

# Social Media: Why This Matters To Everyone in Education

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My son, who is eight, is a fanatical Pokémon gamer. If he cannot work out how to solve a particular problem in the game, he will find a video on YouTube that tells him how to do it (there always is one). He is now taking the logical next step of making his own videos to let others know about things he has discovered. The number of YouTube views, “likes” and comments provide immediate feedback on how useful his video was. He doesn’t know it (and isn’t interested when I try to explain it to him), but what is going on here is free, spontaneous, self-directed and very effective skills-based education. Does this scene provide clues to the future of education?

Put another way, in ten or fifteen years’ time, students may expect to find educational nuggets on demand whenever they need them. Some will have had many years’ experience of creating and sharing content, perhaps quite complex, perhaps to do with education. Will they be happy to accept timetabled classes and sit through lectures?

Is this scary? Back in 1999, when there were still a few people muttering that the Internet was “just a fad”, the science fiction writer and visionary Douglas Adams wrote an article expressing amusement at the way the mainstream media considered the Internet something odd, and slightly sinister:

...you would think we would learn the way these things work, which is this:

- 1) Everything that’s already in the world when you’re born is just normal;
- 2) Anything that gets invented between then and before you turn thirty is incredibly exciting and creative and with any luck you can make a career out of it;
- 3) Anything that gets invented after you’re thirty is against the natural order of things and the beginning of the end of civilisation as we know it until it’s been around for about ten years when it gradually turns out to be alright really. (Adams, 1999)

Mr. Adams claimed this could be applied to any innovation, from the wheel onwards. Sadly, he died before the rise of social media, but a very similar pattern (with some flexibility about the ages), can be seen today. Many companies ban the use of social media at work (Adeyeri, 2011). In June 2011, *The Economist* website hosted a debate with the title, “This house believes that we are in a new tech bubble.” Among many contributors was someone posting under the name of “Kool-Aid”:

“What is the value of websites where people post pictures and mostly useless comments? If any site had value it’s LinkedIn. The rest are fluff or at worst bait to allow companies and governments to data mine the general population, which is how Facebook gets its income...” (“This house believes”, 2011).

Meanwhile, hundreds of millions of people, many but by no means all of them under 30, are getting on with making posting “pictures and mostly useless comments” into the technology phenomenon of our era. For today’s teenagers, and anyone younger, online communication, sharing content, self-publishing and collaboration are not a new thing, they are “just normal” (Lenhart, 2009). Over time, this will have a profound impact on education, and we need to start adapting.

This article aims to help anyone involved in education with this adaptation. I still find there is some confusion about what is meant by social media and what is actually new about it, so the article deals with this, before looking at the impact these media are already having on education. I have divided this impact into what appears to me to be three phases, depending on who is originating the content and who is the target audience. Examples are discussed within each of these phases. My aim is to raise awareness of innovative efforts that are taking place to use social media tools in a positive way, and encourage experiments that will enable educators to take advantage of the new tools and techniques on offer.

### **What are Social Media?**

The term “social media” is everywhere, but, surprisingly, there is no generally accepted definition of it. It is helpful to consider a definition to clarify what we mean by the term, and in particular how it is distinguished from similar terms such as “social networking”. A recent informal survey of experts by blogger Heidi Cohen yielded 30 different definitions - perhaps the most useful for our purposes comes from consultant Doreen Moran:

Social media is a collection of online platforms and tools that people use to share content, profiles, opinions, insights, experiences, perspectives and media itself, facilitating conversations and interactions online between groups of people.

- Social Media is the platform/tools.
- Social Networking is the act of connecting on social media platforms.
- Social Media Marketing is how businesses join the conversation in an authentic and transparent way to build relationships (Cohen, 2011).

It is also useful to contrast social media with “industrial media”, such as newspapers, television and film. Industrial media can be powerful tools for broadcasting information, opinions and entertainment, but they are generally expensive to use, require specialist training to produce, and are often heavily regulated. As such, the content broadcast via these media has tended to be dominated by financial, political and/or intellectual elites.

