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SOCIAL MEDIA, EDUCATIONAL ENGAGEMENT AND ETHICAL BOUNDARIES

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Abstract

Education has embraced social media. We tweet back and forth with our students. We tweet from field trips. We tweet for the eyes of potential students. We have facebook groups for our courses. We tag each other, have tumblr collections from student events. This has opened up fantastic ways of engaging with our students.

As people have begun to bemoan the declines in lecture attendance, or asserted commonplaces about attention spans, Social Media has allowed us to be radically interactive, and be context-specific about where traditional academic hierarchies of communication are and aren't in place. This is to be welcomed, to be pushed further, and innovated with respect to.

But.. Students are beginning to see a collapsing of lines that can make them uncomfortable. They may want to complain on twitter about a boring lecture, or use images as their Facebook profile picture that they would rather their lecturers didn't see. Much of this can be cleared up by them getting to grips with the systems: there's much scope here for staff and student development (which often shows just how flawed and problematic the digital native/immigrants taxonomy is). However, this still leaves an area of ambiguity, an area of problematic self-construction for students, and I would see this as ethically interesting, maybe even difficult, for staff.

This paper seeks to explore the extent to which a flourishing of social media on a Higher Education course deepens and enriches the learning experience, but also brings into play a set of grey areas, where a collapsing barrier between social, academic, personal and private identities should give staff some pause for thought, amidst their enthusiasm and fervour.

Keywords: Ethics, Social Media.

While I have a few relic colleagues who seem to consider the world of social media with the joy they'd reserve for an outbreak of bubonic plague, many of us in Higher Education are embracing social media. We live-tweet from field trips, tag each other in Facebook galleries of class presentations, and use tumblr and flickr to showcase speakers and events.

Social media allows us this extended level of engagement – rather than occasional face I the lecture hall, seen at a blurred distance, your tutor can be an almost-omnipresent e-actor – agile in digital response, facing a differentiated student body with bespoke content, while simultaneously generating materials that be re-tasked as authentic, course-specific marketing collateral.

We worry about lecture attendance, whether we should or shouldn't require it – and whether people are listening or tweeting (often, I hope, in my classes- they are doing both). Some in Education (and in a wider moral panic – more of which later) assert a decline in attention spans, and fret about the possible impact and how to respond. Some bemoan a smartphone generation, flicking attention between apps, unable to read a whole page without googling some aspect. A generation wandering into the traffic zombie-like, staring and grinning idiots, mown down in a series of faintly Darwinian traffic incidents. A generation who know nothing, Google everything, feign world-weary data-overload while still in their teens, and see little point in wasting time on learning 'facts', when they could be LOLing at cats on the internet. Of course – it turns out that there isn't actually evidence for this series of bleated assertions. The more you read the panicked pages of tabloid stories about social media – the more it seems like a good, old-fashioned moral panic. And some of you might be old enough to remember when it was just rock 'n' roll that was going to herald the end of civilisation.

Of course there are inane, childish, malicious, perverted and sinister uses of social media. People are like that. We need to address them. People are also hilarious, witty, clever and creative. We see that in social media too. In Education, there are dangers and risks, but as many bolder, innovating educators have found there are amazing opportunities too. Social Media has allowed us to be radically interactive, and be context-specific about where traditional academic hierarchies of communication are and aren't in place. It can use the VLE for a variety of formal deployments of learning technology, and select from a variety of approaches to broaden the less formal aspects.

In courses where contact hours (between students and staff) may have been as low as 8 hours of lecture/seminar activity per week, social media has given us a chance to extend a real sense of 'The life of the course': The experience of the undergraduates I teach today is more holistic and supported than ever. The staff and students have a variety of complex, often technology-mediated interactions that contribute to the sense of a real, contagious, broad enthusiasm. This is to be welcomed, to be pushed further, and gives us a real chance to avoid the awful, face-in-the-crowd, dislocated, mere fee-paying-units marketization sense of modern University education.

So much for the extended hurrah for social media. This paper wants to offer a salve to our HE approach, but at the same time note the flies in our ointment. There are sever challenges here. I want to note three kinds of ethical reflection that we might engage in with respect to Social Media: The Moral Panic; The Blurring of Boundaries; and, finally, the sense in which we might cast social media

as one of the factors in the tumult of ceaseless recasting of what it means to be human: the Ethics of Self Construction.

