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Use of Social Networking Site Consumer Training to Teach Information Literacy Threshold Concepts

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[Peer-Reviewed Article]

Introduction

Social networking sites (SNS) have been integrated seamlessly into our everyday lives, and college students are one of their biggest consumers (Lenhart, et. al. 2010). Just as consumers of Starbucks have been trained to speak the language of the corporation, ordering “venti” instead of “large”, and consumers of smart phones have come to rely on them in their every-day lives for things like directions, instant access to email, fitness apps, and more, social media users have been trained to intuitively expect and respond to things on their SNS in day-to-day life. The skills that our students have developed through consumer-use of SNS can be incorporated into library programming to teach the threshold concepts outlined in the ACRL Framework for Information Literacy (2015). This paper reviews the skills that students have developed as consumers of SNS which were introduced by Rush and Wittkower (2014) and will introduce creative and practical approaches to teaching students in formal classroom settings as well as outside of the classroom through library outreach and engagement programming. The focus of the ideas introduced is on the consumer-trained skills developed through use of SNS and not necessarily on use of SNS itself, which will provide librarians with ideas for low-tech ways to use these skills to teach students information literacy concepts.

The term “consumer training” stems from the term “consumer socialization” which was defined by Ward (1974) as “processes by which young people acquire skills, knowledge, and attitudes relevant to their functioning as consumers in the marketplace” (p. 2). Current research dealing with consumer socialization and social media focuses on

advertising, purchasing behavior, and brand perception (Wang, Yu, & Wei, 2012, Vinerean, S., Cetina, I., Dumitrescu, L., & Tichindelean, M., 2013, Schivinski, B., & Dabrowski, D., 2013). Rush and Wittkower (2014) introduced the idea of consumer training in relation to skills and habits produced by use of SNS that are not related to marketing, rather are connected to teaching and learning. There is not a dictionary definition for the term “consumer training,” so this article will introduce a working definition of the term. Consumer training refers to the way that we as consumers of products and technologies have been trained by the producers to accept and come to rely on what the product offers as an integral part of our daily lives. For example, 70% of Facebook users log in to the site daily, thus making it a routine part of their lives (Duggan, Ellison, Lamp, Lenhart, & Madden, 2015). Pew Research Center reports that 64% of U.S. adults own a smartphone and that 89% of owners rely on their smartphones to connect to the internet, 88% rely on their devices to check email, and 75% use them to connect to social media (Anderson, 2015b).

Elements of SNS Consumer Training

In 2014, Rush and Wittkower introduced the six elements of SNS consumer training and discussed how these elements could be expropriated in education. These elements should not be looked at in isolation, rather as tasks or skills that can be performed simultaneously in various situations.

- *Social Informatics*: Information on SNS is organized according to the results ranking algorithm of that product, based on the users’ past interactions and searches. It is a crowd-sourced curation of information that comes from all sorts of sources- friends, companies, friends-of-friends and more. The feel is more social than a blog or newspaper, where items are presented in one standard way for all users, and where there may be multiple authors but one editorial voice.
- *Interactions*: Interactions on SNS allow users to choose to participate and engage with content at different levels of commitment. Some low-level commitment interactions include liking or sharing. A higher level of interaction would be to comment on a post, and even higher would be to have an individual conversation with someone via chat or email. Lastly, we have the most risky level of interaction, face to face contact. SNS has trained us to comfortably cultivate relationships with other users without ever meeting face to face, or to just as easily ignore or disengage with content or users without it being a big deal (Wittkower, 2012).

