

Chapter 5

Enhancing Social Presence and Communities of Practice in Distance Education Courses through Social Media

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine the impact social media has on the development of communities of practice and social development in distance education courses. This study evaluated the effectiveness of the integration of social media tools including Ning in Education (an educational social networking tool), Twitter, and WordPress into three distance education courses in instructional technology. The social media tools were examined to identify the educational and pedagogical benefits each tool affords. Utilizing a mixed-method methodology, student data was collected through a series of three online surveys coupled with student interviews. The pre-/post- data collected as part of this study provides empirically based findings indicating that social media technologies can help support online communities of practice as well as the development of social presence. Data analyzed from student interviews provides data triangulation in addition to a richer and deeper understanding of the pedagogical affordances social media tools provide.

INTRODUCTION

The influx of technology into education is continually redefining teaching and learning. With new technologies emerging at a rapid rate, educators are continuously seeking ways to leverage how

to best incorporate these new tools into their educational practices in order to further support and enhance learning (Krüger-Ross & Holcomb, 2011). Among the fastest growing technologies is the use of social media (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickuhr, 2010). Social media tools, such as

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-2851-9.ch005

blogging, Twitter, and social networks sites, are growing in both popularity and demand inside and outside of the educational context. In 2010, it was reported that 73% of wired teenagers and 47% of online adults use social networking sites (Lenhart et al, 2010). Additionally, over one third of online adults utilize Twitter, while 24% of young adults reported being active bloggers. Similarly, distance education is also expanding at an unprecedented rate. The 9.7% growth rate in the number of college and university students enrolled in at least one online class reported by Allen and Seaman (2007) significantly exceeded the 1.5% growth rate in the overall higher education student population during the same period (Brady, Holcomb, & Smith, 2010). Given the rising popularity of social media and distance education, it seems logical to merge these areas with the goal of improving teaching and learning in the online environment. Research has shown that distance education courses are more successful when students are able to develop and engage within a community of practice (Barab & Duffy, 2000; Brady et al., 2010) while also fostering high levels of social presence (Anderson, 2005). Through the creation of a community of practice, students are able to engage with one another and work collaboratively towards a set of shared goals. However, developing a community of practice in an online course can be exceedingly difficult due to differences in time and location (Brook & Oliver, 2003). The use of social networking tools has the ability and potential to aid in the development of communities of practice within the online environment. By nature of their design and functionality, social networking sites have the ability to connect and build community in a socially and educationally constructed network. As noted by the Educause Learning Initiative (2007), social networks have the ability to “facilitate a strong sense of community among students” and encourage “personal interactions that can lead to the creation of new knowledge and collec-

tive intelligence” (p. 2). The following chapter provides empirically based research findings on how social media technologies can help support online communities of practice as well as the development of social presence. Data analyzed from student observations and interviews provides data triangulation in addition to a richer and deeper understanding of the pedagogical affordances social media tools provide.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Social Media

The nature of web-based communication and community has changed radically in the past few years. At the forefront of this evolution is the prolific integration of social media tools and technologies. Often classified as a subset of Web 2.0 or web-based technologies, social media tools have transformed the way we communicate and interact. Web 2.0, a term coined by Tim Berners-Lee in 2006, is frequently misrepresented and misunderstood (Krüger-Ross & Holcomb, 2011). Rather than representing an entirely new kind or type of technology, Web 2.0 is used to describe a way of interacting with the Internet and web-based technologies that reposition and challenge the traditional roles of “content producer” and “recipient.” The focus for social media is how media are being used to communicate, share, and maintain social connections between individuals, groups, and organizations. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) define social media as “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content” (2010, p. 61). With its growing emergence, the impact of social media is now reported regularly, chronicling the influence of new media and a variety of other technologies on any number of users (e.g. teens, youth, older adults)

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