DEVELOPMENT OF A STRATEGY FOR SOCIAL MEDIA USAGE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract

Social media (SoMe) is everywhere in our daily life. People have started to use social media in almost every aspect and field of life, however, limited attention has been paid so far to studying the potential of social media for educational purposes. So an important question is "How to use social media efficiently for teaching-learning processes?" To answer this question standards or strategies should be defined for a more effective and efficient social media usage in an educational context. Hence, being a part of an international research project[1], this article aims to develop a strategy for social media usage in higher education.

The article starts with (1) presenting findings of an ongoing international project researching the status quo- and potential of social media application for teaching, learning and research in higher education institutions. (2) After that, findings from the literature, qualitative research and web searches are related to the results. Based on the previous steps, in a final step (3), a general strategy for social media usage in higher education is presented as a framework for consideration by various higher education institutions.

Examples of Social Media Strategies from Universities: What Came Out of Research and Literature?

This research was carried out for framing a social media strategy that could be implemented in higher education. Hence, qualitative measures, namely data from literature, web searches and together with interviews of instructors from two countries, formed the scientific data on which our framework will be based.

Results of the case studies

For the Turkish case (N=12), two universities, namely Ankara University (AU) and Middle East Technical University (METU), were selected as sample cases. Ankara University was the institution that led the aforementioned international research, and METU is one of leading universities in Turkey in terms of technological innovations. Hence, the data was collected from 6 instructors from AU and 6 instructors from METU. It might be useful to emphasize one point here, that AU has complete online official programmes, so all the instructors and students have experience in both e-learning and blended learning, whereas METU uses social media and Web 2.0 tools to support traditional instruction and uses only blended learning.

For the German case (N=10), similarly two universities were selected. From the University of Konstanz (UK) 4 instructors were interviewed. It was found out that UK has no regular online courses, but usually supplements presence teaching with the Ilias Learning Management System (LMS). At the Technical University of Berlin (TUB), 6 instructors were interviewed. TUB uses Moodle as their LMS while having various online learning opportunities.

The findings that are stated in the following were derived from the two open-ended questions answered by the instructors during individual interviews. The interviews included other questions related to further research issues of the project: The instructors were asked whether they (1) know if there is a social media strategy at their university or not. They were also asked (2) for their suggestions for a Social Media Strategy that could be implemented in higher education. These qualitative data were first recorded, then transcribed, and emerging themes noted. Finally, the findings were converted into a report.

Of the 12 participants from the Turkish case, 9 instructors stated that there was no such strategy. Three instructors from Ankara University did not have any idea. One instructor said that "ICT should be a part of daily life. It should appear automatically in our daily processes". Thus, there is no strategy and there are not many opinions about the strategy. This is an expected result since all the implementations that use social media in education are individual attempts from a small amount of people.

At the University of Konstanz two instructors didn't know whether there was a social media strategy and one instructor stated the university definitely had no strategy. Another stated that press releases are also published via social media channels but rather than there being a strategy, there is "navigation by eyesight"; meaning you look as far as your eyes see, but there is no long-distance goal. At TUB a social media strategy will soon be implemented. An instructor, who was thoroughly involved in the area (working in the E-learning Centre), stated: "Now the focus is on better teaching methods and that is why e-Learning has become important". The other instructors did not know whether there was a social media strategy. Two of them pointed towards various social media activities at TUB but were not sure if there is a systematic strategy behind it.

As for the question about their suggestions for a Social Media strategy, the Turkish instructors provided following insights:

- We can use technology as a powerful network for knowledge sharing. In-service training opportunities are needed for all instructors;
- A top-down and step-by-step strategy should be implemented for academic usage;
- A general course about social media can be provided to students like computer literacy courses. A culture can be established in this way and users will get used to it;
- Firstly, all instructors should become social media users. Moreover, I would expect the university to develop non-commercial social media environments;
- I use social media to develop communication between students and alumni. There should be a social media for academic purposes used only by universities;
- Special interest groups or learning communities should be set up for social natural engineering. By sharing creative experiences, a cumulative know-how can be created. Hidden experiences can be transformed into informative and meaningful information;
- Using top-down and bottom-up approaches continuously and providing training opportunities through e-Learning, everybody can be equipped with the necessary information and skills. But only by considering volunteers;
- There should be a system approach to support symposiums, conferences etc. to form databases and increase collaboration;
- First perceptions should change. If an encouragement strategy is implemented, and instructors share their experiences and thoughts, especially good examples and success stories, it would be useful;
- Everybody should use social media actively and regularly. Technical infrastructure should be enhanced and resources should be accessible at any time and from anywhere. For example, while doing my post-doctorate in a different country, I could search the library from my smart phone through an application, and libraries are open here 24x7 and full of people even at night.

