SOCIAL MEDIA: IT'S WHAT STUDENTS DO

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In assessing the application of social media on the teaching of business communication, this article looks at MBA student use of blogs, online photo database contributions, and video contributions to YouTube channels. These assignments were part of their course activities, which included a 2-week study tour in China. The article looks at these activities within the context of the social constructivist view on learning in general. The student work provides evidence of the positive results that come from the use of social media, when viewed from the perspective of social constructivist theories for learning.

Keywords: *social media; social constructivism; study abroad*

THIS ARTICLE DISCUSSES SOME of the effects of social media on business communication pedagogy. Specifically, we will be sharing the experience and providing some analysis related to implementation of social media into MBA courses at the University of Texas at Austin. We begin by placing the use of social media within the broader theoretical context of social constructivism. Many principles of social constructivism coincide with the ways that social media enhances learning in our everyday lives. Second, we present the background and strategy behind the implementation of blogs, photo databases, and student-generated video clips assigned in an MBA course that included a 2-week study tour in China. We then end with some recommendations and observations for further implementation.

INTRODUCTION

A couple of years ago, I was invited to be a summer session visiting lecturer at a university in South America. Since I was planning to use a course blog to disseminate course materials, I asked about Internet access in the classrooms. The point of contact at this university informed me that students could not bring laptops into the classrooms because "it is disruptive to the instructor's lectures." To their credit, they were willing to work with me and made an exception, justifying the change by saying that the whole reason for having visiting professors was to expose students to new learning environments. Based on student feedback and course evaluations, the class went well and the students had positive comments about the "innovative technologies."

This anecdote is a pertinent introduction to this article because it demonstrates our reluctance in academic settings to try new approaches to learning, even when those approaches are generally accepted outside of academia. Second, it demonstrates that when we do try innovative strategies, often the students are already ahead of us in these matters.

A second anecdote by way of introduction: A few years ago, my teenage son was home playing a video game with five or six of his friends, one of those role-playing games that involve working your way from one location to another, fighting enemies along the way, and gathering items to make the players more powerful. Every so often, when they all got stuck, somebody would run to the computer and do a quick search for details about where to go and what they could pick up along the way. The group would then run back to the game and resume their quest. It was an impressive display of teamwork and online information gathering.

Coincidentally, it was about this same time when my son came home one night with a homework assignment from a science class; the teacher wanted students to color different items on a piece of paper and then cut them out. Compared with the group problem-solving dynamics of the video game, it was almost embarrassing to see what methods were being used to "teach" science to a teenager. No wonder it was difficult to convince my son to do his homework. This experience taught me just how much social media and innovative

technologies affect our learning and that, as educators, we would do well to pay more attention to them.

One of the strategies that we will suggest at the end of this article is to look at the ways that society interacts and communicates in general and then imitate similar strategies in learning and education. First, however, let us begin with a brief review of some of the theoretical ideas that serve as a foundation for the use of social media in teaching.

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIVISM

From a theoretical vantage point, blending social media and innovative technologies with business communication pedagogy results in a strong application of many of the concepts found within social constructivism, which already enjoys great popularity among educators (Bruner, 1990; Dewey, 1933; Piaget, 1972; Vygotsky, 1978). Those readers who are interested in a detailed review of the topic may wish to consult Koohang, Riley, Smith, and Schreurs (2009).

For social constructivists, knowledge is something that is constructed within a social context. People within a community help each other out, lend support, interact with one another, serve as shadow guides, and build on each others' progress. One of the major tenets is that this construction is always collaborative. This is to say, learning is not simply the memorization of information, but it is a situation where people construct their own meaning. This is also why social constructivism lends itself to student-centered learning. Learning works best when it takes place within a social context: It is an active and constructive process.

