



Integrating Social Networks into Out-of-Class Activities for Traditional and Hybrid College Courses

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Abstract

This paper supports the proposition that student use of social networking tools outside of class increases student-to-student and student-to-professor interaction, while enhancing critical thinking skills in the classroom. Given the trend to move some classes into a hybrid format, the increased use of social networks on the students' preferred "technology turf" is a key component in facilitating learning in such activities. Further, the paper will offer insight from the perspective of a professor and a graduate teaching assistant (GTA), as they discuss the pros and cons of integrating social networks into out-of-class activities. For example, the paper demonstrates how students and a professor formed an online Twitter community in an Internet Law business course, where students shared and commented on the latest international law news affecting the internet and social networks. The class then assessed the legal context of social network behavior when they re-grouped in class. As another example, a professor created a Facebook project, and (with a bit of trepidation) asked students to "friend" him. In the project, students were instructed to find inappropriate comments posted anywhere on Facebook, re-post them on the professor's "wall," and comment on the implications of such postings if an employer actually read them. Hand-in-hand with the pedagogical benefits of social networks, there is an overarching need to ensure student privacy in learning environments. A major challenge faced by educators is how to teach students to navigate and leverage social networks in the business world, while maintaining their comfort level of privacy on the internet. This paper addresses the importance of guiding students on how to be responsible digital citizens, as they analyze and assess the ethical use of social networks in the global workplace. Thus, in a professor-GTA discussion over whether students in a study abroad class should maintain a public blog or a closed Facebook group for communication, the closed group option was chosen for privacy reasons. Finally, the paper will introduce how out-of-class social network activities, when augmented with "gamification" (applying game-design thinking to non-game applications in an attempt to make the latter more fun), can elevate student engagement and learning in traditional and hybrid courses.

1. Introduction

It is the framework which changes with each new technology and not just the picture within the frame.
Marshall McLuhan, 1955

On January 30, 2014, as the verdict was read in the Amanda Knox and Raffaele Sollecito prosecutions, interested parties around the world watched the live internet feed and/or took to Twitter for real time updates from journalists in the Florence courtroom. Within seconds, one could discover the case consequences:

Andrea Vogt @andreavogt Jan 30

#amandaknox conviction upheld. sentenced to 28 years and six months. Sollecito to 25.

Ordered passports to be taken.

Retweeted by Perry Binder @Perry_Binder

Hand-in-hand with the free flow of (the sometimes accurate) information that social media provides, comes the predictable opportunity for vitriolic dialogue [1] that this medium affords the general public.



In response to Ms. Vogt's "tweet" above, someone posted the following insensitive comment on Twitter:

[Name omitted by authors] Jan 30

@andreavogt Italy can't order anything. Amanda is in America. They can go eat spaghetti for all I care.

Social media ensures that every opinion is captured fully and preserved for future generations: [2]

[Name omitted by authors] Jan 31

The disgraceful #US media has acted as #amandaknox's unpaid defence team & trashed the Italian judiciary

Stepping into trouble with social media activity is nothing new, [3] even for seasoned journalists. On February 6, 2014, a U.S.-based reporter sparked a Twitter backlash for her unfortunate choice of a "hashag" in this tweet about a case involving a mother's alleged involvement in the homicide of her three year old child: [4]

Nancy Grace @NancyGraceHLN Feb. 6

Mommy needs to stew in the same pot in front of the jury! I'm not going to let go of this until she gets life in jail #FreezerTot

The above examples provide an opportunity for college students to read and analyze appropriate and inappropriate comments on the internet, share them outside-of-class with fellow students and a professor, and then re-group in class for critical analysis. This paper address a professor's and graduate teaching assistant's (GTA) experiences using social media as a teaching and communications tool, and their goal to teach students to be responsible digital citizens. Further, the paper briefly discusses the benefits of using social media in a hybrid course, and how "gamification" may enhance learning in these activities.

