Working with social media in tertiary education: A contested space between academics and policies

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Managing the use of social media in tertiary institutions is not as straight-forward as it may first seem. There is a multiplicity of facets which interplay within this space, from the espoused University policies on the one side of the coin, to the actual practices by students and staff on the other. At times, this misalignment is not the result of deliberate waywardness. For academics, deciphering and adhering to institutional policy whilst simultaneously attempting to enrich students' learning experiences is a difficult feat. This paper explores this contested space, examining the tensions between social media as a disruptive technology, coupled with the interpretation of institutional policies. Our analysis points to a call for clarity in and around institutional policy in the implementation of social media for teaching and learning in higher education.

Keywords: social media, policy, tertiary education, learning, teaching, professional development

Introduction

With the rapid rise of technology in all aspects of our lives, it would be an understatement to propose that the use of educational technology is now an expected common practice in tertiary education. Indeed, Selwyn (2010, p. 65) has noted that technology has become "a standard feature of contemporary education provision and practice". In particular, technology has evolved from the read/write web to become the site presumption (or production by consumers) (cf. Toffler & Alvin, 1981). In Web 2.0, there is the opportunity for creating, storing and sharing of vast content through the web/cloud/internet/technology. This has brought along with it changes in the use of technology in the tertiary sector. Among the Web 2.0 technological tools rapidly adopted for teaching and learning in higher education is social media, utilised for the creation of meaningful connections and networks (Siemens, 2014). It has been argued that social media facilitates an active, authentic and social learning environment for students (Johnson et al., 2016). It does this in part by enabling formal and informal learning opportunities (Bateman & Willems, 2012), between educators and students, among students themselves, and for interaction between students and the learning content (cf. Moore, 1989).

Yet possibilities for learning aside, social media is the site of contestation in tertiary education. From the institution's viewpoint, changes in the use of technology can cause disruption to the status quo, and social media itself viewed as a disruptive technology as it is becoming increasingly used, thereby displacing the dominant technology (Flavin, 2012). The governance of social media requires institutional policies, defined as "the formal laws, regulations, rules, and guidelines that govern institutions" (Johnson et al., 2016). Policy, in turn, can either promote acceleration of the adoption and use of particular technologies for learning (ibid), or block them. The same policy may be contradictory in that it promotes one aspect but dissuades another, causing confusion in the interpretation of the governing policies in different contexts. This is a challenge for key stakeholders such as academics in tertiary education finding policies confusing and jargonistic. This analytical paper sheds a spotlight on these issues. Beyond the remit of this paper, we flag also that where an institutional policy may be clear, users themselves can wilfully or accidentally overlook them.

Social Media

Social media is a subset of Web 2.0 technologies. The term 'social media' is broadly defined in this paper as synonymic term for any technology which encompasses "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content" (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 61). Aichner and Jacob (2015, p. 259) have discerned 13 different types of social media. These include blogging tools, networking tools, forums, photo sharing tools, business collaboration tools, service and product reviews, research networks, video sharing tools, and virtual worlds. In tertiary education, social media are available for a variety of uses including research, marketing, and the creation and promotion of professional student personas. In this paper, we are specifically referring to the use of social media for teaching and learning in the context of tertiary education. The rise of the social media is exponential, and this trend is expected to flourish into the future. As Johnson et al. (2016, p. 30) note, "As well-established as social media is, it continues to evolve at a rapid pace, with new ideas, tools, and developments coming online constantly". This has real implications for the sector of tertiary education. We know that social media is being used in a variety of ways - one way being an alternative learning management system (LMS). For example, research shows that in developing countries the uptake and the prevalence of social media in curriculum bridges the gap which exists in University's digital infrastructure (Sobaih, Moustafa, Ghandforoush, & Khan, 2016, pp. 296-297). In first world countries, social media is also being used deliberately (cf. Willems, Sutton, & Maybery, 2015), or even by accident (cf. Bateman & Willems, 2012).

University policies and procedures – data privacy versus academic freedom and student engagement

Use and policy are the two opposing sides of the same coin in this debate. On the one side, there is student engagement and academic freedom; on the other, data privacy and the protection of the institution's branding and reputation. As Bateman and Willems (2015) have suggested, the use of social media for teaching and learning in tertiary education is outpacing policy, putting the 'cart before the horse'. The authors have argued that the provision of clear principles and policies to guide the use of rapidly emergent technologies will enable the execution of an increased duty of care for all stakeholders within the tertiary education community. The issue of social media policy is becoming a key need for consideration for those of us who work in academia. The press – both in Australasia and around the globe - is more frequently reporting on the intersection between student and staff breeches of institutional social media policy. Some recent Australian exemplars include the case of one academic being temporarily suspended by her institution due to her *Twitter* comments about the Australian flag, and another who was stood down without pay by his institution due to his comments on *Facebook* relating to his perceptions of *Sky News* viewers (Joyner, 2016).

