Developing social media training resources for AusAID scholarship students

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Potentially, effective social media use has a valuable role to play in addressing a number of concerns for newly arrived international students including feelings of isolation, access to information and participation in community. The aim of this paper is to report on a project to develop social media training resources for AusAID students from developing countries. The project was delivered as part of a six-week, 100-hour introductory academic preparation program. Using an action research approach, we conducted three stages of materials production, data gathering and self-reflection. In our overall analysis of the project, we identified resistance to participation, information overload and technological impediments as central barriers to full integration of social media training. We conclude with suggestions for improvement and research in the development and integration of social media training resources.

Keywords: social media, training, international students

Introduction

As part of its commitment to international development, Australia welcomes thousands of graduate students from developing countries who have been awarded Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID) scholarships. Soon after arrival, many AusAID students struggle with adjustment issues that include finding appropriate accommodation, dealing with homesickness and culture shock, and coming to terms with Australian academic expectations (Stone & Gruba, 2012). To assist newly arrived AusAID students, Australian universities provide a 4-6 week Introductory Academic Program (IAP) to help students to cope with adjustment.

The effective use of networked technologies is crucial to both the social and educational lives of university students (Mcmillan, 2006). Indeed, throughout a range of Australian tertiary institutions, there is a strong and active promotion of social media use; at the University of Melbourne, for example, students are encouraged to connect as they apply for entry, to share photos of campus visits, and to stay in touch as alumni long after graduation. In a June 2013 count, for example, the University Library had approximately 5,800 followers on Facebook; for the central University account, there were just over 23,000 Twitter followers. The university has established social media use policies and usage guidelines [socialmedia.unimelb.edu.au], and like many universities, staff are urged to understand the potential risks associated with the institutional uses of social media (Woodley & Beattie, 2012). What we couldn't find, however, were resources for student training in social media use. In light of such a strong promotion of social media use, we began to wonder: Where do students from developing countries learn to use social media? Could social media training assist AusAID students? What resources were available for the teaching of social media use?

In this paper, we report on our efforts to develop and use social media resources for newly arrived AusAID scholarship students. Funded by a university teaching grant, we undertook an eighteen-month action research study to develop, use and integrate social media into an academic orientation program for AusAID students. Following a brief review of the literature, we describe our efforts, report on key outcomes and suggest areas for further research and development.

Social media training and use

One way to view efforts to train students in the use of social media is against a larger backdrop of 'new literacies' education (Gammon & White, 2011; Lankshear & Knobel, 2011). New literacies educators seek to transform the role of technologies such that their use creates a culture of participation such that learners feel engaged as they create, share, and review ideas (Jenkins, Purushotma, Weigel, Clinton, & Robison, 2009). For Gee (2004), it is important that participatory online cultures foster 'affinity spaces' that make learners feel comfortable and supported. If used effectively, social media can help to facilitate a sense of 'connectedness' amongst learners (Greenhow & Robelia, 2009; Rosenthal, Russell, & Thomson, 2006), and thus reduce feelings of isolation and loneliness that international students may experience in Australia (Arkoudis et al. 2010; Sawir, Marginson, Deumert, Nyland, & Ramia, 2007).

Other researchers, such as Wise, Skues and Williams (2011), argue that the use of social media may have a limited role in promoting student engagement. Indeed, they point out, the multi-faced concept of 'student engagement' is challenging to define as it touches on the complex relationship amongst the institution, learning and student interests both socially and academically. Reporting on a study of nearly 700 first year students using a range of measures, the researchers found that "the value of social media tools in an academic environment may be solely psychological, e.g., promoting positive affect, and norming experiences" (Wise et al., 2011, p. 1340). Importantly, they conclude that if a social media is used, the promotion of a microblogging service (Twitter) may have a greater impact on successful learning than a social network site (Facebook).

In their examination of social media use amongst academics, Adi and Scotte (2013) divide barriers to implementation into those that are first-order, or extrinsic to instructors, and those that are second-order, or intrinsic, to instructors. First-order barriers, they argue, and can be tackled through provision additional institutional resources, professional development and staff support. Confronting second order barriers is much more challenging, Adi and Scotte (2013) argue, in that academics must shift their thinking in regards to knowledge integration, their purpose of social media use, and as part of their overall attitude. For Lemon (2013), intrinsic barriers to social media integration for academics most often revolve around concerns for privacy, time commitments, information overload, and learning to work with large communities of learners.