By contrast, social media requires no training to become a contributor, can be free or cheap to use, and is regulated lightly, if at all. Anyone with an Internet connection can publish a blog,

start a group on Facebook, or send tweets. Add a phone or other inexpensive video camera and you can upload a video to YouTube. With a little more support, a microphone and some free software, you can record a podcast and make it available. Any of these tools allow you to broadcast to billions of Internet users worldwide, who make up your potential audience. The direct impact of this on industrial media is, of course, profound. *The Economist* recently published a special report on the news industry which quoted Arianna Huffington, co-founder of the successful news website the *Huffington Post* as saying: “They [readers] don’t just consume news, they share it, develop it, add to it – it’s a very dynamic relationship with news.”

Substitute “education” for “news” here and we may just have a glimpse of our future. The report’s conclusion could also apply to our sector: “A new generation that has grown up with digital tools is already devising extraordinary new things to do with them, rather than simply using them to preserve the old models. Some existing media organizations will survive the transition; many will not.” (Standage, 2011)

### **Social Networking**

Social networking is the most pervasive use of social media. Its roots have been traced back to the earliest days of computing in the 1970s but it gathered pace in the early 2000s, with the founding of numerous social networks such as Friendster, Friends Reunited and Bebo (Cellan-Jones, 2011). The statistics showing the sheer popularity of social networking today are well-rehearsed but, to select a few:

- In 2012, Facebook had 900 million active users, 526 million of whom were active daily. More than 300 million photos were uploaded *every day* (“Key facts”, n.d.).
- In 2012, 72 hours of video were uploaded to YouTube *every minute* and over half of the content had been rated or commented on (“Statistics”, n.d.).
- The most “followed” celebrities on Twitter in 2012, Lady Gaga and Justin Bieber, had over *24 million* followers each (“The 5 most popular”, n.d.).
- According to research by Morgan Stanley, *social networking surpassed email* in terms of number of users in July 2009 and in terms of time spent in November 2007 (Meeker, Devitt & Wu, 2010).

There can now be no doubt that “the rules of the game” have changed for anyone involved in any sort of communication. Those who communicate for a living, such as marketers, politicians and educators, are among the first to experience the impact of these changes.

### **Social Media in Education**

Any major change in the way people communicate is bound to have major implications for education. Consider the impact of the printing press, which made near-universal education feasible for the first time. It took centuries for the impact of the printing press to be fully felt and, while the impact of social media will no doubt be felt more quickly, it still has many years to run. However, it is possible at this stage to discern the outline of three distinct phases of its impact. These are running in parallel, but each began later than the previous one, and they may be distinguished by the main originators of content and the main “target audience” of the content.

Phase one was when faculty started to use the potential of social media to support each other and for their personal and professional development. In phase two, faculty began using social media tools to provide educational content, in one form or another, to students. Phase three, which began recently, is when students start to originate educational content. This content can be aimed primarily at fellow students, faculty, or a mixture of the two. These phases are illustrated below (Table 1).

Table 1. Social media in education

|                        |          | <u>Originators of Content</u>     |   |
|------------------------|----------|-----------------------------------|---|
|                        |          | Faculty                           | Learners  |
| <u>Target Audience</u> | Faculty  | Phase One: "Support for educators | Phase Three: Social learning: student blogging and other learning tools |
|                        | Learners | Phase Two: Delivery of content    | Phase Three: Social Learning: peer-to-peer                              |

**Phase One: Support for Educators**

Many educators are keenly interested in new technology and self-improvement, and were quick to utilise social media from its earliest days to share resources and best practice, as well as discuss issues they face. Today, there are countless blogs maintained by and for educators, and there are even award programmes such as Edublogawards. There are resource-sharing sites such as Google for Educators, discussion groups and even dedicated video-sharing sites such as TeacherTube. Twitter is increasingly popular among educators, with “rock stars” such as Sir Ken Robinson (<http://twitter.com/#!/SirKenRobinson>) clocking up over 110,000 followers.

