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Social Media in the classroom: Challenges and Opportunities for a Better Teaching and Learning Experience in a New Framework

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Abstract

Social media has undoubtedly become a crucial part of many college students' personal and social life. This paper examines the social media usage among university students through the case study of Central Connecticut State University. In the spring of 2015, we surveyed students from nineteen different programs asking them about their social media proficiency, their usage in the classroom and the reliability of social media outlets as a source for academic work. The goal of the project was to find out whether their usage is more geared towards personal interactions or academic efforts. In the spring of 2015, we surveyed students from nineteen different majors. We discovered a large population of highly connected and heavy social media users, (those students spending more than thirty-one minutes on social media per day, according to Martin 2013), who were not engaging in the classroom through social media outlets. This also led us to question whether as faculty we are incorporating social media as part of our course methodology, and whether social media could open a window of opportunity to connect with this "generation next" in a more active, relevant and meaningful way.

Key words: Social media, classroom, course methodology

Introduction

Every morning, all across America, hundreds of thousands of students enter their classrooms, ready for their classes. From community colleges to Ivy League universities, students and professors engage in a learning process filled with high expectations, a certain degree of struggle and hope for not only an advancement of the mind intellectually, but also a better preparation for the upcoming professional world. Undoubtedly, the entire college experience has become a pivotal moment in a person's life. And every day, the same students that fill the classrooms are faced with a number of challenges that will affect their academic performance.

Social media, although quite young as a social phenomenon, is probably the biggest addition to college life in the past ten years. Students are heavily connected, using outlets and tools such as Facebook, Twitter or Instagram that allow them to interact, communicate or simply pass time. Social media and technology to a larger extent, are now a crucial part of a young adult's existence. The student population at Central Connecticut State University is connected twenty-four hours, seven days a week. Research shows the level of dependence on technology to be at all time record high, with a large percentage of students who make up the heavier users of social media. In practical terms, we can define social media as the "internet-based applications that can carry consumer-generated content, which encompass media impressions created by consumers, typically informed by relevant experiences, and archived or shared online for easy access by other impressionable consumers" (Blackshaw, 2006).

Technology at large, and social media in particular, have clearly defined our present generation of students, labeled "Generation Next" by Pew Research (2013). Some of the main features of an average student today were spelled out in a report published in 2013, which highlighted the following as common elements in our students. First of all, we are facing a generation that uses technology and the Internet to connect with people in new and distinctive ways, mostly evolving the idea of self-fulfillment: Pew Research also refers to them as the "Look at Me" generation. They are clearly aware of technology's advantages and disadvantages. An excess of information has not kept them disconnected from parents and family, and they tend to be radical in the continent (tattoos, nontraditional hair styles, body piercings), but not in the content. In terms of political involvement, they tend to show higher percentage of voting participation, and are less cynical about government and political structures. Almost half of them classify themselves as democrats, and they seem to be comfortable with globalization and have been raised on the culture of instant gratification.

Another key element in the social fabric of this generation is the use of technology. A recent report published by Pew Research entitled "Social Media Goes to College", offered insight in today's college student connection with technology. Some of the findings included the following: Students began using computers between the ages of 5 and 8. By the time they were 16 to 18 years old all of today's current college students had begun using computers – and the Internet was a commonplace in the world in which they lived. Compared with the general population (59%), students are online much more frequently (86%) and they are frequently looking for email, with 72% checking email at least once a day (and 66% have at least two email addresses). Almost half (49%) first began using the Internet in college; half (47%) first began using it at home before they arrived at college. They are equipped (85% of college students own their own computer, and are not shy about admitting to a degree of procrastination online: 78%

of college Internet users say that at one time or another they have gone online just to browse for fun, compared to 64% of all Internet users.

College Internet users are heavy music users, and are twice as likely to have ever downloaded music files when compared to all Internet users: 60% of college Internet users have done so compared to 28% of the overall population. They are also twice as likely to use instant messaging on any given day compared to the average Internet user. On a typical day, 26% of college students use IM; 12% of other Internet users are using IM on an average day.

In 2009, a research experiment aiming to measure the students' dependence on technology, conducted by the International Center for Media & the Public Agenda (ICMPA) at the University of Maryland, College Park, showed intriguing results.¹ The assignment was simple: two hundred students would volunteer to withdraw from technology for a period of twenty-four hours. The researchers enrolled students who voluntarily agreed to give up on technology and then recorded their impressions after the experiment had ended. The main finding of the research was the fact that student described their experience without technology in terms of physical addiction. In words of the researchers, "Most college students are not just unwilling, but functionally unable to be without their media links to the world (ICMPA, 2009).