- *Audience Construction:* Many SNS allow users to construct specific audiences and not necessarily individual relationships and interaction. Audience construction allows users to make posts available to specific audiences or to use specific SNS for some audiences and other SNS for others. For example, I use Facebook to post pictures of my kids and cats, while I use Twitter for keeping up with library talk at conferences.
- *Identity:* SNS users are very skilled at cultivating a personal identity that is appropriate for a specific SNS, a specific conversation or audience, and navigating easily among them. Having multiple online identities is easy for SNS users.
- *Incentives:* SNS incorporate incentives structures that feed basic human desires like building relationships, having fun, playing, networking, and passing time. Having the most favorited Tweet at a conference, or sharing a news story that ignites a passionate discussion are motivating for many users.
- *Ambient Awareness:* Ambient Awareness has been integrated seamlessly into the lives of SNS consumers. Finding out about a major news item through our social media feeds is more common than hearing about it on the radio or the evening news on television. SNS friends know information about each other such as what they've eaten for lunch or that they were sick last week and it doesn't seem weird.

Literature Review

There are studies published prior to the publication of the ACRL Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education (ACRL, 2015) that connect social media to the information literacy instruction setting (Miller, 2012, Becker, 2010, Bridges, 2012, Click & Petit, 2010), and even more studies that advocate use of SNS in higher education in-general (Johnson et. al, 2014, Rheingold, 2010, Seaman & Tinti-Kane, 2013, and Sandry, 2014). Since the ACRL Framework for Information Literacy was released in 2015, a handful of articles have been published that discuss authentic learning experiences and the information literacy threshold concepts and several that connect social media, authentic learning, and the information literacy threshold concepts (Carroll, 2015, Wallis, 2015, West, 2015), which I will discuss and map to the SNS Consumer Training Elements in the next section of the paper.

Because of its presence in both social and professional situations, social media easily lends itself to the curation of authentic learning experiences (Mackey & Jacobson, 2014). Miller (2012) discusses the benefits of authentic learning opportunities in library

instruction. As social media becomes more dominant in the everyday lives of students, librarians and faculty can provide the opportunities for students to develop information literacy skills in the online environments they regularly participate in (Miller, 2012). Becker (2010) advocates for embedded librarianship to take place via Facebook as opposed to a traditional LMS because of the familiarity that most students have with Facebook. Bridges (2012) developed a for-credit course on the topic of Social Media Literacy. Bridges (2012) advocates for librarian use of social media in the classroom, given the role that social media plays in our society and in the professional world. Figlio (2011) communicated with classes via Twitter and student blogs. Interactions between the students and Figlio (2011) took place live during class via the class Twitter discussions. Figlio (2011) also read and commented on student blogs. At the end of the semester, informal student surveys indicated that they found using Twitter and blogging to interact with their librarian to be a very positive and rewarding experience (Figlio, 2011).

Using the language that is a part of every-day life for SNS users, as well as likening elements of SNS to elements of research is another way to provide authentic learning experiences for students. Click & Petit (2010) suggest using an example platform that students are very familiar with, such as Facebook, as a bridge to other Web 2.0 technologies. As databases become more social media-like, this will be easier to do. For example, one of my colleagues at Old Dominion University compares the folder option in our Discovery Tool to an online shopping cart, stating that if the user is not logged into an account their items will not be saved. The database Education and Information Technology Digital Library (EdITLIB) provides Amazon-like links to “also read” articles and allows users to tag articles themselves. Tagging in social media can be comparable to subject headings and controlled vocabulary (Click & Petit, 2010). Alfonzo (2014) also discusses using Twitter hashtags in information literacy instruction in a number of ways. For example, showing examples of incorrect use of hashtags and the frustration that comes along with it is something that users of social media can relate to (Alfonzo, 2014). Talking about the experience of searching in Twitter, overuse of hashtags, and information overflow can lead into a discussion about the benefits of searching in a library database (Alfonzo, 2014).

Mapping SNS Consumer Training to the Information Literacy Threshold Concepts

Elements of SNS training can be mapped to the ACRL Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education (ACRL, 2015). These connections can be made in many different library settings including in the classroom, in one-on-one interactions, and virtually, as I will outline in the next section of the paper using specific examples that include my own ideas as well as ideas that others have published (Carroll, 2015, Wallis, 2014, West, 2015). Both the elements of SNS consumer training and the information literacy threshold concepts do not exist in a vacuum, or as single entities, rather sometimes they can exist simultaneously and can co-exist in different combinations. Because of this fluidity and flexibility, this section of the paper is organized by teaching idea or concept.