In looking at the features of social media and innovative technologies, we see that their strengths coincide with the principles espoused by social constructivists. Innovative technologies have the potential to promote active engagement, encourage people to work in groups, provide opportunities for feedback from a wide audience, and connect people to others who are knowledgeable in a host of areas (Fosnot, 2005; Jonassen, Peck, & Wilson, 1998). Indeed, the Internet has changed how people receive input, search for information, and share the outcomes of their efforts. A generation ago, we made

students memorize the names of the various state capitols. Nowadays, rather than memorize capitols, people simply look up information about those states. The focus has changed from the memorization of information to learning how to access information.

We also see that innovative technologies transform large class lecture teaching to small group interactions. There is a shift from traditional multiple-choice and essay testing to more of a project-based approach to assessment. These technologies also enhance the shift from verbal communication to visual and verbal thinking (see Overbaya, Patterson, Vasua, & Grablec, 2010, for research on how much teachers actually make use of constructivist practices). Think of how photographs and video have become part of the online exchange of social media. Traditional education without the use of social media often reverts to being teacher focused and lecture based. Similarly, student work reverts back to individual production. The result is that we lose the ability to "harness the potential of collective intelligence" (Anderson 2007; O'Reilly, 2005) because individually the amount of data that a learner can absorb is limited.

All of this suggests that our implementation of social media and innovative technologies into our pedagogy correlates well with social constructivist thinking about learning in general. It is for this reason that there is a certain irony to the fact that educators sometimes feel that social media is a distraction to learning or that constructivist thought is difficult to actually put into practice (Chen, 2008). The cry to close laptops, turn off the mobile devices, and pay attention to the lecture simply takes us back to a teacher-dominated environment that does not allow for greater learner autonomy. Quite simply, potential learning is sacrificed for greater control. On the other hand, at the University of Texas, we have made a conscious effort to increase the use of innovative technologies into the design of some of our courses. We now turn our attention to specific examples of how social media has been incorporated into the curriculum of some of our MBA courses.

GLOBAL CONNECTIONS CHINA

Every spring, the MBA students at the McCombs School of Business have the option of participating in the Global Connections Program,

which includes travel to an international location. The 30 students who participated in the China program in 2011 exemplify the blend of social media, innovative technology, and education in their predeparture, on-site, and posttrip activities, specifically their participation in three such activities: the course blog, their photo contributions to the LESCANT database (described below), and their postings of video clips to the course YouTube channel.

Students enroll in the global connections course in the spring semester but usually sign up for the trip in late October. The 2 weeks on-site in the spring include a number of company visits, tourist locations, and small-group consulting projects. The latter are usually developed during November and December. Companies design a project where a team of three to five students is expected to dedicate about 100 hours to complete the initial research and prepare a presentation of their results. When the semester begins in January, students begin the actual research phase of the project, which culminates with face-to-face final presentations while in country. The company visits, tourist activities, and consulting projects are designed to help students learn about the cultural and professional aspects of international business.

China Connections Course Blog (http://kelmglobal.wordpress.com)

As part of the class, we maintain a blog, which serves both as a source of information for predeparture training and as a daily log of activities while in country. Additionally, the student comments provide for reflective review postreturn. One of the powerful aspects of a blog is that all of the contributions and entries from a previous year become part of the predeparture materials for subsequent years. This is not a trivial matter. Traditionally, only the instructor views the majority of a student's work. When a semester ends, student work is graded, returned, and basically never seen again. Now, however, the blogs allow for student work to be shared with classmates and future students who will enroll in the same class next year. Our students write daily entries about their impressions and observations of their experiences in country. During the semester, these comments generate group discussion and posttrip review. The

next year, however, these comments become part of predeparture activities for the new group.

In addition to the postings, another positive aspect of the blogs is that they provide a one-stop location for all of the related trip information. For example, our blog contains pages and links with case studies, cultural models and theories, URLs to all of the companies and tourist locations that are part of the trip, and links to background information and country data, in addition to the students' daily comments.