Moving away from institutional and academic concerns, we turned our attention to student motivation: Why should AusAID students hone their social media skills? It is clear that a lack of ICT resources in developing countries has retarded new literacies proficiency rates (Doong & Ho, 2012), but the rapid uptake of mobile technologies across the globe may act as a catalyst for improved conditions (World Bank, 2012). Greater social media use may help to bridge the digital divide (Ali, 2011). Greater social media use may also spur innovation in developing countries. Using Tanzania as a case study, Munguatosha, Muyinda, and Lebega (2011) report on the construction of a model for social networked learning in higher education that is appropriate and sensitive to local factors (Srinivasan, 2012). One key component of their model is to promote the idea of learning communities and student-centred pedagogies through low cost mobile technologies as a way to encourage adoption of social media. In their study of medical professionals in developing countries, Pimmer, Linxen and Gröhbiel (2012) note the importance of participation in virtual communities to bolster educational opportunities, occupational status and professional identities. Accordingly, they argue, the proficient use of social media in 'limited technology' contexts is key to ongoing professional development.

In summary, our review of literature suggests that social media use may help students to better engage with universities, but such a positive view is tempered by what it may mean 'to engage' students or how to overcome barriers to social media use amongst academics. In developing countries, social media is being used to lower the digital divide and promote innovation. Students from emerging countries in Australia may benefit from social media training as a way to hone digital literacy skills, and thus benefit during their studies as well as when they apply their skills to development projects and as a way to build their own professional identities.

Project context and approach

The University of Melbourne is one of several Australian universities that deliver award programs to the federally funded AusAid Australia Awards scholarship initiative. Across Australia, $331 million in scholarship funding was made available in 2012/2013; graduate students taking part in the initiative come from Asia (61%), the Pacific region (18%), as well as Sub-Sahara Africa (15%). One of the major goals of the scholarship program, for both Australians and others, is to foster links amongst peoples, nations and global projects (AusAID, 2013).

As part of their obligation in accepting AusAID scholarship students, Australian universities are required to offer an Introductory Academic Program (IAP). Briefly, the purpose of these pre-sessional programs is to assist newly arrived AusAID students to cope with the demands of Australian graduate study, particularly in regards to the development of critical thinking and academic writing skills. Such programs provide assistance with budgeting, accommodation and strategies for acculturation and personal safety. At the University of Melbourne, the IAP hosts approximately 300 students per year consisting of 25-40 nationalities across 27 discipline areas.

Motivated to improve pedagogy, we thought it appropriate to adopt an action research approach to our study. Enquiries grounded in action research are characterized as instructor-led, flexible, aware and situated in a local context (Costello, 2003; Somekh, 2007). Within a longitudinal action research project, four cycles are typically enacted at each stage: Plan, Act, Observe, Reflect. Over the course of 18 months with three different student cohorts (Summer 2012, Winter 2012, and then Summer 2013), we worked with a total of 16 tutors and approximately 480 AusAID scholarship students as we sought to integrate social media use in the IAP. At the end of each cycle in a stage, we noted our efforts and challenges, and continued to develop our efforts (Table 1).

Table 1: Action Research outcomes by stage and cycle

Stage number and intent	Plan	Act	Observe	Reflect
1) Establish the project; gain experience in using and teaching social media	Based on literature and previous experiences, developed an approach to social media training	Created a paper-based guidebook for social media training; some professional development and integration	Easy to distribute, but students set it aside in lieu of other concerns; difficult to update	Paper-based materials too inflexible – must move online with a strong push for initial integration
2) Gain further experience; strengthen professional development	Deconstructed previous materials to prepare move to online presentation	Created a website with a range of distinct stages and resources; some professional development and promotion of use	Delayed introduction of the training resources diminished uptake amongst students, reduced staff enthusiasm	Need to reposition the social media training within the program, and emphasize and expect its use from the start
3) Full integration of the materials	Based on feedback, revised site with updated resources	Strong emphasis on professional development and program integration	Positive reaction to strong introduction from the start of the program; integrated	Time to move the site, and training, to the entire University community

In the following sections, we reflect on these stages before discussing the project as a whole.

