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

How does social media affect 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.

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Introduction

What I want to focus on here is the ‘social’ aspect of social media, and the way we can, in higher education, leverage human tendencies to network, connect, and interact. I also want to devote a little thought to ensuring that doing so doesn’t replicate or further reinforce social inequities, and avoids imperilling students’ safety, self-esteem, and focus. I want to suggest that when we bear these concerns in mind, on balance, we are still able to find ways of working with social media that draws positively on our social tendencies. When Aristotle observes in *The Politics* that we are social beings, he sees it as core to normal human functioning:

> Society is something that precedes the individual. Anyone who either cannot lead the common life or is so self-sufficient as not to need to, and therefore does not partake of society, is either a beast or a god. (Aristotle and Saunders, 1992)

The runaway success of social media has shown that very few of us are either beasts or gods. Once smartphones and user-experience design reached a tipping point of socio-economic penetration and ease of use, there was an exponential rate of adoption. The much vaunted, if poorly...
conceptualised, ‘digital native’ was no longer alone on social media. Grandparents were sufficiently motivated by the connections it could offer to their distributed families to overcome technical barriers, and mainstream commercial organisations began to note its reach to ever wider demographics.

Some in education have always been early adaptors of technology, due to a blend of techno-enthusiasm and a hunger to find more ways of providing effective and transformative educational experiences. Many have seen the ‘sticky’ nature of social media not as an opportunity, but a threat. Social media can often be a competitor for student attention, and a tireless, monetised, and dangerous competitor as well. Alongside this, the extremist tabloids that dominate the UK newspaper market have decided social media is the latest in its ongoing series of moral panics. In the 1980s parents fretted over the threat posed by ouija boards, Dungeons and Dragons, and brainwashing by religious cults. In the 1990s this moved to satanic ritual abuse and the impact of ‘video nasties’ (Luce, 2013). While the mainstream narrative increasingly portrays social media as a threat to privacy and factual information, research is much more ambivalent in its findings (for instance, see the work of the Australian scholar Catharine Lumby). Nonetheless, it is worth educators being mindful of the way any initiatives involving social media are likely to be received by colleagues, students, broader audiences, and be ready to demonstrate their benefits, and any safeguards they have put in place.

I suggest HE practitioners should consider social media in the development of cohort identity. Cohort identity here refers to the holistic sense of a ‘course’. Students sit within broader faculties, departments, and academic schools, and their studies are often broken down in to units or modules; but most consider themselves students of the course. After all, this is usually the thing that sits on their degree certificate. While students may say that they are a ‘philosophy’ student, rather than identify with a broader department of humanities or faculty of arts, that does not mean that their identification is identical with the way their experience is structured. Since the modularisation of higher education in the last quarter of the twentieth century, many students and educators have worried that the course experience has been compromised. The experience can be seen as bitty, disjointed, and a piecemeal collection of modules, whose tutors may or may not have coordinated the content and assessment with each other. It is arguable that such a lack of strong
cohort identity, in the area where students feel they are based, means that extra and co-curricular events and activities are fewer, or poorly engaged with. Intermittent attendance, and students with jobs, may mean they struggle to see their idea of ‘the course’ they are studying manifest into reality.

There are many ways a course team might address a sense of an absent identity across a course. Some of these might suffer from the challenges of student availability, commuter students, caring responsibilities and timetable clashes (in terms of staff, students and rooms). In my experience of a particular course, I was able, as a Course Leader, to find ways of, at least to some extent, overcoming these challenges in forging a broader sense of a ‘life of the course’ through a social media approach.

In the Religion, Philosophy & Ethics (RPE) course here at the University of Gloucestershire, we took both an offline and online approach to the development of cohort identity. This was an ad-hoc, unplanned approach, and required commitment from a number of colleagues, and the school management, as and when resources were required. The off-line activity involved cross-year coach trips and guest speakers as its primary tools. The trips were often to local museums, but also to religious sites in London, or Diwali in Leicester. These are not particularly unusual or innovative ideas in a course, but they were important to our social media approach. Another important aspect of these events was that they were mostly open to all RPE students, on any module, and from any year/level. The on-going calendar of events was then threaded together via the social media side of our approach. I have written elsewhere about the detail of this, but we began where social media was in 2006, with a blog:

... I started a modest course blog called ‘Religion, Philosophy and Ethics at the University of Gloucestershire’ with the intended audience being our current undergraduate students.

It took a while to get momentum behind it, but it slowly began to engage both the intended student audience and others with an interest in the subject area. That is, up to a point. While the blog persists today, and actually has a clearer role now than ever before, we found that other forms of new media came to surpass it in popularity.

