RESEARCH ARTICLE

NEW AGE DIGITAL SOCIAL MEDIA: AN EFFECTIVE TOOL FOR ENHANCING TEACHING-LEARNING PROCESS

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ABSTRACT

Participation in web based social networking in India is steadily increasing and is largely a youth phenomenon with literally every college going student in urban India becoming a member of at least one social networking site. These sites are equally popular among their teachers and parents. Groups in Social networking "think aloud". Since social media is about communication, conversation, collaboration, community and collectiveness, hence there is plenty of scope for learning in the informal mode. It gives a platform for sharing rather than extracting information. Social networking is opening up new avenues and enabling the teachers to reach new frontiers in using ICT for improving the quality of learning process. This paper briefly discusses the role of social media in academics by enhancing the teaching-learning process as well as the impact of students' knowledge of social media tools on their academic performance. The paper also outlines the pros and cons of use of social networking in the learning process and also the risks involved. The outcomes and findings from this paper will be useful to people who intend to use or are already using social networking techniques and tools for teaching.

Key words: Teaching-learning tools, social media, social networking, academic performance, collaborative learning.

Introduction

As a part of the ongoing debate about the role, social media should play in education, supporters' mention the advantages that social media gives to today's digital learners while its opponent ask for its regulation or even removal from classrooms. This paper intends to foster collaboration and discussion by finding middle ground for social media as an educational tool. Social network has great potential in academic settings, but one of the main obstacles appears to be faculty reluctance to explore and utilize social networking to enhance teaching learning.

This paper discusses the scope of enriching the teaching-learning process with respect to faculty and students' use of social media. Certainly with the rising popularity of social media, students and teachers both will find the use of social media in teaching-learning very interesting and stimulating.

Web technologies like social networking sites, blogs, wikis, twitter, podcasts, virtual worlds, snap chat, video and photo sharing on Instagram etc. have become a part of every youth's day to day life. This tech savvy generation conducts much of their life through social media channels, which makes it prudent for today's institutions to get on the social media train and find ways to successfully integrate these tools into the classrooms. As an initial experiment a WhatsApp group was formed and the acceleration that it brought in the teaching-learning process was keenly observed. This research is also based on the challenges, outcomes and reflections on designing and conducting courses in which social media is used for effective communication of the students of different courses and branches.

This paper discusses the impact of the student's learning skills and knowledge of social media tools on his academic performance. The shared outcomes and the research findings from this paper will be useful to people who intend to use or are already using social media techniques and tools in their teaching-learning.

Social Networking in today's Society: Social Networking sites for the latest generation are the "mediated publics". Unmediated publics are – parks, malls, parking lots, cafes etc. public spaces have many purposes in social life – they allow people to make sense of the social norms that regulate society, they let people learn to express themselves, learn from the reaction of others and they let people make certain acts or expressions "real" by having witnesses acknowledge them. Social networking sites are yet another form of public space. It is observed that group settings are ideal for engaging youth to consider their relationship with social technologies and mediated publics. Mediated publics are here to stay, yet they are complicating many aspects of daily life.

Social media is a collective group of web content prepared, published and primarily influenced by end users. The group is directly involved and members "Think aloud". They share their collective wisdom, thoughts, ideas, knowledge, post questions, discuss and get answers, comments and acknowledgement. Since social media is about communication, conversation, collaboration, community and connectedness, hence there is plenty of scope for learning in the informal mode .It is more than just posting and sharing information. It's about building a social network, it's about relationships, and it's about interactivity.

It is influencing education, specially teaching, business, law enforcement, even administration and changing the way social interactions happen. As a result our communication has become increasingly short, full of abbreviations; often circulated one sentence at a time on Facebook, Twitter or via text message. When things cannot get any briefer than a tweet, nano blogging is the new entrant. Sites like adocu are taking nano blogging to the extreme with their one word updates. Today web has evolved into a platter of diverse site offering from interactive flash presentations to full length movies.

The most fundamental change the new social internet has brought about is that it is a participatory medium, a place for sharing rather than extracting information, a powerful and effective means for people to not only sustain communication but also continue sharing experience and learning. It has become a universal platform and a common repository of knowledge.

Social Networking and Academia: Educators are well positioned to directly engage youth about their networked practices. They can posit moral conundrums, invite youth to consider the potential consequences of their actions, and otherwise educate through conversations instead of assertion of power.

There are many sites and groups that link up classmates and batch mates in schools and colleges in India. Here discussions can be centered on education, class assignments and activities in college. These are different ways to approach conversing with students. The most obvious is through curriculum under the broader umbrella of media literacy. Throughout the world curriculum regulations differ but introducing the technology which is touching everyday life is essential.

Social networking is a great step towards personalization of online communications. Networking sites like Twitter, LinkedIn and facebook help their contacts and share relevant information at ease. They provide a platform where users can exchange ideas and answers to questions thereby creating meaningful dialogue boosting student interactions and building better communication skills.