Stage 1: Gaining experience and understanding

Admittedly, our efforts in the first stage in the summer of 2012 were modest as our aim was to gain experience and understanding of social media resources. We developed a small paper-based booklet and placed it within our set of academic materials. After a brief general introduction to students, a graduate student from a developing country was hired to help promote social media use. The graduate student, we thought, could act as a role model as she tweeted on a daily basis, posted photos and visited workshops to provide tips for effective use.

From student surveys and interviews, we discovered that the general view of social media was to connect with colleagues, friends and family. The students, not surprisingly, also saw social media as a way to get information and opinions and many already made extensive use of a range of tools. A concern for privacy was a common, as

students worried that social media facilitated unwanted attention, misrepresented individuals, or perhaps evoked persecution by authorities. On a more personal scale, they were concerned with time wastage, 'addictions' or information overload, as well as maintaining personal boundaries. Students pointed out that excessive social media use could cause a lack of connection to people in the 'real world'. Finally, technical and financial concerns of the cost of Internet use in some countries were given as a reason for the high use of mobile phones for communication and networking (not, for example, through computers per se).

Given the high familiarity and use of social media, we thought our project to be unnecessary. Students from developing countries knew how to make use of social media: end of story. Our materials had readily been set aside during the IAP. Our Twitter site remained quiet. In the following months, as we continued to monitor AusAID students use of social media, we found that they had no greater engagement in the university than those in previous years. Students again reported poor computer literacy skills as a key barrier in their studies. Perhaps not surprisingly, student suggestions at this point centred on how to join Facebook. One AusAID student simply reminded us that "lessons on social media must be done in the computer lab or room with computers without which it seems much like 'learning to swim by reading a book'."

Stage 2: Developing social media training resources

Now at the second stage of our project, we converted our paper-based materials into an online site [as a 'sandbox', we used an off-campus commercial provider for ease of editing]. We started with the basics of accessing on-campus facilities, and then moved onto essentials, related social media sites, pedagogical activities and social resource sites (Fig. 1)
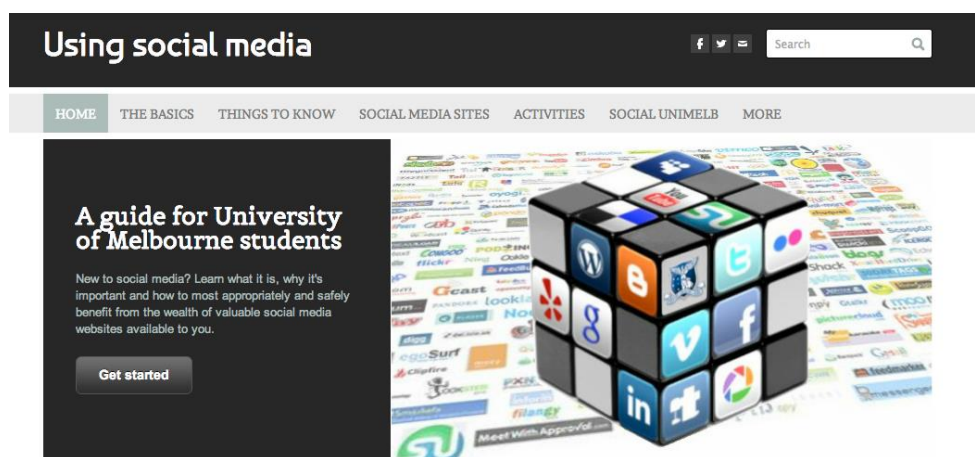

Figure 1: The resource site for social media training

From earlier experiences, we understood that technical issues for students needed to be solved before moving onto further discussions of social media use. Throughout the site, we created visual step-by-step guides with annotated screenshots to help students in navigating complex web and application settings. As a way to promote use, we hired a specialist tutor to run workshops throughout the six-week IAP. Tutors were given some training.

