

A Case Study on Integrating Social Media in an Online Graduate Youth Development Course

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Abstract

Youth today are using web-based technologies and social media at record rates. A reported 95% of teens use the Internet and most with "always on" connections that allow them access to web-based technologies at any point in their day. How teens use technology is ever changing, but what is steadfast is the need for adults to be involved in all facets of youths' lives, including the web. There is also a need for professionals who work with youth and their families to understand and utilize technology. This case study discusses the theoretical underpinnings, process, and results of an online course for youth development professionals, and specifically describes a web-based instructional activity involving the use of social media. Results show that although few students entered with strong technology skills, they left with new abilities and strong attitudes about the importance of using social media in their professional roles.

Key Words: social media, youth development, education, online courses

Introduction

Effective youth development strategies are grounded in ecological theory, a belief that youth are greatly impacted by various systems in their lives (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). These systems have traditionally been identified as ranging from micro to macro, with the systems closest to youth (e.g., family, friends, and teachers) having major impact on the youth's well-being and then projecting outward to systems such as schools, communities, and even societal norms. Community youth development (CYD) theory puts Bronfenbrenner's theory into action by suggesting that adults in a youth's life have impact on a youth's well-being. In other words, a community that works together in an effort to provide positive opportunities is optimal for the development of young people (Eccles & Gootman, 2002).

For many young people, experiences often occur digitally. In today's world, youth utilize technology in nearly every facet of their lives (Lenhart, Madden, & Hitlin, 2005). The Pew Research Center reports that 92% of young adults in the 18-29 year old age group who are online use some form of social media on a daily basis. In the 12-17 year old age group, 80% are social media users (Brenner, 2012).

Based on these ideas, it is logical to suggest that in order for youth development professionals to positively impact the lives of the youth they serve, they must not only understand the various systems impacting a youth's development, including digital systems, but they must also have the skills and ability to engage with youth throughout those systems. In fact, it is the role of a youth development professional to help youth navigate systems for optimum outcomes (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). In order to best serve their clients, youth serving professionals must know how to navigate the world of web-based technology (Russell, Bebell, O'Dwyer, & O'Connor, 2003). For many youth development professionals, however, novel web-based technology such as social media is not an area in which they

have knowledge or training.

Technology, and more specifically social media, has great implications for the field of youth development. The use of technology influences the four primary domains of positive youth development: social, psychological, physical, and intellectual development. Furthermore, it also impacts how youth development professionals are able to offer services designed for maximum impact in each domain. For this case study, social media is defined as web-based technologies that promote the creation and sharing of user-generated content (DeBell & Chapman, 2006; Greenhow, 2011). Occasionally referred to as Web 2.0, these technologies can be further categorized as content generation and sharing tools such as [YouTube](#) and [Flickr](#); social bookmarking tools such as [Delicious](#) and [Pinterest](#); collaborative publishing tools such as wikis, blogs, and microblogs; or social networking tools such as [Twitter](#), [Facebook](#), or [LinkedIn](#) (Greenhow, 2011a).

Literature Review

Technology is impacting youth relationships. In many ways, youth today are more engaged in their interpersonal relationships than ever before, and as a result, they often have wider and deeper friendship networks (Rolfe & Gilbert, 2006). These relationships are integral to their development and are often supported through participation in social networking with tools such as Facebook or Twitter. Although the digital methods youth use to engage with one another may not seem ideal or even familiar to adults in their lives, today's youth are building and deepening relationships with their peers through interactional technologies such as instant messaging, text messaging, and often through social networking applications (DeGennaro, 2008). In fact, it is estimated that youth ages 18-24 send and receive over 100 texts each day, or approximately 3,200 per month (Smith, 2011), showing evidence of engagement with their peers in a way that is unfamiliar to many adults.

Technology also impacts how a young person learns. Youth today are highly engaged and often learn independently or in collaboration with their peers via technology (Tapscott, 2002). In addition to using social media for communicating with friends, youth are using their interactional technologies and social media to gather information and aid in decision-making. These advances are expanding the worlds of today's youth in ways that have yet to be fully understood (Mesch, 2012). Studies show that youth learn differently with social media and online technology tools, and as a result, the need for more flexible education and online interaction has become critical (DeGennaro, 2008; Ghorbani & Heidari, 2011).