Role of Teachers and Trainers: Social media works best when it is used to initiate a conversation. So it is more necessary for trainers to enhance their digital communication skills for sharing ideas with confidence, then to

have the knowledge of how to operate a website. Hence need of the hour is to shift the focus of digital literacy training from the use of technology to the soft skills development of an individual.

This medium is about creating narrative which is both richly rewarding for an audience of parents and students. So it is necessary for teachers to make correct judgments on the knowledge they use and what they project about themselves on the public platform. The best way to succeed in this intuitive way of working is to deal with the negative perceptions of social media. Only with confidence of medium it can be used effectively, else it will constantly project anxieties and mistakes. Examples of content, that can be shared online may be - celebrating student's success, reaching out to disengaged parents or collaborating with colleagues at a local, regional or international level. This amalgamation of content, context and right understanding of e-safety norms can be put to good use.

A digital footprint is a record of information that you have left online. A major reason of anxiety while creating a digital foot print is the fear of saying the incorrect- either factually wrong or sharing information with the wrong group. Therefore, it is must to know the methods of protecting one's information by ensuring the right settings of privacy, format and password. This habit should be developed in our everyday interactions with the technology whether it is offline or online.

Through a process of careful research one can choose the right content to create a positive impact for professional success. This method can result in collaboration with peers to create and share new teaching learning materials. Instructors, who use social media as a part of their course activities should be aware of potential dangers and plan to intervene on minor incidents before they become more serious while insisting on civil and respectful behavior. The usage of social media in education is a window where the trainer has to act as a guardian and guiding force for their students so that this window can be opened to look at the virtual opportunities to achieve their goals without losing their ground of virtual risks and threats.

Experiment:

A close group was formed on WhatsApp with the researcher as ADMIN of the group. Any student who wanted to join the group was required to send the message regarding their official name, roll number, class, and branch to ADMIN for confirmation which was tallied from the official data base of the institution. Teaching content in the form of links, uploads, educational videos etc. were posted and shared by students. Students put forward their queries related with the teaching content which were followed by the feedback from ADMIN.

Observations

- Immediate dispensing of the information to all members of the group.
- Fast disposal of queries forwarded by members.
- A feeling of "WE" generated among members and gave them a comfortable zone where they discovered their own self as an active part of the learning system.
- Everyone got opportunity to put forward their ideas, opinions and suggestions which at many times is not possible in the limited hours of the time table.
- The group acted as a bulletin board and forum for discussion, where students kept track of the outgoing activities of the classroom even when they inadvertently missed their classes.
- Apart from all this the whole activity created a dynamic vitality in teaching methodology of the teachers.

Suggestions

- Different branches or courses must have different groups so that content remains focused to the ideology behind group formation.
- Refraining strategy should be practiced by teachers on subjects which may lead to controversies.
- Formulate clear cut policies on social media. These must be prepared in collaboration with fellow teachers, students, parents, head of institution and administration. All activities must adhere to this code of conduct.
- Personal and professional spaces should be kept separate. Personal information like pictures, videos etc. must not be shared either by students or faculty.

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- Gossip, rumors, name calling, teasing etc must be prohibited and students should be made aware about these issues.
- Cyber bullying must be strictly dealt by authorities.
- Strong malware protection and content filtering must be there for the systems (desktops etc.)
- Faculty must create awareness among students about the time management skill while using social media.
- Students may be asked to use "After the Deadline", a browser plugin that checks for spelling, grammar and writing style mistakes. This feature can at least provide assistance before submitting assignments with elementary mistakes.

Recommendations

The social network sites are not classrooms and they should not be treated as such. The goal in being present on these sites is not to enforce rules but to provide responsible models and simply be "eyes on the street".

Following are recommendations for those attempting to implement courses with the objectives of developing the social media communication skills of students.

- Pre-assessment of the e-learning skills and basic IT skills of students in order to plan the types of tools and learning tasks to be included in the curriculum.
- Design of learning tasks should have compulsory collaborative group work online using social networks.
- Project based assignments that will allow students to discuss, share, and explore social media strategies of organizations will be a plus point.
- Challenging grading system, strict deadlines and compulsory online presentations serve as monitoring factors for quality learning.
- e-portfolio development, participation in social networks for professionals, use of blogs as personal e-portfolios, Twitter for education, the use of creative commons licensing and the use of privacy features in social networks should be emphasized.

Merits and Demerits of use of Social Media

a) Educational tool: Nowadays majority of students arrive on campus, fluent in computers, web and social networking technologies. Educators can leverage this knowledge to enrich the learning experiences.

b) Enhanced student engagement: Students who rarely raise a hand in class may feel more comfortable expressing themselves on social media platforms which also enables teachers to establish "backchannels" that foster discussion and surface ideas, which students are too shy or intimidated to voice out loud.

c) Improve communication among students and teachers: Educators can answer student's questions via a feed back page or twitter feed, post homework assignments and lesson plan, send messages and updates, schedule or announce upcoming events and share interesting web resources, and multimedia content. Students can use twitter to get help from instructors or fellow students.

d) Preparing for employment: Students entering the workforce can use social networking sites to network and find employment and establish a professional web presence, post a resume, research a target company or office, and connect with other job seekers and employers. Also alumni of the college could be a big resource for finding appropriate employment. The training and placement office, college career centres and alumni associations are using these sites to broadcast job openings and internships.