Educators can also leverage social media to expand their network and possibly to carry out collaborative research, although some have suggested that take-up in this area has so far been quite limited (Weller, 2011). It is not obvious whether any of this phase is changing the process of education itself. Educators aim to become better at delivering a very similar “product”. Communication is also intended to be into and within the community of educators, rather than being aimed at students or the wider world.

**Phase Two: Delivery of Content**

The second phase began when educational institutions started to see the potential of delivering content to students, and any other interested users, via social media or similar channels. The obvious advantage is that it is very easy to access the content. Usually, this is free of charge and therefore amounts to “open sourcing” educational material. Three of the most high-profile examples illustrate some of the range of options here.

- The U.S. Massachusetts Institute of Technology's OpenCourseWare project was the pioneer in the field of open sourcing, albeit publishing material via its own website rather than social media channels -which were not well developed in 2001 when the project started. It has published notes, assignments, videos and other materials from many MIT courses, for the use of other institutions, students or anyone who is simply curious (<http://ocw.mit.edu/index.htm>). MIT have recently announced plans to expand their free provision of material in a collaborative venture with Harvard called edX (<http://www.edxonline.org/>).
- Apple Inc, which dominates the market for legal music downloads, announced in May 2007 that it would allow universities to deliver content either to their students or publicly via the iTunes Store. Over 800 universities worldwide now use iTunesU, with about half making content publicly available, including many of the world's leading institutions. The site offers 350,000 free resources, which have now expanded from audio files to include slideshows, files in pdf format, and films (<http://www.apple.com/education/itunes-u/>).
- Khan Academy was created in 2006 by Salman Khan, at the time a hedge fund analyst. He aimed to record high-quality educational videos and make them available for free on his site and via YouTube. It has been astonishingly successful and now offers over 2700 videos, along with many tests, teaching resources and a game-based reward system. It is run as a not-for-profit organisation and has attracted funding from Google and the Gates Foundation, among others (<http://www.khanacademy.org/>).

It is uncertain how far the "open sourcing" of educational material will go, or what the implications for educational institutions are. On the one hand, MIT's project has not noticeably damaged their business model. One cannot get a degree from MIT via OpenCourseWare and people are still happy to pay for the overall experience and the validation of their learning. On the other hand, some are starting to question whether ever-increasing university fees are really justified when more and more resources are available for free (Kamenetz, 2010); the OER University project aims to offer formal academic credit to learners using only open access content (<http://wikieducator.org/OERu>).

Although phase two may have profound implications for some organisations, it is striking how similar it still is to the traditional model of education. In particular, the style of delivery in material from iTunesU or Khan Academy is identical, or very similar, to that of face-to-face learning in the classroom. There is scope for students to get involved here, for example, by sharing research essays, but the main communication flow is one-way, from the educator(s) to the student(s), with the students at best able to contribute some comments and ratings. This does not really seem to be in the spirit of social media!

### **Phase Three: Social Learning**

#### **Social learning with videos**

I started this article with my son's approach to learning about Pokémon games. He does not seem to be particularly unusual - interestingly, the phenomenon of spontaneous, on demand, peer-to-

peer learning has so far been closely linked to gaming, with gamers being by far the most active users of wiki-hosting site Wikia (McGonigal, 2011).

However, it is not restricted to gamers. In 2009, UK telecommunication giant BT rolled out “Dare2Share”, which is a YouTube-style network allowing employees to upload video or audio content covering any work-related topic. The system also allows social features such as comments, instant messaging and rating, to make the most useful content most visible. The company expects substantial cost savings and efficiency gains but acknowledges that the major barriers to its success will be cultural not technological (Overton, 2009).