2. A Professor's Experience with Social Media as a Teaching Tool:

Discussion of Out-of-Class Activities, Hybrid Courses & Gamification

For out-of-class activities, I believe that the internet is the most significant innovation in teaching since I began in this profession. It allows me to supplement the texts with lively, current material, as well as supply practice-oriented and state-specific legal material relevant to businesses. In recent years, I integrated social media sites into my classes and have students search for and analyze appropriate and inappropriate postings, and how the comments would be viewed by a supervisor in a workplace setting.

From 2006-2007, as Facebook became the social networking choice of college students, I was shocked at how freely people posted opinions on that site. I asked my Legal Environment of Business students about their activities on Facebook and discovered a level of indifference to the ramifications of leaving digital footprints on the internet. Sensing a teaching opportunity, I created a Facebook Project, where I "assigned students an outside-of-class project, directing them to find items posted on the Internet that a current or future employer might find inappropriate. Students then posted findings on the professor's Facebook 'Wall,' a forum that allowed students to evaluate and discuss the comments in a collective, safe environment." [5] Students participated with enthusiasm (especially since they earned extra credit points), and a few students even created and posted short videos on my Facebook wall. Another component of the Facebook assignment included *The Facebook Project - Dealing with Employee Gripe Sites*: (A "gripe site" is a blog or Web site maintained to criticize a person or company.)

SCENARIO: Assume that you work as a middle manager for Social Media Law, Inc. ("SMLaw"). A disgruntled person has started a Web site, www.SMLawIncSucks.com, which is highly critical of the company. You suspect that the owner of the Web site may be a current

employee. Assume that SMLaw does not have a social media policy. In the below scenarios, [6] SMLaw determines that this Internet activity did not occur on work equipment, whether stationary or mobile.

In 2010, I taught a Social Media Law class for Journalism and Communications majors in Northern Italy, and was looking for a way to enrich students' out-of-class activities in order to generate livelier classroom discussion. Since Twitter was becoming a popular social networking tool for journalists and public relations professionals, this medium was the natural choice. I assigned students a cornerstone, comparative law project, where they were instructed to open a Twitter account, find relevant items dealing with timely legal issues and "re-tweet" them for fellow students to read and react. Our class followed the Meredith Kercher homicide trial, which gave students a measure of how individuals in different countries perceived the defendants, Amanda Knox and Raffaele Sollecito. That case led to lively classroom debates of civility and incivility on social networks, and the importance of dialing down the tone and emotions of discussions online.

In Spring 2013, I integrated many of the lessons and projects from Social Media Law into Internet Law at my university. In the latter course, students also form a Twitter community, where they share and comment on the latest international law news affecting the internet and social networks. I refined the assignment by adding a class "hashtag," [7] to facilitate more efficient interactions with each other and me when we are out of class. In one instance, students were asked to research the Twitter postings of a Communications professor, prior to his in-class presentation on how social networks create challenges worldwide when governments censor speech. Using our class hashtag, students were able to research, share, and analyze his tweets, which included:

Emiratis in the #UAE favorite my tweets but they don't retweet them. Don't blame them. Could easily lead to imprisonment. #AbuDhabi #Dubai.

As a result, students were engaged and better prepared to ask questions of the guest speaker. In summary, these assignments foster out-of-class critical thinking skills and elevate classroom discussions, by having students assess the tone of social media content and the accuracy of information. Ultimately, students become more careful with the words they use on social networks, and discover the importance of being ethical digital citizens in the workplace and beyond. Web materials for Internet Law are available at <http://www.gsuinternetlaw.blogspot.com/>.

2.1 Hybrid Courses and Gamification

While MOOCs are all the rage in higher education, [8] an equally important dialogue is continuing on the creation of hybrid college courses, [9] where students examine content out-of-class for the equivalent of an entire class session, and then re-group for an in-person critical thinking session. The out-of-class social media activities referenced in this paper are offered as a key starting point to engage students on their preferred technology ground, in the virtual sessions of a hybrid course.