The instructions in the course syllabus read as follows:

Cultural blog posts: Every day during the trip the professor will add a blog post with a summary of the day's activities. Each student is required to add a brief comment to each post. In your comments, include your reactions to things that you have observed and learned. Focus your comments on your takeaways about Chinese culture and what you became aware of about American culture. Comments need not be long; around 75-100 words is fine. It is best if you write your blog comments every day during the trip, even if you are unable to actually post them on a daily basis. All comments should be posted by 3:00 am on Wednesday, March 23. The URL for the cultural blog posts is http://kelmglobal.wordpress.com/.

Student comments from the daily activities are invaluable, providing insights and perspectives that would be difficult to obtain in large group classes. (Even in face-to-face classes, it would be almost impossible to hear more than 30 comments about each topic.) Having the comments in a written format allows us to go back and discuss them in even greater detail later. This, in fact, is exactly what we did: During our final debriefing meeting after the trip, we were able to review the daily activities and discuss the blog comments and observations.

What follows is one student's observations about her day in Hangzhou, written after spending 5 days in Beijing. Her contrasts are enlightening when she compares the traditional image of China that she experienced in Hangzhou with the bustling images from Beijing (China 2011, 2011a):

One of my favorite experiences in this "little" city was going to the Hunan Fu traditional teahouse. I went with Carolyn and Kim and we expected to just have a cup of tea and enjoy the view of the lake.

Little did we know that we were going to get a full tea service, complete with around 30 little bowls of nuts, fruit, rolls and cakes. Carolyn ordered a tea that was from the area and before it was brewed it looked like a brown ball, and after it looked like a beautiful flower. Everything on the table, from basic nuts to exotic fruits, was beautiful in a very understated way, which I think is reflective of the traditional China beauty. Now, China is moving towards a more overstated image, focusing on flashy cars and expensive handbags, also beautiful, but in a very different way.

The comment that "everything was beautiful in a very understated way" exemplifies the traditional China, whereas "overstated image, focusing on flashy cars and expensive handbags" truly represented her experience in Beijing. The contrast gave all of the students a more complete picture of China. That same day, other students commented on their experiences renting bicycles, getting foot massages, watching brides having their pictures taken at the lake, ordering food at restaurants, and going to sing karaoke. Together, all of the comments paint a picture of the whole day. Imagine how these 30 comments will help the next group prepare for their visit to Hangzhou.

Using blogs in our courses and as part of the study abroad experience has changed the dynamics of our communication. From the predeparture training to the on-site analysis to the posttrip review, the blog has enriched the communication not only among the current students but for future participants as well. The learning principles of social constructivism have been exemplified in the use of the blogs.

One recommendation in asking students to add comments to a daily blog: It is unrealistic to expect them to write all of the blog comments on a daily basis while in country. As the instructor, I was able to make the initial blog post with introductory statements, question topics, and instructions. However, many of the students did not actually post their comments on that same day for several reasons: Students already had very busy daily schedules, often Internet access is limited, not everyone travels with a laptop computer, and typing long comments on mobile devices may not be desirable. Consequently, most students prefer to write their final comments after the trip. For this reason, we established a date after the trip as the comment deadline; in this case, it was March 23, a week after return. Of course, this feature is unique to our brief

2-week on-site trips. Those who are abroad for an extended time or who use the blog comments as part of class time activities would want to make other arrangements. For example, I have led study abroad programs where students were in more of an academic setting, at a school and enrolled in a course. In that case, it was easier to require the students to post comments every night, which we then discussed in a class setting.

LESCANT Photo Database
(http://www.laits.utexas.edu/lescant/)

Clearly, one of the advantages of traveling abroad is that students have opportunities to experience new cultures upfront and personally. The problem is that without training, students may consider many of these cultural issues as something weird or cute, without any understanding as to why they are different or what is really going on. David Victor's LESCANT model is a way to teach students about the cultural aspects of business communication (Victor, 1992). LESCANT is an acronym that stands for seven areas where cultural difference may affect communication: language, environment, social organization, context, authority, nonverbal, and time.

