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A SMASHing approach for developing staff and student digital capabilities within a community of practice

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Introduction

It should go without saying that the pace of change in the way we now use technology to interact with others has been exponential. Some welcome and embrace this, yet others still see it as a barrier or, at best, an uphill struggle to keep up. Whilst Web 2.0 and interactive social media have become increasingly accessible as individual access to mobile devices and connectivity has grown, users don't always use these tools positively or constructively. As with any communication channel, there is potential for misuse. As we needed to address 'netiquette' with the advent of email, so we must now discuss the appropriate use of social media. Anonymity has certainly allowed negative and destructive comments to flourish and we must also explicitly challenge this tendency. However, social media can be applied positively, especially in making learning collaborative and engaging and in encouraging learners to communicate professionally with each other.

This case study will share the outcomes thus far of a student-staff partnership focusing on how social media can be used in learning and teaching. The paper reflects on: how a co-learning community of practice (Wenger, 2009) has emerged and continues to work; the affordances this has brought; the impact upon the students leading this project. It will also briefly share some examples of the outputs which have provided a foundation for continuing work to develop the digital capabilities of both the students' peers and tutors.

Social media

Social media spaces have the potential to enable users to connect, communicate, curate, collaborate and create (Nerantzi and Beckingham, 2015) through many media. As Weller (2018) posits, within social media spaces, status is not significant and individuals are judged on their contributions. Students, staff and professionals can engage in meaningful dialogue and share mutually useful resources. Key to engagement in an educational context is the development of a range of digital capabilities (Jisc, 2017) – individuals learn not only what tools are available and how to use them, but how, within these spaces, to listen and reflect, question and interact. Online participation can provide time and space for reflection and opportunities for co-learning with and from each other. Interactions can be synchronous or asynchronous.

As argued by UNESCO (2013, p.9), *"While mobile technology is not and never will be an educational panacea, it is a powerful and often overlooked tool – in a repertoire of other tools – that can support education in ways not possible before"*. Social media accessed through mobile technology can provide individuals with opportunities to engage in their chosen personal learning environments (PLEs) and those integrate into the learning experience (Dabbagh and Kitsantas, 2012). However, the affordances of social media are not always associated with learning and teaching. As Brown (2018) says, we must not assume that all students or staff are confident in the use of technology and social media.

The purpose of this project and partnership is therefore to draw out useful examples that are meaningful and valued by the students themselves (as opposed to what the tutor feels might be most useful and engaging). The next step is to develop these examples and create an online resource that includes the benefits of using social media for academic studies, as well as to signpost relevant support and resources.

The start of a student partnership

SMASH (Social Media for Academic Studies at Hallam) is a student-led group, formed in January 2017. Having attended inspiring sessions the previous year at the 'Social Media for Learning in Higher Education' conference hosted by Sheffield Hallam University, four students were motivated to look for ways to enhance learning and teaching in their own course, through the use of social media and other digital apps and technology. Mentored by their tutor, they formed the founding group.

From the outset, the tutor wanted to empower the students in this partnership to lead the project and determined that she would be their 'guide on the side' (King, 1993). The students chose the name for their group and – over time – a logo for it. At the initial meeting, the group considered frequency of meetings and how best to communicate between meetings; it agreed that social media could be the means both of capturing progress and of achieving synchronous and asynchronous collaboration.

Healey *et al.* (2014, p.7) suggest that partnership affords co-learning between staff and students as they work together and, through active engagement, all may gain from the process. Discussing what the students would gain as a result of developing a partnership was important, as was recognising and celebrating learning gain – this was therefore considered by the tutor from the start. As an aide-memoire, all ideas were documented using Google Docs, allowing everyone at any point of the partnership journey to see the opportunities and progress made and to share milestones and planned outputs along the way. This space enabled comments to be added – useful for everyone to raise questions and contribute to the answers.

Though this planning stage took time, it was, in retrospect, what enabled a firmer foundation for the group.

Pedagogic framework

One of our first objectives as a group was to consider and categorise how social media could be applied to learning and teaching. The team identified three key areas where social media could be used – within learning activities; as a means of organising learning; as a way of showcasing learning – and developed them into a framework that would help contextualise the potential of social media for learning and teaching. The three strands or pillars were:

1. Helping staff to identify and use social media tools for communication and collaboration within and beyond the classroom (Learning Activities);
2. Helping students and staff to identify and use relevant social media tools to curate and organise information relating to learning (Organising Learning);
3. Helping students to prepare digital portfolios for sharing outcomes and projects openly, so as to develop a professional online presence (Showcasing Learning).