While there is a great deal of literature on the use (and abuse) of social media in higher education, there is less research on the intertwining of policy (Pomerantz, Hank & Sugimoko, 2015). University policy and procedures exist to guide practices within the institution. This is decided by a myriad of factors from legislative changes at one end of the spectrum, to user expectations at the other. The policy exists to govern the use of social media by stakeholders within the reach of the institution: students, academic staff, professional staff, and the institution itself and yet, the organisation requires a single policy point (Blair & Willems, 2015), if one exists at all (Boudreaux, 2011). As Pomerantz, Hank and Sugimoko (2015, p. 2) note: "policies are difficult to construct in a way that suits all stakeholders and protects academic freedom". On the flip side, policies also exist to uphold institutional branding and reputation, with the increasing corporatisation of higher education (Joyner, 2016).

Regardless of their importance, policies and procedures are generally considered difficult to comprehend in the tertiary education sector, including those policies that relate to learning and teaching, and in particular within the context where academic freedom deems a virtue. This creates a lack of clarity around whether academic staff should engage with students in certain spaces such as social media and whether or how these staff will be supported by university policies.

Highlighting some excerpts from one Australian tertiary institution's policies, we aim to reveal how this confusion can arise. First, we will look at some examples which deem to discourage the use of social media – mainly pertaining to the data privacy and maintenance of students' data.

Some key issues that may be interpreted as reasons not to use social media include privacy of student information and data or record keeping for education and training activities (see Table 1). First and foremost, Information and Records Maintenance Policy states that no university data shall be sold or have ownership to a third party company such as Facebook or Twitter. However, there are social media platforms such as Facebook that acknowledge their right to access and use certain user data within their private policy under certain circumstances. In the case of University communications (under Information and Communications Technology Use Procedure), it is a requirement that all records (including education and training activities) are kept safely for an adequate period of time and destroyed after certain periods. This becomes problematic when staff and students are asked to mind its storage and maintenance of learning activities outside of University's formal learning spaces such as LMS and also when social media platforms might have direct access to private data and its maintenance (e.g. Facebook). Finally, when academic staff use social media for teaching – namely, under the banner of conducting university 'business', they are invited to use the institution's email accounts. This could also be an obstacle when academics already have Facebook accounts, for example that they need to create another Facebook account to just be able to do the teaching and learning with their students. Archiving of data relating to the learning and teaching activities within social media also becomes an issue.

Table 1: Policies which potentially discourage the use of social media (emphasis added)

POLICY- SECTION	RELEVANT CLAUSES
INFORMATION AND RECORDS MANAGEMENT POLICY SECTION 4 - POLICY	(9) No University information will be sold or have ownership transferred to a third party without the approval of the Vice-Chancellor.
	(10) The University will manage its records throughout their lifecycle to ensure that they are **a complete and accurate record of its business activities and that they remain the property of the University.**
	(11) The Records Unit will maintain an information and records management program that includes: a. guidelines, including requirements for information classification b. **education and training activities** c. a retention schedule, including instructions about the disposal and archiving requirements for records.
INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATIONS TECHNOLOGY USE PROCEDURE SECTION 5 - PROCEDURE	(21) Staff members are required to **use only their [University] email accounts and [University] resources when undertaking business transactions on behalf of [The University] and not other and personal email addresses.**
PRIVACY POLICY SECTION 4 – POLICY Security and disposal	(17) The University will ensure that Personal Information and Health Information is: a. **kept secure and protected from misuse, loss, unauthorised access, modification or disclosur**e b. **destroyed or permanently de-identified when it is no longer needed by the University**, subject to the University's obligations under the Public Records Act 1973 (Vic) and other legislation.

There are, on the other hand, other policies which seem to encourage the use of social media for teaching and learning in tertiary education. From the same policy document in Table 1, the second set of policies (listed in Table 2, below) essentially evolve around the concepts of academic freedom and engagement with students. Academic freedom in that established scholars should have the autonomy to promote and perform teaching that resonates with their teaching philosophies and students. Academic staff are encouraged to seek advice where necessary in complying with the University's code of conduct as described above, and advised to state that their views expressed in social media are personal detached from University's views in relevant media. Above all, staff are generally encouraged to make personal connections and interactions with students so that their learning experiences (both face to face and online) are personal, engaging and relevant (under Teaching and Learning Policy).

