



2012

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Recommended Citation

Hand, Rosie, "Exploring Social Media as a Means of Fostering Student Engagement" (2012). *Teaching Fellowships*. 29.
<http://arrow.dit.ie/fellow/29>

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3 Exploring social media as a means of fostering student engagement

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Abstract

The overall aim of this project was to explore the emerging potential of social media as a tool to engage students and enhance their learning. The specific objectives were:

- To assess the potential uses of social media as a means to foster student engagement.
- To explore creative methods of leveraging existing and new social media technologies to enhance the overall student experience.
- To assist programme directors and lecturers in identifying opportunities where social media may be utilised to enhance module and programme delivery.

Google+ was identified as an appropriate social media platform to engage with students for formal teaching purposes. The platform was leveraged to help students overcome some of the barriers they had encountered in engaging with academic literature, collaborating in groups and presenting their work in front of their peers. Focus groups were conducted to evaluate the research project. Students were generally very positive about the use of Google+ to enhance their learning and made a number of suggestions for future reiterations of the project.

Key words: Google+, social media, student engagement, teaching/learning strategies

Introduction

This generation of students have been raised in an environment where their relationship with the internet is deeply embedded within their daily lives and routines. These students are “always on” and they engage online to satisfy many of their functional and social needs. Social network platforms, in particular, are used to take social interaction to deeper levels. Indeed, Pelling and White (2009) contend that social media has become the most popular channel of communication for college students.

Students have therefore developed certain expectations with regard to their learning. The phenomenon is best described by Baird and Fischer (2005–2006: 5) who suggest “This net-centric generation values their ability to use the Web to create a self-paced, customized, on-demand learning path that includes multiple forms of interactive, social and self-publishing media tools”. Students, therefore, would appear to relish the opportunity to engage with and shape their learning outside the traditional confines of the lecture room. Given that social networking encourages social bonds to be strengthened it is unsurprising that Baird and Fisher (2005–2006) also found that using social networking technologies has a positive influence on student retention.

Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT) students do not buck the trend in relation to their use of social networking sites, particularly Facebook. According to the “DIT IT Strategy Report 2011–2014”, a recent DITSU survey indicated that 66% of DIT students spend over five hours per week on Facebook. The researcher believes that this is an underestimation. A recent poll by Behaviour & Attitudes (Silicon Republic 2011) indicates that while the average Irish internet user spends eight hours per week on social media sites, those in the 18–24 years age bracket are spending 11 hours per week on Facebook and Twitter.

Consideration was given to whether Facebook would be a suitable platform to use for the purposes of this project. However, academic literature supports anecdotal evidence that students are generally reluctant to engage with formal learning on Facebook. Madge et al. (2009) contend that Facebook is regarded by students to be primarily a tool for social engagement. It is secondly considered a channel for informal student-to-student interactions. However, students did not consider Facebook a platform for formal teaching purposes. The researcher’s own teaching experience would concur with these findings. Students are reluctant to engage with lecturers on Facebook and are not comfortable “sharing” with them.

Google+ was identified as an appropriate social media platform to engage with students for formal teaching purposes for the following reasons. Firstly it is positioned as a privacy-centred approach to social networking. Secondly its focus is about sharing content and information rather than life events and thirdly, the platform is built around targeted sharing. Students were therefore reassured that personal information and/or discussion could remain firmly out of the realm of the project. Google+ is a relatively new platform having launched in June 2011; it now has over 250 million users. One of its major advantages is that all of google’s products are integrated across the platform. Therefore users can access google search, gmail, googledocs, youtube etc. with ease. Google+ has a “hangout” feature which was incorporated into the project as it provided an ideal opportunity for blended learning.

The Google “hangout” function allows up to ten users to video chat online.

Consumer engagement is a key objective for most brands and social media is invariably used by brands to proactively enhance engagement. Porter et al. (2011) recommend the following to foster and sustain engagement in virtual communities.

