Social Media as an Educational Tool

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Abstract: With the high percentage of young people on social networks, where students feel at home, social media is no longer a trend, but part of everyday life and each year it becomes a greater part of education. It's a way that students, teachers, administrators, and community members interact and exchange information with each other. Their experiences with technology, compared to those of teachers and administrators who possibly remember when the Internet came to fruition, are drastically different. This provides a very different understanding of the twenty-first century student as a digital native. Specifically, this study examined how schools and educators use social media, and whether being connected presents a better way to educate the twenty-first century learner. It investigated the level of parent and community engagement using social media and the students' perceptions of social media use in their education. Limited research exists on how teachers and schools actually use social media to enhance education and communication with school stakeholders, i.e., teachers, parents, students, and administrators. This empirical study attempts to fill this research gap and make some useful recommendations in the light of statistical findings.

Keywords: Social media, Empirical study, Student, Teacher, Parents

Introduction

Social media is no longer just a way to connect with family and friends. It has a wide range of uses, and various persons view it differently. In addition to using it to stay in contact with family and friends, many people use it as a source of daily news or instruction, to cultivate business contacts, or to connect to someone with a common interest (Whiting & Williams, 2013). Social media is unarguably part of everyday life, and each year it becomes a greater part of education (Mao, 2014). It is a way that students, teachers, administrators, and community members interact and exchange information with each other. Today, students can navigate the technological world with ease as digital natives, having grown up immersed in technology (Watson & Peccioni, 2011). Digital natives do not know a life without social media and Internet access. Their experiences with technology, compared to those of teachers and administrators who possibly remember when the Internet came to fruition, are drastically different. This provides a very different understanding of the twenty-first century student, a digital native (Howard, 2013).

Social media, also known as social-network sites, has many definitions and is understood in various ways, depending on usage. Mao (2014) defines social media as "new technologies and applications that use the Internet and Web 2.0 technologies and allow users to create and participate in various communities through functions such as communicating, sharing, collaborating, publishing, managing, and interacting" (Mao, 2014). Since various understandings of social media can influence their use, it is important to ascertain the perspectives of users — specifically students, teachers, administrators, and parents— in the context of education. In his study, Mao (2014) found that students feel schools should be more open-minded with regard to social media use, and communicate with them clearly about school social-networks policies.

The reasons for such an approach relate to the issues associated with use of social media on school campuses. Issues such as student and employee privacy top the list of administrator concerns (Wang, 2013). Concerns over privacy overshadow such concerns as student education and community engagement. A respondent (school principal) from Wang's study (2013) states that he "firmly believes social media is not a fad but has unbridled potential in communication with parents and the community" (p. 57). The research shows that students' Internet connectivity, in general, is extremely high (Lenhart, et, al., 2015). This connectivity to social media potentially presents opportunities for student learning. Hrastinski and Aghaee (2011) found that more than 80% of students are willing to use instant messaging, such as Skype, to coordinate classwork and get quick answers. Few studies look at how social media could be or is already used across public-education institutions.

Although the percentage of students connecting through social media sites is high, not much has changed in the training of teachers to accommodate students' needs and learning patterns with regard to social media (Howard, 2013). Teachers often receive instructions not to use social media in the classroom, rather than an introduction to ways of safely and effectively using it.

The literature shows that students and teachers use social media inside and outside of school (Lenhart et al., 2015). According to Davis (2014), teachers and parents are already avid users of social media, but primarily in their personal lives. Davis (2014) surveyed more than one thousand full-time teachers and found that 80% use social media for personal use, while only 18% use it in the classroom. This shows that social media could be a common means of enhancing communication among all stakeholders within a public-education organization.
The goal of this study was to gain insight into the use of social media in classrooms, and for communication among students, parents, teachers, and administrators. To achieve this, the study explored how the observed high school uses social media. This research aims to assist administrators in navigating the online world, a natural environment for digital natives.

Specifically, this study examined how schools and educators use social media, and whether being connected presents a better way to educate the twenty-first century learner. It investigated the level of parent and community engagement using social media and the students' perceptions of social media use in their education. Limited research exists on how teachers and schools actually use social media to enhance education and communication with school stakeholders, i.e., teachers, parents, students, and administrators. This research addresses that gap in available research.

Literature Review

With the high percentage of young people on social networks, where students feel at home, social media is no longer a trend, but part of everyday life (Davis, 2010). "The bottom line is that people use social media and innovative technologies in their everyday lives" (Kelm, 2011, p. 519). The literature reviewed for this study aligns with Kelm's (2011) findings. Many studies discuss the problems with social media use in public- school systems (Sawyer, Bemiller & Trendafilova, 2012; Careless, 2012; Davis, 2014; Howard, 2013; Mourlam, 2013). However, much less research specifically discusses student engagement and teacher involvement in the classroom.