Case Studies

The framework helped to focus attention on a 'pedagogy first' approach (Glover *et al.*, 2016). When considering pedagogic concepts relevant to technology-enhanced learning, Gordon (2014, p.8) refers to personalised learning, support for synchronous and asynchronous activities, flexible learning, gamification, online learning and blended learning. The opportunity to engage students with technology-enhanced learning through the affordances of social media chimed with these approaches.

The team in the first year went on to create some resources and shared these, initially in the form of a guest-blog post. Leading consultant in higher education Eric Stoller acknowledged this work and referred to it in a number of his keynote presentations – very motivating for the students, as, having thus published their initial work, they reached an audience beyond their own personal networks.

Sustaining the student-staff partnership

The students were keen to find ways to continue this work in the following academic year. Despite the fact that one was about to graduate and two had secured placements, they felt there was the potential to sustain the group and encourage other students to become involved. By means of a Google Forms survey and a Canva-designed flyer to promote the SMASH team, the call was sent out for new members. Despite the efforts of the team, response was very low; members felt that the timing at the end of the academic year was perhaps the reason and decided to re-group in September and try again.

In the new academic year, two of the founding members (one of whom was now on a placement year) followed up the responses from the previous year and once again looked to recruit further members. One second-year student (who had expressed an interest in response to the call the previous academic year) joined the team and took the opportunity to speak to peers at the start of seminars, visiting three different groups. Two 'recruited' final-year students (peers of the two founding members) also joined. One other student – who did come along to the first meeting – chose not to continue as he felt he had to focus on his academic studies. The group now comprised five students.

It's important to note at this point that students need to be reassured that their studies must always come first and that involvement in such a project must be flexible. As a group, we made the decision to capture all ideas, but with the understanding that not all would be completed. The students decided what to focus on and prioritise first. It helped that there were no specific deadlines to meet. It was clearly important to plan so that some outcomes would be achieved. The use of social media and technology supported this, as progress was not then reliant on face-to-face meetings. The students developed their ideas and shared out tasks using their WhatsApp group. They could then work independently on these at a time that suited them. The work was saved in Google Drive to facilitate a shared working space.

Once again, the tutor provided an opportunity to discuss what might be gained from the project and the founding member present at the first meeting shared what she had gained thus far.

Digital capabilities

The new members had all expressed a desire both to explore social media for learning themselves and to help peers and tutors appreciate the affordances such tools can bring.

Case Studies

The group felt that producing a digital toolkit – for use by others to plan activities – and case studies to demonstrate the use of social media tools in context (Conole, 2007) would be useful in supporting development of the digital capabilities of both staff and students.

Jisc (2017) defines digital capabilities as “those which equip someone to live, work and learn in a digital society”. The six elements resonated with the SMASH framework and values.

<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. ICT proficiency 2. Information, data and media literacies 3. Digital creation, problem-solving and innovation 4. Digital learning and development 5. Digital communication, collaboration and participation 6. Digital identity and wellbeing 	<p>The students wanted to improve their own skills and realised that developing their own digital capabilities could help them help others to utilise digital tools for learning activities, organising learning and showcasing learning. Participating in the project as an extra-curricular activity was a unique way to enhance their own digital identity through the digital artefacts they created and shared through social media.</p>
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Figure 1. Building digital capabilities: the six elements defined (Jisc 2017)

Initial achievements

In order to produce a toolkit, the group had to develop some resources. They began by creating a series of A5 cards which outlined seven ways they had used a given social media tool in the context of learning. The students led an initial workshop at the 2017 'Social Media for Learning in HE' conference and then a further workshop, with invited students and staff from their course, where these cards were used as conversation prompts. The attendees were encouraged to share their views and experiences of using social media for learning.

Reflection on the second workshop led to recognition that, since the workshop participant group was small (and already interested in social media for learning, so justifiably to be deemed converted!), it would be useful to gain an initial understanding of students' and tutors' opinions. Bryson and Hand (2007) advocate that student engagement is increased when students feel supported by teaching staff and when the staff engage with the students. An arranged opportunity to discuss with tutors the future enhancement of the students' modules was well received and valued by those students who attended; the tutors who came were similarly appreciative, welcoming suggestions for enhancing their modules.

We learned that staff:

- agree that the current University platform requires more flexibility;
- support the idea of tracking student progress;
- feel the need to support individual learning through group work.

