

# Connect, Participate and Learn: Transforming Pedagogies in Higher Education

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**Abstract**— There is an emerging need for a transformation of traditional pedagogies in higher education environments. Social media tools present opportunities for designing learning experiences that afford extended social interaction and collaboration. This paper presents a case where several social media tools were used as course platforms in the context of a blended “Social Media in Education” graduate course. In addition to presenting instructional design decisions behind the course organization and delivery, this paper aims to introduce an example of how an open course content was created with the learners on different social media channels and helped them eliminate learning boundaries by engaging in formal and informal learning experiences. Various affordances of each social media tool for different pedagogical purposes are presented.

**Index Terms**—Higher education, learning, pedagogy, social media

## I. INTRODUCTION

For more than a decade, educational institutions have been challenged to reconsider their current teaching approaches in the light of an increasing popularity of social and networked Internet technologies among highly active and participative Internet users. New media technologies have provided opportunities for users to create, share and express themselves in different media channels [1]. We are now witnessing a large technological shift in the history that is being driven by users who want to be engaged, active, social and networked than ever before. However, how much of this shift is reflected in our current educational practices is still questionable.

Although educators are witnessing a shift in the notions of learning and teaching as shaped by social and cultural practices of social media and new digital technologies, traditional teacher-directed pedagogies still dominate higher education learning and teaching environments. Technology is generally used in the form of integrating conventional learning management systems (LMS) to the teaching settings with the implementation of standardized, unintuitive, highly structured and static tools that comes default with these systems. These LMS platforms often lack the necessary tools and social

This work was carried out while Dr. Baran was a Ph.D. student and instructor within the Curriculum and Instructional Technology Program at Iowa State University. The “Social Media in Education” course presented in this case was offered as an elective graduate course in a blended format to the graduate students from different disciplines.

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structure to support student engagement and just-in-time social connection. Within those systems, teacher is seen as the source of the information in a closed learning environment and the student as the passive consumer of the static content that is presented online. The educational philosophy that undergirds these systems limit teachers to think and act within the defined traditional teaching paradigms lacking the flexibility to be creative and adoptive to different learning contexts [2]. Moreover, the conversation that happens within these systems dies after the semester ends and generally doesn't extend to the informal learning environments.

The ubiquity of open social media tools offers a new paradigm of teaching and learning that places teachers and learners as co-constructors of learning. These tools not only support participation at different levels, but also extend learning and interaction beyond formal learning environments. Considering these affordances as critical elements of emerging higher education pedagogies, a case study was conducted to investigate the integration of social media tools in a blended course on “social media in education”. This paper presents the instructional design decisions behind the organization and the delivery of the course as well as the affordances of various social media tools for different pedagogical purposes.

## II. CONTEXT

### A. Course Goals

Social Media in Education course was designed to help educators immerse themselves in the theoretical and practical aspects of social media in various educational contexts. The purpose of the course was to allow educators not only to learn and practice several social media tools but also critically analyze their use in their educational settings. Following questions guided the design of the course:

- What do we mean by “social media”?
- How do we encourage, discuss, understand and design educational environments with the emerging social media tools in the age of participatory culture?
- How can we encourage the critical usage of social media and build sustainable learning environments and networks?

Rather than examining social media tools in isolation, this course intended to explore the interrelationships among different tools in specific cultural communities that grow upon around them, and the educational activities they supported. Weekly course activities included the discussions on social media concepts, the examination of the affordances and limitations of social media tools, and hands-on activities for

exploring the integration of the tools within students' unique learning and teaching contexts.

### B. Course Participants

This course was targeted to the graduate students from diverse disciplines who were interested in the implications of social media within their educational contexts. The purpose was to bring different perspectives, school of thoughts, implications, and experiences to the learning context. The students who were enrolled in the course came from the disciplines of human computer interaction, business, family and consumer studies, fashion and retail, and educational technology. The diversity in the backgrounds and educational levels provided a rich discussion and collaboration setting where learners were constantly challenged with different perspectives on the issues related to social media use in educational contexts. For instance students who were working as teachers and technology coordinators in the K12 school contexts brought fresh and first hand experiences and observations about children's use of social media in their everyday life.

### C. Course Topics

The course was organized around the topics of theories and concepts on social media in education including connectivism [3], [4] social networking [5], new media literacies and participatory culture [1], [6], copywriting and creative commons, Web 2.0 and social collaboration environments, learning Space Mashups [7], [8], Dj culture, edupunks, open educational resources and open access [9]. Students learned basic processes, concepts, and terminology associated with the social media such as tagging, rss, folksonomies, tag clouds, rss readers, microblogging, social networking, social bookmarking, blogging and wikis.

