



“Yes for sharing, no for teaching!”: Social Media in academic practices



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 25 March 2015

Received in revised form 16 December 2015

Accepted 18 December 2015

Available online 19 December 2015

Keywords:

Social Media

Higher education

Digital scholarship

Personal use

Teaching use

Professional use

ABSTRACT

This study aims at providing empirical evidence on how higher education scholars are using Social Media for personal, teaching and professional purposes. A survey tool was addressed to the entire Italian academic staff, with a response rate of 10.5% corresponding to 6139 responses. The study takes into account a number of socio-demographic variables such as gender, age, numbers of years of teaching, academic title, and academic discipline. It also explores the relationship between the different kinds of use, the relationship between frequency of use of Social Media and online and/or blended teaching, as well as the use of institutional e-learning systems. The results show that Social Media use is still rather limited and restricted and that the variable most associated with frequency of use is scientific discipline. In addition, age and seniority seem to influence the adoption of Social Media. The results also revealed that frequency of personal use is mostly associated with the frequency of professional use more than with the frequency of teaching use. They also show that prior experience with e-learning or blended learning is greatly associated with Social Media use. Overall, the study emphasises a generally more favourable attitude towards personal sharing and connecting with peers in professional networks rather than integrating these devices into their teaching practices.

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1. Introduction

Social Media are becoming increasingly popular in the research on the potential of Social Media for higher education. Specific attention has been paid to the use of tools such as Blogs, Wikis, YouTube and social network sites like Facebook or Twitter (Avcı & Askar, 2012; Gao, Luo, & Zhang, 2012; Manca & Ranieri, 2013; Ng'ambi & Lombe, 2012; Trentin, 2009). Several studies have reported positive affordances for teaching and learning (Brady, Holcomb, & Smith, 2010; Junco, 2012; Mbatha, 2014), underlining that an increased use of Social Media in higher education would lead to reconnecting academic institutions to the new generations of students (Karvounidis, Chimos, Bersimis, & Douligeris, 2014).

On the one hand, attitudes and actual and intended uses of Social Media for teaching have been analysed (Ajjan & Hartshorne, 2008; Brown, 2012; Moran, Seaman, & Tinti-Kane, 2011, 2012; Rogers-Estable, 2014; Ulrich & Karvonen, 2011), emphasising ambivalent results towards the benefits and challenges of these tools in higher education, with obstacles prevailing over advantages (see also Manca & Ranieri, *under review*). On the other hand, the increasing role of Social Media in professional development of academic staff is revealed by the persistent attention that these tools are gaining in the field of digital scholarship and in the ways social technologies are transforming academic

work and identity (Barbour & Marshall, 2012; Conole, Galley, & Culver, 2011; Esposito, 2013; Greenhow & Gleason, 2014; Jordan, 2014; Nentwick & König, 2014; Veletsianos & Kimmons, 2012, 2013; Weller, 2011).

However, despite the claims about the affordances that these tools would provide for educational innovation and professional development, it is still questioned whether and why faculty are or not using them in their teaching and professional practices. To advance in the investigation of plausible reasons that could explain academic attitudes towards Social Media, we rely on Cuban's (2001) influential work on the adoption of new technologies in educational settings, aimed at understanding why technologies were generally “oversold” but “under-used” in education. In his study on schools and universities in the Silicon Valley, the Northern American scholar found that there is no direct link between personal and professional uses of innovative technologies, on the one hand, and their use for teaching, on the other. Teachers and professors had access to information technologies both at home and on campus; they intensively used these technologies for their research and to communicate in their scholarly discipline, but not to deliver instruction. Interestingly, this reluctance was not simply due to technophobic attitudes, otherwise teachers and professors would not have adopted new technologies for personal and professional lives. It seemed to pertain more to the (internal and external) contexts that teachers interacted with. It was the range of beliefs and attitudes they had about teaching and learning to determine teachers' and professors' choices to innovate their teaching practices and the learning practices of their students.

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With this in mind, we aim at exploring the relationship between different purposes of use of Social Media by academic scholars in order to assess what kind of connection exists between the different uses, and whether the adoption of these tools for personal reasons also reflects their teaching and professional choices. Through this study, we do not take for granted that faculty staff should adopt Social Media for teaching. Our attention is more focused on understanding what types of use are more common and what kind of relationship exists between them. The interest of this issue is strictly linked to what we have learnt from Cuban (2001): if there still exists a divorce between home and university in terms of academics' technological practices, it is worth reflecting on the reasons that are preventing full adoption of new technologies in higher education. In the following, we first introduce the theoretical and methodological framework of the study, and then we describe and discuss the results and their implications.

2. Literature review

2.1. Scholars between personal and professional uses of Social Media

Over the last ten years, the proliferation of Social Media has represented one of the most significant phenomena in the history of Information and Communication Technologies. Global surveys (ITU, 2014) report an increasing use of Social Media tools among adults, especially in the United States (Duggan, Ellison, Lampe, Lenhart, & Madden, 2015) and in Europe (TNS Opinion & Social, 2012). Social Media applications are seen as drivers of Internet use, since increasingly people create and share their contents through Social Media platforms.