The staff valued using these social media tools for learning:

- Google Apps – achieve efficient engagement amongst student groups;
- Trello – divide responsibility and maintain accountability;
- blogging – track student progress;
- YouTube – gain more flexible learning;
- WhatsApp – generate student community, with direct messaging.

We learned that students:

- welcomed the idea of having direct messaging chat support via Twitter for quicker responses;
- supported Socrative and working in teams when completing online quizzes;
- realised that learning content can be subconsciously viewed whilst using social media.

The students valued these tools for learning:

- Google Apps – collaboration;
- Trello – project management on group projects;
- Twitter – links to resources;
- Socrative – engaging medium / option to be anonymous;
- YouTube – visually appealing medium / accessibility to students.

Developing digital capabilities of self

For the future, there is clearly scope for developing more in-depth research. It will be important to gain an understanding of social media-related barriers to and enablers of learning and to identify how any future resources created may support the development of digital capabilities and of the toolkit. So, whilst the team recognised that there was still further research to undertake, there was a sense of the significance of focus on the value of reflection – on whether the students themselves felt that they had developed their own digital capabilities and on what the experience had meant to them.

In April 2018, the students presented their work at the CAN conference at the University of Winchester. Figure 2 captures the quotes – used within the presentation – which consider what the students had initially found useful as a result of being a member of the SMASH group.

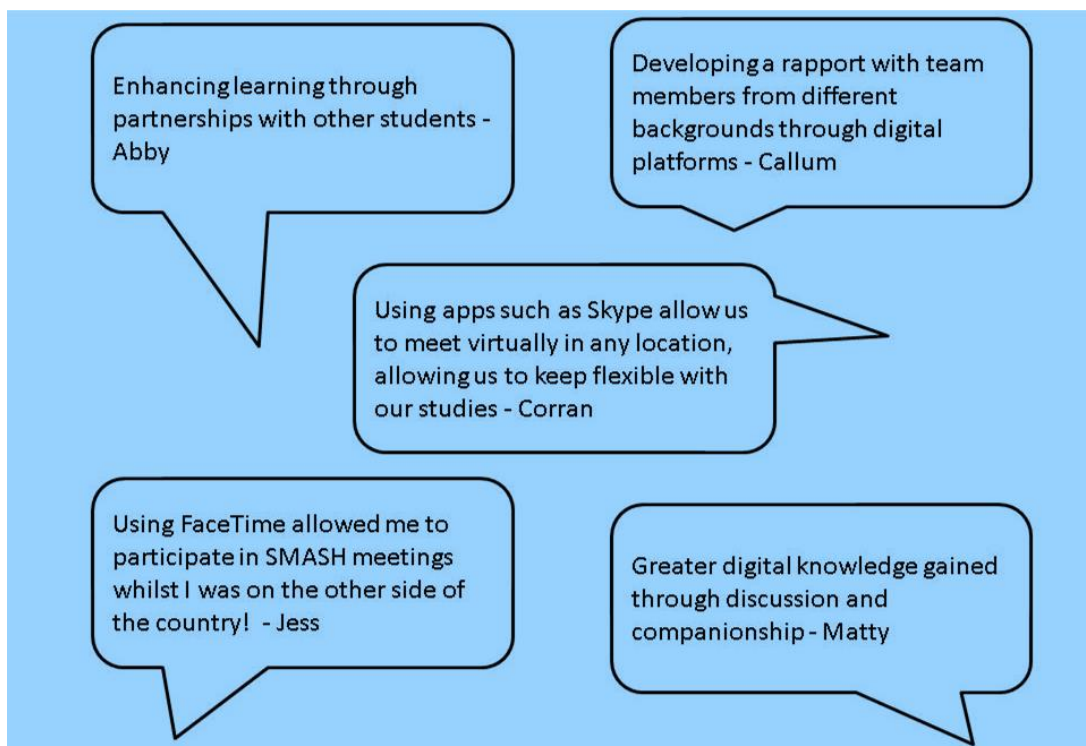


Figure 2. SMASH team reflections

The students valued highly the experience of leading their first workshops. They were able to demonstrate the knowledge they had gained and they had developed more confident communication skills through leading the conversations in the workshops and presenting at two conferences.

At the end of the academic year, the students were asked to revisit their experience, reflecting again on the learning they had gained overall and what they had valued as members of this group.

Case Studies

Jess, one of the founding members and out on placement during 2017/18, was keen to stay involved with the project in the second year. Despite being away from University, she remained active and learned how to make the most of tools that could facilitate asynchronous communication and collaboration.

