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Published version

BECKINGHAM, Sue, PURVIS, Alison and RODGER, Helen (2014). The SHU Social Media CoLab: developing a social media strategy through open dialogue and collaborative guidance. In: Proceedings of the European Conference on Social Media. Sonning, Wokingham, Academic Conferences and Publishing International Limited.

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The SHU Social Media CoLab: Developing a Social Media Strategy
Through Open Dialogue and Collaborative Guidance

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Abstract: This paper shares the strategy we have developed at Sheffield Hallam University (SHU) to educate and guide staff and students in their use of social media. Students need to understand their responsibilities to themselves and the institution, to develop sustainable strategies for using social media to enhance their learning and to develop their employability skills as future graduates. They need to place value in the development of a professional online presence, appreciate the difference between their personal and professional uses of social media tools, and understand the impact that one can have on the other. Staff want to feel confident in the application of authentic social media learning activities. They need to see the value of social media competence in graduates within their disciplines, and easily access shared practice and guidance. To facilitate such learning activities they also need to understand and consider aspects such as online safety, professional impact and configuration. We discuss how we developed and are now implementing our strategy; how this features a strong emphasis on collaborative relationships across different areas of the institution; and our recognition that social media guidance is not the sole domain of any one team. It also considers the importance of digital literacy skills, and that care is needed in the management of sometimes conflicting priorities. We will show how our work is informed by the needs and priorities of our staff and students in order to be fit for purpose. Our initial findings showed that we must address the constantly evolving nature of social media, and not consider guidance that we develop to be finite - there will always be more to do. In addition, we must acknowledge the significant overlap between personal and professional use of tools, since one might easily have implications for the other (positively or negatively), and people often draw on experiences for different contexts, or allow their future practice to be dictated by them. We will include how we have engaged staff and students to revisit their digital literacy skill set and develop new ways to connect, communicate, collaborate, create and curate. The enablers to achieve these outcomes include a rich collection of resources using different media, the development of a 'Social Media CoLab' and communities of practice exploring, using and evaluating their use of social media; and the support of the university to embed the use of these and other technologies to enhance the learning experience.

Keywords: social media, digital literacy, social media CoLab, community of practice

1. Introduction

The authors are three colleagues with roles connecting to Technology Enhanced Learning (TEL). One works centrally supporting TEL across the university, one is a Faculty Head of Learning, Teaching and Assessment (LTA), and one is a faculty-based TEL developer.

This work was not commissioned as a project. It evolved from an initial response to staff asking for clarification on student use of social media. The nature of our roles and our instinctive approaches placed us perfectly to respond. We have articulated our approach into a set of strategic elements that will underpin the future direction of social media guidance at SHU. What emerged through this process was the desire from both staff and students to contribute to this and the wider use of social media.

2. Context and Background

Social media within an educational context (and for some personal/social) is still a relatively new phenomenon with many participants still at the start of a learning curve needing advice and guidance. With such a vast and constantly evolving area there are two main perspectives to consider. How we effectively use social media as a university and how we, staff and students, use social media in a personal context, understanding the implications. It this latter point that has been the catalyst for a call to bring together support and guidance that can be used by staff with their students. Our use of social media as an organisation may include: the support of learning and teaching; university-wide, departmental or team communications (internal or external); or as a

means of creating communities of practice.

Social media is rapidly and broadly becoming established as a necessary method of communication, organisation and collaboration, regardless of context. The New Horizons Report (NMC and ELI 2014: 8) refers to the growing ubiquity of social media and state that 'understanding how social media can be leveraged for social learning is a key skill for teachers, and teacher training programs are increasingly being expected to include this skill'. Despite evident affordances there are concerns that without constraints in place social media will have serious implications for corporate brand and identity. There are many examples of where blurring of social and professional boundaries have led to unfortunate outcomes. Rather than block such activity (which will continue to take place in personal spaces anyway), far better that we develop the digital literacy skills of staff and students and indeed recognising and rewarding digital scholarship (Weller 2011).

3. Digital Literacy

Effective use of social media requires digital confidence in the use of new tools for connecting, collaborating, creating and curating. An individual's attitude to print, visual, audio and digital media can have an impact on how they may or may not integrate such technology into learning and teaching (Hobbs 2011). Our working relationship with the directorate responsible for Information Technology has been key to the success of our project. Creating a hub of social media good practice and resources requires a dedicated online space and the support to do this.