While working on the concepts presented in the literature, students engaged in hands-on learning activities to become knowledgeable of social media tools for teaching, facilitating learning and designing learning communities. The purpose was to introduce students social, educational, political and cultural issues associated with social media in education, help them build sustainable online learning communities using social media tools, and become critical consumers and producers of social media content in their own learning contexts.

## III. COURSE DESIGN

### A. Structuring a blended course on social media platforms

The Social Media in Education course was designed in a blended format with synchronous face-to-face meetings and asynchronous online meetings in a period of four weeks during the Summer 2010. First half of the course included both face to face and offline sessions where students worked on various activities each day related to the social media tools and their use in educational settings. In the second half of the course, students worked on their projects where they designed and developed a social media project that they planned to implement in their own educational context.

A significant portion of the course learning happened outside of the scheduled face-to-face sessions at the online

asynchronous sessions. Students gained experiences about social learning processes such as writing reflective blog posts, commenting on participant blogs, building class resource repository, exploring social learning tools and creating educational social media.

### B. Creating an open course content collaboratively on wiki

A wiki platform was designed as the central point where all interactions happening in other course platforms (e.g. course blog, twitter, and course social bookmark) were called via RSS feeds. The massive online activity in the social media platforms can create "avalanche of information that feels absolutely overwhelming" (p. 71) [6]. This is particularly an important issue when social media is integrated into the courses. To overcome the excessive communication and participation in several social media platforms used in this course, students were introduced with the RSS (Real Simple Syndication) feeds of the course platforms, the aggregators (feed collectors) such as Google Reader, and personalized dashboards such as iGoogle, pageflakes, and netvibes. Using these, students were able to keep track of the class interaction in various platforms in an efficient and organized way. Moreover, the course wiki was designed in a way that the widgets of different platforms such as Twitter and Diigo were embedded on the side bar, collecting the current interaction and latest content from each tool and displaying them as part of the wiki site.

PbWorks was used as the wiki platform in this course. The course content including syllabus, schedule, activities, readings, assessment materials, and presentations were presented at the wiki. Students were assigned as authors of the wiki so that they could build on the initial content created by the course instructor. Details regarding the guidelines for authoring the wiki were also provided. The wiki platform helped course participants easily edit the collaborative course space. For example, students generated content for the social media toolbox page where the educational uses, benefits, limitations and resources on various social media tools were listed (See the course wiki platform at PbWorks <http://socialmedialearning.pbworks.com/>).

In the wiki platform, students were encouraged to generate an open content on social media in education that was presented openly to public for reusing and remixing purposes.

### C. Generating a collective resource repository with social bookmarking

Social bookmarking can enhance collaborative information discovery and provide a location for storing the resources and a collaborative space for bringing people with similar interests together. It can serve as an extensive resource for students to access after the classes end. There are various social bookmarking services that are used extensively by the Internet users such as Digg, StumbleUpon, Delicious, and Diigo. These platforms allow users save, store, group, and share their bookmarks online and also join groups with like-minded people. Users can follow or be followed by other individuals who post similar types of bookmarks and engage in a conversation.

In order to allow students to store, describe and share numerous web resources on social media and education, a

group was created in Diigo social bookmarking platform. The resources were tagged using the course tag “ci593b” and other descriptors and shared within the Diigo group where all students were assigned as members. Diigo class group was used extensively during the course as an online space for encouraging group collaboration. Students shared online resources, commented on each others’ bookmarks, annotated their own bookmarks, and attended to online discussions about the bookmarks (See the course bookmarks at [http://groups.diigo.com/group/ci593\\_b](http://groups.diigo.com/group/ci593_b)).

During the course, students contributed to the resource collection on social media in education by sharing and commenting on various resources. Social bookmarking helped students keep up with the recent news and resources on social media and education topics that were updated frequently in online platforms.

#### D. Course blog as a reflection and discussion space

A blogging space was incorporated into the course to help the instructor and the students blog about their reflections on the course topics. During the online sessions, students and the instructor used the Edublogs platform. The course instructor posted her reflections on the course activities after each offline session and shared her comments on the agenda for the following online activities. The blog was designed as a platform to create an interactive discussion environment where students expressed their opinions and commented on each other’s posts (See the course blog at <http://socialmedialearning.edublogs.org>).

Course blog helped students keep track of their own learning progress and read instructor’s reflections on the course activities and topics.