“I’ve learnt how to overcome communication obstacles throughout this year, and the sheer amount of research on social media there is to be done.”

Jess - placement student

Corran, another founder member, developed clear leadership skills and helped to ensure that everyone in the team found a way to contribute, despite the different skill-sets they brought with them.

“Over the past two years, I’ve learnt about the flexibility of social media, how it can be used in education from many different directions and ultimately how to work in a team of diverse people.”

Corran – final-year student

Matty was one of the few students to respond to the initial call to bring in new members of the team and, at the time, was just coming to the end of his first year at the University. He quickly recognised that, through the group's collaborative approach, he could learn from peers and contribute to others' learning. Furthermore, he used the skills developed in modules he was taking and the combined learning helped him secure a placement.

“I’ve learnt how to create engaging content using digital tools such as Canva. This has enhanced my understanding of different tools that are available to staff and students to support their studying and allowed me to apply my digital knowledge to my studies. I’ve used Twitter to create a hashtag #shuSMASH which has helped to showcase our activities and the conferences we’ve attended. This has allowed us to engage with followers and gather feedback from people who attended our presentations. Furthermore, the use of Skype has developed my understanding of how online communication tools can be used in a formal and business environment. This will prepare me for future endeavours into the professional environment, where I’ll be able to apply my knowledge and digital skills gained through SMASH.”

Matty – second-year student

Callum, a final-year student, recognised that using social media as a team, as an additional form of communication, was a useful way for the group to bond and get to know each other. Being involved in the events provided him with opportunities to develop his network through meeting new people within and beyond his course.

“The SMASH project has increased my efficiency when learning new skills, finding the best ways to collaborate and share ideas between team members. Using a variety of technology enabled each team member to learn in different ways, using what they felt most comfortable. This has allowed me to overcome obstacles, using social media to bridge gaps and bring everyone closer together. Through this project, I was able to reach out and make new connections after attending the conferences and also from university staff and students that we solicited opinions from. Being part of the SMASH group in 2018 has allowed me to develop my skills, meet new people

and use new and exciting digital technologies.”

Callum – final-year student

Finally, Abby, who is also a final-year student, used her creativity to re-brand the logos used for SMASH and took a lead in designing the presentations and artefacts created. Like the others, she had also developed skills to enhance the way she lives, works and learns.

“Through the SMASH group I've developed many of my digital capabilities and been able to adapt and use these skills in a completely new environment. Developing these skills has supported me in finding new and creative ways to utilise social media whether it be for academia, social or personal use. I've become more confident in exploring new digital applications that can support me in my personal life.”

Abby – final-year student

The value of being a member of a virtual community of practice

To me as a tutor reflecting on the students, it became clear that a virtual community of practice (vCoP) (Kosh and Fusco, 2008) was forming spontaneously. There was early evidence of both cooperative and collaborative learning, where the students developed their own digital capabilities and those of others. They actively used social media to communicate and plan and were able to work virtually both synchronously and asynchronously between face-to-face meetings. They developed their own vCoP using Skype, FaceTime, Facebook messenger and Google Apps.

The students highlighted the fact that they had established a sense of belonging and identity as a result of being part of this vCoP. Each brought different skills and experience to the group and, despite not initially knowing each other, they quickly bonded and became co-learners. It was interesting to observe how they each took turns to lead on a particular approach and actively coached each other.

When asked what they valued about being part of a vCoP, it was encouraging to see that they had personally found value in the use of social media. The key themes that emerged were as follows:

- Peer learning - the significance of helping others learn;
- Confident communication - learning to utilise different media to suit the situation and task at hand;
- Companionship and teamwork - taking ownership and supporting each other to work collaboratively;
- Transferable skills - recognition that these skills can be applied in the workplace.

Conclusion

We feel our student-staff partnership has been successful as we: have a mutual interest in the research topic; from the start discussed what the benefits are for everyone; were clear that engagement is flexible. We also recognised that, whilst it's important to capture all ideas, only some of these will be achieved and that's ok!

To have the opportunity to engage with peers and tutors in research on the use of social media for learning, to go on to develop tangible resources and then to present this work

were all motivating. Whilst not expected at the start, recognition for this work is an important factor. The interactions and dialogue within social media spaces – as a result of sharing the project and this being re-shared – provided affirmation that other educators recognised and valued outputs.

The students and tutor have learned a great deal through this partnership. We look forward to seeing how the incoming SMASH team will contribute to taking this journey forward.

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