Investigating Instructional Approaches for Utilizing Social Media in Distance Learning

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Abstract:

The social media has dominated the world around the globe in recent times. The use of interactive methods and social software may facilitate educators to engage learners than any traditional educational technology. Though online social media has gained high fame but still its usability for the faculty members and students in distance education is little. The present study examined the pedagogical strategies for the use of social media by the faculty members of different disciplines of Allama Iqbal Open University in Pakistan. It is an investigative study of existing practices, apprehensions, and perception of the teachers about the utilization of social media in teaching learning process. Ten faculty members contributed in the semi structured interviews about their observations and experiences utilizing the social media for instructional purposes. It is felt after analysis of the qualitative data that distant learners applying social media might be facilitated by their teachers for enriched conversation, boosted engagements, and extensive links. This study endows with qualitative practical support for distance learning through social media and offers approaches and illustrations for the use of social media in distance learning.

Key words: Social media; qualitative study; pedagogical practices; distance learning; social software

1. Introduction

Social media has become an addiction for the society about their every notion of feelings, individual and group photographs, personal & professional details within the circle made by an individual. Solis (2008) takes social media as a dialogue and two way conversation among the people that bring them closer for discovery and sharing of information. Social media is now very common and comes in the form of Face book, Twitter, YouTube, and LinkedIn with highly specialized tools of interaction (Selwyn, 2012). A gradual but remarkable raise in the use of social media is seen in current time. The statistics in December 2013, based on individual companies' the number of Face book users had crossed 1.19 Billion; LinkedIn reached 259 Million users ; Twitter touched over 232 Million users and Instagram went up to 150 Million users (Stout, 2013).

There can be many interpretations of social media. Merriam Webster Dictionary calls social media, "forms of electronic communications (as Web sites for social networking and micro blogging) through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages, and other content (as videos)". Another definition by Bryer and Zavatarro (2011): "Social media are technologies that facilitate social interaction, make possible collaboration, and enable deliberation across stakeholders. These technologies include blogs, wikis, media (audio, photo, video, text) sharing tools, networking platforms (including Face book), and virtual worlds."

This study aims to find out the usability of social media by faculty members in distance learning. It is probed that how do they allow students to connect in innovative and significant modes through the use of this new mode of interaction. The

center of attention of the study is to recognize the usability of such media among the faculty at higher education level, approaches they devise to incorporate social media in distance education, their concerns and the plans to restrain the concerns about the use of social media. The outcomes of the research will enhance the awareness level of the students about the positive use of social media in education in general and distance learning in particular and will recommend instructional approaches and standards to use these technologies in distance learning.

2. Review of Literature

It has become crucial for educational institutions over the years to keep up their pace with the knowledge spread around them and their sources too. Information technology has made the opportunities to grab knowledge for the learner in such a way that the barrier of time and space is removed. Education through social media has attracted the attention of, researchers, academics, as well as educationists plotted within reach and affordability. (boyd & Ellison 2007).

2.1 Conceptual Framework: Constructivism and Connectivism theories and their application to social media
2.1.1 Constructivism
Cognitive development of any individual is carried out through social interaction of human beings with the society around them. The role of social interface is very important in the fundamental development of cognitive aspect of human development. The theory presented by Jean Piaget about the process of child development. He was of the view that development is the result learning. Piaget's point of view was rightly denied by Vygotsky who felt that social learning is the factual thing that precedes development. He gave the theory of

communal constructivism focused on the need of social constructivism through learning from community. He says "Every function in the child's cultural development appears twice: first, on the social level, and later, on the individual level; first, between people (inter psychological) and then inside the child (intra psychological)." (Vygotsky, 1978).

The belief of social learning was also presented in the 1960s (Vygotsky, 1978) through the theory of social constructivism. The theory stresses the need of careful engagement of students in problem solving activities under active supervision of teacher or supervisor (Vygotsky, 1978). Group work in close collaboration is the crucial characteristic of social learning. The monitoring and facilitation of instructor gives self control with confidence to the students for better understanding of problems and to take out better solution after analysis.

2.1.2 Connectivism

George Siemens (2004) offers a learning theory known as "connectivism" for this technological age. This theory is a successor to the theories of constructivism, cognitivism and behaviorism. Downes (2007) suggested that in this era of technological advancement, the theory of connectivism in which social learning is incorporated with the tools of social media. In this age of social media explosion, the learning activities are not a matter of an individual rather a common issue. "Now learners have the immunity to interact with the global world using Facebook, Wikipedia, Twitter, RSS, and other similar platforms. One of the principles of connectivism is that capacity to learn is more critical than what is currently known" (Siemens, 2004). Now responsibilities of faculty members have been increased many folds. "It is not just to define, generate, or assign content, but it is to help learners construct learning paths and make links with existing and new knowledge resources". (Anderson & Dron, 2011).

