Chapter 14

New Social Media Agendas for Teaching and Learning in Libraries

Michelle Kowalsky
Rowan University, USA

Bruce Whitham
Rowan University, USA

ABSTRACT

This chapter reviews the current literature on the types of social media practices in college and university libraries, and suggests some new strategic agendas for utilizing these tools for teaching and learning about the research process, as well as other means to connect libraries to their users. Library educators continually hope to “meet students where they are” and use social media to “push” library content toward interested or potential university patrons. One new way to improve engagement and “pull” patrons toward an understanding of the usefulness of licensed resources and expert research help is through the channels of social media. By enhancing awareness of library resources at the point of need, and through existing social relationships between library users and their friends, libraries can encourage peer interaction around new research methods and tools as they emerge, while increasing the use of library materials (both online and within the library facility) in new and different ways.

INTRODUCTION

As libraries seek the attention of users who have search engines at their fingertips and continuous connectivity with others on their mobile devices, they need to find new ways to engage their university community in resources beyond those that are free on the Web. Licensed journals and database subscriptions, as well as e-books and the services of expert research librarians, provide a window into the scholarly content on which high-level professionals, academics, and scholars base their daily work.

While many people may be content to have information served to them by their favorite media outlet or their network of friends, libraries attempt to break people out of these passive routines of consumption by providing a range of...
resources containing alternative viewpoints and data for decision-making. Learning to interpret these resources is the primary task of any college or university student, and one which librarians believe can be facilitated by social media.

Academic libraries are undergoing rapid transformation, away from a library centric model to a user based model focused on skills, knowledge, and relationships with faculty, staff, and students. Objectives include an emphasis on ensuring students can find resource and can make informed and critical evaluations regarding quality and relevancy. Success more than ever requires methods that engage students who are highly connected to social networks.

Social media users of all ages, by their very nature, now possess an enhanced capacity to self-organize and to provide for themselves (Selwyn, 2012, p. 3). Libraries can assist users with research by capitalizing on their interest in self-reliance, or more accurately their interest in technology-reliance, by providing avenues of social media which both teach information skills and promote use of library resources. The return on investment in implementing and maintaining social media initiatives for libraries, especially in their effects on university community engagement and learning, is often priceless.

The impact of social media in libraries, according to the research, is mixed at best. Social media seems to be most useful as a strategy for increasing awareness more than a mechanism for delivering instruction or a method for achieving learning outcomes. Social media has been documented in the library literature as improving libraries’ connectivity to their patrons, or users, and providing better access to targeted groups who might benefit from the library’s resources or services. Yet the literature also shows that social media is not as effective for quantitative measures of assessment, especially given the numerous variables and outcome effects generated. Qualitative and anecdotal evidence, however, is readily available for libraries using social media to expand their reach, and it is a useful way to document the scope and sequence of these activities.

This chapter aims to identify a variety of teaching and learning agendas for libraries which can be served via multiple social media tools, both now and in the future. In this way, libraries will not feel compelled to react to each new trend without critical consideration, but rather will be able to develop and categorize multiple efforts towards maximum impact in assessing library outreach as well as institutional learning about research.

**BACKGROUND**

Social media as understood by libraries is a broad phenomenon intimately related to widespread use of wireless Internet and handheld devices. Boyd and Ellison (2008) define social network sites as “web-based services that allow individuals to

1. Construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system,
2. Articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and
3. View and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system” (p. 211).

The nature and nomenclature of these connections may vary from site to site, but their basic functions remain similar; people want to know what their friends and aspirant peers are doing, thinking, and deciding.

The Pew Research Center’s Internet and American Life Project has been conducting research on topics related to Internet use since 2000, and has provided a variety of this data for review on their website. Since worldwide technology trends are often on the minds of library professionals, a