Going Viral

A common learning outcome in undergraduate library instruction is to teach students how to determine whether or not a resource is reliable. This is a key performance indicator of Standard One of the ACRL Information Literacy Standards (ACRL, 2000) and the following example addresses the threshold concept *Authority is Constructed and Contextual*. YouTube is the second-largest SNS and 82% of young adults surveyed in by the Pew Research Center used YouTube last year (Anderson, 2015a). Students already have their own developed system for determining credibility based on their experience with using YouTube. In a current research project being conducted by librarians at Old Dominion University we ask students what is important to them in regard to instructional videos. A recurring theme thus far has been the number of views a video discovered on YouTube already has. Videos that have the highest number of views are considered reliable by students. While this is not always an accurate assumption, this common belief of students can be related to areas of academic research. When students are searching for resources for their research, they can think of number of citations as “views.” The more times an article has been cited, the more authority it has. Authority is something that is built over time. Students who seek out YouTube videos about applying makeup will begin to follow more popular, more viewed artists in this area. We can convey to students that academic research works in a similar way. Scholars who are more established in their fields will receive more citations and more views, thus establishing their authority within a certain research area over time. If

this same scholar decided to venture out and create make-up application videos to post on YouTube, researchers of make-up application would not see them as authorities in this area, regardless of their Ph.D. and number of articles published. This is an example of a way to help students understand the threshold concept *Authority is Constructed and Contextual*, and exploits the consumer developed SNS element of *Social Informatics*.

Carroll (2015) discusses using Twitter followers and Tweet likes and retweets to introduce students to the concept of scholarly metrics including citation counts and H-indexes. This taps into the SNS consumer-trained elements of *Identity and Audience Construction* as well as the threshold concept *Authority is Constructed and Contextual*. Scholars build *Identities* for themselves in their fields which allow them to have authority in their community of practice and in scholarly conversation, while social media users also establish *Identities* based on their goals for using a particular social media platform. For example, one could have a professional blog, or a public Twitter account that is used only for professional and career networking purposes, while they may have a Facebook account that is set to private for personal use.

Comparing YouTube and Google Scholar

In the library instruction classroom, when addressing knowledge practices and dispositions within the threshold concept *Authority is Constructed and Contextual*, a number of short activities could be implemented to make the comparison between YouTube videos and peer-reviewed articles. Students could be asked to do a quick pair and share or poll about how they determine whether or not an informational or “how to” type of video is reliable. They could then search in YouTube for a reliable video on an assigned topic, for example, the psychological benefits of doing yoga. They could then do the same search in Google Scholar or an appropriate database, and compare how they determined reliability for each search. This also allows them to tap into the already developed consumer-developed awareness of *Identities*, and to discuss how identities are created in various formats.

Another practical example of implementation of this idea would be to have students use Google Scholar to find the most cited articles in their area of study and then to search YouTube for videos on related topics. A popular topic with undergraduate students when they have the typical pros and cons paper assignment is the legalization of

marijuana. A search in YouTube for the most viewed videos on this topic, compared to the most cited articles on the topic found in a Google Scholar search turns up very different results in regard to authority on a topic. This comparison helps to instill the threshold concept *Authority is Constructed and Contextual*. Students use the knowledge that they already have about search rankings and views (Social Informatics), to understand Google Scholar rankings and citations and how they relate to authority on a topic. Additionally, this example can be used to teach students that *Information Has Value*. Students should be encouraged to explore the value of a popular YouTube video about the legalization of marijuana, such as the video depicted in Figure 1 and compare it to the value of a highly cited article related to the same topic. A discussion should be held about the value of each type of information, the intended audience, and the methods for determining their authority.



Figure 1. YouTube and scholarly article comparison. This figure provides a discussion starter for students on the topics of Authority is Constructed and Contextual and Information Has Value.