Students

The advances and accessibility of technology have changed how students can be reached. According to Mourlam (2013), students would be open to using social networks they already know how to use, such as Facebook, to assist in learning new content in their classrooms. According to Mourlam (2013), students do welcome social media use, with at least one caveat—the content must be engaging and interesting. Further, Mourlam (2013) reports that 67% of students would find more interaction through Facebook appealing, and would have preferred to have all their assignments posted on Facebook.

Careless (2012) finds that when students get to use the Web and social media to collaborate with their peers in other schools, cities, or even other parts of the world, they are more engaged and actively participate in the lessons. According to Kelm (2011), when social media is used for educational purposes, much can be learned from simply observing young people using technology in everyday life. These observations can provide insight into enhancing classroom instruction, enabling educators to make use of the skills that students already have.

Teachers

The circumstances under which teachers must navigate the integration of social media into their classrooms and instruction are challenging. Teachers go through very little training to prepare for the evolution of the modem student (Plopper & Conaway, 2013). Although teachers are not being trained effectively, some teachers attempt to incorporate some new technology in the classroom. According to Plopper and Conaway (2013), 30% of teachers use podcasts and videos from social media sites to help their direct instruction.

While teachers use tools such as videos from YouTube, little is known of how they use other forms of social media inside the classroom. According to the definition from Anderson (2005) presented above, social media is a place where the students can come together with the teacher and other students to learn. Simply viewing a video on YouTube does not necessarily mean that social media is being incorporated into the lesson. Davis (2014) found that 80% of teachers use social media for personal and professional purposes, but only 18% integrate social media into their direct instruction.

This raises the question of how to promote collaboration between and among teachers and students, especially since both groups are already versed in the function of these sites.

In addition, due to policies of their educational institutions, many educators run into the barrier of being unable to access sites such as Facebook and Twitter on campus, due to social media policies that block them. Working with school administrators and technology officials to get them unblocked is a lengthy process. Teachers must be very clear and specific about the purpose for which they will use these sites (Davis, 2010).

This discourages educators from the idea of even attempting to incorporate social media into classrooms. Additional research into the educational uses of social media may help create a plan for teachers who would like to use these tools for instruction or communication with students and families.

School Administrators and Parents

In recent years, school administrations have introduced many initiatives to engage with their employees and the local community through social media. According to Fleming (2012), many schools use Twitter feeds, Facebook pages, and mass text-message systems, to reach out to parents of students with announcements in the form of one-way communication. Schools are increasingly creating web portals to make communication easier between parents and teachers, as well as to provide easy access to grades and assignments (Fleming, 2012). Despite this move toward the use of social media in schools, information is still lacking on what schools are doing to incorporate communication with their employees through social media (Rubin, 2014). In some cases, schools only allow using social media to communicate with their staff through the communication office, and this communication is strictly one-way, out to the community with announcements. Teachers and students may not even access sites such as Twitter during work hours.

In general, most schools are still skeptical about the benefits of social media in schools (Davis, 2010), amid concerns of cyberbullying, privacy issues, and access to inappropriate content. In some instances, such as the state of Louisiana, state law requires documentation of any and all interaction between teachers and students through any devices not issued by the school, including cell phones and email accounts (Davis, 2010). This is yet another reason that schools and educators still shy away from the use of social media in their classrooms or for outside-of-school projects (DiMarzo, 2012).

The discussion of social media use in educational settings by teachers, students, parents, and administrators often occurs in the context of Web interactivity that facilitates the desired engagement among publics. Definitions of interactivity vary, depending on the subject. According to Jensen (1998), interactivity in communication can be the way people adapt their behavior toward each other. An example is using the computer or other devices, such a smartphone, to communicate with others through social media (McMillan & Downes, 2000). Interactivity in communication is a relatively recent concept, and the definition is evolving with the use of technology and social media.

Looking at how schools use social media, six dimensions of interactivity can help in understanding social media use (McMillan & Downes, 1998): (1) direction of communication, (2) time flexibility, (3) sense of place, (4) level of control, (5) responsiveness, and (6) the perceived purpose of communication.

Method

Many research studies investigate social media use in the personal lives of teachers, parents, and students (Howard, 2013; Hrastinski & Aghaee, 2011; Mao, 2014). However, limited research exists on perceptions of using social media as an educational tool. To address the gap in the literature, a survey-based approach is preferred and an online survey was distributed via email in a high school.