Moral Panic is a much-noted sociological phenomena – my teenage children study it at school – we know it. What is notable, from Rock ‘n’ Roll, to Sony Walkmans, Dangerous Dogs (in the UK), Video Nasties in the 1980s, and headbanging Heavy Metal fans is the persistent correlation between an absence of evidence and a preponderance of inflated claims, newspaper articles and popularity-sniffing politicians. What we see in the UK is also a classic example of fallacious appeals to authority – made more compelling here by the apparent validity of the appeal. The tabloid newspapers in the UK have led, as ever, the vanguard of moral panic. While simultaneously making money from link-baiting outrage on their online editions, the tabloid papers have run a series of anti-internet stories. Their key piece of rhetorical artillery is Professor Susan Greenfield (you can call her Baroness if you insist on antiquated aristocratic nonsense). She is an important and respected neuroscientist – but also has written numerous pieces¹ claiming that video games, social media and the like are causally linked to autism², changes in the brain and likely behaviour. However, her work in neuroscience and her claims about the harms of internet (particularly social media use) are not connected by an evidence-based chain. A good summary by Clive Thomson seems to show that the evidence here is, at best, mixed.³

While middle-England may fret over moral panics, serious educators need to do more. We need to acknowledge that research may lead us to consider how these technologies fit in our lives, the lives of children and social developments more widely. We also need to think about how we use them, and I think there are much more interesting questions to interrogate than the “we are all going to hell in a handcart” flailings of hypocritical newspapers.

More interesting is the second area that I set out: the boundaries. We have seen a collapsing or reshaping of some of the formal boundaries in Higher Education. Students are beginning to see a collapsing of lines that can make them uncomfortable. They may want to complain on twitter about a boring lecture, or use images as their Facebook profile picture that they would rather their lecturers didn't see. Much of this can be cleared up by them getting to grips with the systems: there is much scope here for staff and student development (which often shows just how flawed and problematic the digital native/immigrants taxonomy is). I solve some of this by setting out boundaries: I won't have my (indeed, my University's) current students as ‘Facebook-friends’ – but will have a course Facebook page. I won't follow students on twitter, unless they follow me – and declare (by that) that there are using their account for academic purposes. I discuss with them having multiple accounts for differing purposes.

However, this still leaves an area of ambiguity, an area of problematic self-construction for students, and I would see this as ethically interesting, maybe even difficult, for staff. Many students are stunningly naïve about the detail of social media: what they think is private, shared, and visible is often erroneous. This is often true of staff too. Skill development here is vital – and perhaps the most useful principle to apply is that of consent. Are students fully aware of how we will and do use social media and the information we thereby obtain? My students are still students – not my friends – and I still

grade their work. There are power relations in place here, and while they may be less clear on our course social media, we need to keep these contextual concerns securely mind. For doctors in the UK, the BMA (British Medical Association) has very specific guidance⁴, that they have published. It is a short guide, but makes important points about relationships, but also about presenting a professional image. The world of ‘online reputation management’ may make us faintly nauseous, smacking of control-freak PR departments and stage-managed self-as-brand micro capitalism. These are serious concerns, but we still, while be wary of being over calculating in our presentation, need to be aware to who might encounter what we post, and in what context. For most of us, online invisibility is neither possible nor desirable – but what and how we are visible, and to whom, deserves more than fleeting reflection for us all.

Finally, we might consider what kind of ethical impact we allow social media to have on us. I would maintain, in line with notions of ethical responsibility, that the effects on us of social media are only those that we allow to happen. We are not passive beings who are made solely by external influence. We shape ourselves, using the social ,cultural and philosophical tools at our disposal. One of these tools is that of Social Media. Of course ,we may despair – and point to ‘clicktivism’ – where we mistake ‘liking’ or ‘sharing’ political statements, or cloying truisms, as some kind of activism. We may do this. We may, as I said, be inane and shallow. But I’d like just to introduce an idea here and see where we can take it in conversation. The idea of **Cosmopolitanism**⁵ in ethics is compelling. It represents a diverse body of views, but at its heart is the notion of a single community. Clearly there are serious obstacles to realisation of the ideals it promotes. The radical wealth-shifts to the 1% in recent years, could be argued to be an undeclared war on the very ideals of cosmopolitanism. But for educators, the idea that we can still preserve boundaries, recognise power relations, and be honest and transparent, while harnessing the idea of singe community should be radically intoxicating. Can’t we take our classrooms, and lecture halls, virtual and physical, and use hierarchy-collapsing features as they emerge from social media, alongside critical pedagogies, to model human relations that acknowledge boundaries where they are needed, but also recognise the mutual contributions to learning that we can all make? The use of social media can draw out what many excellent educators aspire to transmit – that learning may require borders, experts and transmission at various stages, but that it is a shared journey that we all shape together, and that should transform all those engaged in it.

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Dr David Webster

Course Facebook Group: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/RPEglos/> (open to all)

New Book/Project blog <http://dispirited.org>

Video Interview blog for A-Level/Teachers: <http://philosvids.wordpress.com/>

TAROSA Project: <http://tarosaproject.wordpress.com/>

Course blog: <http://www.r-p-e.blogspot.com>

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