We launched the social media resource site [gosocialmelb.com] in the second full week of the Winter 2012 IAP. Unfortunately, a delay in the launch gave the impression to both students and casual tutors that our work was an afterthought. Indeed, although we used Twitter on a daily basis and made staff available for individual social media training, there was little uptake of the materials. To wit, we had not integrated them well into our syllabus and they were generally set aside in lieu of other seemingly more pressing concerns. Two points clearly emerged at this stage: a) flexible resources, even those that are well-considered, must be promoted to become truly effective, and b) students must be motivated from the start to use social media if they are to see its use relevant to their studies and professional development.

Stage 3: Integration, and motivation, from the start

By the third stage of the project, the IAP program itself came under the leadership of a new program coordinator. The new coordinator revised sections of the curriculum, placed greater emphasis on initial tutor training, and employed a casual tutor specifically to handle aspects of social media integration and use. Accordingly, social media training was moved to the first week of the program in two 2-hour workshops: a)

'Introduction to University computing resources' (email, LMS, student portal, etc.) and b) a two-hour information sessions concerning social networking, purchasing advice, and connectivity. Following that, we offered three hour-long drop-in sessions for individual consultation. Notably, we emphasized the professional networking site, *LinkedIn*, to the students as we invited students to imagine themselves after graduation working as a global professional. In workshops, we demonstrated how other professionals were using the site to spread and enhance their reputation. We also demonstrated live tweets from events as they were happening (#spill was popular with students as they followed changes in Australian politics, for example) as a way to make social media use come alive. Discovering hashtags related to their own interests we hoped would spark motivation.

To evaluate our efforts, we invited students to participate in an online survey. Just 53 of the 160 students (30%) responded in. Overall, results pointed to a lack of familiarity or information, a feeling of being busy, or simply a disinterest in resources, particularly in Twitter. Despite our best efforts, the survey revealed that most students were not even aware of our own social media training resource (Fig. 2).
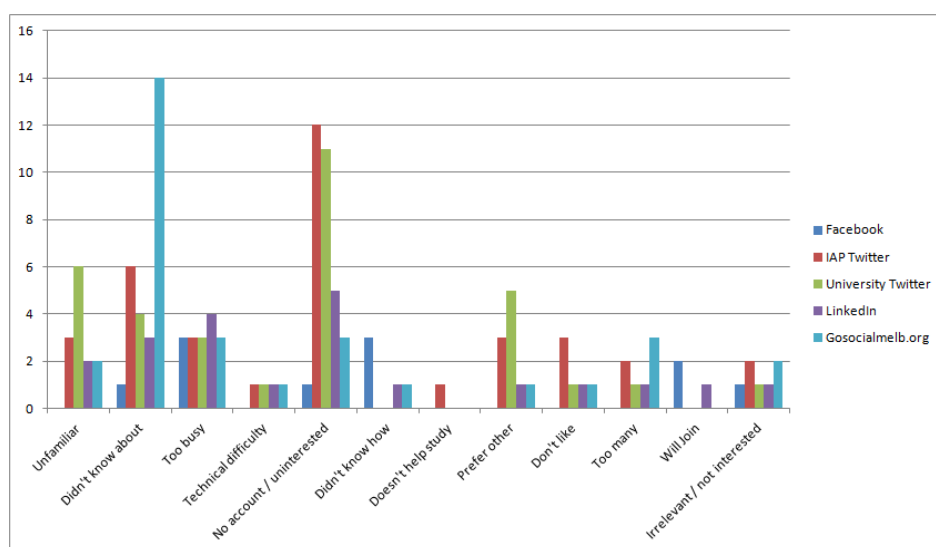