Background, Rationale, and Framework

Although youth development professionals know that understanding and connecting with youth is critical for positive youth development, these rapidly developing changes in technology often leave youth development professionals unclear about how to engage and educate those they serve. Although there is scant research on the opinions and attitudes of youth development professionals regarding the use of technologies with their clientele, adult educators have expressed a concern that new technologies will inhibit the formation of or decrease the quality of relationships they build with their target audiences (Seger, 2011). More commonly, youth development professionals are resistant to utilizing new technologies such as social media because they are not clear about how to use technology in their role (Diem, Gamble, Hino, Martin, & Meisenbach, 2009). It is essential, however, that youth development professionals recognize how technology is impacting youth and find ways to engage and educate youth via media.

The rapid pace of change in the development and access to technology creates important implications and opportunities for youth development professionals. New media can enable youth development professionals to intervene and promote positive youth development practices via technology. To successfully positively engage youth however, professionals must adapt their teaching and engagement design to accommodate digital advances (DeGennaro, 2008). Of the limited data that exists, it appears that only a small number of youth educators have engaged in creating social media for youth to network (Rhoades, Thomas, & Davis, 2009).

There is a gap of evidence-based research about educating youth development professionals on technology to better engage and serve youth. Research is needed to explore youth development professionals' opinions and their use of social media for program development (Rhoades et al., 2009). However, within educational settings there is an increase in research on the benefits of using social network activities for instruction (Holcomb, Brady, & Smith, 2010). It appears that students who engage in social networking not only benefit from better technological skills, but also demonstrate creativity,

increased openness to new ideas, and improved communication (Greenhow, Walker, & Kim, 2009). Training, specifically experiential, hands-on training for educators, is essential if they are to be successful at engaging youth through social media and other new technologies (Seger, 2011).

The authors of this study add that new strategies are needed for training youth development professionals. In an effort to better understand and create a promising practice, the authors of this article created a learning opportunity for future youth development professionals that is highlighted in the case study detailed below.

Method

A qualitative case study methodology was used for this research. A qualitative case study allows for exploration of a specific phenomenon using a variety of data sources, including both qualitative and quantitative data (Baxter & Jack, 2008). The case study methodology is completely exploratory, offers no hypotheses, and has a major limitation for generalizability; however, the benefit of qualitative inquiry is that it allows for deeper understanding of a phenomenon, allowing the essence of the experience to be revealed. In this study, researchers wanted to know more about the quality of the social media assignment for an online graduate course in youth development and its impact on the learners. First, a rich description of the course is offered, followed by course evaluation analysis and lessons learned. Data were collected through interviews, a course reflection paper, and open-ended survey questions. Analysis of the qualitative data revealed four themes: technology, teamwork, challenges, and successes.

Program and Course Description

Applied Concepts in Child and Youth Development is a required course in an online master's program offered at a land-grant university in the Southeastern United States. The program is housed in a university department that does extensive training and outreach for the statewide extension system that focuses on youth and family programs. The program provides graduate students with a strong theoretical background in the field of family life and youth development combined with significant applied real world learning experiences.

The students enrolled in the case study course were already familiar with online instruction from the student perspective since they were enrolled in an exclusively-online degree program. Course development within this program was done in a collaborative environment that included the faculty member and an instructional designer, and was supplemented by support of the institution's digital librarians and the university's centralized online education support office. The program's courses are designed to comply with the [Quality Matters](#) rubric that addresses best practices in course design issues such as proper alignment of learning objectives, inclusion of appropriate instructional activities, and application of effective assessment strategies.

Course design is informed by a social constructivist view that places emphasis on instructors as facilitators as opposed to simply being transmitters of information (Anderson & Dron, 2011). This theoretical approach was most obvious in the instructor's candid description of herself as a social media "novice," and it was explained to students that she would be learning along with them.