Truth and Lies

Students are adept in finding information online and do so frequently. As part of the Project Information Literacy Report (Head & Eisenberg, 2011), students were observed and surveyed during exam time at various libraries. Forty-five percent of the more than 500 students in the study said that during the time that they were studying for exams they also took timeout to “satisfy personal curiosity with a computer search” to find information about sports, news, or gossip (Head & Eisenberg, 2011, p.3). Finding information is easy for students, whether it be via their SNS feeds, searching or

following a specific hashtag, or by doing a quick Google search. By allowing students to use the skills that they already have to find information, we can spend more time teaching students how to evaluate the information that they find. As students search for information or see information show up in their SNS feeds they often are not actively thinking about the information, rather they are experiencing *Ambient Awareness* of this information.

One of the things that students are not good at is figuring out whether or not the information that they absorb is true and reliable (Biddix, Chung, & Park, 2011). The threshold concept Research as Inquiry can be taught by connecting to the *Ambient Awareness* that students experience through use of SNS. By using examples from SNS that have gone viral that turned out to be untrue, we can talk about the peer-review process and the differences between creating something to share on the internet and writing an article for publication in a peer-reviewed journal. Adding in a simple game, such as Two Truths and a Lie, and sharing statements from various types of resources including sentences from peer-reviewed articles, edited books, and statements that have gone viral online that turned out not to be true can be an effective way of allowing students to use the information that they are familiar with and skilled at finding to teach about reliability of sources. Activities like this can help them to learn how to synthesize information and formulate questions about the information they encounter, experiencing the threshold concept *Research as Inquiry*.

Facebook and Embedded Librarianship

As part of a 2-year project with my research partner at Old Dominion University, I was embedded in a class in which we sought to integrate the elements of SNS consumer training using a class Facebook group. Students were required to complete an annotated bibliography assignment on the Facebook group. The classes created a content-rich, course related newsfeed. As the librarian, I participated by engaging with student posts, offering them searching advice, and helping them identify the type of source (news, commentary analysis or scholarly) when needed. Students were able to choose their level of *Interactions* with classmates. Some students didn't interact at all, while others commented, liked, or shared the posts of others, and some even had in-person conversations about posts during class. They were able to experience the threshold concept *Scholarship as Conversation* in an infancy stage through these interactions, in both a virtual and in-person setting. The annotated bibliography assignment included a

reward structure in which students received points if someone else cited one of the resources that they posted to the group, so students were able to practice “citing the contributing work of their in their own information production” (ACRL, 2015, p.8).

Through the class Facebook experience, students also were able to grasp the threshold concept of *Searching as Strategic Exploration*, as the annotated bibliography was created over a period of a semester. During the semester, they received feedback from their professor, the librarian, and their classmates, which allowed them to modify their search and resource evaluation strategies. There was no one final product to be turned in, rather they were to post entries over the course of the semester building their annotated bibliographies over time. By the end of the semester, they not only had a bibliography of resource that they discovered as an individual, but also had access to a crowd-sourced bibliography related to the class.

Facebook, *Research as Inquiry*, and *Ambient Awareness*

The consumer training element of *Ambient Awareness* becomes apparent, as we think about how often consumers check in with these sites. The frequency of use of SNS by consumers is growing each year (Duggan, 2015). Seventy-percent of Facebook users report that they log in at least once a day, and 45% indicate that they check their newsfeeds multiple times per day (Duggan, 2015). Additionally, 52% of SNS consumers use two or more sites. In the previously cited Project Information Literacy study, 81% of students said that they had checked email, Facebook or IM while in the library within the hour before they were interviewed (Head & Eisenberg, 2011).