The progressive adoption of Social Media tools is also affecting the current practices of academics and higher education teachers (Moran et al., 2012), including generalist or specialised social networking sites such as Facebook or ResearchGate, media-sharing platforms like YouTube and content creation services such as Blogs or Wikis. As pointed out by Boyer in his seminal work (Boyer, 1990), traditional dimension of scholarship (discovery) has been broadened to include also integration, application and teaching practices. This implies that scholarship would allow public sharing and the opportunity for application and evaluation by others. From this perspective, Social Media may provide a public arena where to accommodate the social demands of general and specialised publics.

However, the levels of adoption for professional and teaching purposes lag behind that for personal use. In Moran et al.'s (2012) study Facebook is the most visited Social Media site for personal use, with over one half of faculty visiting at least monthly. Daily use of Facebook exceeds the daily, weekly and monthly uses of any other site by faculty for personal purposes. As far as professional use of Social Media is concerned, a comparison of results of the survey administered in previous years shows that while in 2011 Facebook was the most visited site for faculty professional purposes, by 2012 this had been replaced by LinkedIn. The use of Facebook for professional purposes dropped, while the usage of LinkedIn increased over the one-year period. In addition, Veletsianos and Kimmons (2013) explored how social networking sites are generally used positively for professional purposes, but the values embedded in such tools are the object of resistance or rejection when transferred to teaching. In the next section the reasons associated with the tensions and challenges related to the adoption of Social Media for teaching are presented.

2.2. Tensions and challenges to incorporate Social Media into teaching

Many studies have reported positive affordances of Social Media for teaching and learning in higher education (Brady et al., 2010; Junco, 2012; Mbatha, 2014; Sadaf, Newby, & Ertmer, 2012), but also disadvantages or problematic issues (Bennett, Bishop, Dalgarno, Waycott, & Kennedy, 2012; Hew & Cheung, 2013; Selwyn, 2011). Several scholars present critical positions (James, 2014; Kirschner & Karpinski, 2010;

Paul, Baker, & Cochran, 2012) or caution against the possible tensions that may be generated by the incorporation of participatory practices linked to Social Media into formal contexts of learning (Crook, 2012; Merchant, 2012). Indeed, when considering teaching practices based on the use of social platforms, higher education instructors should confront a number of issues relating to their previous experience with educational technologies, their expectations and their pedagogical beliefs and practice (Ajjan & Hartshorne, 2008; Brown, 2012; Scott, 2013; Veletsianos & Kimmons, 2013; Veletsianos, Kimmons, & French, 2013).

Ajjan and Hartshorne (2008), for instance, found that most respondents have a positive attitude towards the adoption of Social Media as a teaching tool. However, only a minority were using or planning to use these. Scarcely perceived usefulness and low compatibility with current practices were the main obstacles mentioned. Perceived usefulness was also found relevant in a study of Rogers-Estable (2014), who showed that declared uses of Social Media by teachers did not match the reported benefits, concluding that faculty use of Web 2.0 tools in education was obstructed, if not prevented, by extrinsic (e.g. time, training and support), rather than intrinsic (e.g. beliefs, motivation and confidence) factors. Veletsianos et al. (2013) highlighted how social platforms are usually framed by the ways other tools, such as Learning Management Systems, are experienced, thus contrasting with the argument that social software might contribute benefits to educational practice. While prior experience may affect, though not prevent, teachers taking up e-learning and social network sites, gender and age may also influence aptitudes and dispositions towards Social Media. Age was found important in the survey of Moran et al. (2012), according to which younger faculty use Social Media in their teaching more than older faculty do. In this study, seniority is found to be a factor influencing Social Media adoption, where young faculty members (under age 35) use Social Media at much higher rates than older faculty do. With reference to the scientific discipline, Dahlstrom (2012) found that adoption may vary across disciplines with faculty in the humanities and arts, professions and applied sciences, and the social sciences using Social Media more than those in natural sciences or mathematics and computer science. Also in the survey of Moran et al. (2012) it emerged that faculty who teach in the humanities and arts have the highest rates of use while those in the natural sciences the lowest.

2.1. Social Media for professional opportunities

Several studies have focused on the role and function of Social Media in scholarly lives (Greenhow & Gleason, 2014; Grudz, Staves, & Wilk, 2012; Li & Greenhow, 2015; Veletsianos, 2012, 2013). Some authors (Fitzmaurice, 2013; Forkosh-Baruch & Hershkovitz, 2012; Kirkup, 2010; Kjellberg, 2010) found that when using Social Media, including social network sites, academics seem to be more engaged, and in more effective ways, with colleagues interested in their scholarship. Their Social Media related practices are linked to professional identity since the former allow them to become "public intellectuals" (Kirkup, 2010), to increase visibility outside (Forkosh-Baruch & Hershkovitz, 2012) or enhance their professional identity (Fitzmaurice, 2013). Similarly, Kjellberg (2010) pointed out that one of the motivations for using Social Media is addressing multiple and diverse audiences.

Other scholars (Esposito, 2013; Greenhow & Gleason, 2014; Li & Greenhow, 2015; Veletsianos, 2012, 2013) have underlined the relevance of sharing that Social Media support. For instance, Veletsianos (2012) found that higher education scholars are using Twitter to share information and resources with colleagues or students, to request or provide assistance, to comment on other tweets or to network with peers to build their professional identity. In a similar vein, Greenhow and Gleason (2014) and Li and Greenhow (2015) suggested that among the main reasons for academics adopting Social Media are that their use enhances scholarly communication by strengthening relationships, facilitating research collaboration, publishing and reflecting on ideas, disseminating information, and discussing issues in an open and

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