In this course, as with all courses in the degree program, developers worked to create an online learning environment that provides frequent opportunities for student–teacher and student–student communication, including regular use of threaded discussion boards on a Moodle course website, email, and synchronous class meetings via the Blackboard Collaborate interface. The course was purposefully designed to encourage discussions within the course Moodle to help promote social presence, starting with the first time that students logged on to the course site. During the initial orientation, students were encouraged to create a Moodle profile, including an image and self-description; to post self-introductions; and respond to classmates' posts. In addition to text-based forum posts, the instructor posted short updates via YouTube to communicate with students, in which recognized strategies for building social presence were used such as: using humor, calling students by name, and including stories and personal notes in communications.

Online delivery can effectively accommodate different student learning styles, a practice that has been associated with success in the classroom (Battalio, 2009), and in order to accommodate different learning styles, several modes of content delivery were included in this course. Although this is primarily an asynchronously delivered online course, four synchronous "live class meetings" via Blackboard

Collaborate web conferencing provided options to promote real-time student–student and student–teacher interaction. Students were also expected to log on to the Moodle course site multiple times each week to engage in a variety of learning activities and assignments. They had weekly required readings and live or video-recorded presentations from the instructor. Additionally, students engaged in forums that required additional self-learning where the students answered reflection questions or described processes or resources relevant to their personal or professional inquiry interests.

In addition to weekly assignments, there were three major assignments: a personal reflection paper, a service learning project, and a social media project. Although these three major assignments and the weekly participation assignments were designed to work in tandem to help the student meet the course objectives, the focus of this case study is the social media project.

Process of Designing the Social Media Project

DeGennaro (2008) made recommendations on learning designs for educators working with youth that included the needs for grounding learning activities in real world experiences, utilizing technology to foster activities, and encouraging the learners to innovate as part of the learning process. Although his implications targeted youth specifically, the course developers utilized DeGennaro's design suggestion with youth development professionals for the social media project. Teaching models that integrate technologies such as student created technologies provide opportunities for active learning and more learner control, and thus may be effective strategies for supporting knowledge construction (Beldarrain, 2006). The social media project fit this model.

As an initial introduction to social media in an academic setting, the instructor required each student to sign up for a Twitter account at the beginning of the semester. The instructor tweeted information on course related topics throughout the semester and encouraged students to also participate by "following" one another. This introductory activity was an opportunity for the instructor to model good social media practices. Additionally, the instructor found opportunities to discuss the need for students to consider their projected public presence through their postings and eventually through their group projects. All students successfully signed up for Twitter; during course discussions it was noted that Twitter was a new forum for all class members. Although a few had a personal Twitter account, none had ever used Twitter for formal or informal learning.

Research shows that today's students do best when they collaborate, connect, and create social change (Pinder-Grover & Groscurth, 2011). In keeping with a constructivist approach to teaching, the social media project was designed as a way for the students to learn by doing in a team setting and then share their results with a target audience. In this three-part social media assignment, students were asked to form small groups (3-4 members), select a current issue topic as the basis for a learning project, and to identify a target audience for whom they would eventually produce a social media-based resource. Their product was to be a web-based learning resource or presentation that would be posted on a social media platform and was to include an opportunity for the intended audience to interact online. Students previewed a variety of existing products such as podcasts, YouTube videos, and websites, and then independently chose a medium that fit their project and group interests. A total of three groups were formed.

The assignment was broken into three parts:

Part 1: Students turned in a written summary of the project that included a background of research on the topic, demographic information about the target audience, and a detailed project plan for how they would create the final product. This written summary was due early in the semester, which gave time for feedback from the instructor and classmates. Additionally, the teams were required to have their project plans peer-reviewed, which provided feedback before they actually created the content.

Part 2: The project team was required to submit the completed project to a social media site of their choosing and then post the link on the Moodle course website for all classmates to review. Students were required to receive and provide peer review of the work of their classmates. This step not only allowed for reflection and further clarification of their own projects, but also helped them learn from each other as all students reviewed all three projects.

Part 3: Each member of the collaborative team wrote a 2-3 page reflection paper that described the process and any insights gained, provided an evaluation of the process, and summarized each team member's contribution.