The embedded librarianship previously mentioned was a great way for students to tap into the *Ambient Awareness* developed through use of SNS. The topic of the class, *Philosophy of Technology*, fit very well with the use of social media for the class. For students who were fully engaged, postings from the class began to show up in their newsfeeds, thus becoming a part of the everyday lives outside of the classroom and the assignment. Additionally, students sometimes shared related posts to the class Facebook group that they had discovered elsewhere and thought that the class would be interested in reading it. This allowed the students to do things that they are good at doing on SNS: sharing, posting, and engaging in conversations about controversial issues, in a virtual classroom setting. This also helped to facilitate the learning of the threshold concept of *Research as Inquiry*. By participating in the course Facebook page

over a period of time, students learned that it is okay to ask questions about posted resources, to change their minds about their stance on a particular topic, to become informed through a variety of resource types from blog posts to academic articles, and to seek out multiple perspectives on a topic.

Let Them Talk

Microblogging can be a great way to encourage students to participate in scholarly conversations. Menkhoff, Chay, Bengtsson, Woodard, & Gan (2015) successfully used Twitter to engage students during in-person undergraduate Knowledge Management classes. They found that by having students tweet throughout the class allowed them to be more engaged and more motivated to ask questions (Menkhoff et al., 2015).

Encouraging students to participate in a backchannel conversation during library instruction sessions can allow them to ask questions and share their knowledge and thoughts with others. Students are well-practiced in utilizing several consumer-developed SNS skills simultaneously, and it is common for students to switch between tasks often (Head & Eisneberg, 2011). Analysis of student backchannel conversations can serve as a method for the instructor to assess the types of conversations that are being held. This allows the student to tap into several of the SNS consumer-developed skills as well. First, the response to *Incentives*. Many people are motivated by *Interactions* on microblogging sites such as Twitter by the instant gratification that they receive when their posts are interacted with (Rush & Wittkower, 2014). Secondly, it offers several levels of social *Interactions* for students, from passively viewing the conversation, to sharing or favoriting Tweets, to responding, and asking an in-person question of the librarian.

Facilitating microblogging or text-like conversations doesn't have to rely on students having a Twitter account. Online polling tools such as Poll Everywhere, or polling and chat tools available in conference software such as Adobe Connect, can also facilitate this type of backchannel conversation. Students can text questions to the instructor live during the class. In distance classes, software such as Adobe Connect already have built in chat functions that allow students to have private conversations during class. By encouraging students to use this for backchannel conversations about the course content, or even setting up break out conversations for this purpose allows students to communicate in a way in which they are very familiar to actively participate in a scholarly conversation.

Though the previous examples would require students to use some type of technology, encouraging students to participate in scholarly conversations doesn't require use of an online tool in class. An easy way to implement this idea is to provide sticky notes for students around the classroom, and allow students to "write notes" to you or each other throughout the class, which would encourage those who did not want to speak out in class to participate in a low stakes way.

Messy Creation

Badke (2015) points out that "scholarly research processes are messy, often not tied into a clear research problem statement until much time has passed" (p. 71). But in teaching our students about research, we tend to teach them a step-by-step approach (Badke, 2015). Blogging is a perfect SNS platform to share with students as an example of the ACRL threshold concept Information Creation as a Process. It is a very public way for authors to show that they are "learning by doing" (Rettberg, 2014, p. 5). Even if students don't blog themselves, they are most likely used to seeing blogs related to their interests that show up in their SNS newsfeeds and some even confuse blogs with news. Sharing an example of a blogger that has evolved over time can be a great way to relate their everyday experiences with SNS to information creation, and for students to tap into the SNS consumer-trained knowledge of what it is like to create and later change an online identity.

West (2015) suggests a lesson plan that connects blogs to teaching students about the threshold concept *Scholarship as Conversation*, and points out that, as with many lessons dealing with the threshold concepts, this idea also overlaps with *Authority is Constructed and Contextual* and *Searching as Strategic Exploration*. West's (2015) idea is to first guide students through a discussion about what scholarly conversations are like and how a blog may play a role in their research processes. Students are then given a blog to examine for credibility and contribution to the scholarly conversation on its topic. This can be connected to the SNS consumer-trained elements of *Interactions*. While students may not have their own blogs, they can most likely recall heated conversations that they have seen occur in the comments sections of blogs or even in their own social media newsfeeds. West (2015) suggests comparing a social conversation to a scholarly conversation to help students identify common elements.