These above mentioned theories of social learning give very deep analysis of the duties of instructors to cope up with the social and technological advanced environment.

2.2 Social Media in Distance Learning

The most viable channel for increasing the boundaries of knowledge has been through distance learning. Distance learning not only solves the problems of access but the quality issues of education are also resolved through this. Distance Learning provides a great opportunity to the students to interact with not only learners of their age group but also for bringing responsibility in learning process (Calvert, 2006).

Due to rapid growth of distance education, a number of students are getting attracted towards this convenient mode of education (Allen & Seaman, 2010). Online distance learners are those whose learning is delivered and mediated by technology and who have little or no direct interaction with teachers and students of their level (Keegan, 2008). The importance of social media increases for distance learning students as they are far apart from their instructor and cannot interact with them. Social media provides them with an opportunity to be socially interactive with not only with their instructors but also with the community. Here students get connected socially and educationally to share information with each other and create closeness through taking help from social media (Educause learning initiative, 2007).

It is strongly believed that social media opens up new avenues as medium of instruction. It brings new convenient modes of affordability for students in respect of time space and money. Social media may be used as a strategy in distance education to decrease dropout rate of education at every level (Rovai, 2003; Woodley, 2004)]. It's a common thing in distance students that they are older than regular students in age (Rovai, 2003), one does not know about their proficiency to deal

with social media tools and their expertise in connecting those for distance learning.

There is a reservation about interaction of distance learning students with their peer group. Actually distance education is marked by flexibility and individual freedom is valued more among students of distance learning (Anderson, 2005; Caspi & Gorki, 2006) but other researchers think that, certainly, ease is the main source of motivation for the students to opt distance mode of learning (Poellhuber, 2005).

3. Methodology

This study was an investigative analysis of existing approaches, apprehensions, and perceptions of instructors for the usability of social media in distance education. In Pakistan, there are a few universities using the mode of distance learning. All the faculty members of these universities make the population of the study. Although, there is quite little research on the integration of social media in distance education, a qualitative research was conducted through semi structured interviews. Interviews were conducted and all respondents were asked questions about their strategies for communication, evaluation and their views regarding benefits and concerns for the usability of social media in distance education. There were also questions in the interview protocol to take suggestions of the participants regarding issues generated while using social media.

4. Data Collection

Using the random sampling technique, we chose 10 faculty members to interview. They were contacted on telephone in December 2013. The interviewees were from three universities, two of these covering the whole country. These were Allama Iqbal Open University and Virtual University of Pakistan.

5.   Data Analysis

There were 08 questions, included in the 'interview schedule'. The researcher, personally, conducted the interview of 10 faculty members from distance education universities of Pakistan and recorded the responses in the systematic way. All responses, given by the faculty members were pooled together on each question, separately. Responses were categorized in terms of their nature and frequency. Keeping in view the commonality of matter in the responses, frequency counts were shown against each element. On the basis of these frequency counts, an objective summary was prepared to show the overall reaction of the sample to each question. All questions were dealt, in the same way and conclusions were drawn accordingly.

6.   Results

Q 1: Which tools of social media have been used by you for instructional purpose in distance learning?

Objective summary
All respondents were using social media in distance learning for instructional purposes. On the whole, 20 types of responses were given by the faculty of the universities of distance learning. After categorization, it was inferred that the entire faculty was using 'Facebook' as a tool for instructional purposes. In addition to facebook the use of 'Skype' was the practice of two of the faculty members while the remaining three tools 'LinkedIn, Twitter and Google Blogs' were being used by one faculty member in each case. The faculty also discussed about the relevancy of social media with distance learning. One of the faculty members was also using webnire. It was concluded that the 'Facebook' was the social media tool, being used by the majority of respondents, included in the sample.

Q 2: Which strategies have been used by you using the tools of social media?

Objective Summary

Discussion groups and sharing of information were the strategies used by 100% of the faculty members. Additionally, blogs were used by 40% of the respondents while 10% were involved in the activity of assignments receiving and return of evaluated assignments through social media. Some of the participants were involved in the activities of hiring of resource persons among their fresh graduates. On the whole, it was found that discussion groups and sharing of information were the activities done by most of the participants.

Q 3: Which strategies have been used by you to assess these strategies?

Objective Summary

The interviewees were investigated about the assessment strategies they were used to evaluate the activities of social media. Most of them were not using social media for assessment purpose. They were of the view that in Pakistan the usability of social media is not mandatory in teaching. They were using social media personally for their and students' convenience. They suggested that it would be easy to assess the activities of social media if there were some soft wares for evaluation. Only 10% of the participants were using social media for assessment of assignments on their own.