- a shift from a dialogue to a triologue
- understanding that personal needs are at the centre of social media engagement
- promoting member participation within the community
- sustaining engagement by motivating members to work cooperatively with one another and the brand.

The researcher was cognisant of these recommendations from industry and endeavoured to integrate them into the design and format of this project.

Outline of Project

The project was conducted as part of the Marketing Communication Module with a group of third year undergraduate students on the B.Sc. Marketing degree (DT341). The cohort of 98 students was enhanced by the presence of over 15 visiting Erasmus students from France, The Netherlands, Argentina and Canada. The cohort was divided into two groups, each receiving two hours teaching per week. The learning outcomes of the marketing communication module are as follows:

- to provide students with a thorough understanding of the theoretical foundations of marketing communications;
- to explore in depth the thinking behind marketing communications’ activities;
- to evaluate the role of branding within marketing communications;
- to examine and evaluate traditional marketing communication strategies;
- to examine the role of digital communications and emergent technologies/platforms in challenging the vision and scope of marketing communications.

Students are assessed on this module through individual and group continuous assessment weighted at 50% and also through an examination weighted at 50%. As part of the group assessment students are required to engage with the academic literature and collaborate as a team to present a critical analysis of the literature related to a specific marketing communications topic to their cohort. Over five years of teaching this module, the researcher has identified a number of barriers for the student in relation to this type of assessment.

- Students often find it very difficult to understand and engage with academic literature. In particular, they struggle to see the relevance of the literature in the commercial world.
- Students find group work challenging and are often concerned that the workload is not evenly distributed and that their contribution is unacknowledged.
- Students are generally self-conscious and nervous about presenting their work to their peers

One of the key aims of this project, therefore, was to leverage the chosen social media platform, Google+ to overcome the identified barriers to student learning and engagement.

At the first lecture, the parameters of this research project were explained to the cohort. Many students did not have experience of Google+ and were directed to links where they could gain information on the various features of the product. Each student was invited to set up a Google+ profile and to place the researcher and the other members of their team in a circle. This ensured the researcher could observe the interaction between team members and could mentor each group individually. Students could also invite other members of the cohort to be in their circle. Each team interacted within its own team but also had the ability to “share” with chosen members of the wider group.

The academic literature was made available to the cohort and a date was set for each team to present its work. Students were invited to contribute by posting to Google+, comments, videos, links or any content pertinent to any topic covered within the module syllabus. The importance of quality and relevant content was emphasised to students.

The use of social media to support this module was intended to address some of the barriers which students have encountered in this type of continuous assessment. Google+ afforded students an online opportunity to discuss the literature and find and post examples or applications of prescribed theory in industry. The collaboration among team members could be demonstrated through online discussion of issues arising from the assessment and the uploading of photo evidence of team collaboration. Some of the concerns of students regarding unfair distribution of workload should have been alleviated as all team member contributions are transparent online. Finally, the Google+ hangout was utilised to mentor groups before their presentation. Students were given the opportunity to have a Google+ hangout at an agreed time in the week before their presentation. They could then discuss or question points of theory and share any of their concerns regarding their forthcoming presentation.

Marks were distributed across the social media element of the assessment as follows:

Participation	5%	Setting up a Google+ profile; agreeing to participate in project and the dissemination of its findings; participation in focus groups; use of +1 to show engagement with content
Collaboration	10%	Uploading photo album to show team at work; sharing content with other teams
Content creation	10%	Quality and relevance of posts, uploads
Presentation and report	25%	n/a
Examination	50%	n/a

Table 3.1 Breakdown of assessment marks

Evaluation

Three focus groups were conducted to evaluate the students' perspective on this fellowship project. The focus groups were facilitated by the Head of the Learning, Teaching and Technology Centre who had prior experience in leading such discussions. Each focus group had 7–8 students and all three were audio recorded. A theme sheet was designed by the researcher in order to allow the facilitator to guide the discussion.