Figure 2: Survey results of social media use

Further analysis revealed that AusAID students made relatively little use of social media. Of the 53 respondents, 12 of the students, or nearly 25%, reported that they had not joined the Facebook Group; 41 out of 53, or about 80%, had not followed our IAP Twitter account. Other survey data, gathered two weeks after the end of the IAP, showed that overall use of social media had in fact *declined* amongst the AusAID students (Figure 3).
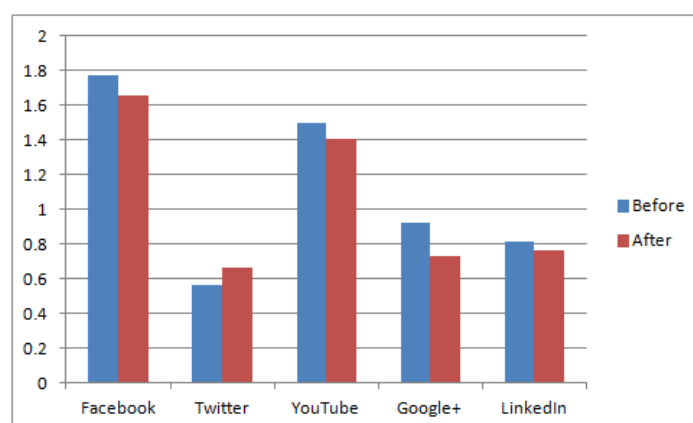

Figure 3: Survey results of social media use

The lone exception to the overall decline in social media use amongst AusAID student was that of a slight increase in the use of Twitter following the conclusion of the program. What had gone wrong with our project? Our primary goal to stimulate social media use was certainly not an outcome in our work.

Discussion: Learning from our past

The purpose of our project was to develop and use social media resources for newly arrived AusAID scholarship students. During 18 months of working periodically in three stages, we first developed paper-based materials, then online materials until developing a full resource site. The use of our materials was mixed throughout, with casual tutorial staff wary to use social media and students seemingly too busy or simply uninterested to make use of the materials. At this point, we took stock of the key challenges (Table 2).

Table 2: Summary of overall project challenges

Themes	Description
Wariness to participate	As a whole, casual tutors and related academic staff showed reluctance to participate fully in social media use, and thus did not foster student participation in the project.
Professional development	Time for professional development for casual tutors, limited to a short time, was focused more on larger issues of AusAID student adjustment than social media use.
Curriculum integration	Situating social media training is difficult in a program that stresses the need for Australian culture familiarization, academic writing, and critical thinking.
Information overload / time pressure	Students often felt overwhelmed with pressing cultural and academic adjustment processes to the detriment of social media training or awareness.
Technical proficiency development	Our goal, to encourage social media use, often became confounded amidst the challenges of providing sufficient resources to develop fundamental technical skills.

Echoing concerns raised by legal experts (Woodley & Beattie, 2012), a number of staff on the IAP were wary of potential risks of social media use. In a sense, such hesitancy touches on the second order barriers that may hinder technological and media integration (Adi & Scotte, 2013) that includes poor personal experiences with social media or negative views gleaned from mainstream media (Arceneaux & Schmitz Weiss, 2010). Working with a large team of casual staff, our options to influence professional attitude, or to create a vision that motivated purposeful use, were limited because we had little time to train them at the start of the program.

The IAP is held twice a year, with a changing group of casual tutors and academic staff, and thus professional development opportunities are limited. Although the sustainable program set out by Signh, Schrape, and Kelly (2012) is clearly desirable, casual tutor training would be difficult to align with university strategic goals, be integrated into a reward system, able to afford ongoing opportunities and be made to be fully accountable amongst participants. Tutors, already wary of social media, thought that its use lay outside their contractual obligations; in short, our attempts at professional development amongst casual tutors were poorly received.

Because the IAP is designed as an intensive six-week program, the curriculum is packed. Over the years we have added and deleted, changed and then rejected several initiatives. How much should we continue to highlight social media training as a core skill amidst efforts to develop critical thinking, strengthen efficient reading, practice academic writing and encourage tutorial participation? In discussions, we have committed to the development of 'new media literacies' and perhaps we must face up to our own second order barriers of creating a purposeful vision (Adi & Scotte, 2013) in a world that is 'always on' (Baron, 2008) and in constant contact (Gillen & Merchant, 2013).

Time pressures during the IAP may have thwarted student uptake of social media use. In follow-up interviews, students told us that they had little time to use the site during the intensive program. Two weeks after they left the daily interactions of the IAP, students came to realize that tools and sites had social utility. Some now signed up for an established Facebook site. For students, the need to reconnect with their former IAP classmates was now a motivating force to make concerted use of social media. One student summed up the sentiment in a single post -- "Anyone miss IAP like I do?? hehe.. :)" – but in our subsequent periodic monitoring of the site, we found that any further uptake and use was limited beyond a self-select group of AusAID students.