However, it will become essential to re-create classroom synergy while students are learning in virtual hybrid class sessions. The "gamification" of courses (applying game-design thinking to non-game applications in an attempt to make the latter more fun), may be the key to replicating in-class student engagement. Some professors are already making use of gamification for out-of-class student activities. [10] In the near future, I will be experimenting with hybrid courses and gamification techniques in the above mentioned Internet Law class. For example, I will create an extra credit point system to see which students can gain the most Twitter "followers" and influence the most Twitter users worldwide, given the number of re-tweets, favorites, and posted reactions to student tweets. This experiment is a work in progress, and is not complete at the publication of this paper.



3. A Graduate Teaching Assistant's Experience with Social Media as a Teaching Tool

One of the biggest hurdles to overcome in teaching is to bridge the cultural and communication gap between instructors and pupils. Often times, this is exacerbated by generational elements, particularly technological differences. However, social media gives instructors an avenue to reconcile this gap by simultaneously reaching students and demonstrating course content into practice and application.

When I first started teaching, I found myself underestimating and doubting the significance of this issue. I held a false sense of confidence that I would be able to relate to my students since I was close in age to them and a graduate student. However, as I started teaching my course in American Government, I found myself troubled that I could not seem to connect with my students or adequately convey the importance of learning the course material. One day, needing a method to release my frustration, I began to search Twitter for trending topics from other educators. I came across “#teacherproblems” and then had an epiphany when I realized that I needed to change my approach to teaching: instead of trying to convey the importance of the course material, I needed to reach my students by making the course material relevant and applicable to their lives. In other words, I needed to speak their language and social media was the translator that was going to allow me to do so.

I changed my teaching style and incorporated social media and topics trending on social media into my lesson plans and course curriculum. For example, when teaching partisan ideology, I had my students come up with “hashtag/#” responses that they thought each party might hypothetically have regarding issues such as balancing the budget and the Affordable Health Care Act. I then asked them to explain why the Democrat or Republican Party would post those hashtags. This class activity allowed me an innovative technique to reach my students and required them to synthesize substantive course material and application by utilizing social media. I also incorporated other social media mediums by showing TED Talks and YouTube videos made by other students and educators who had posted projects and presentations related to topics outlined in the syllabus.

In a recent 2014 editorial, *New York Times* op-ed columnist Nicholas Kristof lamented about how higher education has de/evolved into a culture and system that ignores the importance of impact and audience and making material accessible to the general public. [11] However, utilizing social media in the classroom, besides teaching concepts in a modern way, symbolically rejects the sentiments related to Kristof's editorial and the conventional notion of the “ivory tower” and the irrelevance of scholars. Instructors and educators are able to take esoteric and often times theoretical jargon and transform it into relatable and understandable material through social media platforms such as trending tweets, wall posts, and even viral videos. Employing social media elevates students' classroom experience as well as demonstrates the relevance of the course material for students across all majors and fields of discipline. Additionally, social media helps break down the “ivory tower” and gives students a mechanism to relate to and approach instructors. This is especially important in American Government, a course that is a university-wide required course for all majors.

4. Conclusion

"Twitter is not allowed. Blogging is not allowed," declared South African Judge Thokozile Masipa in March 2014, during graphic testimony in the Oscar Pistorius murder trial. [12] Predictable, someone following the trial tweeted, presumably in real time:

[Name omitted by authors] Mar. 10

*12:32 - Judge Masipa: When I referred to Twitter, I failed to refer to blogging as well. **Twitter is not allowed, blogging is not allowed.***

The introduction of social networks revolutionized the way we consume news and operate our daily lives. This principle has translated in higher education, as our findings and observations indicate that social networks impact how traditional college students think and learn. Thus, educators need to



consider implementing and utilizing these tools for out-of-class activities, in order to enhance critical thinking skills and effectively communicate with and relate to students.

