An experiment in form and content, its aim is to be a guide and map of some of the opportunities to develop more open and networked practices while navigating the potential downsides of social media, including perceived loss of privacy and amplification of disadvantage and abuse. It is an excellent and accessible starting point for, as well as route to, a deeper understanding and a more sophisticated use of social media.

—Prof. Shân Wareing, Deputy Vice-Chancellor, London South Bank University

Social media affects working life in Higher Education? How are universities harnessing its power to aid student learning? This innovative collection brings together academics and those working in professional services to examine these questions and more. The diverse and expert contributors analyse the many ways social media can be used to enhance teaching and learning, research, professional practice, leadership, networking and career development. The impact of social media is evaluated critically, with an eye both to the benefits and the problems of using these new forms of digital communication.

This is the first volume to give such detailed attention to this area of high interest. Its innovative approach extends to its creation, with contributors found via their presence on Twitter. The short and impactful chapters are accessible while retaining an academic focus through their application of relevant learning theories and educational context.

Social Media and Higher Education is essential reading for any professional working in higher education, including lecturers teaching education courses. It is also significant for researchers looking at more recent developments in the field and what it means to work in a modern higher education environment.

As with all Open Book publications, this entire book is available to read for free on the publisher's website. Printed and digital editions, together with supplementary digital material, can also be found at www.openbookpublishers.com

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Social Media in Higher Education
Case Studies, Reflections and Analysis

Edited by Chris Rowell
Introduction

Social media has been actively penetrating all aspects of modern life, including learning, and its influence over HE classroom activities is no exception. Today’s learners in the United Kingdom are well armed with a range of the latest gadgets: smartphones, tablets, smart watches, health bracelets — to name but a few.

HE students carry these gadgets around with them, bring them into the classroom, and use them regularly throughout their sessions. Often smart gadgets are utilised by academics and other professionals who teach or support learning in higher education. Such activities may include searching for resources, creating opportunities for interaction, group work, projects and participation in large and small group sessions. This book includes examples of smart devices and social media being used effectively for such purposes. Further, growing research into the use of digital technologies suggests that there are a plethora of benefits for learners and academics (Beetham, 2018) since digital technologies, based on an informed pedagogical rationale, have the potential to enhance and transform learning in and outside the classroom to create new and stimulating learning experiences.
In this chapter, the focus is on reviewing students’ perceptions and behavioural patterns with respect to their use of smartphones during lectures and tutorials. We share some reflective guidance for HE practitioners to suggest that the use of smartphones by students can be a learning opportunity and contribute to students’ learning journeys.

**Smartphones and Classroom Dynamics**

The array of amazing technology has an impact on students’ behaviour and preferences beyond its immediate benefits (Duvalet et al., 2017). All these gadgets have in common a built-in sophisticated notification system, aiming to keep the gadget’s owner abreast of any changes and updates. These notifications however, intentionally or not, have been facilitating certain behavioural modifications to their owners’ lifestyle associated with ‘connected’ presence (Licoppe and Smoreda, 2005). Using another explanatory angle — classical conditioning — as a frame of reference (Melton, 2014), being unremittingly attentive to one’s own smartphone is, de facto, the result of continuous reinforcement provided by notifications. In other words, when a notification arrives, the smartphone’s owner seems to check up on its content almost mechanically, creating an intermittent but permanent distraction of attention. Despite the fact that notifications can be switched off, many smart device users seem to live in a state of being constantly connected or switched on.

Another angle to consider when reflecting on the use of smart gadgets and social media is social influence (Aronson et al., 2013), that is a self-alteration of behaviour governed by imaginary approval or disapproval of our physical surroundings — classmates in our case. Being able to glance at our own smartphone almost without limitations is an established social norm and it is being reinforced incessantly by peers and technology (Derks et al., 2015). One more influence that reinforces this intricate behavioural pattern is the myth of multitasking, especially among the so-called millennial generation. There is no definitive scientific verdict about it.