#### E. Social networking for extending the classroom interaction

A significant portion of students’ time were devoted to reading formal and informal online texts on various social media channels, watching the videos and following the tweets and updates related to the course content. Twitter helped class members receive updates about recent news and resources related to social media. Students were encouraged to use class tag in their tweets in order to create an easy access to the class related topics. Twitter was also used as a tool to connect the classroom to the experts and educators around the world who were interested in the use of social media in educational environments. For instance Twitter was incorporated as a backchannel in one of the guest speaker sessions. The guest speaker, while presenting on Skype, interacted with the students with tweets and answered the questions that the students asked using the course hash tag. Additionally, a Facebook group was created for the class to help students interact socially and informally in a social network with personal stories and pictures at the beginning of the class. Facebook and Twitter posts were linked through Twitterfeed that allowed posting class related tweets on the Facebook Wall. Connecting various platforms via RSS feeds helped to collect various online interaction at certain hubs.

## IV. CONCLUSION

This paper intended to present a case where several social media tools were integrated in a blended course on social media in education. Because university students have embraced the capabilities of social media channels, using these tools in blended courses might enhance the social interaction in the classroom and carry the conversation outside of the formal teaching environments. The purpose for using several tools in the course was not only helping students experience the integration of social media tools in learning environments but also presenting an example where the unique affordances of each social media platform could be used for different pedagogical purposes. Fig. 1 illustrates how each social media platform was integrated into the course with the specific learning and teaching activities they afforded.

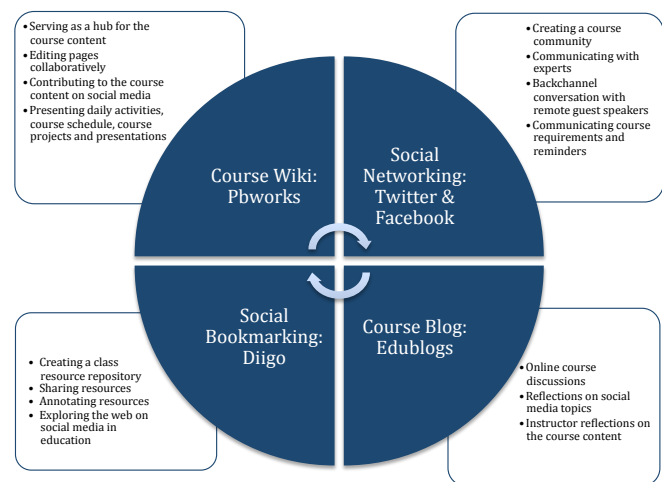


Fig. 1. Course Design on Social Media Platforms

This course was designed with an initial mission to provide educators an extensive resource on social media in education that was shared with the Creative Commons “Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike” license. The instructor designed the initial course content, yet an extensive resource collection on different social media platforms was created with the students throughout the course and made available to public for reusing, repurposing and disseminating purposes. Instead of keeping the course content in a closed course management system, the purpose was to reduce the barriers to sharing, remixing and reusing educational resources on social media.

As societal structures get more dynamic and complex with the new technological innovations, the divergence between higher education and the society grows. Four categories exist where this discrepancy becomes apparent between educational settings and everyday life: Analog to digital, tethered to mobile, isolated to connected, generic to personal, consumers to creators, and closed to open [10]. Higher education institutions now face with a pressure to adapt to the changing structures within the system they exist. Therefore changes in higher education systems need to address “increases in connectedness, personalization, participation, and openness” [10]. This course was an attempt to bridge the gap between the educational settings and everyday life of the students, and

increase their awareness about the way higher education systems could be designed with the characteristics of openness, participation, connection, and sharing.

The ubiquity of open source and social media tools offer a new paradigm of teaching and learning that places teachers and learners as co-constructors of learning. Recognizing this potential, instructors may incorporate social media tools into their educational environments with innovative uses and develop pedagogically sound and sustainable learning environments. Several pedagogical decisions should be considered to create pedagogically sound practices. Instructors who intend to integrate social media tools into their educational settings may follow the recommendations that grew out of this study:

- Analyze the affordances and limitations of each social media tool with pedagogical methods, content, and the context of the instruction.
- Spend considerable time on planning and design of learning experiences before the course starts.
- Allow flexibility for change and revisions as the course progresses.
- Consider students' levels, interests, backgrounds, and knowledge on the use of social media tools in their everyday life and educational settings.
- Rather than using each social media tool in isolation, follow an integrated approach.
- Communicate clearly the purpose and the usage of each social media tool with the students.
- Review the institution's policies on social media use, and create social media guidelines (eg. privacy, security) for the specific course. Allow student input in preparing these guidelines.
- Integrate authentic assessment activities with social media tools into the courses.
- Take advantage of social media as a way of connecting the class to the experts around the world.
- Conduct formative evaluation of the course and frequently receive feedback from the students.
- Explore the opportunities for creating an open content with and for the students. Be familiar with the Creative Commons licenses.
- Encourage students' participation in creating and contributing to course content.

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