References

- [1] In March 2013, a journalist observed the inflammatory tone of bloggers in the Knox/Sollecito case and wrote: "I Googled 'Amanda Knox' and got 7.1 million hits. I then tried 'Amanda Knox' and 'bitch,' which returned 1.7 million hits. 'Amanda Knox' and 'pervert' came back at 880,000 hits, and her name coupled with 'slut' yielded 380,000." Douglas Preston, *Burn Her at the Stake*, Slate (Apr. 19, 2013), http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/foreigners/2013/04/amanda_knox_she_was_acquitted_of_the_meredith_kercher_murder_why_do_people.html.
- [2] Doug Gross, *Library of Congress digs into 170 billion tweets*, CNN Tech (Jan. 7, 2013), <http://www.cnn.com/2013/01/07/tech/social-media/library-congress-twitter/>.
- [3] Perry Binder and Nancy R. Mansfield, *Social Networks and Workplace Risk: Classroom Scenarios from a U.S. and EU Perspective*, 30 J. LEGAL STUD. EDUC. 1 (2013), <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1744-1722.2013.01113.x/abstract> (subscription required). U.S. and EU employees face suspension or firing for social media activities, both on and off company time. *Id.* at 4-6.
- [4] Nancy Grace 'FreezerTot' hashtag prompts online uproar, Atlanta Journal Constitution (Feb. 7, 2014), http://www.accessatlanta.com/news/news/nancy-grace-freezertot-hashtag-prompts-online-upro/ndGpP/?icmp=ajc_internallink_textlink_homepage.
- [5] *Social Networks and Workplace Risk*, *supra* note 3 at 7-8.
- [6] *Id.* at 38-41.
- [7] A Twitter hashtag "is used to mark keywords or topics in a Tweet. It was created organically by Twitter users as a way to categorize messages." *Using hashtags on Twitter*, Twitter Help Center, <https://support.twitter.com/articles/49309-using-hashtags-on-twitter>. The Internet Law hashtag is #LGLS, which is short for the course designation, LGLS 4060.
- [8] Keith Fowlkes, *MOOCs: Valuable Innovation or Grand Diversion?*, Information Week Education (Feb. 5, 2013), http://www.informationweek.com/education/online-learning/moocs-valuable-innovation-or-grand-diver/240147875?itc=edit_in_body_cross; Tamar Lewin, *Instruction for Masses Knocks Down Campus Walls*, The New York Times (Mar. 4, 2013), <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/05/education/moocs-large-courses-open-to-all-topple-campus-walls.html?pagewanted=all>; and Antonio Fini, *The Technological Dimension of a Massive Open Online Course: The Case of the CCK08 Course Tools*, 10:5 IRRODL (Nov. 2009), <http://www.irrodl.org/index.php/irrodl/article/view/643/1402>.
- [9] Michael Sharnoff, *More good news for the hybrid learning model*, eCampus News (Jan. 30, 2014), <http://www.ecampusnews.com/top-news/hybrid-learning-highered-444/>.
- [10] See, e.g., *U-M professor recognized for innovative teaching*, Ann Arbor Journal (Feb. 14, 2014), http://www.heritage.com/articles/2014/02/14/ann_arbor_journal/news/doc52fab77f7a473682233375.txt?viewmode=fullstory (using a point system to promote student engagement and autonomy through collaboration in Political Science courses).
- [11] Nicholas Kristof, *Professors, We Need You!*, The New York Times (Feb. 15, 2014), <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/16/opinion/sunday/kristof-professors-we-need-you.html>.
- [12] *Pistorius Sickened After Pathologist's Graphic Testimony*, Associated Press via The Wall Street Journal (Mar. 10, 2014), <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052702303795904579430943481407668?mg=reno64-wsj&url=http%3A%2F%2Fonline.wsj.com%2Farticle%2FSB10001424052702303795904579430943481407668.html>.