### **Peer-to-peer learning on Facebook**

Students on many courses around the world have seen the benefits of organising “study groups” on Facebook, or other social networks. It is an easy way of offering support and encouragement, and sharing resources. More formally, it has been widely noted that Facebook has many similarities to a Learning Management System (LMS) (Wang, Woo, Quek, Yang & Liu, 2011) and, with the development tools now available, it is increasingly customisable. There are widely recognised privacy and intellectual property (IP) concerns with using Facebook. However, it has recently been argued that the familiarity students have with Facebook, and the presence of their support network on it, makes it attractive, at least to supplement the “official” LMS (Wing, 2011).

This approach has been piloted by Purdue University (Indiana, U.S.A.) whose developers have created Mixable. This is generally used as an application within Facebook, allowing students to share and store resources, post new content such as videos, comment and discuss. Students are automatically invited to join groups for all their classes, but can opt not to join, or to make content viewable by some fellow students and not others. Purdue’s faculty are keen to emphasise that Mixable is a supplement to faculty-driven learning, not a replacement for it, and results of the pilot are not available as yet (Kolowich, 2010). However, it is possible that this type of social learning may, over time, reduce the amount of faculty-driven learning required and change its nature.

### **Student participation on Twitter**

The real-time, informal nature of Twitter means that it lends itself well to educational discussions. There are many examples of Twitter being used to discuss topics, complete assignments, carry out research and provide a live “backchannel” when a lecture or class is taking place. One high-profile example has been at the University of Texas, where Professor Monica Rankin encouraged her students to use Twitter for discussions during and after their history class. She identified two benefits of doing this:

- It encouraged wider participation, including students who were nervous about speaking up in a class of 90 people.
- It provided a permanent record of the class discussion which students could go back to in order to reinforce learning and develop a stronger sense of community (Ferenstein, 2010).

In this example, the education is still faculty-driven, but these tools may increasingly allow students to take control, and reshape the way they interact with their faculty and each other.

### **Student blogging**

Another possibility opened up by social media is for learners to use the new tools as part of their coursework. An increasing number of university courses are requiring students to maintain blogs as part of their course, possibly even as part of the assessment (McClurken & Meloni, 2010). My own experience of blogging my way through a course I am currently studying has been that it makes a profound difference. Work which would have stayed within the confines of my tutor group can be shared with a wider audience, and I can benefit from the comments and feedback of anyone who is interested. It has opened up my network among academics and learning technologists. And it is a good discipline, knowing that whatever I write can be read by anyone.

Of course, if we are to expect students to blog, educators need to lead by example. It has been strongly argued that blogging carries many benefits for educators, including opening up new audiences, providing feedback and encouraging creativity (Wheeler, 2011).

### **Conclusion**

The key conclusions of this article may by now be fairly clear:

- Social media are now used throughout society and by educators at all levels. This is a radical change in the way we communicate with each other. It will have profound implications on any business that involves communication, certainly including education.
- Despite increasing use of social media by educators, the approach of most educational institutions still seems very “industrial media”, with timetabled classes, an emphasis on learning delivery in person and by printed books, transmission from educator to students and much assessment being by written exams. No doubt this will take time to change, but we can begin with small steps and small-scale experiments.
- As with all new technologies, it is impossible to predict what those implications will be in any detail. However, they are likely to include greater transparency, more involvement from students, including opportunities for live collaboration and learning in small, on-demand pieces rather than in a logical, sequential structure.
- Specific actions for educational bodies can be grouped around the three phases described above. Relating to phase one, all faculty should be provided with support and encouragement to use social media as part of their professional development, and to use social media tools to improve communication and sharing of knowledge. Relating to phase two, universities should look at how they can share their educational content more widely using tools such as YouTube and iTunes. This will build valuable expertise, fulfil their social mission and promote their brand. The development of phase three is unclear as yet, but the key here is to experiment with ways of increasing student participation, such as discussions on Twitter and blogging.

Changes in the education sector will probably include the rise of new participants and the demise of some existing ones. The most successful organisations are likely to be those who embrace and

experiment with the new technologies and gain experience in them, rather than those who hang back. Engagement with social media needs to be seen as a strategic priority for all institutions and individuals involved in education.

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