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During its brief moment in the sun, the blog was a noticeboard, debate hub, event invite, signpost and more. But social media, or more precisely Facebook, killed its wider role. While students still read the blog, by 2009 the comments had dried up: people did their interacting elsewhere. So, as Facebook was where most conversations were happening, we realised that’s where we needed to go, too. (Webster, 2015)

The blog can still be found, now with over a decade of content, and I still pop the odd thing on it to keep some sense of currency, and to prevent it from becoming too much of a digital relic. Since then, we have had to match our practice to the shifts in social media usage. Our Facebook group initially became a way to connect current students with each other. It operated better than a ‘page’, which was something more promotional and didn’t have the requisite functionality. While at first we used the group to have students interact across years and modules; we had ambitions beyond interaction and event advertising. This was really intended to develop a sense of ‘us’. The staff were able to adopt a consistent tone, and draw on links, news stories, and articles, in order to give a sense of what we are all about on this course. Hence, we became able to model the way that academics interacted with the world, via the prism of our subject. To some extent, this gave us all a sense of being engaged in some form of common endeavour, using philosophy and religion to try and collectively make sense of the world. What began to happen after a year or so of the Facebook group was that students began, as they do, to leave and new students arrived. What this meant was that the group now had graduates in as well. We also mentioned it at Open Days, and during outreach activities. The group began to have potential students, and Religious Studies teachers in too. It still does, but as time has gone by, the biggest group by far is that of graduates. They are not as active as current students, but the Facebook group has been a key means of keeping a more direct alumni connection with the course. In this same period, of 2006–2009, we made use of a Flickr account to host photo content, and to operate as a course photo album. This worked nicely on Open Days, as it gave a sense of what it was like to be on the course, with lots of shots from coach trips, our visits to Spain, and internal events. This still exists, and is posted to, but we have also begun to use Instagram, due to its dominant position and easy integration with Twitter, and the ability to use hashtags effectively.
For five years or so, the Facebook group was hugely active, and served as somewhere we could bring together our other activity. Guest speakers, including those who had physically visited as well as those we had Skyped into classes, would also join the group and answer questions. It also served as the primary events noticeboard, and way of sharing photos from field trips. There emerged from it a real sense of the course; a sense of something that over-spilled the classroom; of something more than a collection of modules. By 2014 this was clearly not the case in so strong a sense. Facebook was not the dominant market leader in that same way. We had already begun to use Twitter, and had been producing a video-interview resource blog at www.philosvids.wordpress.com since 2012. These began to have a new importance, as we strove to thread all this together to maintain this sense of our course identity. This has been partly effective. The Twitter account seems to resonate most effectively as a means of reaching wider audiences, notably teachers in schools. The video interview blog also has global visitors but we also use it in a conjunction with our internal VLE (Virtual Learning Environment, Moodle in our case) to host video content that is part of our core course delivery — so our students make a lot of use of the wider resource. The Facebook group still has activity, but its dominance has passed.

This fragmentation does mean a certain level of extra labour, and although we have sufficient staff buy-in to largely make it work, and maintain our sense of a collective course identity, it comes at a cost of time. Our response, in part, along with the rest of our wider academic School in the University has been to have a course-level Social Media Intern from the student body, who we give a tablet device to, and who takes a role in tweeting and some posting on the course Instagram account. The hashtags on Instagram also mean that staff and students can share pictures from a trip, without the need for a central course account.

If I was trying to spin out a wider set of recommendations from our experiences, these would open by stating that you shouldn’t underestimate the amount of both time and energy that using social media can soak up. Yes, you can use tools to auto-schedule WordPress posts, and tweets, and you can become very efficient, but it requires staff who really want to do it. And staff who will be there next year. Dormant
Social media is like a flag of a stale course to external audiences! It also takes time to keep on top of current trends and norms, and avoid seeming to merely go through the motions. Social media literacy takes time to both develop and maintain, and a reluctant course team will be at a real risk of generating materials that make the students feel less part of the course, rather than supporting and generating a sense of identity.

Another set of considerations relate to privacy, opt-ins, and the nature of online spaces. We never required students to join Facebook, and there are ever-growing reasons to steer clear of doing so. We always sought to post to Moodle a copy of anything important that went to Facebook. We also used a guideline whereby we refrained from being Facebook ‘friends’ with potential and current students. While the course Instagram and Twitter accounts do follow the accounts of our students, I ensure my personal accounts (which students can follow) do not follow student accounts on those platforms. This avoids me seeing any information that might compromise my role in marking student work, avoids the issue of who I do and don’t follow, and allows me to give the students clarity and sense of borders. When we began to make greater use of more public spaces, like Twitter, for students to communicate through — rather than the public-broadcast model of a blog, or the walled-garden of our Facebook group (which requires membership to be approved by a moderator) — another set of issues concerned us. Public Internet spaces are experienced by me (a middle-aged, male, white, straight, professional), quite differently to the way those spaces can feel for, say, young women, BAME students, or openly transgender students. We need to be wary that our enthusiasm for the advantages we might see as accruing from student social media use doesn’t blind us to ethical considerations. Should I really nudge my students into spaces where they may experience abuse, or other troubling interactions which I have no control over? It is of course the case that many students may have these experiences anyway, but there is something about them taking place as part of an approved study setting that is problematic and normalising.

In terms of closing, I fear there is no silver bullet, and the target seems to be perpetually moving anyway. However, my sense is that building course identity so that the cohort of students currently studying with you feel something collective, is partly about the off-line activity: the
language we use in class, that we ‘do things together’ (events, trips, and the like) helping them feel included in the wider ‘life of the course’. Social media can play a role in broadcasting and showcasing, but also in intensifying and reinforcing the sense of the communal, such that in its best moments it becomes a tool of self-fulfilling prophecy, and that the students really, when they log in and see their course activity, gain a sense of belonging.

References