4. Space and Place

An online 'affinity space' (Jones and Hafner 2012:115) or 'social media colab' (Rheingold 2008) offers opportunities for colleagues to raise questions and build communities of practice. Providing a trusted and welcoming forum to begin the conversation at a level that is comfortable is crucial. Conversations are new and indeed the language associated with the tools (DM, retweet, embed code, dashboard etc.) could act as an inhibitor, deterring someone from trying new things. We found that a blend of face-to-face and online is key to developing confidence in this area. Our social media CoLab therefore became a fluid social space, enabling the formation of a collaborative network to engage in dialogue around social media.

5. Unpacking the strategic approach

These are the elements that have shaped our progress so far, and are now being applied as a strategy for future direction and development:

- **We recognise the boundaries of our responsibility**
  As three staff with TEL roles, our primary concern is the effective use of social media in LTA, however we saw a need and informally extended the boundaries of our responsibility to include all staff and students.
- **We prioritise needs based on resources and potential impact**
  We are selective in the guidance we provide. We seek to cover general themes where it is appropriate to provide a SHU perspective, and in the case of LTA, supplement these with case studies. Our aim was to be as complete as possible, within the identified boundaries of our roles and the resources available to us.
- **Collaboration is championed**
  Social media is not the domain of any one department or team at SHU. In order to avoid duplication of work we monitor for others with an interest in social media, raise awareness of our work, make a point of approaching others when an overlap or a common interest has been apparent and update senior staff. Ultimately, we understand the value in being approachable to anyone with an interest in our work. We are interested in the 'conversation' and believe collaboration will provide sustainable high quality social media guidance at SHU.
- **Value is placed in listening to staff and students**
  In addition to the CoLab sessions being a space for sharing ideas and practice, we used them to listen

to staff as they explored their thoughts, concerns and ideas about social media. Through this we were able identify main themes and define university priorities. We also shared these back with senior staff from other areas (IT support, Library services, Secretariat) so that the conversations could be heard more widely.

- **The constant evolution of social media is understood**
  The ecosystem of connective media in a growing culture of connectivity (van Dijck 2013) will continue to present new considerations, meaning that guidance should be reviewed regularly for changes in trends, behaviours and functionality. However, there is a 'line'. We are only able to pay attention to the big themes, and must develop an effective model of referring to external resources and cultivating users' skills in seeking and finding the guidance they specifically need.

- **We challenge and question**
  We look to build an open understanding and where our evidence allows us, quashing the myths behind social media in higher education. Social and digital media present the very tools to open a forum for discussion, but should not be used exclusively. Encouraging questions is important and so is looking to provide different approaches and spaces to do so.

- **We believe that guidance must be inclusive**
  Our approach should enable any of our users to access or locate elsewhere guidance no matter what their starting point. In this field the digital divide can be particularly obvious, those with confidence and a vision may find it easier to develop a teaching approach embedding social media very easy, while others need to know the absolute basics.

- **Authenticity is promoted**
  Helping colleagues and students understand that the affordances of new technology and in particular social media is 'not peripheral but fundamental to all aspects of scholarship' (Weller 2011:173). This works best where authentic and contextualised examples are shared.

6. Outcomes and next steps

The project is ongoing and is still in its early stages. A set of resources have addressed the immediate need for student guidance on responsibility, security, digital footprint and using social media strategically. These will be periodically reviewed and adapted to ensure currency. By the summer (2014) a similar approach will have been taken for general staff guidance. We are making distinctions between resources that need to be developed in-house for the SHU context, and where they exist elsewhere, but can be linked to.

http://go.shu.ac.uk/socialmedia

The CoLab is our starting point for establishing staff guidance and ran in a world cafe style forum. It began with short show-and-share presentations and followed with detailed discussions with the presenters at tables. In the future we will continue to develop the community of practice using a variety of social media tools as well as face-to-face sessions. Meanwhile, student projects are addressing the points raised in the leaflets and are creating digital artefacts in the form of animations, film and infographics. Early adopters are writing case

studies to share how they have used in learning and teaching. As priorities are identified as a result of the CoLabs, we will develop a digital home for resources, environments for discussion and support for the use of social media in LTA. This is a collaborative project that is alive and ongoing, drawing in the voices of both staff and students. It is a growing community of practice, developing through sharing and openness.

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