Using WhatsApp for Teaching a Course on the Education Profession: Presence, Community and Learning

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ABSTRACT

Social media has gained popularity in the realm of education. However, little research has examined empirically the extent to which students interacting using social media experience a different level of social presence, sense of community and perceived learning compared to those interacting face-to-face. As many as 100 students who were taking a course on Education Profession at the Department of Primary School Teacher Education at Halu Oleo University were recruited for this study. The students were randomly divided into two groups: Group one attended conventional face-to-face classroom instruction over the course of seven weeks and Group two used WhatsApp for learning. Questionnaires measuring social presence, sense of community and perceived learning were pre- and post-tested, followed immediately by interviews. The WhatsApp group reported a stronger sense of community, but both groups experienced an equal level of social presence and perceived learning. Reported benefits of WhatsApp far outnumbered its drawbacks.

KEYWORDS

Mobile, Perceived Learning, Sense of Community, Social Media, Social Presence, WhatsApp

INTRODUCTION

Defined as “technologies that facilitate social interaction, make possible collaboration, and enable deliberation across stakeholders” (Bryer and Zavattaro, 2011 p. 327), social media is entrenched in the lives of today’s generation of students known as ‘digital natives’ (Prensky, 2001). Digital native students become used to using social media for various purposes – learning, working and socializing with peers. Research studies suggest that the majority of this generation of students enjoys using the new technology for learning (Alberth, 2018; Balakrishnan, Teoh, Pourshafie, & Liew, 2017; Scott, DOI: 10.4018/IJMBL.2020010102

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2016). In fact, it has been claimed that the participatory web is especially appropriate for teaching the generation of digital native students (Vassileva, 2008).

One of the most frequently cited benefits of social media in the realm of education is that it promotes social interaction among social media users (Al-Rahmi & Othman, 2013; Vollum, 2014). However, little research has actually examined empirically, using an experimental research design, the extent to which using social media, such as WhatsApp, may impact on students’ levels of social presence, sense of community and perceived learning. Many of the claims in the literature appear to have been based on either anecdotal evidence or mere assumption. Understanding how the use of social media may impinge on the above variables is vital as they are all critical to success in learning.

In the following sections, the use of social media in higher education will be discussed, followed immediately by a discussion on social presence, sense of community research questions, methods, findings, discussion and conclusion respectively.

SOCIAL MEDIA IN HIGHER EDUCATION

The potential of social media in higher education has been widely recognized (Alberth, Mursalim, Siam, Suardika, & Ino, 2018; Graham, 2014; Manca & Ranieri, 2015). In fact, there appears to be a shared belief regarding the merits of social media in this particular context, despite a lack of empirical evidence. The popularity of social media is attributed primarily to the fact that students are so familiar with technology and that it is perceived as free and technically simple (Bexheti, Ismaili, & Cico, 2014). However, the decision to incorporate social media into higher education should be based on rigorous research evidence, rather than on its mere omnipresence or simplicity.

With social media, students can interact with classmates and teachers, post comments, respond to comments posted by others, post learning materials or links to learning materials, etc. Learning materials can be in various forms – e-books, journal articles, PowerPoint slides, PDF or Doc files, pictures, notes, audio, videos and so forth. These files can even be posted directly to a WhatsApp group. Such social learning environments could help learners to find the right content that suits their needs, connect with the right people with whom they feel comfortable to work, and motivate them to learn through the provision of engaging learning environments (Vassileva, 2008). Since learners can post links to relevant learning materials, social media contributes potentially to significant changes from teachers generating teaching materials to students creating materials themselves (Cochrane, Guinibert, Simeti, Brannigan & Kala, 2014). Thus, social media provides students with “…the opportunities and ‘power’ to create, collaborate and share ideas and information in an open fashion, all of which are important facets for nurturing student development” (Graham, 2014 p. 16). In other words, integrating social media in a course encourages students “to become creators and publishers – a very active way to learn” (Callens, 2014, p. 19).

The challenge for the teacher is to ensure that discussion on the social media is relevant to course objectives, course materials, assignments and assessments (Callens, 2014). Through social interaction mediated by social media, each individual student can contribute to the establishment of shared knowledge (Al-Rahmi et al., 2015). Reading postings from classmates may help other members to reflect on the topic of discussion more deeply, thus promoting critical thinking and the construction of new knowledge. Additionally, the use of social media appears to reduce psychological barriers between the students and the lecturer. Research shows that students who befriend their lecturers on Facebook are inclined to feel comfortable to communicate with them (Davis, Deil-Amen, Rios-Aguilar, & Canche, 2012). Thus, the use of social media appears to boost social interaction, social presence and sense of community.

Al-Rahmi, Othman, Yusof and Musa (2015) examined the link between social media usage and academic performance at Universiti Teknologi Malaysia. It was found that the use
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