Designing curriculum to shape professional social media skills and identity in virtual communities of practice

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ABSTRACT

A broad range of professional communicators employ social media as a professional practice; however research indicates that it has yet to become a prevalent component in professional writing courses. Additionally, the competencies surrounding social media practices and the pedagogy to incorporate such competencies are not well established. Compounding this shortcoming is the problematized nature of social media technologies for learners as being a source of their personal identity; thus instructors must transform learners' everyday practices that inform their personal identity into professional practices that will inform their professional identity. This article reports on the first iteration of a four-year design-based study exploring the following research questions:

- What challenges might students face when transforming everyday social media practices into professional practice?
- How can social media technologies facilitate professional identity formation?

The results indicated that introducing professional social media skills into the curriculum provoked a significant amount of resistance on the part of learners. In general, the students lacked agency on social networks and required guidance when articulating modes of online authenticity. The study also discovered an alarming gap between students' everyday practices on social networks and professional practice. Through course inter-vention and reflexivity on the part of the students, final results demonstrated a remarkable growth in terms of research participants' beliefs, engagement, insights and goals regar-dingthe usage of social media.

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1. Introduction

Research has revealed a new concern with respect to the large number of communication professionals and professionals who communicate who are not prepared for the challenges that social media presents and who face a number of barriers due to a lack of social media knowledge and skills (Lariscy, Avery, Sweetser, & Howes, 2009; Macnamara, 2010; McKinsey, 2013;

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Moreno, Navarroa, Tenchb and Zerfass, 2015). In a global survey of over 3.500 executives, McKinsey (2013) found that among the most frequently used tools in corporate communication were social media technologies; for example, companies were using social technologies to interact with 38% of their customers and 50% of all external business partners (p.37). McKinsey also noted, "As in the previous two surveys, 90 percent of executives whose organizations use social technologies report some kind of measurable business benefit from this use with employees, customers, and business partners" (p. 37). Concerning in the survey, many corporate executives reported a number of risks associated with social media use, including the following: leaked confidential information, risk of inappropriate sharing of intellectual property, distracted employees, employees posting content that reflects negatively on the company, and inappropriate discussions using social technologies; only 6% of the executives reported no concerns regarding the risks. The issue for educators is that no comprehensive studies have fully examined the incorporation of a social media component into a professional writing course, identifying the barriers, skills, and processes that facilitate or foster the professionalization of the tools for learners and enable them to use these technologies both appropriately and strategically.

The goal of this study was to systematically study how to design an effective learning environment for the integration of social media technologies. The study involved the developing, testing, investigating, and refining of a yearlong professional writing course. This article reports on the initial iteration of the study. First, we present our definition of social media to orient the reader before turning to the need for this research followed by our research questions, methods, findings, and conclusions.

Defining social media is problematic. Carr and Hayes (2015) observed, "There is no commonly-7accepted definition of what social media are, both functionally and theoretically, within communication studies" (p. 49). For the purposes of this article, Carr and Hayes' (2015) definition of social media will be applied, since it avoids the complications of identifying specific tools and focuses more on the processes that the tools engender: "Social media are Internet-based channels that allow users to opportunistically interact and selectively self-present, either in real-time or asynchronously, with both broad and narrow audiences who derive value from user-generated content and the perception of interaction with others" (p. 50).

1.1. Social media as a professional tool

Social media practice itself is also problematic due to its often being misrepresented, misunderstood, and underutilized (Kent, 2013; Macnamara, 2010; Moreno et al, 2015; and Taylor & Kent, 2010). For example, Moreno et al. (2015) discovered that the bulk of social media use was actually "operational" in nature, i.e. the opening of accounts and uploading and delivery of web content, rather than "strategic" in nature, i.e. concerned with branding and trend analysis. Taylor and Kent (2010) also found that much of the information published, which advocated social media use, contained minimal reflection regarding the negative risks and issues (p. 213). Correspondingly, Kent (2013) claims that the bulk of social media "research" promoted by public relations firms is disguised advertising. They voiced concern that without any evidence that social media is effective or any practice-based evidence as to what works and does not work for professional practice, young professionals, from lack of experience, will most likely believe that the articles promoting social media, how to employ it and its importance, contain facts (p. 440). They feared that after reading professional literature promoting social media, students are likely to believe that they were ready to use social media as public relations experts (p. 440).

Furthermore, Macnamara (2010), in a review of the literature, found that "communicators are using social media and social networks in naive and even deceitful ways, causing considerable harm to the reputations of their organizations and their brands" (p. 24). Moreno et al. (2015) observed, "[A] lack of policies and guidelines on social media content, a lack of training and support provided to staff engaged in social media in most organizations, and a lack of social media strategies in organizations were found, which are inconsistent with the knowledge levels and role claims of PR and corporate communications practitioners" (p. 245). While some researchers believe that perhaps practitioners can self-educate (Kitchen & Panopoulos, 2010; Robson & James, 2011), a number of social media experts have described collecting analytics and drawing insights to create a social media strategy is the most important skill. Due to the disastrous consequences that can unfold when employing an inappropriate strategy, Macnamara (2010) warns against recklessly self-educating and entering the arena of social media in a professional capacity.

1.2. Social media as a curriculum component

Conversely, communication courses are not effectively preparing students to enter this arena; for example, Moshiri and Cardon (2014) conducted a nationwide study of 166 business communication courses to determine present trends on how business communication is being taught in higher education and one somewhat surprising finding was the limited number of courses that offered significant coverage of social media (p. 32). They reported, "Memos and letters continue to be the forms of written assignments more common than online discussion, blogs, wikis, and other social tools" (p. 32). Instruction was not including enough social media and online content to provide learners with the necessary skills for the 21st century workforce (Moshiri & Cardon, 2014, p. 32). They also noted that a number of articles in the Associated Business Communication journals had focused on the types of social media projects that could be incorporated into the curriculum rather than the issues that might occur when doing so. Educators need to consider a number of relevant issues: what are the criteria to determine the compatibility and relevance of tools, what are the barriers to performance, and what strategies can instructors utilize to gain competence in social media and an understanding of how to choose appropriate pedagogies for introducing it (Moshiri & Cardon, 2014, p. 323).