Data shows that young 18-25 college students are heavily involved in social media. Students are sharing posts, updating status, creating blogs, sharing video and interacting with one another in levels previously unseen. With their behavior, our students are well aligned with what experts are considering now a new trend of consumers who now "expect to be active participants in the media process. This requires new approaches to media strategies, involving media that do not simply replace traditional media, but rather expand media choices to capture, reach, intimacy and engagement" (Hanna, Rohm and Crittenden, 2011).

This generation of students, sometimes referred to as "generation next" or "generation y", enters the classroom with years of experience in social media networking. They search for ways to connect in a new environment, including their relationship with media. According to DeAndrea "Newer forms of social media differ from older, traditional broadcast media in that they enable peer-to-peer messages, as opposed to unidirectional transmission of one-to-many media content" (DeAndrea et al, 2011). They are clearly ahead of their predecessors and in many cases their professors as well. Not only they are more connected, but they are laying a new set of social usages for technology in the classroom. This poses a new threat for professors and educators in general. How do we interact with students who seem to be largely uninterested in traditional methods of lecturing and teaching? How do we integrate their social media skills in the learning process? How are the social interactions between students and faculty affected by social media? And lastly, and more importantly, what efforts are we putting in the classroom to exploit the benefits of social media?

With these questions in mind and the experience of dealing with social media in the classroom in different ways, I decided to conduct a research project with my students to find out what the role of social media in the classroom was, and what their usage for academic purposes could be.

Methodology

The project started with the simple observation that my students were not only connected on social media, but seemed *too* connected. In the spring of 2015, I taught an advanced course on social media at Central Connecticut State University. As part of the syllabus of the course,

students had to develop a large consultancy group project where the goal was to create a social media marketing strategy for a non profit. We developed the project in the classroom during the week. It was precisely those contact hours with students where I began to wonder whether they were fully exploiting social media for their academic projects, papers and projects for classes, or whether they were separating personal from academic usage. As I introduced some research tools available online, I realized some students were completely oblivious to those, while others had already used them for different projects.

The project was designed to confirm my initial hypothesis: there was a clear difference between personal and academic usage of social media among my students. I was interested not only in the amount of time, but also on the strategic usage of social media. For instance, if they had to research a particular topic, most of them seemed to simply Google the keywords and work from there. Only a few would use LinkedIn or Twitter to search for the information. They seemed to keep the academic and personal spheres on social media truly separated: Although students were actively involved in social media, they were not using it for academic projects, but only personal interactions. This sparked a conversation in the classroom that led to this project.

For the purpose of the research, social media usage for academic purposes is described as any use of social media for class projects such as writing papers, researching for information, establishing group dynamics, sharing information for group projects, working cohesively with team members and approaching companies and individuals on social media.

The research method used was a survey, underpinned by the following research questions:

- 1) What is the level of presence of social media in the students' lives, including the amount and frequency of use?
- 2) Do they use social media for academic purposes? If so, what are the most common uses of social media?
- 3) Do they know if there are existing policies related to social media usage in the classroom and in the university at large?

The survey was structured in three areas. Questions 1 through 5 focused more on the key demographic component of the study: presence on social media, time spent, and technology used to access their accounts. Questions 6 and 7 asked about specific usage (“Which of the following have you done within last week on social media?” and “Have you ever used social media for a class related activity?”). Questions 8 and 9 were designed to measure the student's perception of trust and reliability of social media (asking about sources and their level of reliability). Lastly, questions 10 to 14 asked specifically about connection with other classmates, usage during class time, the existence (or lack of) policies regarding social media and the professors' usage of social media as part of a class tool.

The demographics of the student body at Central Connecticut University are as follows: A public institution serving a largely commuter school (70% of students do not live on campus), with a large undergraduate population (82% of students) with almost a identical gender distribution (51% females - 49% males). Almost 67% of students hold at least one part time job, most of them belonging to a wide middle and low class section of the central suburban areas of Connecticut around the capital city of Hartford.ⁱⁱ

To avoid any possibility of bias or external influence, we decided to focus on students who were not a part of the social media course I was teaching correctly. In order to avoid further

external influence from the researcher, we had the Department’s graduate student assistant carry out the field research portion of the project

Once the surveys were completed and tabulated, the results were as follows. In terms of gender, the survey came close to the demographic composition of the university with 46% males and 54% female student, with an average age of 20 (35%) and 21 (36%) followed by 18 year-olds (19,2%) The majority of respondents were under twenty-three years of age. As far as field of study, the responses included degrees from across the board, with a total of 19 different programs, representing 18,2% of the total number of programs offered by the institution.ⁱⁱⁱ

The first question addressed the level of proficiency on social media, according to the surveyed student. Over a scale of one to ten points, students were asked to rate themselves from 0 being not proficient to ten being highly proficient.

