Social Media in Bulgarian Higher Education: An Exploratory Survey

Rositsa Doneva, University of Plovdiv Paisii Hilendarski, Plovdiv, Bulgaria

Silvia Gaftandzhieva, University of Plovdiv Paisii Hilendarski, Plovdiv, Bulgaria

ABSTRACT

Although many teachers are sceptical and think that the use of social media can disengage students and lead to lower results, we have witnessed increasingly widespread use of social networks in the educational environment. In recent years, there is also a trend towards more formal acceptance of the role of these networks in higher education by participants in the educational process. The study presented in this paper is intended to seek clarity on the development of this trend in Bulgaria. On the one hand, it aims to assess the extent to which the use of social networking for educational purposes shall be formally accepted by the two main groups of participants in the educational process (students and teachers) and to what degree it is still informal. On the other hand, the study explores specific areas of the use of social networking in higher education, with an emphasis on their efficacy.

KEYWORDS

Exploratory Survey, Formal Acceptance, Higher Education, Social Media, Social Networking, Students, Teachers

INTRODUCTION

The wide academic and research interest in the use of social media for educational purposes in higher education is the natural result of constantly growing popularity of social networking. In literature can be found a number of examples of the successful informal use of social networking by teachers (Doneva & Gaftandzhieva, 2012; Doneva & Gaftandzhieva, 2015; Kropf, 2013; Rankin, 2016; Somova, 2014; Walsh, 2016; Xiaosong, Ganeshan & Guorong, 2012; Arquero, & Romero-Frías, 2013; Ellison, Steinfield & Lampe, 2007) to develop interaction, communication and cooperation between students, to stimulate students' creativity, to increase students' motivation for active participation in the learning process, and to provide feedback.

For example, the students who learn „European Affairs Journalism" at City, University of London (European Affairs Journalism, 2016) have a closed Facebook group, in which they share with each other information they have read on the Internet about the European Union - ideas, articles, etc. Queen Mary, University of London has a Facebook group (QM-Students, 2016), in which all members are students who learn languages and during the third year of their training in their bachelor programme they have the opportunity to choose whether to work or to study abroad to deepen their language knowledge in the target language. Students communicate with each other in the group, ask each other questions and obtain answers. The social networking site Twitter is used as an informal environment for communication between students and teachers at the University of Colorado Denver (Dunlap & Lowenthal, 2011). According to observations, communication in Twitter allows students to engage in professional communities through connecting with practitioners, experts and teachers who often

respond to the questions. At the University of Texas, one history professor (Rankin, 2016) has been using Twitter since 2009 to encourage discussions for educational purposes. During lectures, students have to use Twitter to ask each other questions and to respond to questions related topics covered the previous week, or to discuss specific topics set by the teacher using their mobile phones or laptops. The discussion is presented through a projector. At the Faculty of Information and Engineering Technology at University of Cambera, Twitter is used as a means to improve communication and collaboration among students, to hold debates and discussions, to ask questions (to colleagues or to teachers), to share additional learning material and to communicate with teachers outside university hours (Alam, 2016). Closed groups on Facebook are used for discussion at Queensland University of Technology (English & Duncan-Howell, 2014). Students can ask their teacher questions, to which they cannot find the answers, as well as comment on topics being studied on the group walls. The University of Granada (Ballesta-Claver, de Orbe-Payá, Quintanal, Pérez & Capitán-Vallvey, 2011) plays host to experiments with the use of Facebook as a means of making a connection between teachers and students. Feedback from students is good due to the fact that they have access to online lessons, up-to-date material and tools, which provide the necessary information (changes in classes, laboratory sessions, schedules, and other activities). Brigham Young University (Walsh, 2016) uses Facebook for its course British Literary History. After reading each lecture material students have to publish in the created group a paragraph about what they have read. Through the group the teacher finds out what students have understood and what they have trouble understanding, and he or she can pay attention to the parts of the course material that present problems for the students. This kind of discussion is useful for students because they have the opportunity to read reviews by their colleagues. Moreover, is saves to explain already understood material during school hours, and it encourages students to focus on what they have read.

Although many teachers are sceptical (Churchill, 2007; Selwyn, 2007; Abdulahi, Samadi & Gharleghi, 2014) and think that the use of social networks can disengage students (Brabazon, 2012) and lead to lower results, we have witnessed significant changes in this direction. Today we observe a transformation from the informal use of these networks in the educational environment to their formal adoption by participants in the educational process (students, teachers and administrators).

In recent years, research on this topic has increased exponentially worldwide (Piotrowski, 2015; Voorn & Kommers, 2013; Aviles & Eastman 2012; Waldeck & Dougherty, 2012; Santos, Hammond, Durli & Chou, 2009; Wang, Woo, Quek, Yang & Liu, 2011) but much less is known about the development of this trend in Bulgaria.

The study presented in this paper is intended to seek clarity on the issue about transformation from the informal use of social networks in the educational environment to their formal adoption by participants in the educational process in Bulgaria. On the one hand, it aims to assess the extent to which the use of social networking for educational purposes shall be formally accepted by the two main groups of participants in the educational process (students and teachers) and to what degree it is still informal. On the other hand, the study explores specific areas of the use of social networking in higher education, with an emphasis on their efficacy. The paper presents the methodology, organization of the study and thorough analyses of the results separately for the two target groups (teachers and students) in accordance with the study objectives. Some general conclusions about the latest trends in the use of social networking in education are derived.

DESIGN OF THE STUDY

The study´s methodology is based on an empirical approach – an exploratory survey using questionnaires for data collection. According to the purpose of the study participants are divided into two target groups - students and teachers.

For the collection of primary data two questionnaires (for each of the two groups of participants) were developed. The questionnaires have been prepared in such a way that without being time-

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