Recently we created a LESCANT photo database to give students experience in identifying the differences that emerge whenever we deal with people from other cultures. When entering the site, users can search photos by country, city, author, or LESCANT category. During the China trip, students were required to add one photo to each category of the LESCANT database: From the hundreds of photos that each student took during the trip, they were required to add seven to the database. As they add photos, they are also required to describe in an input box why they think the photo represents some aspect of the LESCANT model as well as write comments in the discussion blog about photos that others had posted.

The syllabus description is as follows:

LESCANT Photo Database: Each student is required to add 7 photos to the LESCANT photo database. Choose one photo for each of the categories: language, environment, social organization, authority, non-verbal, and time. Additionally, all of the photos in the database have a discussion blog and each student is required to add comments

and observations on at least 7 photos that have been added to the database by other members of the class. All photos and comments are to be posted by 3:00 am on Wednesday March 23. The URL for the LESCANT photo database is http://www.laits.utexas.edu/lescant/.

Because of this assignment, a very interesting thing happened while in country. All of a sudden, students were seeing China through the LESCANT lens. Frequently, students would say things such as "this is a LESCANT moment" or "here's a great shot for 'social organization.'" We even heard students use the verb "LESCANTing" as they referred to what was going on around them. One afternoon, for example, we were visiting an elementary school in Shanghai. Little by little, our American students were sent to a different classroom located on the next floor. In the stairway was a sign that represented the Chinese high-context culture. Since the students were heading up the stairs at different times, nobody knew that all the others were also taking pictures of the same sign. Everyone simply had their focus on trying to find examples of LESCANT features, and that sign was perfect.

To send the LESCANT photos to the database, students used iPod Touches while they were in China, provided on loan from Drake University as part of its Virtual Language Studies development program (http://virtuallanguagestudies.net/). Although many of the students already had their own digital cameras or mobile devices, the majority took advantage of the iPod Touches and took them everywhere. This database is open to the public, but at this time, only students from the University of Texas are allowed to log in and contribute new photos.

As an example of the type of database contributions that the students make, one student submitted a photo that showed some animated cartoon characters of policemen who were advising people not to trespass. The student comment that accompanies the photo reads as follows (LESCANT Photo Database, n.d.):

Another photo of nice looking police officers. These were placed outside of areas that they did not want anyone trespassing on. It was interesting to see the passive aggressive attitude in making the request.

In response to this photo, two students added these comments in the same blog post:

> Comment 1: I liked that we saw cartoons for everything in China. In America, we see cartoon characters as something silly for children, but the Chinese government believes that these characters will be taken seriously.

> Comment 2: Agreed, it seems bizarre in a communist country to create cartoons portraying authority. I don't think I saw any of their police smiling and waving like the cartoon portrays. They were all very serious in their job!

If not for the innovative technology (iPod Touches, online photo database), it would have been extremely difficult to replicate the social dimension to jointly contributing to the database. In my more than 20 years of experience accompanying students abroad, I have never seen them so focused on identifying and analyzing the cultural aspects of their surroundings. It was a perfect blend of course assignments made possible by innovative technology.

Our recommendation for this activity concerns what students do during the trip as compared with what they do afterward. Initially, we thought that the students would add photos to the database during the actual trip. However, because the assignment was to choose their best photo for each LESCANT topic, they did not want to submit a photo too soon, because they might have an even better example the following day. Although the assignment helped students be aware of their surroundings throughout the whole trip, it was unrealistic to expect that they would be posting their pictures while travelling. It bears repeating that these students were not in a course setting. If students abroad are enrolled and attending an actual class, requiring the postings at specific intervals would be a reasonable expectation.