Level of proficiency	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
% of responses	0	0	1,4%	3,2%	8,5%	8,5%	17%	38%	11,7%	11,7%

Table 1. Responses to Q1: How savvy do you consider yourself on Social Media?

Based on the responses to this question, we understand that a large majority of our students rate themselves considerably savvy on social media (78,4% over the level of 7). The largest group of students (38%) ranked themselves highly with eight points of our ten, with only a few residual responses show a low level of interaction on social media.

The following question addressed the social media outlets used by our students. They were asked to indicate if they had an active profile on the following outlets:

- Facebook. The world’s largest social network. Founded in 2004, it now has 700 million users worldwide.
- Twitter. Micro blogging site. As of March 2015, it has over 500 million users.^{iv}
- Instagram. Recently acquired by Facebook, Instagram is a highly popular photo sharing and video-sharing site, where users publish pictures and share them with their network. As of December 2014, Instagram had 300 million users worldwide.^v
- LinkedIn. Resume building site, where users upload their CV and can connect with companies and other users, endorsing their professional skills. Highly used in the corporate world, it has 364 million users worldwide.
- Tumblr. Micro blogging site, more geared towards the creative crowd. As of 2011, it had 30 million users.^{vi}
- Pinterest. Similar to Instagram, it allows sharing photographs but it also adds an element of organization in different categories.
- Snapchat. Video-sharing site where users can share images or short videos. There are 60 million users of Snapchat.^{vii}
- Other tools (we kept this option open to less used outlets).

Outlet	Percentage of students who had a profile	Outlet	Percentage of students who had a profile
Facebook	93%	Tumblr	20,6%
Snapchat	92%	Vine	4,7%
Twitter	87%	Reddit	1,5%
Instagram	87%	Tinder	1,5%
Pinterest	44%	Yik Yak	1,5%
LinkedIn	31,7%	Vampirefreaks	1,5%

Table 2. Q2 Do you have a profile on the following social media outlet?

The results from this question offer three interesting conclusions. First of all, the fact that most of our students use largely four outlets (Facebook (93%), Snapchat (92%), Twitter (87%) and Instagram (87%). The second conclusion is more surprising: only 31,7% of the surveyed students keep active profiles on LinkedIn, precisely the tool that brings relevance to their upcoming professional careers. According to Hall (2013) It could also be seen as an indication of the student body social media usage being more directed towards personal leisure than professional development. These results parallel other research previously conducted, such as Shweiki Media (2013), with almost identical figures for the different outlets.

Pinterest and Tumblr proved to be the least popular photo sharing sites, and under the option “other” we found a 4,7% responses indicating Vine and a few remedial presences on Reddit, Tinder, Yik Yak and Vampirefreaks.

We were also interested in the amount of time spent on social media every day. The results showed almost half of the participants (46%) admitted using between two and three hours. One out of four admitted to an hour or less, while 19% opted for the option between four and six hours and only 10% admitted to spend more than four hours daily on social media. In connection with the previous question, students were asked to indicate the access platform to social media.

Technology	Percentage of students who had a profile
Mobile phones	98%
Tablets	19%
Laptops	59%
Computers	42%
School computers	18%

Table 3. Q5 where do you access your social media profiles?

The most common device used to access social media was a mobile device, with a response rate of 98%. Far from it were personal laptops (59%), followed by personal computers

(42%), tablets (19%) and school computers (18%). Although this answer reveals the presence of technology among our students; the fact that schools computers were the least used it could also be connected with the fact that the student population is largely commuting to class (the official data from the university shows a percentage as high as 70% of students commuting to class every day). Therefore the time spent on school is mostly during lectures, after which many students leave campus. There is not an existing culture of computer lab usage by students: they only remain in school for lectures. As an indication, the Communication Department keeps two Apple labs open almost ten hours a day with little affluence.

The following question dealt with the type of activity performed on social media. They were given different options, accordingly to the most popular activities on social media, and asked to select as many as they usually did within the week before the survey was conducted.