In general, we underestimated the technical difficulties that students encountered. Holding hands-on activities and workshops, though a valuable and oft-repeated suggestion from students, is resource intensive. Logistically, we found that computer labs were difficult to book for extended periods. Further, because the focus of our

workshops within the IAP program was on the use of official university websites and the LMS site, we sought to utilize university computers as much as possible rather than students' own devices. Students, however, often preferred to use their own devices. For us, though, given the peculiarities of a range of devices, operating systems and native language interfaces, we were soon overwhelmed trying to 'support' such a range of technologies and systems. student devices. Students, too, were keen to receive advice on 'the best' local Internet Service Providers, as well as 'the best' laptop or 'the best' smartphone; oftentimes, we shied away from giving such advice because we are university employees and not willing to provide commercial advice.

Critical self-reflection: Understanding our present

Ideally, our project would have fostered sustained and engaged AusAID student participation within local and institutional 'affinity spaces' (Gee, 2004) through the use of social media. In turn, training at the early stages of their academic careers would then lead students to increased understanding and use of sites across the vast global network of cyberspace. But the realities of time pressures, skill limitations, resistances to use and curricular demands tripped us up, and we now realize such a project must be long-term and developmental.

Our own analysis reminded us of two points; 1) being mindful of the capabilities of newly arrived students acclimatizing to a challenging environment, and 2) a keen awareness of curriculum and delivery issues within a multi-faceted, intensive program. Slowly, though, we came to understand that our project originally geared towards social media training came to be used for a range of differing purposes (Table 3).

Table 3: Varied goals of social media training for AusAID students

Purposes	Description
Technical training	Essential, hands-on education to direct students how to make use of University resources effectively and/or to connect mobile devices to local providers
Intergroup participation	Foster a sense of participation across the 200 member group that consists of 25-40 nationalities from diverse backgrounds and cultures
Information and media literacy	Provide an understanding that, increasingly, the 'news' comes in the form of online tweets and blogs often from private individuals with direct experience of the event
Alumni and professional networking	Encourage students to stay in touch with other University graduates and/or to build their own professional contacts through demonstrated knowledge and related personal connections

As our own thinking and experiences matured, we realized that 'technical training' was the least of our worries. Though from developing countries, AusAID students tend to be amongst their countries' most capable and many of the scholars had extensive international experiences. Program after program, we continue to be impressed that most students arrive with (or quickly purchase) the latest smartphone, a thorough knowledge of global network sites, and a keen understanding of creating and sharing media. There are some exceptions, of course, but no longer do we have to offer a remedial course in computer basics as we did just three years ago. Nonetheless, at this point, we continue to stress the need for technical proficiency in the IAP, especially in the areas of accessing library databases but now highlight efficiency of getting information more than simple basics. This seemingly contradictory approach – not to worry about technical training but continue to stress it in some ways – points to our need to balance the widely varying skills across the diverse cohort.

Each of the three cohorts we worked with during this project was relatively large. In the two summer sessions, the number of students ranged from 160 to 210; in the winter, the group consisted of 100 or so students. The group is diverse, too, with nearly 45 nationalities and approximately two dozen discipline areas. In the first stage of the project, we sought to use social media to encourage participation across the large group. We found, however, that the reality of seeing each other almost daily for six weeks largely undermines the need to 'connect' through online postings. The most popular use of our collective site was as a repository for shared online photos. Photography is a serious pursuit for a few students, and as such, they take on shared roles of 'unofficial photographers' throughout the IAP. In a similar manner, one person would read a tweet or see a Facebook update and simply tell others at shared morning teas, in classes, or at extended lunch times.

One reason we started this project was so that students could better respond to University resources. In particular, we monitored what the Library was tweeting but soon found that many postings were simply informational or meant to amuse. (Postings included, for example, 'We will be in holiday mode next week' and 'Ever wonder what WWII chemicals smelt like? Check out these cheerful posters …'.) For newly arrived

students, the University postings captured neither their imaginations nor met their needs, and certainly did not evoke a sense of immediate urgency.

