Distance learners' use of non-institutional social media to augment and enhance their learning experience

Dr Trish Andrews
Teaching and Educational Development Institute
The University of Queensland

Professor Belinda Tynan
Global Learning
University of Southern Queensland

Ms Kendra Backstrom
SeE - Student e-Experience Project
The University of Adelaide

This paper reports on initial data elicited from two related studies which draw on the learner voice in relation to experiences of distance learners in their use of social media in higher education contexts across four universities. Data from these studies suggest that the wide availability, accessibility and affordances of social media create alternative learning options for some distance learners. The studies reported here draw upon affordance theory and identify that some distant learners are actively and deliberately using popular, non-institutional social media tools to augment and extend their learning experiences. This brief paper discusses emerging findings and the possible implications of these findings for the sector.

Keywords: Distance learners, social media, affordances, higher education

Introduction

Distance learning is a rapidly growing segment of the education market with more learners moving to online distance learning every year (Allen & Seaman, 2010). Online distance learners are those whose learning is delivered and mediated by technology and who have little or no face-to-face interaction with teachers or other students (Keegan, 2008). Social media is becoming a major form of communication, interaction and information access and generation for people globally and as Selwyn (2012) suggests, in recent years the wide-scale uptake of these tools 'has transformed the ways in which the internet is experienced by most end users' (p. 1). However, it remains that widespread benefits of web-based tools have largely failed to materialize for the majority of distance learners. The focus of much online learning is still based on the delivery of content rather than the emergent possibilities for engagement and interaction (Lonn & Teasley, 2009; McKeogh & Fox, 2009).

This paper draws on data from two phenomenological studies. One pilot study completed and reported elsewhere (Andrews & Tynan, 2012; Andrews, Tynan & James, 2011) and the second building on the findings of the pilot study to a) attest the veracity and extant of the early findings; and b) develop the research towards unanswered and raised questions of the pilot study. Emergent findings are reported as follows and illustrate that social media plays an important role for some distance learners whose use of social media for social and emotional learning support is surprisingly a deliberate and considered choice of students. Social media is being used by students outside of the intended curriculum design without teacher intervention.

The rise of social media

Social media, as now very well known, comes in many forms with Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Wikipedia being some of the most commonly used and recognised tools (Selwyn, 2012). Despite the variations in the activities they support or enable, social media "rely on openly shared digital content that is authored, critiqued and re-configured by a mass of users" (Selwyn, 2012, p.X). It has also become apparent that social media use is not just the province of young people with large numbers of older people adopting these tools for a wide range of activities (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickhur, 2010). While the social use of these tools is undisputed, use of social media for teaching and learning activities remains less explored. Much of the current literature reporting on the use of social media for teaching and learning suggests that on-campus learners do not generally use social media much for deliberate or teacher constructed teaching and learning activities As Selwyn suggests probably no more than 10% of these leaners fall into this category. However these studies have not investigated the ways in which online distance learners use social media in relation to teaching and learning activities.

Conceptual framework: Affordance theory and its application to social media and learning

Originally conceived by Gibson (1979), affordance theory is described as a way of explaining 'what the environment offers an organism … and were thus seen as properties of the environment relative to a specific organism of group of organisms of the' (Day & Lloyd, 2007, p18.) Over time the concept has evolved with Norman's (1998) addition of the understanding of the distinction between actual and perceived affordances to more recent additions by Day and Lloyd (2007) who draw upon contextual factors in applying affordance theory. This could be extrapolated to include curriculum development, teacher facilitation and the learning environment more generally. Affordance theory therefore becomes a welcome lens to explore the wide availability and ease of use of social media (as the environment) and their wide spread use by students (human interaction). The intersection of the environment, student interaction and learners contexts (contextual factors) and the purposes for which social media have arisen may well alter and will no doubt evolve from what they were originally envisaged.

Investigating learner experience

Distance learners from five different Australian universities are participating in the studies reported here. As noted earlier the study builds and extends on a previous pilot study conducted in 2010. The original pilot study explored the 'lived experience' of twelve distance learners use of ICT for teaching and learning (Andrews & Tynan, 2012; Andrews, Tynan & James, 2011). The current study is further testing the findings of the initial study and expanding on the recommendations of that study which included amongst others further investigation of distance learners' use of social media. Forty learners across the partner universities, have been recruited under strict ethical approvals. Appropriate ethical clearance for the studies was obtained from all participant institutions, with particular attention being paid for permission to use photos, videos and voice data for presentations. To date thirty eight students have completed the current round of data collection activities and data collection will be completed by the middle of October, 2012.