Activity on social media	% of students performing it
Update status	46%
Share or watch videos and photos	76%
Chat with friends	70%
Play games	16%
Share news	31%
Research information for a class project	25%
Like a photo or a status	93%

Table 4. Q6 What of the following have you done within last week on social media?

The most common activity in social media involved liking a photo or a status (93%), followed by actively participating on social media sharing videos or pictures (76%). Interpersonal communication via chat was also one of the largest options (70%). Far behind were status updates (46%) and sharing news (31%). The least performed activity on social media was researching information for a class project. Only 25% of students admitted to use social media for a class related projects. Interestingly enough, the following question.

Question seven asked students directly if they had used social media for a class related activity. The vast majority of students (63%) answered affirmatively. This result clearly contradicts the previous question, where only 25% of surveyed students admitted to use social media for a class project. The disparity between the percentages (25% vs. 63%) is remarkable.

On question eight we dug deeper in the usage of social media for the classroom. This time we reverted the order of elements and asked students to think specifically about their research and gathering information strategies. We asked them to name the tools they used for their last assignments. The options were Google, Wikipedia, the library, journals and social media.

Tools used for class projects	% of students using it
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Google	51%
Wikipedia	16%
Library	11%
Journals	19%
Social Media	3%

Table 5. Q8 Think about the last assignment you had. Where did you find your sources?

Analyzing the results from question 8, we see clearly that Google was used half of the times, with journals and Wikipedia following at a distance (19% and 11% each). Only a remedial percentage of students (3%) admitted using social media for the assignment.

The logical next step was to ask about the reliability of the sources from the previous question. We pretended to confront their usage with their own opinion about the trustworthiness of the tools. That is, if Google is not a very reliable source in the mind of a student, why insist on relying on it as the main tool? As expected, the results were as telling as the question before. Students were asked to rate in a scale the reliability of the sources in a scale (1 being not reliable at all and 10 completely trustworthy). The results were as follow:

Tools used for class projects	Average grade or reliability
Google	8,22%
Wikipedia	5,2%
Library	8,9%
Journals	8,7%
Social Media	4,1%

Table 5. How reliable in your opinion are the following sources?

Comparing all the tools and their level of perceived reliability, we find can see how the items “library” and “journal” ranked higher with an overwhelming curve on the upper side of the scale, while Wikipedia was almost average (5,2%) and social media tended to score mostly between the 3 and 6 on the scale (hence the 4,1% average result).

The last set of five questions was strictly connected to the object of research, and was formulated using a yes or no choice. On question ten we asked students whether they had connected with other classmates on social media for class projects.

Have you connected with classmates on social media for class projects?
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Yes	75%
No	25%

Table 6. Question 10.

Question 11 covered one of the hot spots of social media integration in academic life, class disturbance and distraction. When asked directly if they had accessed social media during lecture time, an overwhelming majority of students (89%) admitted being on social media at some point during the class.

Have you accessed social media profiles during class time?	
Yes	81%
No	19%

Table 7. Question 11. Have you accessed social media profiles during class time?

The result validates one of the main preconceived ideas about this generation of students: they are always connected, regardless of the social situation. A larger majority of the surveyed individuals (81%) admitted checking social media during class time, whether browsing Twitter, sending a video on Snapchat or messaging friends through Facebook. This obviously becomes part of a much larger conversation about some of this “generation Y” technology-influenced behaviors: lack of attention span, loss of interest and a certain lack of respect of previously very rigid social situations, such as classroom settings. What used to be a traditionally quiet environment of attention and concentration on the lecture has turned into a good moment to interact with friends over social media. The improvements in technology have clearly facilitated it, and have redefined our previous concept of classroom management.

We were also interested in studying the perception about how we as faculty are using social media as a tool in the classroom, and whether that was connected to student perception of class content. We asked students about the faculty performance, and 76% claimed that professors were not using social media at all as a tool or as a resource for content related to the class material.

Do your professors use social media as a tool or a resource for content?	
Yes	34%
No	76%

Table 9. Question 12. Do your professors use social media as a tool or a resource for content?

The last two questions dealt with a particularly interesting aspect of the presence of social media in our classrooms: the existence (or lack of) different policies. We asked two different questions, the first one (Q12) concerning the individual policies regarding social media, which rank from absolute bans and frontal disapproving to warnings on the syllabus to a lukewarm attitude towards technology. Students claimed to know that their professors had a social media

policy on 66% of the cases, while the remaining 34% indicated lack of knowledge, not lack of existence.

Do your professors have a policy regarding social media in the classroom?	
Yes	66%
No	34%

Table 8. Question 12. Do your professors have a policy regarding social media in the classroom?