The key findings of the focus group are summarised below:

Use of Google+ as a learning support/driver of engagement on module

Students were positive about the use of social media to support their learning. They agreed that it had been a beneficial exercise and that they had discussed more advertising and marketing communications issues and had been more engaged than on other modules.

An initial problem however, was that many students were not familiar with Google+ as a platform. This lack of familiarity caused confusion at the beginning of the project. Students said they were unsure which circles they belonged in and were uncomfortable about sharing/posting. Many students agreed that Facebook would not have been the appropriate platform to use for this project as the space is too personal. The social media platform LinkedIn was perceived as "too formal". Most students agreed, however, as they became familiar with the features of the platform that Google+ was the correct choice for this project as it was perceived as "professional" rather than personal. Therefore, students tended to post content related only to the module and maintained a relatively formal tone in their comments.

To overcome student's lack of knowledge of Google+, it was suggested that lab sessions should be integrated into the module to familiarise students with the platform. This would ensure that they became confident at an earlier stage when creating content. It was also suggested that students might be more inclined to participate in online discussions on Google+ if the class were divided into smaller groups as they would be posting content to smaller numbers.

While it was agreed among students that using Google+ had given them access to more resources and industry examples than they would have had otherwise, students felt that the stream of information was just "too rich". Many students did not log on to Google+ on a daily basis and felt when they did log on, they were faced with an overwhelming volume of content, which was posted by a number of students who uploaded content on a daily basis. It was recommended that students should be given more detailed guidelines as to what constitutes a quality post, how often they should log on, and how often should they post content.

Use of Google+ as a tool for team collaboration

A certain level of resistance to using social media platforms other than Facebook would appear to exist. Students uniformly stated that although they all had set up Google+ profiles, they immediately set up a Facebook page when the time came to collaborate on their work for the presentation. Students were not clear on how they could have collaborated more effectively and suggested that more detailed guidelines could be introduced to ensure more collaboration.

Students were very positive about the potential of the Google+ hangout feature. They noted that there were a number of technological issues, some of which were related to Google+ but most of which were related to wifi issues within the college. It was perceived that the hangout function was particularly useful at the beginning of the semester when students were unfamiliar with what the presentations entailed and unused to presenting in front of their peers. Students welcomed the opportunity to participate in an online mentoring session with their lecturer.

Conclusions

Students welcomed the idea of using technology to support and enhance their learning. It was felt by them that the project explored a novel way for them to engage with the module, their lecturer and each other. They suggested a number of adjustments to tweak the project for future years such as:

- lab sessions to familiarise students with the platform;
- stricter guidelines on volume, timing and quality of contributions/content creation;
- promotion of the use of Google+ hangout as a means to mentor individuals/groups of students.

Overall students found that Google+ did enhance interactivity among their group and they benefited as a result of the bank of resources and discussion created by their cohort.

Recommendations to DIT

This project has provided a better understanding of the uses of social media as a key component in fostering student engagement. It has also provided insight as to how social media can be leveraged to improve the quality of the student experience.

Findings of the study indicate that students are receptive to using technology/social media platforms to support and facilitate their learning.

Students, however, when unfamiliar with new platforms, require tuition to ensure that they understand and can use the technology available. This is particularly important now, in the context of the integration of webcourses across all colleges in the coming academic year.

It is hoped that this project has also assisted programme directors and lecturers in identifying opportunities where social media may be utilised to enhance module and programme delivery.

Proposed Future Work

The use of the social media platform Google+ to enhance learning and student engagement will continue in the academic year 2012–2013. The project will be refined based on student recommendations and suggestions.

Acknowledgments

The author would like to acknowledge the support and advice of everybody at the DIT Learning, Teaching and Technology Centre, especially Jen Harvey who kindly facilitated the focus groups. In addition the students are thanked for their participation in this project.

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