Demerits

Reliance on social media may decrease the relationship between students and their Professors due to the detachment of e-mail, which hides the face linked to their voice. Relationships have become different with students due to the networking tools. Students have become reticent and intimidated in the classroom to speak directly with their teachers. They feel more comfortable sending an e-mail from a computer which is impersonal and does not contain context at all.

Face to face communication and phone conversations have become foreign to the millions of users who rely on social media and networking sites. Avoiding personal interactions deters the competency of professionals as it becomes difficult for them to speak during interviews or because they lack the necessary non-verbal behavior like eye contact. Besides, writing skills reflect intelligence and articulation, which has taken a backseat now due to the total neglect of grammar and punctuations in social media, leading to the vast difference existing between the way students communicate via social media and how they should write and speak to Professors, employers and their peers. Faculty needs to enhance their digital communication skills in order to correctly choose what to share and with whom to share.

For trainers, digital engagement is a paradox, because on one side there is constant pressure to use social media for teaching in classroom and on the other side there are heated debates on the norms of using social media. Hence trainers become apprehensive of the internet as a teaching learning aid, especially because of the fact that there is no formal process of using social media. If students can be trained to tweet, the skills of this trained group twitters will become obsolete with the launch of the next social media tool. This makes the skill training in the digital world a continuous process.

As social networking expands to the wider audiences, new issues arise. Students may find that some of what they do and say online with their friends can lead to problems with parents, teachers and prospective employers. At the same time, students may feel peer pressure to do things that will lead to many other problems.

Some educators are concerned that students are missing valuable lessons in real life social skills. A common complaint among educators is that social media is distracting and disrupting their attention frequently. Besides cyber bullying and trolling is a reality and social networking sites can be weapon of malicious behavior.

Social Networking for preparing Employment Ready Graduates: Social networking is opening new avenues and enabling the teachers to reach new frontiers in using ICT for improving the quality of learning process in all sectors of education. The trio of academics, industry and Government i.e. all stakeholders of education need to have better bondage to make all the outturn of educational institutions employable. Economy would grow in geometrical progression, only when every graduate is employable or self-employable.

LinkedIn has carried out a strong identification within professional job seekers. People were able to switch jobs helped by their contacts established through LinkedIn. Social networks are starting to become part of the tools that both job searchers and hiring managers are using to track potential candidates.

The success of these sites rests on the concept of "Strength of weak ties". A network that is only strong ties (everybody knows everybody very well) is not valuable on its own. Genetically, that can lead to birth defects. In companies, it leads to stagnation; in social circles, it can lead to snobbery and prejudice. The outsider with a new perspective is valuable. Many companies have incorporated internal social networking sites to focus on employee development and information sharing.

Conclusion

In a rapidly growing social world, skills to use a wide variety of web based tools have become inevitable. Through guidance and support in terms of tools and with lot of learning materials available, still students awareness of these tools remain inadequate. After discussion and interaction with the teachers and students, the importance of training in social media tools was realized in order to enhance their knowledge on conduct and behavior in social networks, information security rights and utilization of an array of freely available tools for communication.

The use of social media includes a set of ideas about transformation and social gathering, mass participation, user generated content, openness, flexibility, collaboration, community and the fact that they are user centered. The researcher found social media, a more accessible tool for providing information to the students as compared to other traditional modes like using telephones or putting the information on Notice Boards, Bulletin Boards etc. The Social Media groups help transform students from anonymous spectators into a community of active learners and this is important for student performance as well as his personality development.

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Social Media literacy is a tool that needs to be skilled for proper usage much like a gun. A gun is a tool that can be used for protection as well as for assault to hurt anyone. Similarly, social networking sites are tools that can be used to represent one as a professional, seeking networking opportunities or can be logged on to make a fool of one's own self.

Furthermore, it is recommended that all Educational Institutions must have social media guidelines of their own and care should be taken that all students are aware of these guidelines in order to maintain a good professional identity in their social Media Communication. The positive results of the experiment conducted were encouraging and motivating.

The author hopes to have succeeded to a considerable extent in creating awareness about social media in academics by applying some of the core concepts of social media in practice for the personal and professional benefit of students. If educational institutions can understand and adapt some of the practices and principles, perhaps there will be a chance for significant change in how teachers teach and how students learn. The role of an educator is not to condemn or dismiss youth practices but to help youth understand how their practices fit into broader societal and academic context. These are exciting times-embracing societal changes and influencing the established norms will help and evolve all stakeholders.

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