Most of the suggestions were at an individual level rather than being institutional. Therefore, it is suggested that the starting point for implementing such a strategy would be at the individual level rather than the institutional level.

On the other hand, the suggestions made by the German instructors were as follows:

- We should make what makes sense. Teaching and research should be placed at the centre of our attention. Technology is not an aim in itself;
- We should use social media to allow more participation from both students and staff;
- Future instructors should be told what is expected from them in this area when hired;
- The primary focus should be on good teaching.

Based on the findings, it can be concluded that there are no strategies regarding social media use in the sample universities. Although participants from the Turkish and German universities gave some suggestions, the Russian and Swiss participants had none. In the following we will expand the focus to other universities and scientific literature.

Results of literature and web search

Blazer (2012) had some recommendations for the establishment of social networking policies in school districts including:

1. Develop an appropriate usage policy for social networking,
2. Develop strategies for preventing, identifying, and responding to cyber bullying,
3. Adhere to federal guidelines governing students' Internet use,
4. Start with a pilot programme,
5. Try out different social networking sites,
6. Consider using specially designed education-based social networking sites,
7. Provide teachers with training on the use of social networking in the classroom, and
8. Develop strict guidelines for student-teacher communications.

On the other hand, there are some universities which have already developed their own strategy and started implementation. For example, Vanderbilt University has a "Social Media Handbook" containing a "Social Media Strategy Worksheet". They are pioneers in social media usage, and the handbook has parts like: How Vanderbilt is Using Social Media, Important Policies: Read These First, Getting Started, Tell Us About It! and Best Practices for a Successful Social Media Presence (http://web.vanderbilt.edu/resources/social-media-handbook/). While looking at social media strategy worksheet, it is seen that the strategy is intended for general purposes, and not specifically for educational purposes.

University of Cincinnati also has a "Social Media Strategy" (http://www.uc.edu/content/dam/uc/ucomm/docs/UC-Social-Media-Strategy.pdf). Their overall strategy is "to coordinate and strengthen the university's social media efforts and to incorporate social media as an integral part of an overall communications strategy". Their goals are to:

• "Build a collaborative university-wide social media environment.
• Strengthen UC's brand and improve UC's reputation.
• Recruit and retain students, faculty and staff.
• Build a culture of philanthropy.
• Establish social media as an official emergency and crisis communication resource".

However, none of the goals address the use of social media in teaching-learning processes.

Tufts University provides a template for their social media strategy (http://webcomm.tufts.edu/wp-content/uploads/SocialMediaStrategyTemplateFINAL.pdf). The university states that the purpose of Tufts University social media strategy is to ensure that they:

• "Use social media as an integral part of an overall communications strategy at Tufts.
• Leverage current outlets while also maintaining a clear vision for how we can continue to engage new audiences as the landscape changes.

- Tell the Tufts story – stories that reflect the University's core values – and engage our audience in new and interesting ways.
- Support our schools, departments and offices at Tufts in their social media endeavours by providing guidance and best practices."

Tufts University also set up their goals for their Social Media Strategy. Some of the goals include ideas like: using a variety of social-media platforms that reach the university's various audiences to provide users with a sense of community, conveying the key messages of the University to a broad audience, enhancing the reputation for Tufts' social media presence, ensuring consistency in a style and approaches to social media across the institution, while recognizing the necessity to tailor tone and platforms to various constituencies, staying on top of trends and new technologies. But again, no items relate to the educational use of social media.

Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy and Silvestre (2011) presented a framework that defines social media by using seven functional building blocks, namely: identity, conversations, sharing, presence, relationships, reputation, and groups. They stated that various social media activities are defined by the extent to which they focus on some or all of these blocks. The researchers explained the implications that each block can have from a business point of view.

Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) provided a classification of social media that groups applications, currently subsumed under the generalized term, into the more specific categories by the following characteristics: collaborative projects, blogs, content communities, social networking sites, virtual game worlds, and virtual social worlds. Moreover, they provided some suggestions for companies which decide to utilize social media. Although characteristics, like collaboration, virtual games and blogs, are the ones that may also have some premises from an educational point of view, the researchers only revealed business use cases.

Hence, it is obvious that universities' social media strategies have been developed for guaranteeing "web presence" of the university and having different goals than serving for supporting educational processes, and other strategies are studies that are promising from a business point of view which will be addressed in the following section.

Examples of Social Media Strategies from Business

Social Media Strategy Framework

A framework proposed by the Advanced Human Technologies company is presented in Figure 1. The company states on their website (http://ahtgroup.com/services/social-media-strategies) that they use their Social Media Strategy Framework primarily to help their clients who are at the initial stage of engaging with social media to understand what is required to create a social media strategy. They also state that a "Social media strategy is unique to every organization, so in consulting engagements we always use the approach that is most relevant to the client's issues and situation".