The delivery of social media training resources within an intensive course raises particular issues around what is compulsory, and hence assessable, and what is not. We took the entirely voluntary approach, hypothesizing that students would be self-motivated to connect and engage. However in an environment of 'information overload', the training resources that we provided were not best utilized. Students later said that they would have preferred dedicated instruction on social media technologies in a computer lab-like environment, just the same as they had been offered for the university's LMS system, citation management software and so on. This would require internalizing the social media resources fully within the program and training educators such as tutors to incorporate social media within the course. To do so would require a shift of mandate so that familiarity with social media is considered an essential academic skill. Conversely the training materials could place a greater emphasis on use of social media for academic ends, something we would argue is long overdue for all students, not just international students. For example, students could be asked to organize a group project via a social media event feature.

Training resources need to be highly visible and promoted. In our experience working with AusAID students for nearly a decade, the digital divide between AusAID students and local students appears to be narrowing. Perhaps *all* students could benefit from social media training at the start of their studies. In this respect an approach that's easy to access but expands to depth of issues which students have often, in our experience, not considered such as privacy, identity management, professional social networking and academic use of social networks. Designing training materials such that the reach across spectrum will likely make it easier to justify the inclusion of these resources to institutional stakeholders. While perhaps an obvious conclusion, our experience highlighted the fact that it is insufficient promote yet more online materials to those students already experiencing 'information overload'. Social media use is not, for most students, a high priority in light of the competing demands of tertiary study.

It became apparent to us during the project that we must target the effective use of student owned mobile devices. Earlier, though, we were overwhelmed with trying to provide 'support' for a wide range of technologies. Perhaps because handheld mobile devices are widely use in developing countries (World Bank, 2012), students prefer their own devices over university computers and laptops. It is a reality we need to direct more attention to meeting technical issues of local connectivity for AusAID students before we can move onto social media use. One novel solution would be to host a collaborative 'super-workshop' in a lecture theatre for a large number of students in a single day. Together, both local and international students could focus on getting connected and sharing tips for device settings. Ideally, such activities would provide the ideal opportunity to then organically introduce social networking activities to build on basic skills and continue engagement after a technical focused session.

Electric dreams: Imagining the future

Although we are alert to possible feelings of social isolation and loneliness for newly arrived students (Arkoudis, et al, 2010; Rosenthal, Russell, & Thomson, 2006; Sawir, et al, 2007), it is interesting to note that AusAID students did not raise the such issues until we interviewed them after the IAP had finished. One suggestion, from several students, was to provide resources that would assist students to connect to local ethnic communities. Nonetheless, such training might well be odds with university goals to increase student engagement: Indeed, we were keen to pursue the role of social media in enhancing 'connectedness' and 'affinity' with Australian culture. One area ripe for further research, then, is to investigate the actual use of social media through an analysis of affinity discourse (Gillen & Merchant, 2013; Zappavigna, 2011). Such work could shed light the relationship between student perceptions of institutional goals related to international student engagement.

In line with the work of Mirrihai, Dawson and Hoven (2012), it would be helpful to identify key actors amongst newly arrived students as a way to help motivate social media uptake. With a better understanding of key actors, we can imagine devoting our limited time and resources more to those students who were likely to train others. Over the long term, we would like explore how students socialize into discourse communities. Similar to the examinations of how computer-mediated communication influences pragmatics (Herring, Stein, & Virtanen, 2013; Lee, 2011), we would like to investigate how newly arrived students come to understand and use discourses specific to an Australian tertiary institution. To do this, we need to make use of closer observational techniques, for example to capture how students make sense of texts (Barton & Lee, 2013), look at their patterns of interaction within online connections that may foster a 'imagined audience' (Marwick & boyd, 2011) and

undertake computer mediated discourse analysis of their work (Zappavigna, 2012). For us, it is important in future work to emphasize the role of language socialization as students take up social media tools and resources.

Finally, we would like to return to question that sparked our project: Where do students, particularly those from developing nations, acquire new literacies and learn to use social media? We can imagine a future when such skills training is essential to university students, and we wonder what the role of staff will be, and how policies will be shaped, and how issues regarding wariness, privacy and the lack of time will be addressed. Beyond action research, a longitudinal mixed methods approach across several institutes may provide answers.

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