

Ethical concerns concerning the use of social media in education

The Higher Education Academy is currently running a series of practitioner workshops under the umbrella of “Changing the Learning Landscape” <http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/cll>. One of these workshops was organised by Teresa MacKinnon at the University of Warwick on the subject of social media in learning and teaching: its focus was making effective, safe, efficient and appropriate use of social media.

As part of the workshop, Steve Wheeler (Associate Professor of Learning Technology in the Faculty of Education at the University of Plymouth) and Mark Childs (Senior Research Fellow in Elearning at Coventry University and Loughborough University) ran a focus group encouraging participants to identify and share their leading concerns about the use of social media in their practice. The following four items were the leading ones that they shared with the group.

1. *A code of conduct or legislation is needed.* People felt exposed as educators without guidelines on how to use social media. With a code of conduct in place, those present felt that even if problems occurred then they would have the defence of being able to demonstrate adherence to the guidelines. That social media was seen as a particular source for problems in education is due to the potential of being permanently tagged with our digital trace. Sometimes self-censorship once social media are engaged with is more difficult than simply not taking part in online interaction at all. This is the reason why some people resist the use of social media completely, and given this it may not be considered fair to impose the use of social media on our students, as it opens up the possibility of them being put at risk in this way. The possibility that as a response to repeated exposure by social media, society itself will become more accepting of a range of different behaviours was raised, but viewed as optimistic. An opposing viewpoint was that, as technology becomes better at tailoring our social networks and our internet searches we become more and more subject to a filter bubble, and anything that doesn't adhere to our very select peer group as far as behaviour goes, is considered to be inappropriate. This would mean that, if social connections are imposed on our students through media, the potential for more cultural clashes of this sort will actually increase. A solution could be to completely lock down all communication to purely work-focused interactions, but research indicates that doing this severely undermines the ability of groups to interact online, as a social dynamic is important for building levels of trust since without it individuals are not representing themselves as fully-rounded “authentic” people. These issues therefore raise the importance of pseudonymity in online interactions as well as considerations of how we balance our professional identities versus authentic identities while online.

2. *Online harassment.* The second issue brought up was that of online harassment and the balance that needs to be struck between censorship and freedom of speech. The causes of cyberbullying were thought to be due to the cyberdisinhibition that comes with being online, particularly when people are anonymous. Expressed amongst the delegates was some bewilderment at the mentality of people who do harass others online, and there was seen to be a need to understand more the reasons why people do it, as without this understanding, addressing the issue would continue to be difficult. Previous experiences of cyberbullying are another reason why some students may be reticent to participate, and this can expose them to renewed harassment or cyberstalking. The problem of harassment can be limited by removing anonymity, but then this runs counter to the needs for pseudonymity stated above.

3. *Intellectual Property.* The third ethical issue discussed was that of IP of content in social media. There is a lack of awareness of who owns anything placed in social media and how to protect the intellectual property of students who use it. There is the precedence of shareware within online interactions, and creative commons, and perhaps intellectual property is not as important as it used to be, because we are more accepting of the concept that ideas are free. There is some opposition to this free sharing by colleagues but the general opinion expressed by the delegates that it is those who are more reticent to share ideas tend to be the weaker ones; the fewer ideas you have, the more jealously you guard them. Accrediting ideas in social media is also more difficult, and the accreditation is more likely to be separated from the content as posts, messages etc. are compiled and shared, but it was noted that people are more forgiving of accidental misuse and inadvertent plagiarism in social media.

4. *Authenticity of voice.* There were also issues about knowing who is whom online. There is spoofing of identities, sometimes inadvertent, and false claims of experience, sometimes for fraudulent reasons, sometimes to become part of a group, sometimes because of a syndrome known as Munchausen's by Internet (a version of Münchhausen's by proxy). It is important to remember, however, that many people only feel they can be themselves when online because their sense of self is at odds with their physical form, or because their immediate peer group cannot accept their true nature, which means their online identity is authentic, just different from their offline one. There are also a range of cultural reasons why people may need to perform in a particular way online (not using their real names, not using their image) and we should not enforce particular requirements on users, since it's impossible to anticipate what all of these issues may be.

Overall, the discussion highlights a growing awareness and confidence with knowing what the issues are, and in having experience of online interaction with social media from which to draw, but without an accompanying movement towards any answers. In short, the position of the educators is that there is a good understanding of what the problems are, but no sight of the solutions. Guidance, codes of conduct, and protection (and some leniency) for both staff and students is needed for the use of social media in education to grow.