds us all, individuals and not just groups are maximizing its utility for various purposes, with one being community building. Their use has been predicated by on the one hand by the need for socialization and on the other, information sharing. In addition to news sites and private companies, universities have also started using social media in a more active way, in part because their clientele has embraced it as a part of their daily dealings and as a form of instant communication, not limited by time and place. Our research questions sought to identify whether or not university teachers as well as university programs and pre-service education students utilize the social media, which types and for which purposes. What we found is that there is in fact increased use by all actors, use that varies between the different universities. We would argue that there is to an unidentified degree a certain amount of community building but to be able to fully support this more detailed and focused research is warranted.

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