Q 4:   In your opinion which benefits do you identify for using these tools of social media in distance learning?

Objective Summary

All of the respondents conversed about the benefits of using social media in distance education. They took benefit of the Web

2.0 technologies to get the response of students. Some faculty members considered social media as the additional classroom for distant learners and they can be benefitted from different means by using audios, videos and images. Moreover, the social media networks are suitable approaches for instructors and students to maintain their collaborations. Most faculty members added that social media was very useful tool for shy students who did not participate in face to face teaching component. According to some of the participants it was easy to scale up the responses of the students on social media. They were of the view that it is time saving, economical and instant way of taking responses from distant learners. Faculty perceived that it increases the classroom diameter and availability of multi experts was become possible. They believed that learners especially the distant learners were in touch with their Facebook account and checking blogs were part of their daily routine.

Q 5: In your opinion which concerns do you identify for using these tools of social media in distance learning?

Objective Summary

The participants also discussed their concerns about social media. They said that in Pakistan, energy crises was the main issue of using any electricity related technology. Limited resources of the students was another concern, they shared. Those students who had computers and access to internet were addicted to use social media and wasted time unnecessarily. Privacy and security were also the concerns of most of the faculty members. The internet provides such environment where no one can get command over others to post anything on internet. Most of the users are quiet young and they are not familiar with their future apprehension and they upload quite useless things. One participant may think that those students

who do not get any learning may lose their learning environment and the vice versa and these tools provide more entertainment and is also very supportive for the learning. There are students who mentioned that many of us have deep concerns as far the security is concerned.

Q 6: What are the effects on learning outcomes of the students after using social media?

Objective Summary

Most of the participants hoped that use of social media can have positive academic impact on learning outcomes if the use of these technologies will remain positive. Three of them said that integration of social media in distance learning can boost up the process of leaning of distance learners and create an environment of competition among them.

Q 7: Which more technologies the instructors might use in teaching and learning process?

Objective Summary

Mobile technologies such as ipad, ipod, tablets and mobiles were the technologies the instructors can use in teaching and learning process, in opinion of most of the respondents. One of the faculty members said that the IT related technologies will hijack the education system and the use of sms technology might be in use in future for educational purposes. She is of the view that some softwares will be introduced in near future that could be used with the help of computer technology. Another participant gave his view that 'webnire' was the latest technology in which groups can be formed and multiple users can interact with each other at the same time. This technology will flourish in future in distance education.

Q 8: What suggestions you want to offer concerning the problems of using social media in distance education?

Objective Summary

The participants gave many suggestions concerning the problems of using social media in distance education. "Keep it interesting and take it serious" it was the view of most of them. One participant said, "Use social media with its beauty". Most participants were of the opinion that as a teacher the interest of the students was more important to them and the main target of teaching was the effective learning outcomes. To achieve these outcomes social media should be used as a big weapon in the form of technology. Some of them were in favour of positive use of social media tools in teaching. Time limitations and technology obstacles were big issues among the faculty members.

7. Discussion

This study reflects that educated people use social media for their instructional purpose even in distance learning program. Internet is such a limitless and wonderful means of learning it directly reflects the human curiosity about learning. Internet can provide textual knowledge that leads to the authentic world issues to resolve appropriately. However they improve their learning by facing many challenges in an individual manner.

Social media and other related tools can be responsible to refresh learning and teaching relationship between teacher and student. The present study points out that instructors use social media as an instructional approach in distance learning activities. Social media gives them the capability to break the constraints of the courses, facilitates them for up to date and joint interactions, assists in communal constructive environment and joins the knowledge of course books with real problems. The participants also monitor drawbacks, such as

security and privacy issues for teachers and students. Learning has many dimensions and even the most problematic area in leaning can be resolved by the common mutual interaction. The modern concept about the teacher is now plays a part as a facilitator by becoming a subject specialist. Student can learn very effectively by adopting this methodology.

Training is essential for the teachers to get possible learning outcomes so that they may know the social learning theory and minimize the distance between teacher and students. They expect from their institutions to provide advanced technology.

Conclusion

Integrate social media as an instructional strategy to assist informal discussions and teamwork. Assess students' approaches through social media for their expertise. Use social media as additional tool or additional teaching strategy in distance learning. Keep social media interesting for the purpose of teaching. If the students are not willing to participate due to lack of resources or any other reason give them alternative assignments. Train students about the issues of privacy and security for uploading personal information on social media. Use social media with its beauty.

In respect of social media, there is need of more research and training to be conducted to achieve better out comes. Inspite, there are different tools of social media such as Facebook, Twitter, you tube and some other social networks, another source is needed that can provide the opportunity to the students around the world to interact and share information with each other in more convenient ways.

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