Video Clips on the YouTube Channel (http://www.youtube.com/user/orlandocourses)

Based on our experience with the photo database, we were confident that the students would find excellent examples of the cultural differences that they observed. The LESCANT model simply

provided the context to look for those differences. Since the students had received training in LESCANT and already had the loaner iPod Touches, we added a new feature to the in-country assignment: requesting that the students record brief video clips of their cultural observations. Once again, the assignment was to find one example for each LESCANT category. Unlike the photo database, however, we gave this assignment to each of the eight consulting groups instead of individually. Since we had already asked each student to write daily blog posts (30 students × 10 days = 300 comments) and seven cultural photos (7 pictures × 30 students = 210 photos), it seemed excessive to ask each individual to also post seven videos. Additionally, by asking each consulting group to post a video, the students would have to meet with their partners and decide which video clips best represented the group's perceptions of cultural differences, reinforcing the social constructivist vision of collaboration.

Video presents challenges that photographs do not. First, video files can become extremely large, so we suggested that they be less than 1 minute. Second, we understood from the beginning that videos could capture examples that photographs would not. However, we also knew that the videos would be more raw, unpolished, and less edited. This indeed was the case. Whereas the photographs have a polished, cleaned up, and finalized look, the videos have to deal with movement, sound, focus, and light, all of which potentially diminish the final quality. For our purposes, we simply accepted that this was going to be the case. The attempt to capture and analyze the cultural issue was more important than the "quality" of the video recording.

The third challenge, and the greatest, related more to the distribution and sharing of the videos. The most direct method would be to simply ask students to attach a video clip to an email and send it to the instructor. But then the instructor would have to still decide what to do with them and how to make them accessible to students. This is where social media became part of the solution: YouTube is a popular choice for video distribution and viewing, and the iPod Touch has an option to directly send videos to YouTube. The problem, however, is that it is difficult to get multiple users to contribute to a single YouTube channel. If the total number of clips is low, the instructor could manually upload each one, but this solution is not really feasible with larger numbers. Instead, we had

students email their video clips to our posterous.com site, which can autopost entries to other sites. By listing the students as contributors to our posterous group, their video contributions were automatically passed on to my YouTube channel. When the video clips arrived, I simply designated which playlist they belonged to (one of the seven LESCANT categories). After the YouTube posting, students could then add comments and observations, as with any YouTube video.

Syllabus instructions read as follows:

> *LESCANT video contributions:* Each consulting group is required to add 7 videos to the LESCANT YouTube channel. Choose one video for each LESCANT category from all those that each member of your group collects. Include a written description about how each of the video clips demonstrates some cultural aspect of China vs. USA. The email address to send each video is as follows: longhornorlando@ posterous.com. The URLs to view the videos are as follows: http:// www.youtube.com/user/orlandocourses.

Indeed, the video clips were able to capture cultural differences that mere photographs cannot. For example, for the "Environment" topic, one group recorded Chinese sellers at a meat market cutting the chicken parts, collecting money, and giving out change. The video shows how both activities—cutting meat and dealing with money—were happening simultaneously. Another clip, under the "Nonverbal" category, shows some ladies receiving a massage, which consists of smacking them with tiny sticks. Without the movement of the video, it would have been difficult to get a sense of the smacking action. Under the "Language" topic, one group submitted a video clip of a street performer, and they titled the clip "China Blue Grass." The audio of the man's singing would have been lost in a photograph. Video is a powerful tool because it allows learners to build on all of the visual cues that surround us. The activities involved with this assignment—recording videos, choosing one to represent the group, sending it to posterous.com, and viewing it on YouTube—follow the learning principles of social constructivism, and all would have been technologically nearly impossible just a few years ago.

One recommendation is that posterous.com provides a convenient way to have multiple people contribute to a single YouTube channel.

It also resolved the problem of where students send their video clip. Our second recommendation is to be open to a less polished and edited product. Video clips have extra challenges related to movement, light, audio quality, and so on. Still, the focus of this assignment was to identify cultural differences and to provide students with an opportunity to analyze those differences. The actual quality of the clip seemed less important.

CONCLUSIONS

We began this article with the common observation that when social media are used for educational purposes, many of the learning principles espoused by social constructivists are automatically present. In the examples that we shared from the MBA Global Connections course, social media was crucial for completing the assignments. We conclude with a brief summary of how each of these activities ties into social constructivism.