Methodology

The two studies discussed here adopted a phenomenological approach to investigate the 'lived experience' of distance learners' use of technology for teaching and learning (van Manen, 1997). Students were purposively selected for participation in the study on the basis of identified criteria including: students currently actively participating in distance learning courses; students working full time and studying part time; international students; students representing a range of different course; postgraduate students; undergraduate students and students living on-campus and studying via online distance learning materials. The current study also had a specific focus on recruiting males as in the original pilot study all participants were female.

The same tools were utilised by both studies to collect data to provide 'thick descriptions' (Mayes, 2006) of distance learners' daily experiences with technology for teaching and learning. The data collection tools which included two journal tools, the Day Experience Method (Riddle & Arnold, 2007) and Charting the Week's Activities (Andrews & Tynan, 2012) provided the participants with an opportunity to provide detailed daily accounts of their activities.

The Day Experience Method (DEM) is designed to collect a snapshot of participants' activities. It involves sending text messages with a set of questions to participants on their mobile phones at irregular times throughout a 24 hour period (Riddle and Arnold, 2007) Participants were required to answer the questions at the time they receive the message in as much detail as possible. The questions asked participants to identify their activities at the time the messages were received as well as information about who they were with, what technologies they were using and how they were feeling. For the purpose of these studies the DEM was adapted slightly to cover an eighteen-hour period and during this time participants received 7-8 msn messages.

The Charting the Week's activities (CWA) was developed by the first author for the pilot study to overcome perceived limitations in the DEM method in developing an understanding of patterns and routines in the ways in which distance learners use technology for teaching and learning. For the CWA, participants were required to provide a summary of their daily activities including learning activities across a week. Participants could use print, video or audio for their diary activities. Participants were required to provide a photo or photos of their learning spaces. Learning space was identified as any space they used to engage in learning activities. The photos were used as prompts in follow up focus group discussions conducted using Skype and a software tool that plugs into Skype, Call Recording, was used to record the Skype conversations.

Analysis was undertaken using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, (IPA) an approach described by Mayes (2006) and requiring reading and re-reading the data to extract themes and meaning.

Results and discussion

As noted above analysis was conducted using IPA, with the conceptual framework of affordance theory being used for the first time to assist in the explanation of the learners experiences. Fifty students from five universities have completed the study so far. These students represent a wide range of distance learning contexts including international students, postgraduates, undergraduates, males and females, full and part time workers, full and part time students. Programs represented include Primary Teaching, Secondary Teaching, Education, Environmental Science, Psychology, History, Social Science, Music, French, Italian, Business, Science, Maths and Agricultural Science. To date, ten males have participated in the study. These participants also represent a great deal of diversity in their ages, personal circumstances, work and family situations. The analysis of data, although in the early stages, suggests that use of social media to augment and extend the learning experience is emerging as a strong trend from both studies. While there is no doubt that some learners make little use of social media for teaching and learning as suggested by Selwyn (2012), forty one (more than eighty percent) of the students that have completed the study to date, currently make deliberate use of social media to augment their learning in some way. Below in table 1 is a summary of some of the social media technologies being utilized by distance learners, the ways in which these learners are using them to support teaching and learning activities and their reasons for adopting these tools.

Table 1: Distance students' use of social media to support teaching and learning activities

Social media	Activity	Reason for using social media
Facebook	Replacement of BB discussion forum Language learning Creating a learning community Connecting to experts	Dissatisfaction with quality of discussion Dissatisfaction with BB discussion forum interface Practicing a foreign language in a safe environment Passion for learning and desire to connect with other learners around items of interest Accessing other 'expert' opinions
Skype	Assignment Discussions Completion of quizzes Participation in informal learning	Opportunity for real time discussions Discussion of assignments/developing an awareness of different perspectives
MSN	Connecting with other learners	
Blogs	Connecting to other professionals	Seeking alternative expert viewpoints Engaging in professional discourse around course topics Participating in special interest groups related to studies
YouTube	Watching educational videos Animations	Dissatisfaction with quality of institutional lecture recordings Seeking other recognised experts' views on subject matter Seeking additional content to that provided Seeking increased understanding of content
Yahoo groups	Discussion with experts Special interest groups	Seeking alternative viewpoints Engaging in professional discussions
Google tools	Special interest groups	Engaging in professional discourse around course topics

As shown in Table 1 our emergent findings are explicitly identifying ways in which some distance learners are using social media to augment and enhance their learning experience. As noted, some make considered decisions to 'stretch their understanding' beyond what is provided by the institution. The affordances of social media enable easy access to 'experts' or professionals in the field who are themselves active users of social media. Furthermore, this kind of activity has enriched and extended students' learning experience well beyond what was perhaps intended by their universities. In some cases this kind of activity was motivated by a lack of meaningful interaction on institutional forums. For others it was a desire to extend their learning and develop alternative perspectives to deepen their understanding. There are also indications that some students, familiar with the ease of use of widely available social networking tools and other popular online technologies struggle with the perceived un-user friendliness of tools such as institutional learning management systems and are shifting their learning activities, both formal and informal to these tools: *It's so hard to find anything in blackboard (discussion) and so difficult to search. I don't know why they don't do it like Facebook* (participant,