A study of the effects of multitasking in the classroom found the ‘students performing multiple tasks performed significantly poorer on immediate measures of memory for the to-be-learned content’
While it is acknowledged that multitasking can rewire the brain, enabling a learner to deal with multiple tasks more rapidly (National Chamber Foundation, 2012), there is a trade-off — a capacity for thinking deeply and creatively suffers as a result. Hence, the multitaskers are ‘more likely to rely on conventional ideas and solutions rather than challenging them with original lines of thought’ (Carr, 2011).

Can this rather distracting phenomenon, in the context of learning and attention span, be reduced or even stopped, or do we have to learn to live with it and try to normalise the use of smart devices in the classroom, even if not used for learning? Is asking students to switch them off an option when we want them switched on to learning?

Here we aim to elicit new insights into students’ use of social media, which is often perceived by academics as a distraction from classroom activities, and to articulate specific teaching strategies that have the potential to maximise students’ engagement and participation while at the same time minimising, where possible, the distracting use of smart devices and browsing behaviour in the HE classroom.

**Research Settings**

A small-scale study was conducted at a UK HE institution, focussed within a Business School, with the following objectives: to identify the characteristics of the current use of smartphones in the classroom and propose interventions to mitigate the perceived distracting effect of random browsing of social media by students in these settings.

Gadamerian hermeneutics (Gadamer, 2004) was used to gain rich insights into the usage of smart devices during classroom learning. Thirteen students from several undergraduate Business and Management programmes, predominantly in the final year of study, volunteered to participate in this study through in-depth interviews using a convenience sampling method.

The interviews were followed by a questionnaire to obtain views of a larger student audience for the purpose of validating interview findings. The questionnaire was introduced via Blackboard to the group of thirty third-year students. It consisted of fifteen statements using the Likert scale with the choices: Never, Rarely, Sometimes, Quite Often, Almost Always.
The questionnaire was available to a mixed class of 29 Stage 3 students of different schools and programmes. Due to the timescale restrictions on this study it was open to responses for two weeks and had a 93% of response rate.

The respondents quotes used in this study have been anonymised and given a reference e.g. R1, R2, etc.

Results and Discussion

A number of findings emerged from the analysis of interviews based on the identified uses of smartphones during classroom activities, which are grouped here into the following themes that emerged during the interviewing stage: continuous connectedness, entertainment, educational drift and catch of advertisement. The findings from the interviews and questionnaire are brought together and discussed in themes.

Continuous Connectedness

One observation common to all the interviews is that students want to be constantly connected to their chosen cyberspaces. Students’ connections to their virtual social surroundings are often closely monitored. One of the respondents summarises this connection as follows:

the use of social media through mobile devices is almost a mild addiction [...] many students (including myself) would feel like something is missing if they did not have their phone on their person for an entire day. (R11)

This trend is also receiving prominence in research literature. According to Rosen (2017), a typical student actively engages in six types of social media several times a day due to the fear of missing out and/or the constant temptation of keeping up with others in their social networks. The questionnaire’s results demonstrate that 100% of students indicated that they have been using their smartphones during classes for non-educational purposes with varying degrees of regularity: sometimes — 15%; quite often — 50%; almost always — 35%; with almost all respondents (85%) using Facebook during classes. It is interesting to note that only 11% of respondents indicated that using smartphones
during classes is unacceptable, whereas 61.5% of respondents believe that using smartphones in the classroom is a new reality of the contemporary learning environment and hence, where educators fail to incorporate smartphones for educational use, they would be used for other purposes.

The influence of Facebook specifically extends beyond being a mere distraction in the classroom. Since group space within Blackboard’s discussion forum, one of the dominant learning management systems in HE institutions, is not popular due to its limited functionality, the majority of participating students prefer to form a group file exchange and communication environment in Facebook.