Figure 1. Social Media Strategy Framework (www.ahtgroup.com)

The Framework begins with LEARN, divides in streams of ENGAGEMENT and STRATEGY DEVELOPMENT, that come together in the ongoing imperative to DEVELOP CAPABILITIES.

Social Media Strategy Transit Map

Another example is provided by Smiciklas (2010) and named as the Social Media Strategy Transit Map (http://www.intersectionconsulting.com/2010/social-media-strategy-transit-map/). This "social media commuter" guide maps out the five main strategy arteries as (Figure 2):

- Discovery;
- Strategy;
- Implementation;
- Management;
- Audit.

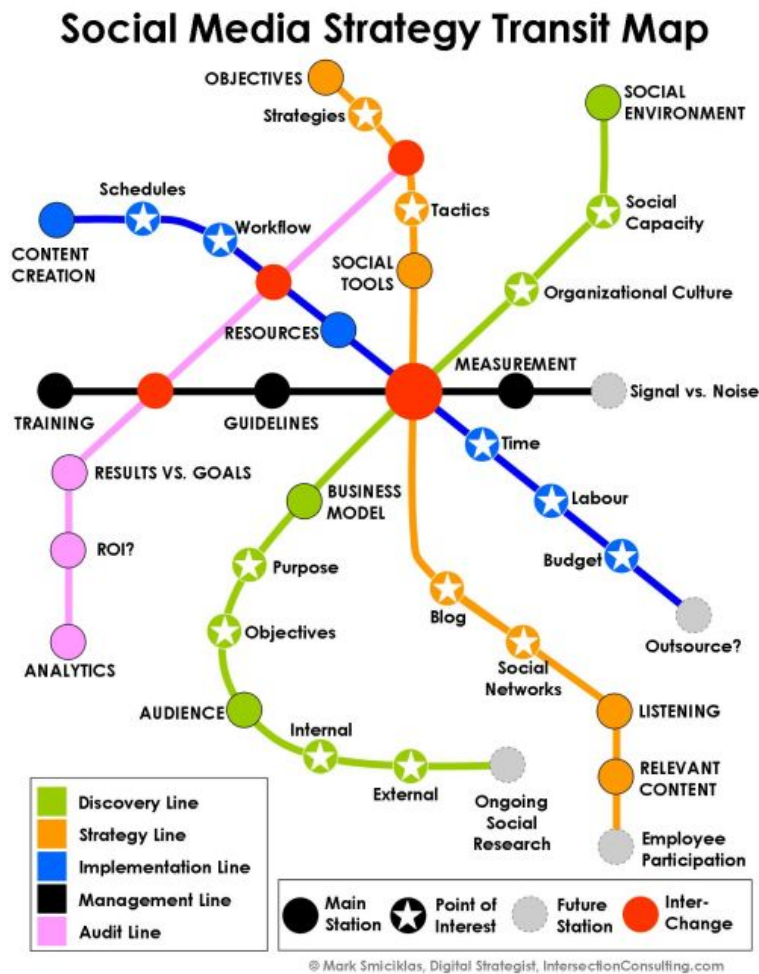The author asks readers whether and what stations they would add.

Figure 2. Social Media Strategy Transit Map Smiciklas (2010)