Grazing and Exploration

Students today are well-practiced in grazing the information that shows up in their SNS feeds. They prefer to pick up news in bits and pieces, as opposed to reading a newspaper or magazine from cover to cover (Palfrey & Gasser, 2008). But when the typical college student works on a research paper for a class, they expect to find the perfect source or two that magically work for their topic. The *Social Informatics* skills that they have developed through years of SNS use easily lend themselves to teaching the threshold concept of *Searching as Strategic Exploration*. Users of SNS are used to falling into rabbit holes of information finding, just as experienced researchers can end up spending countless hours experiencing Searching as Strategic Exploration. Articulating the similarities between these two experiences to students can help them to understand the research experience and process. By teaching students to graze the literature, look for resources in multiple formats, and how to dissect a scholarly article instead of reading it from cover to cover they gain knowledge in a way that they are used to receiving information.

Hashtags and Keywords

According to the Project Information Literacy Report, 74% of the students in their sample reported that they had trouble selecting appropriate keywords to find information for their research (Head, 2013). Students are good at tagging photos and posting them to SNS. Using the example of tagging can help students broaden their thinking in developing keywords for a topic. For example, one may tag themselves in a picture of the fancy sandwich they ate for lunch. While it is not exactly a picture of that person, he or she may be recognized by the picture depending on their past posting habits. Presenting students with images or snippets of articles and asking them to develop tags (aka keywords) may help them as they are developing keywords for their own research topics. Throughout this process they address the threshold concept *Searching as Strategic Exploration*, and realize that there may not be one perfect keyword combination for their research rather they will need to try multiple searches and have several viewpoints before realizing the full spectrum of the finding part of the research process.

Picture, or it didn't Happen

Photo sharing SNS like Instagram and Snapchat are continuing the gain in popularity, especially with teens and young adults (Lenhart, 2015). Fifty-two percent of teens use Instagram and 41% use Snapchat (Lenhart, 2015). Using one of these types of SNS to facilitate a learning activity can provide a very engaging opportunity to learn new concepts as well as to use the skills that they already have. Wallis (2014) used Instagram to facilitate a library orientation for new students. While the activity was to serve as an orientation to the physical library, students used SNS consumer-developed skills like categorizing their photos with hashtags and sharing their photos. Their posts became part of the library newsfeed which automatically gave them the opportunity to see themselves as content creators (Wallis, 2014).

Social Gaming

Creating social gaming opportunities to aid in the teaching of the ACRL Framework threshold concepts that expropriate the consumer-learned SNS skills of *Incentives* and *Social Informatics* can be used in almost any teaching situation. I created a simple board game to teach Information Ethics to my students. The game addressed the threshold concept *Information Has Value* and included issues in copyright, plagiarism, social media, and intellectual property (Rush, 2014). It had built in incentives and quick cycles of feedback, as well as peer to peer learning opportunities. While students are used to playing highly visual, technologically impressive online games, simple games can be used to teach almost anything and to give students the opportunity to use the skills that they already have to learn something new.

Conclusion

Students are used to a world in which the line between their online and offline lives is very blurry and in some cases nonexistent. Thanks to advances in technology and social media, we are seeing a quicker cycle of research, a more seamless approach to information finding, and more social media-like features in our databases and search engines. All of this can be connected to allow our students to use the knowledge and experiences that they are already familiar with to learn information literacy concepts. Like the threshold concepts, the elements of SNS consumer training are rarely experienced in isolation, but blend and overlap depending upon the situational or

informational need. Librarians can help students to realize that they can use the skills that they already have to learn the concepts and skills that they will need to excel in their personal, academic, and professional lives. Whether we are making these connections in a formal classroom setting, in one-on-one research consultations, at our help desks, or through our websites and online instructional tools we can help students achieve mastery of our threshold concepts a little at a time, by using what they know to teach them what they need to know to be successful and productive in the 21st century.

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