The students' projects included an Animoto video and brochure on the characteristics of effective youth programs; a website and supporting documents for the 4-H program *Application, Interview, Resume and Essay*; and a website and resources on bullying prevention. Two of the three student teams opted to leave their creations live for future viewing:

Example 1. *Characteristics of Effective Youth Programs:*

<http://animoto.com/play/yhMKZkbvGke41kMZO1V0dw>

LINK NOT WORKING



Example 2. *4-H Resume Writing Classroom for AIRE!*

<https://sites.google.com/a/ncsu.edu/4-h-resume-writing-classroom/>



Results

In addition to the aforementioned description of the course and social media assignment, the authors collected data from students about their experience in the course. Data were collected through interviews, a course reflection paper, and open-ended questions on a survey. Analysis of the qualitative data revealed four themes: technology, teamwork, challenges, and successes.

Technology.

On the issue of technology, students stated that they had technology-related concerns regarding the project. One student shared, "*When I first learned of this social media project, I was scared and overwhelmed.*" This fear, however, was often overcome by the prospects of using technology. "*This was the first time I had seen this type of media, and it immediately opened my eyes to a new way of providing information to my audience.*" Although using social media was a new approach to outreach and providing instruction, there was an overall feeling that this new approach would be something that would be used again. "*I definitely plan on using social media in the future.*"

Teamwork.

Teamwork was another theme that was identified in the analysis. In online learning, students may feel isolated, and assigning group projects is one way to help students feel connected. As one student explained, "*Sometimes I feel like online education is a very isolating endeavor, but projects such as this bring you out of solitude to collaborate with classmates and share ideas and thoughts.*" In this project, students expressed happiness with the teamwork process, which can also be seen as frustrating, especially when students fear having to 'carry' their partners. "*This group has restored my faith and*

willingness to work with my future fellow classmates. I am well satisfied and pleased with working with these ladies and would do it again without hesitation."

Challenges.

As with any graduate-level course, success and challenges were identified. The challenges were clustered around the newness of the technology. *"My biggest challenge for me with the social media project was the lack of knowledge I had regarding the different social media outlets available. I felt totally ill equipped in discussing different media outlets that we could use to create our end product."* Many of the expressed technological challenges were overcome with collaboration and experiential practice with using the new mediums. Students reported feelings of self-satisfaction, accomplishment, and of learning new skills. As one student said, *"I look forward to using the skills I've obtained doing this project with other aspects of my career. This venture left me feeling comfortable enough to possibly lead a workshop teaching youth and volunteer 4-H leaders how to create a web-page for their club event or special project."*

Successes.

The student survey that was administered at the end of the course was separate from the standard university end-of-course survey. The survey had a 100% response rate (N=9) on all points of data collection (interviews, survey, and course assignments). Quantitative survey results show that 78% of the respondents reported having never used any form of social media for educational purposes. This is congruent with anecdotal evidence that suggests a discomfort of youth development professionals using social media. In fact, the use of social media was a new approach for a formal learning experience as 89% reported that this course was the first time they had used social media for educational purposes. A large percentage (89%) reported that their skill level for using social media in an academic setting increased as a result of the course, and 89% also reported that they felt the clients they serve would benefit from their new social media skills. All of the students (100%) agreed with the statement that they "think youth and family professionals need more access to technological training".

Lessons Learned

The benefit of a case study is that it allows the authors to identify unique lessons. As in teaching any class, the lessons learned here can help in the development and refinement of future social media projects.

1. *The instructor does not need advanced technical skills.* Although this assignment involved social media technology, the instructor did not self-identify as a social media expert, and therefore, students had to be more self-directed. The teacher's role became that of co-learner, and the students and teacher developed a true "learning community" in which they learned from one another and gained new expertise. When instructors interact with students and support them in a variety of ways (e.g., academically, proximately, emotionally), and when student participation is high, there is high potential for student learning and student satisfaction (Wallace, 2011). This collaborative learning environment not only allowed for personal growth by all members, but also facilitated interpersonal classroom relationships in the process.
2. *A constructivist approach to learning produces varied and enriched learning opportunities.* In a learner-centered course setting, the instructor's role became more of a facilitator. In this case, it was beneficial for the instructor to be viewed as a collaborator rather than an expert. As a result, students learned that they had to rely on their teammates and other networks for problem solving with technical issues and support. This approach ultimately led to a need for collaboration among student groups and between students and the instructor.
3. *Teamwork can be effective.* Although student engagement and interaction with peers is considered highly important in online education, it was clear that students had major reservations about teamwork for this project. The success of these teams can be attributed to the fact that this course was highly collaborative, and the instructor provided a separate reflection assignment where the students were instructed to talk about each member's contributions. The collaborative experience combined with accountability likely contributed to the success of the team project.