Facebook is a useful tool for group work however it was rare for me to make use of this during a lecture. My use of social media during lectures has definitely more to do with boredom or communicating with my friends, both in the lecture and outside the university. (R3)

Unlike social media, most learning management systems place greater emphasis on a formal curriculum than on the ‘networking’ element of social media (Cho and Cho, 2014). Therefore Facebook has filled this gap. Social media allows students to collaborate informally, and instrumental support from Facebook friends is found to have a positive impact on the learning process (Khan et al., 2014). 84% of respondents indicated that they prefer to use Facebook for group-work activities, and that raises questions about the effectiveness of learning management systems and investment in them by HE institutions.

Entertainment

Another common aspect of social media that was indicated by all participants is the immediate and often entertaining content available online: games, music, video and sharing of amusing textual and multimedia content.

social media was used relatively often as a form of entertainment between my friendship group within lectures and content was shared between us […] because there is plenty of interesting stuff there… (R12)

While the students do not commonly use social media for this purpose in tutorials or seminars because of ‘respect for the tutor’ (R1), they
Social Media in Higher Education

might certainly do so in lectures, especially in large classes, as a way of dealing with boredom. Responding to the perceived monotony of lectures, students tend to improvise a short break to re-energise their focus on the lecture’s content. This self-administered brief pause in a form of ‘disconnect from class’ or ‘technological break’ (Aagaard, 2015) is typically filled with surfing the web or checking on social media news or shared gags.

I felt it was totally unacceptable to use a phone unless an emergency or for work in the context of a tutorial. I think there is a more personal connection in this setting than in a lecture and it would therefore be rude not to pay attention to the tutor. The underlying reason for this may be to do with morals instilled in me by my parents. Use of a mobile phone was always discouraged at the dinner table or in other more formal settings such as family/ friends visiting. (R4)

This view is supported by the majority of respondents, 69% do not mind using smartphones for entertainment purposes even during hour-long lectures as long as the lecture is deemed to be boring. This distribution of responses raises a number of questions, some rather controversial, regarding the need to make the delivery of the educational material as engaging as possible for all students. Is there a need for ‘edutainment’ or for another type of radical change in higher education? What constitutes an engaging lecture in nursing, engineering, mathematics and other technical sciences? And there is a more enduring question concerning the essence of large-group teaching: are large groups intended to communicate content, or to be a learning opportunity of a new kind?

Educational Drift

The use of rapid-response applications to achieve more effective classroom engagement is becoming more common (Wang, 2015). These apps, such as Mentimeter or Socrative, enable tutors to connect with students to support their learning process, helping them to self-assess within the scope of prearranged activities and/or on-the-fly questions, and allowing tutors to gain an immediate insight into students’ understanding of subject matter. They also encourage students to find out more about the information on slides provided in the apps.

The respondents seem to appreciate the use of response applications but are also mindful of their distracting potential:
I think that [it would be good to use] a system where everyone in the lecture has their device assigned to their name and the system can tell if an individual has not responded to a question (this may already exist in the apps mentioned as I am not familiar with them). (R2)

I think that allowing or encouraging fellow students to use social media would help alleviate the desire to use a smartphone in lectures and thus remove the ‘mental itch’ of not using the device for the duration of a lecture. (R11)

The above excerpts show students’ awareness of the potentially distracting power of smart devices when used for learning and teaching in the classroom. However, around 85% of the questionnaire’s respondents are in favour of using in-class response applications for the purpose of active participation in classroom activities.

**Catch of Advertisement**

Despite a general trend in which advertisements on web resources and social media are ignored by users, marketing campaigns have been evolving to become more sophisticated, entertaining, and informative. Students are therefore increasingly finding themselves in the situation of being carried away by the interest of the moment, triggered by clever advertisements, particularly on the Pinterest platform.