The design of the survey considered three dimensions of interactivity: responsiveness, time flexibility, and sense of place. Questions specifically looking at responsiveness set a baseline for respondents' actual use of the various social media sites. Further, questions addressing time flexibility provided information about the best time to reach students to enrich their education and address issues about instruction or homework, either after school or during school hours. Finally, a set of survey questions that focused on a sense of place determined how these users utilize mobile Internet access, and if they are willing to use it to improve education for students.

The anonymous survey was designed for four different categories of respondents: students in grades 6-12, teachers of grades 6-12, parents of students in grades 6-12, and administrators. The survey for teachers included questions that looked into their use of social media, both personally and professionally, to collect data on teachers' basic understanding of how to use social media. This included their presence on many platforms, including Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram and LinkedIn. The questions helped to determine what sites teachers might already be using, if any, to create a virtual presence for their students' learning and to connect with parents.

Students and parents received a similar survey. First, a set of questions collected data on their personal use of social media and their knowledge of these sites. Second, questions were included to gather data on their perception of using social media for learning, classroom engagement, and collaboration online. Also, the survey asked students questions about mobile access to their social media accounts.

Results and Discussion

At the end of the data collection period, 229 responses were collected, 9 of which were not completed. Among the responses were 22 from parents, 169 from students, 26 from teachers, and 9 from administrators. The majority of students participating in the survey reported being high-scb freshmen (n=57). Significant numbers of sophomores (n=40), juniors (n=36), and seniors (n=28) took the survey as well. The youngest participant (n=l) reported being in 6th grade. There were no respondents from middle-school grades 7 and 8.

Social Media Use Among Students, Teachers, and Parents

Understanding what a potential implementation of a social media policy might include calls for exploring how social media is being used in education, and the platforms that both teachers and students use most frequently. The participants reported time spent on the following social media platforms: (1) Twitter; (2) Instagram; (3) Facebook; (4) Snapchat; (5) Pinterest; (6) LinkedIn; and (7) YouTube.

The results showed that students spend an average of 4.5 hours on social media each day. Parents spend an average of 3.4 hours each day on their preferred social media sites, and teachers spend an average of 1.7 hours each day on social media sites. The social media sites most frequently used by students are Instagram, Snapchat, and YouTube, with nearly 40% of students reporting that they use YouTube daily. The least used platforms reported by students were Facebook and Pinterest.

Table 1. Frequency of social media platforms use by students

	Never	N	Once a week	N	2-3 times a week	N	4-6 times a week	N	Daily	N
Twitter	9.2%	87	16.7%	20	15.7%	8	15.1%	11	8.9%	30
Instagram	5.8%	55	12.5%	15	21.6%	11	21.9%	16	17.7%	60
Facebook	11.3%	107	19.2%	23	7.8%	4	4.1%	3	4.7%	16
Snapchat	6.0%	57	6.7%	8	7.8%	4	16.4%	12	23.4%	79
Pinterest	11.8%	112	19.2%	23	9.8%	5	6.9%	5	1.2%	4
LinkedIn	14.5%	138	4.2%	5	2.0%	1	0.0%	0	0.0%	0
YouTube	0.2%	2	5.0%	6	19.6%	10	19.2%	14	39.1%	132
Other	0.6%	6	2.5%	3	0.0%	0	1.4%	1	1.2%	4

Facebook was the most frequently used platform among parents, and 21% of parents reported using Facebook very often. Interestingly, parents rarely use Twitter and Snapchat. Teachers report using Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook most often, with 21% of teachers reporting that they use Facebook very often.

The data on social media frequency of use among teachers and students shows a generational gap in identification of the preferred social media platform. Generally speaking, the data demonstrated that parents and teachers use Facebook much more often than students, the majority of whom reported using Snapchat almost daily. At the same time, the data showed that students, teachers, and parents have a working knowledge of YouTube, and all use it rather frequently. YouTube appears to be the only common social media platform for all respondents and could be the common ground in creating a space for collaboration between the stakeholders in a school.

School Administration

With respect to the level of engagement, administrators shared their school's social media presence. To determine the frequency of updates, the scale was set from 1, the lowest (less than once a week), to 5, the highest (daily). Administrators reported that other administrative staff members do not often update the campus's YouTube and Facebook accounts (M=1.9, SD=1.1). Fewer administrators indicated that Twitter is updated on behalf of the campus as often as four to six times per week (M=l .4, SD=1.4).