4. *Students are motivated by real world experience.* Each group of students created something useful – a tool that they could continue to use long after the course had ended. Because youth development professionals are often very busy, giving them the option of creating a tool that will be useful and not just "busy work" was important. This fits with DeGennaro's (2008) recommendation to ground the learning activities in real world experiences.
5. *Process and product are equally important.* Although the students were graded on this assignment, it was made clear from the beginning that students would be graded more on the process than on the technical details of the final product. This allowed the students the flexibility to be innovative and try new technologies with less fear of having to produce a perfect product.
6. *Students need clearly-defined expectations, milestone assignments, and feedback.* This assignment had three parts, two of which offered feedback provided by fellow classmates and the instructor. This feedback allowed the students to make adjustments before continuing. One student stated that "*having three separate due dates helped with flow,*" and another said that "*feedback from peers and the instructor was helpful.*"

Discussion

The provided case study showcased a social media project that fostered student connectedness and allowed students studying youth development professionalism to increase their content knowledge and social media technology skills. Although students identified certain challenges related to technology and teamwork, the overall result was quite positive. The success can be considered, at least in part, to the constructivist approach to education. The students had to rely on each other to complete the project.

The students clearly approached this project with hesitation due to their lack of technological skills, yet they used the technological skills they had to their advantage. "*Being the least techno friendly, I was not sure exactly how I would contribute to the team.*" Finding purpose in the project also contributed to the students' willingness to work together to overcome the technological challenges. The students stated that they saw a benefit to using social media in their current and future work. "*It takes time and practice. It may not be right or easy on the first try, but in the end it is worth it when your audience benefits from your efforts.*" The theme of technology appeared to center around the notion that using technology will be an important element of their work with youth.

A constructivist approach to teaching and learning, combined with the use of small, project-based teams, can lead to students becoming more independent learners. The use of a constructivist approach required the students to explore and collaborate. These opportunities provided authentic learning environments that could easily be replicated in other courses.

Of course with the very small sample size, the results from this case study are not readily generalizable. Still, it is important to note that all students agreed that having training and an opportunity to practice social media use was helpful. It is also important to note that instructors do not need to be experts in the use of technology in order to have a technology-focused project. In fact, the instructor's lack of expertise on the topic of social media might be an advantage. In this case, as the students had a clear expectation of the assignment and milestones throughout the process, the experience of learning by doing proved to be an effective approach to integrating social media into course content.

Conclusion

This case study describes the teaching philosophy and instructional strategies used by a professor for a social media project in an online graduate course for future youth development professionals. As part of this course, students were expected to work in teams to create a web-based project that would be shared via a social media outlet of their choosing. Three teams worked together to create three distinct projects, all specific to helping youth and/or their families. All three teams, with a total of nine students, completed their project as well as an evaluation of the project.

Through a discussion of the learning outcomes and feedback from students, this article shows how the use of social media contributed to the opportunity for students to collaboratively develop and leverage their social networks to achieve a richer learning experience. The students all showed a willingness to

try new learning technologies with the youth and families they serve. Results from this case study show that although few students came in with strong technology skills, they left with new abilities and strong attitudes about the importance of using social media in their professional role with youth and families. More importantly, these students left with the belief that their project would help the families they serve and the confidence that they would continue to use web-based technologies in their work with youth.

In this paper, the goal of the authors was to detail the process of creating a social media assignment for an online graduate course. True to the goal, there were lessons learned in this case study that might be of benefit to others who wish to implement social media projects in their own courses, or for anyone wishing to create a hands-on learning activity for youth development professionals. This case study could be a model for other instructors wishing to empower their students in the use of social media in an academic or professional setting.

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