Table 2: Policies which potentially encourage the use of social media (emphasis added)

POLICY - SECTION	RELEVANT CLAUSES
MEDIA POLICY SECTION 4 - POLICY	4) In accordance with the Academic Freedom Policy, the University recognises and values the tenets of **academic freedom** as central to its endeavours in scholarship, teaching and research and is committed to its promotion and protection within the University. It supports the right of its scholars to engage in critical inquiry and robust and unfettered critical debate which extends to engagement with the media. In their exercise of academic freedom staff and associates must at all times comply with the requirements for personal and professional behaviour in the Code of Conduct.
	(5) Academic staff are encouraged to engage freely with the media in their areas of expertise, but on politically or socially sensitive issues, they are encouraged to seek the advice of the Media Relations and Corporate Communications Unit.
	(6) Academic staff may make other public comments **as long as the staff member makes it plain he or she does not represent the University when making these comments.**
	(9) The University recognises the use of and participation in social media to learn, advocate, collaborate, exchange and contribute information and ideas. **Social media is recognised by the University as a key channel for remaining active, aware and fully engaged with its students, staff and communities.**
	(10) Use of social media by University staff and students, where there is a connection with the University, must comply with this and all relevant University policies and procedures. Use of social media will have a connection with the University in each of the following circumstances: a. if the social media account is established or used as an official University social media channel; b. if the social media is accessed using University information technology systems or equipment; **c. if it is clear there is an affiliation between a staff member or student and the University on the site;** or d. **if the content of the social media is specifically about the University or its staff or students, in whole or in part**.
SOCIAL MEDIA PROCEDURE SECTION 5 - PROCEDURE	(10) All social media content and comments linked to the University (including official University social media accounts), must comply with the University's Code of Conduct, the Student Code of Conduct, the Equity and Diversity Policy, and the Public Relations and Marketing Policy.
TEACHING AND LEARNING (HIGHER EDUCATION COURSES) POLICY SECTION 4 - POLICY	(6) The University's courses, led and taught by educators with teaching expertise and discipline specific knowledge, have an integrated and inclusive curriculum with: a. clearly articulated course learning outcomes, consistent with [University], Graduate Learning Outcomes, the Australian Qualifications Framework and professional standards where relevant, and clearly communicate standards of expected student performance b. **a focus on personal connections and interactions between learners and fellow students and educators so that located and cloud learning experiences are personal, engaging and relevant** c. learning experiences, including assessments, that enable students to create and share evidence of their learning achievements, with particular emphases

Understanding the variety of policies and procedures around the use of social media is only the first step for academics to safely dive into the initiative. Once academics are in the space under the guiding policies, academics ought to still learn how to best use social media and practice so that that they become efficient operators of social media for learning and teaching. It is these multi-facet steps that academics find themselves caught in-between to move forward, which calls for a need for ongoing professional development. Finally, we must not forget that these policies (in particular those associated with privacy) are only the ones practiced at the university, and that there are even more complex and multiple of terms and conditions with which each social media requires its users to agree to and sign on, outside of institutional policies. We will not touch on each social media's policies, except to mention that they certainly add to the complexity of understanding policies and legal agreements in deciding whether social media is an appropriate tool for learning and teaching.

Building capacity for academics through professional development

The unpacking of various policies in tertiary institutions can be an onerous task, yet alone how to effectively facilitate social learning within the space once academics are there. Not only to talk about the wide range of policies and procedures available at universities, it is imperative that academics are guided and supported in exploring the pros and cons, opportunities and challenges of using social media for their teaching. There are often no university-wide professional development opportunities provided as a forum for academics to engage and unpack these policies related to their teaching and learning. Following Willems (2016), we advocate that professional development opportunities that allow discussions on what affordances and risks social media would bring to academics and their students are crucial. Staff professional development is essential to expand educators' awareness of contributing "to the effective education of their students and the accomplishment of the organisation's objectives"(Marriss, 2011, p. 1); to improve the quality of student learning and to help produce capable graduates who are work-ready (Pleschová et al., 2012); and to aid the institution survive ever-changing demands and to meet accountability measures (Seyoum, 2012). In summary, for an "effective staff development process [it] is supportive of the individual and beneficial for the organisation" (Marriss, 2011, p. 4). However, as Altany (2012) has noted, professional development is not just something to employ to remediate problems; it is a necessary initiative that is a necessary prophylactic measure, ensuring stability for the academic and the institution.

Conclusion

This paper highlights the contested space where academics find themselves in thinking about social media for learning and teaching when dealing with diverse and complex university policies and procedures. Drawing on excerpts from an Australian institution, our analysis reveals that arguments both for and against the use of social media can be supported by those policies. This can in turn cause confusion for academics.

In summary, the tensions created by actual and espoused use of social media for teaching and learning in tertiary education, versus institutional policy and procedures can no longer be overlooked. Often, policies and procedures lag behind the rapid rise of the various social media technologies. As Blair and Willems (2015) have argued, social media policy requires agility in development, management and application. Pomerantz, Hank and Sugimoko (2015) join this call by arguing that in order to keep pace with the rapid development of social media use in higher education, institutions not only need policy, but need to revisit these policies frequently as the technology, applications and uses of social media evolve. To this, we add that social media policy needs to be adaptive and current, and especially able to provide clarity around interpretation of specific policies which will relate to their desired teaching practice. Ongoing and dedicated staff professional development can also help to address this issue. To conclude, we call for further research into this contested space.

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