In studying the effects of information and communication technology on teaching and learning, Löfström and Nevgi (2006) provide a list of how the use of innovative technologies applies to constructivist principles:

1. Learners construct knowledge as a collaborative activity.
2. Learners benefit from the cognitive process of working towards a goal.
3. Learners use previous knowledge to build on new knowledge.
4. Thinking, emotions and action lead to empowerment, commitment, and responsibility.
5. Learners actively and purposely set cognitive objectives.
6. Learners collaborate by sharing knowledge with other members of a community, engaging in dialogue and receiving feedback.
7. Learners reflect on the process and understand the implications.
8. Learners connect learning to the context of the real world and transfer knowledge to new applications. (p. 315)

According to this list, our MBA students were certainly engaged in collaborative activities. The daily blog posts were followed up with comments from each of the students. Many times the students referred to the comments of others, answering their questions or

building on their observations. Since everyone was divided into consulting groups, everyone had a sense of team. We even referred to students by their company names (e.g., "Lenovo, you have an appointment at 9:00 a.m. tomorrow."). The teams also had to decide which individual clip best represented their group for the video assignment.

Second, there was a sense of working toward a goal. Since the objective of the course was to prepare for the study tour in China, everyone was focused on maximizing the learning experience. As part of the predeparture activities, the URLs and page links on the course blog provided students access to information about all of the companies, tourist locations, and country information they would need to prepare for the actual visits.

As to using previous knowledge to build on new, it was impressive to see how the students actively looked for examples of cultural differences, searching for LESCANT situations and looking for opportunities to take pictures of those differences. There was a sense of empowerment in being able to make those connections, noticing cultural behaviors that students might have otherwise not appreciated. This also ties into actively focusing on cognitive objectives. The photo and video assignments caused all to be more aware of their surroundings. It is significant to note that it was not enough to take a picture of the cultural behavior, but students also had to submit a written description about why the content of the photo or the video demonstrated a cultural difference and how it fit into the LESCANT model. This writing activity, in the public forum of the discussion blog, provided students with a sense of dialogue with a community. Indeed, the other students often responded to written descriptions by adding their own observations and perspectives.

The reflective processes and the connection of learning to the real world are important considerations in social constructivism, and they were present in the MBA student assignments as well. The blog comments often exemplify the students' reflections on how the visits, sights, and people affected them. Since many of the company visits included sessions with Americans working in China, it was easy for students to imagine how they would react if they were to live abroad as well. One brief example will suffice (China 2011, 2011b):

The visit to Intel was really rewarding because many of the panelists were so candid and honest in their answers. A few things that stood out to me were that they all send their kids to international schools rather than Chinese ones and also the discussion about making friends with other expats. Having moved from New York City before school, I related to the interesting discussion about how difficult it can be to be "left behind" due to the transient mindset people have when working abroad; like in Manhattan, many Americans plan to live abroad only for a few years at most, so it becomes difficult to find lasting friendships if you are one of those in it for the long-haul. I thought that discussion with respect to working in China was unique and something I hadn't thought about before.

The bottom line is that people use social media and innovative technologies in their everyday lives. I often find myself casually counting how many students are talking on a cell phone or who are plugged into a mobile device as they walk on campus. Rarely is it less than 50% to 60%, and this only includes those who are actually using them when I pass by. A recent discussion with a group of teenagers revealed that they sent 80 to 100 messages per day! And I have also observed students who customarily switch their Facebook page to a foreign language setting, just to practice reading in another language.

We learn much from observing how young people use technology. In fact, even the idea to use posterous.com for student video transfer to YouTube came from a student. Truly, the secret for us as educators is to observe how technology is used in everyday life and then implement that use in our educational situations. The experience of seeing how our students used social media to complete their assignments related to the business and culture in China and seeing how closely this ties into the learning theories of social constructivism leads me to believe that there is going to be a major shift in the future of education. As noted in the title of the article, we should do as students do.

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