Framework for Social Media Strategy

From this point of view, our social media strategy will be the first attempt for defining a strategy to enhance educational use of social media with a focus on higher education institutions. On the base of the emerging themes of research articles, our research findings and suggestions made by instructors, and some templates provided from different universities, a framework for a possible SoMe Strategy has been developed by relating business scopes with educational aims. The proposed framework is shown in the mind map (Figure 3).
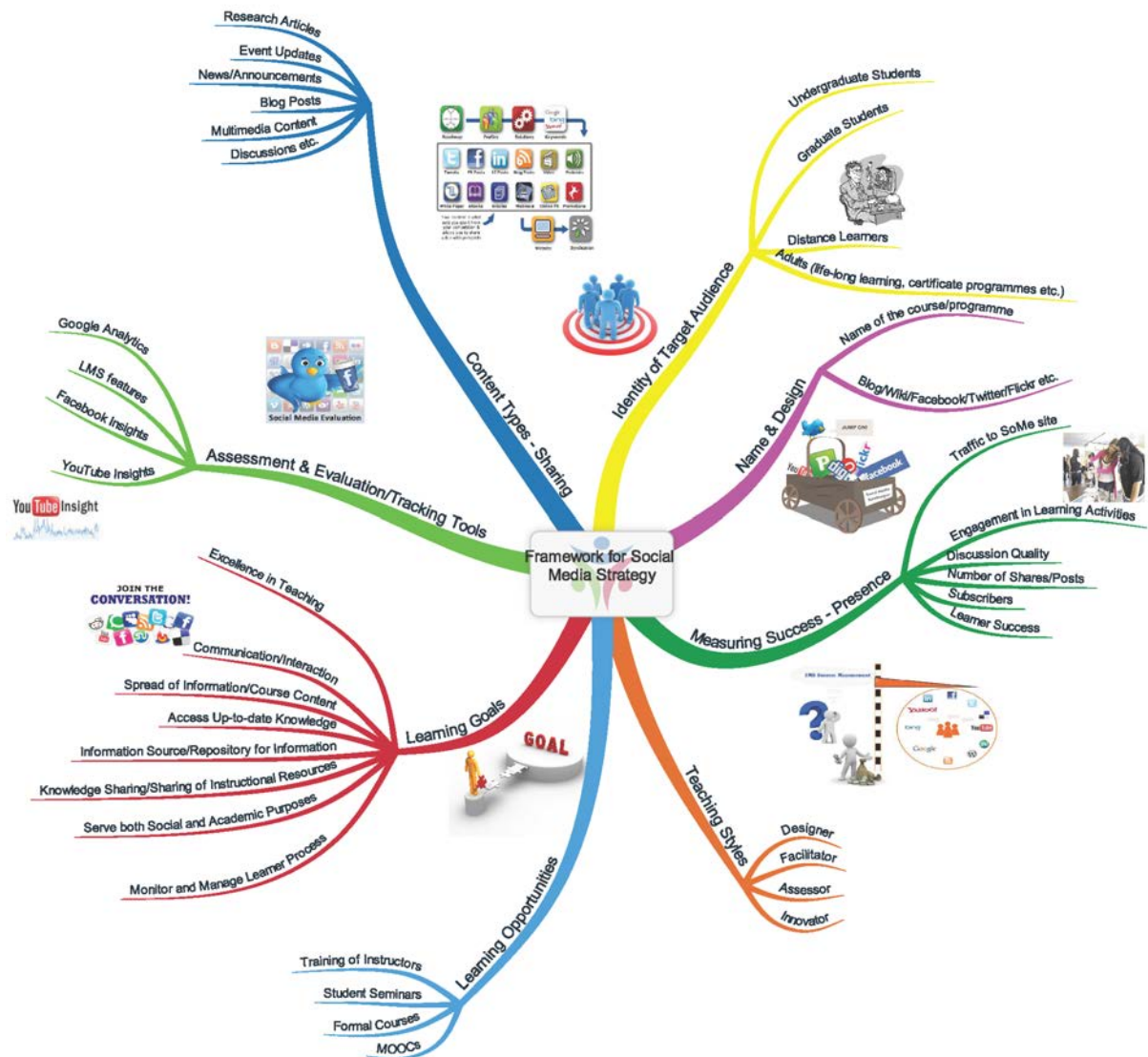
Figure 3. Framework for Social Media Strategy

The framework consists of 8 dimensions:

1. Identity of Target Audience,

2. Name & Design,

3. Measuring Success-Presence,

4. Teaching Styles,

5. Learning Opportunities,

6. Learning Goals,

7. Assessment & evaluation-Tracking Tools,

8. Content Types – Sharing.

For this framework, "Identity of Target Audience" was an important aspect since social media users in higher education will be adults. Adult learning theories, characteristics and SoMe preferences of higher education students are important inputs for any SoMe that will be used

in a higher educational context. "Learning Opportunities" was another important aspect since SoMe can be integrated into any kind of e-Learning types like blended learning, webinar and MOOCs. "Learning Goals" are important because learning outcomes can be in cognitive, affective or psychomotoric dimensions or require different learning levels like the classification of Bloom's Taxonomy. "Content Types – Sharing" aspect is important as the types of shared files will determine the SoMe category. "Teaching Styles" are important since SoMe is a learner-centred environment and instructors should be adhering to a constructivist approach (this finding is also revealed from our research). "Measuring Success-Presence" is important in terms of assessing whether the right decision has been made and implemented. "Name & Design", in other words the selected and implemented SoMe tool itself is important in terms of its interface, usability and educational uses provided to students. Finally, "Assessment & Evaluation-Tracking Tools" are important to monitor student progress and effectiveness of educational implementations in a SoMe environment.

Conclusion

This framework is provided to reveal possible determiners of an effective implementation of SoMe in educational contexts. Researchers hope that these findings will shed some light on this area for leaders of universities for implementing in SoMe Strategies, and will also be used to drive a Social Media Toolkit, currently being developed within the international research project, which is aimed to be a guide for instructors in their innovative teaching implementations.

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