The last question also offered an interesting response. This time we asked about the university as a whole, and whether students were aware of a social media policy on campus. The response was an overwhelming 90% of students who admitted not knowing if there was such a policy implemented on campus. Interestingly enough, they were correct, for there is nothing to this date implemented on a large scale to regulate social media usage on campus and in the classroom.

Do you know if there is a social media policy implemented on this campus?	
Yes	10%
No	90%

Table 10. Question 14. Do you know if there is a social media policy implemented on this campus?

Conclusion

The research findings provided us with a number of interesting facts and challenging notions for the future. In many ways, those questions are transportable to a different universe, as they underpin the very human nature of the college student experience with technology.

In relation to the research questions, we obtained interesting answers that in turn demand further research. In regards of the presence of social media in our students' lives, it was clear that a vast majority of students surveyed had incorporated it to their everyday lives. The average use of 2-3 hours per day is relatively low compared to other research. Similarly, the distribution of social media outlets was as expected, with Facebook leading the charge along with Instagram, and Twitter relegated to a third position. As noted, the major surprise was the low score obtained by LinkedIn, arguably the more useful tool in the students' upcoming professional experience, yet almost two out of three students surveyed did not have an active presence on LinkedIn. As most institutions, Central Connecticut State University places an important emphasis in the transition to the professional world through the Center for Advising and Career Exploration (CASE). On a regular basis, students can attend specific career building events, such as CV writing seminars, career fairs, mock-up interviews and job searching tips. Maybe it would also be an interesting addition to the number of services provided by CASE to offer a seminary on LinkedIn for students, to prepare them to face the world after college with a solid presence on the web's number one career building social media outlet.

When we asked students about the usage of social media for academic purposes, the responses were telling. First of all, a large majority of them admitted to using social media during the classroom time, regardless of the connection with the lecture content. That is, they are prone to being distracted by social media, or they may simply turn to social media out of disengagement. The lack of specific policies from professors and the university at large can also be responsible for the overall confusion. According to the survey, two out of three professors had no specific policies regarding social media. At best, professors may have an opinion about how to deal with the disturbance factor of technology in the class, but they are yet to engage with social media in terms of content and as a connection tool with the students.

Students were also reluctant to use social media for academic purposes, basing most of their online research on search sites such as Google, and not utilizing networking tools for group chats, online meetings and file sharing. This could be partially due to the Faculty's lack of engagement on social media, as most professors are still requiring traditional research papers, sources such as journals and books and are not utilizing social media to conduct research, despite the many tools available to do so. It could also be explained as part of the student general attitude of disengagement and detachment from the academic content of the class, as social media is seen for leisure, personal connections and fun.

Our project ends with an open question and an invitation to reflect of our concept of social media policy in the classroom. There seemed to be a large gap between the students and our Faculty in terms of social media acceptance and usage. But as social media keeps shaping the future students' life, it is crucial for us as faculty to engage with them at that level and utilize their tools to adapt our content to their language. Undoubtedly, social media seems to be the perfect vehicle to do so.

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<http://www.unh.edu/news/docs/UNHsocialmedia.pdf>
- <http://www.aabri.com/manuscripts/121214.pdf>

Endnotes

ⁱ The results of the experiment can be found online at Source:

<http://withoutmedia.wordpress.com/>

ⁱⁱ Fast facts about CCSU:

http://web.ccsu.edu/uploaded/departments/AdministrativeDepartments/Institutional_Research_and_Assessment/Fast_Facts/FactsS2014.pdf

ⁱⁱⁱ CCSU offers a total of 102 programs with different variations. In our survey, we had students from the following programs: Communication, Nursing, Biology, Exercise Science, Psychology, Marketing, Secondary Education, Sociology, Journalism, Chemistry, Business Management, Computer Science, Bimolecular Sciences, Finance, Mechanical Engineering, Construction Management, Economics and Biochemistry.

^{iv} [Twitter MAU Were 302M For Q1, Up 18% YoY - Twitter \(NYSE:TWTR\) | Benzinga](#)". April 28, 2015. Retrieved May 2, 2015.

^v <http://www.statista.com/statistics/253577/number-of-monthly-active-instagram-users/>

^{vi} <http://www.forbes.com/sites/jeffbercovici/2014/08/21/forecast-tumblr-will-grow-25-in-2014-but-its-slowing-down/>

^{vii} <http://www.businessinsider.com/snapchat-active-users-exceed-30-million-2013-12>