CQU University, 2012). These emergent findings offer insights when viewed through the conceptual framework of affordance theory. It appears that where learners augment their learning experiences through the adoption of social media that they are demonstrating an evolving new use of social media where the learning context and human interaction as afforded by social media (Day & Lloyd, 2007) are merging into an unexpected learning space which was previously used for more personal and social interactions.

Conclusions

The emergent ideas presented here suggest that there is a need for universities to recognise that distance learners are using social media to support a range of learning needs in unexpected ways and that this trend is most likely one that will continue to grow as internet users develop greater familiarity with the range of technologies and resources available and accessible online and the affordances they enable in teaching and learning contexts. It may be worth noting that learners need to be able to perceive potential affordances in order for them to be actualised and learning conditions need to support the use of those potential affordances. If, as the data here suggests, there is an emerging trend in the use of social media by online learners in higher education, the implications for institutions will include the need to help all students to see the potential affordances of social media within the learning context and to support the realisation/utilisation of those potential affordances. Such support could include re-structuring of learning and teaching activities, support and development of teachers and support of technology. Furthermore, given that students are accessing study materials from a diverse range of sources, rather than relying on those provided by the institutions at which they are undertaking their studies, there is an increasing need to ensure that students possess the skills necessary to evaluate the credibility of the sources they are using to augmenting their learning.

References

Allen, I. E., & Seaman, J. (2010). *Learning on demand: Online education in the United States*, 2009. http://sloanconsortium.org/publications/survey/pdf/learningondemand.pdf.

Andrews, T. & Tynan, B. (2012). Distance learners: Connected, mobile and resourceful individuals. *Australasian Journal of Educational Technology, 28*(4), 565-579. http://www.ascilite.org.au/ajet/ajet28/andrews.html.

Andrews, T., Tynan, B. & James, R. (2011). The lived experience of learners' use of new media in distance teaching and learning. *On the Horizon*, 19 (4), pp.321-330.

Day, D. & Lloyd, M. (2007). Affordances of online technologies: More than the properties of the technology. *Australian Educational Computing*, *22*(2), pp. 17-21.

Gibson, J. (1979). *The ecological approach* to *visual perception.* Boston: Houghton-Mifflin.

Keegan, D. (2008). The impact of new technologies on distance learning students. *eleed*, 4. http://eleed.campussource.de/archive/4/1422.

Lenhart, A., Purcell, K., Smith, A. & Zickhur, K. (2010). *Social media and Young Adults Report*, http://67.192.40.213/~/media/Files/Reports/2010/PIP_Social_Media_and_Young_Adults_Report_Final_with_toplines.pdf [viewed 26 June, 2011].

Lonn, S., & Teasley, S. (2009). Saving time or innovating practice: Investigating perceptions and uses of Learning Management Systems. *Computers and Education, 33*(3), 686-694.

Mayes, T. (2006). LEX: The Learner Experience of e-learning: Methodology Report. Glasgow Caledonian University. http://www.jisc.ac.uk/elp_learneroutcomes.html

McKeogh, K., & Fox, S. (2009). Academic staff in traditional Universities: Motivators and Demotivators in the Adoption of E-Learning. In U. Bernath, A. Szucs, A. Tait, & M. Vidal (Eds*.). Distance and E-learning in Transition: Learning Innovation, Technology and Social Challenges*. London: Wiley-ISTE.

Norman, D. A. (1988). *The psychology of everyday things.* NewYork: Basic Books.

Riddle, M. D. & Arnold, M. V. (2007). The day experience method: A resource kit. http://dtl.unimelb.edu.au/dtl_publish/12/67585.html.

Selwyn, N. (2011) Social Media in Higher Education. *The European World of Learning* 2012. Routledge. www.worldoflearning.com [viewed 16 April 2012].

van Manen, M. (1997). *Researching lived experience: Human science for action sensitive pedagogy*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Author contact details:

Trish Andrews, t.andrews@uq.edu.au

Please cite as: Andrews, T., Tynan, B. & Backstrom, K. (2012). Distance learners' use of non-institutional social media to augment and enhance their learning experience. In M. Brown, M. Hartnett & T. Stewart (Eds.) Future challenges, sustainable futures. In Proceedings ascilite Wellington 2012. (pp. 50-54).