The survey also asked administrators to give an example of the content posted and the audience for which it is intended. Only four of the seven respondents answered the open-ended questions. Three of the four reported their campus's accounts were for celebrations of students, and two of them specified that the campus's accounts were for announcements and upcoming deadlines. Two of the four respondents identified the intended audience as students and parents, while the other two did not specify. When asked about the effectiveness of the use of social media sites to deliver announcements to parents, 66.7% of school administrators responding believed it is moderately effective. Additionally, 16.7% perceived social media to be moderately effective for obtaining feedback from parents.

The administrators' responses to survey questions show that they see the potential for social media use in education. One respondent described the battle to get students to use social media to network and learn in a positive way. In addition, two administrators stated they would be willing to develop a social media policy, while the other two stated that they would not be willing to develop a policy.

Teacher behaviors and practices concerning communication with students are a reflection of the school's policies. The data shows that students think that their teachers are open to online interaction, including email (M=3.47, SD=1.16). At the same time, students are not communicating with teachers using social media outside of class (M=1.75, SD=0.95). The student responses also indicate that students are not able to use social media platforms (not including email) to communicate while on campus, due to school network blocks (M=1.95, SD=1.34).

Students

The data demonstrate clearly that students frequently use their mobile devices (M=4.52, SD=0.93), such as their cell phones, to access social media accounts on campus and off campus. Most students agree that this is how they communicate with their peers (M=3.08, SD=1.3). Students' responses reveal that students rarely communicate with their teachers via social media, outside of school hours (M=1.75, SD=0.95).

The majority of students reported not using social media outside of school hours to get help with classwork (see Table 12). Yet, students are willing to use social media to communicate with classmates and teachers (M=2.86, SD=1.29), although they reported that currently such practice is not frequent (M=l .75, SD=0.95).

Teachers

Teachers reported that they spend an average of 1.7 hours a day on their social media sites—although teachers do not use it as a tool of communication for school purposes.

Similar to student responses, teachers' feedback show that they do not use social media to communicate with students about classwork. However, teachers sometimes use social media to interact with colleagues for planning purposes, showing that to some extent, they use social media to improve instruction in the classroom. It also shows that teachers and students agree that they do not interact on social media for assistance with classwork (M=1.75, SD=0.95; M=1.83, SD=0.96 respectively). Interestingly, students believe that they are sometimes required to communicate about classwork outside of class using social media (M=2.86, SD=1.09), while teachers reported that they rarely encourage it (M=2.04, SD=1.24).

The teachers' responses show that they generally use learning management sites, LMS, sites to interact with students (M=3.08, SD=1.41), but are open to the idea of learning to use other sites (M=3.04, SD=1.46). Like the students' responses, the teachers agreed that they do not use social media to communicate with students about classwork (M=1.83, SD=0.96). The responses illustrate that teachers are willing to learn more, and this would be an important insight for administrators to note if they do decide in the future to implement a plan.

Parents

The parents' responses demonstrate that parents highly appreciate and find it useful when administrators post updates on the campus' social media sites (M=3.89, SD=1.07). Parents regularly communicate with teachers online, most likely by email (M=3.63, SD=1.22). Given this information, it would be beneficial for parents to be able to post comments to teachers that might be helpful to other parents as well. This would save teachers' time spent answering the same questions for multiple parents.

The campus's social media accounts, such as Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook, are being updated four to six times per week, according to two respondents. No other updating of a social media site is reported. When campuses post updates to their sites so few times throughout the week, it represents another missed opportunity to reach parents.

While it is beneficial to know that parents visit the school's website for information (M=4.16, SD=0.99), parent responses indicate that they also find useful the school's posts of information about upcoming bond elections on its website (M=3.79, SD=0.89) or general information on its social media sites (M=3.37, D=1.09). Despite the number of parents that visit school websites and social media sites for school information, parents report that they do not use social media to communicate with their child's teachers (M=1.37, SD=0.48)

Conclusion

Social media can be a way to enrich education, and a key factor in the communication among students, teachers, parents, and school administrators. The results of surveying students, teachers, and parents show that perceptions toward learning in general are positive. The open-ended questions to which administrators responded show that getting them to commit to the idea of social media as an educational tool would require more education on their part. It could take many more studies such as this one to reveal to administrators and teachers the perceptions of parents and students about social media use.

The major finding of this study was that the perceptions of students, teachers, parents, and administrators, regarding the future use of social media as a tool in education, do not align. The responses show that teachers and students have positive attitudes toward learning more about the use of social media in the classroom. Likewise, parents appreciate when the school uses it as a way to distribute information. The study also revealed major differences among students, teachers, and parents in the current use of social media. Administrators took a rather strong stance against social media use as a classroom tool, as well as the possibility of developing a system to enable using it in the future.