When I go on Pinterest I almost always follow prompts and pop-ups as they are so creative and I’m getting a lot of ideas for my work [as a marketeer]. (R10)

Sometimes I would have to watch a snippet in order to get to the content I had chosen to watch and even forgot my original purpose for browsing. (R6)

According to the respondents, Pinterest is an effective platform in capturing their attention because it sends visual information (compilations of examples) to the registered users matching their interests. It sends these compilations every day, typically in two ways: as notifications to smartphones and as emails with a focused summary centred on users’ interests. As a result, during the interview participants agreed that Pinterest is more interesting and effective in keeping attention of its users compared with Facebook, labelling it as ‘captivating but addictive’ (R1).
Recommendations (for HE Practitioners)

The authors have used a number of teaching interventions for embedding smartphones into teaching and learning processes with the aim of counteracting perceived boredom in large-group sessions. These include, but are not limited to: mood-setting starters; conversational dialogues; using multimedia material; changing the routine of the session regularly; allowing for students’ questions and feedback using technology; and alternative no- or low-tech strategies to engage students in a variety of ways. These interventions require the attentive participation of students in classroom activities to varying degrees of success, depending on stimuli that would fuel different aspects of students’ interest in learning as well as their curiosity and imagination. The use of rapid response systems, such as Mentimeter and Socrative, appears to be one of the most effective interventions in utilising for educational purposes the urge many students have to use their smartphones in the classroom. This suggestion is based on a personal observation that students normally respond to an invitation to use their smart devices for classroom activities quite enthusiastically.

Typically, such an activity can be organised in three steps. Initially, students are invited to use Mentimeter or Socrative to register their views in a tailor-made mini-quiz on a particular subject discussed in the lecture or tutorial. After the quiz, a sequence of browsing tasks aimed to encourage the discovery of specific resources (e.g. published articles or proven working solutions) can be introduced to give students an opportunity to explore the concept- or subject-related resources. Lastly, the lecturer can point out to students how the quiz and subsequent browsing tasks relate to a specific threshold or advanced concept within the lecture or tutorial. This allows students’ attention to return gradually to the main subject of the session.

Such an approach offers a variety of things for the student to focus on, thus maintaining their attention and helps to develop their research skills. In practice, it was noticed that at the end of browsing tasks students often do a quick check of their social connections anyway, but this habit seems to be fading with time. Overall, embedding smartphones in the class activities helps to change the perception of smartphone use as forbidden (by tutors) or as an inappropriate activity. Similarly,
Wang (2015) has found that introducing new learning technology in the classroom results in a spike of enthusiasm from the students, and although this fades over time the students remain fairly engaged and motivated. The findings of this study also indicate that 81.4% of respondents would appreciate an opportunity to use in-class response applications as a form of active participation in classroom activities.

Conclusions

This review of the use of smartphones by higher-education students has identified certain challenges academics have been facing recently. It was established within the scope of this small-scale study that all respondents have used and continue to use smartphones during classes to access social media platforms (mainly Facebook and Twitter), with more than 60% of questionnaire respondents believing that this is a new reality in higher education and their tutors should find ways of using it.

It would appear that despite the omnipresent use of smartphones to access social media platforms in the classroom, certain approaches for regaining students’ attention may prove to be sufficiently effective. A proven practical example, supported by 85% of student responses, is the use of rapid-response applications, such as Mentimeter or Socrative, to invigorate the academic involvement of students in classroom activities by appealing to their habit of using smartphones.

While the choice of student engagement strategies is fairly broad, it rests on a few assumptions to be considered in further studies. First, academics should try to recognise the presence of smartphones in the classroom as a learning opportunity and attempt to integrate them into the teaching process. Second, a large number of student comments that express the desire to have interesting sessions indicates the challenges higher education faces: none of the participating students were able to specifically articulate the key characteristics of an interesting lecture. What might these be? Is it the perceived appeal of the subject material, or its delivery, or another combination of yet-to-be-rationalised factors?
References