The administrators that responded clearly felt that potential issues surround the use of social media, although further research would need to be conducted to fully understand what those problems could be. Since the majority of administrators who responded did not already have a social media policy in place, nor did they plan on having one, it could be assumed that they fear the worst. Consistent with DiMarzo's (2012) observations, it is possible that the administrators do not allow the use of social media for the sake of student privacy, or to ensure no inappropriate communication could occur. This also echoes Davis's study from 2010, which discusses administrator skepticism in regard to social media use. Although some administrators did mention benefits of social media, including the benefit of "meeting people where they are," demonstrating the current frequency of social media use among students would be pivotal. This could be a step in the direction of implementing a social media plan.

Careless (2012) argues that when students use the Web and social media to collaborate with peers from their school or other schools, they are more engaged in the lesson. This information, combined with the data found in this study, shows some benefits of developing a policy to incorporate social media into education. Plopper and Conaway (2013) found that teachers were already trying to implement new technology for instruction in the classroom. According to their study, 30% of the surveyed teachers incorporated videos from social media to enrich lessons. The data in this study similarly show student and teacher interest in this learning strategy.
The results of the present study also show that parents' perceptions of social media are positive when it comes to communicating with teachers and the administration. Social media use by parents is fairly high, especially on sites such as Facebook. Analysis revealed that parents appreciate the access to information shared on social media. Almost half of the parents report using Facebook often, and almost a third use Facebook very often. Parents reported that they spend an average of 3.4 hours per day on social media. This demonstrates that social media is a viable tool for the school and the teachers to deliver information to parents, as well as an opportunity to receive invaluable feedback.

The responses show that teachers spend a substantial amount of their personal daily lives on social media as well. In general, teachers seem to be open to the idea of using sites with which they are already familiar. Part of the reason teachers have a hard time adopting social media for instructional use is the rapid growth and development of new platforms and LMS sites; yet, teachers do not get the level of training necessary to effectively use the new technology. This finding echoes Davis (2014), who argues that teachers do not get the training necessary to make new technology successful. Arguably, students do not receive any training on how to use social media for schoolwork either, and it is up to the teacher to take time out of instruction to teach students how to effectively use another online platform. Teachers are already using social media, but both students and teachers report that it is not being used to enrich classroom materials or communication.

Students report that they are online a significant 4.5 hours per day. However, the students and the adults in the study frequent different sites. Students are mostly using Snapchat and YouTube. Teachers and parents report using Facebook and YouTube most frequently. Fortunately, there is one important commonality between teachers and students: YouTube, a resource used across the board, with more than a third of the students using YouTube on a daily basis. Again, this is an opportunity on which schools and teachers could bank to reach students and to enrich their education. YouTube is a space with an abundance of content and collaboration opportunities.

When thinking about integrating YouTube into instruction, an important consideration is that it can be an open network platform— i.e., students do not have to have a YouTube account to access public content. Teachers can benefit from creating content or posting student content in a space that any students can view. Luckily, the findings of this study show that a large number of students use YouTube daily. If those users already have an account, true collaboration can take place in the YouTube space, with sharing of students' and teachers' content, while commenting on and subscribing to each other's content.

In fact, YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram can all potentially be used as open networks, allowing for easy implementation in the classroom. In addition, monitoring the activity on open networks is much easier. Compare this to the Snapchat, also highly used by students according to the findings, but much more difficult to imagine in classroom use. Additionally, open networks provide a level of transparency needed for schools. Administrators, or other faculty and staff, could easily monitor activity and hold students accountable.

The policies for most of these platforms require the user to be at least 13 years of age. With that in mind, the issue of asking a student in the 6th grade, who might still be too young to meet that requirement, to use social media would be problematic for schools. Moving forward, this research would be better applied to schools with grades 9 - 12 only, using 8th grade as a transition year in which to begin training students on best practices for educational social media use.

This study has determined that there are, in fact, missed opportunities to engage with students in their learning, and with parents as key stakeholders in the students' future. Almost all students believe that their teachers would be open to more online communication; at the same time, they acknowledge that communication on social media is currently lacking. That is where the school comes in. It is up to the school administrators to make clear what is appropriate and what is not, through a solid social media policy, and with proper teacher training. First, however, sites like YouTube would have to be unblocked from the school's Internet network.

Social media is here to stay, with or without the integration of social media as a tool in the public-education system (Davis, 2010). People are using it in their everyday lives (Kelm, 2011). This research helps inform understanding of the best ways to properly and efficiently integrate social media into the classroom communication strategy.

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