

Exploring the Virtual Classroom: A case study of Malaysian and Honduran University Students

Professor Beatriz Lovo Reichmann
Central American Technological University
Department of Mass Communication
Honduras
beatrizlovo@unitec.edu

Professor Sharon Jacqueline Wilson
Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman
Faculty of Creative Industries
Department of Mass Communications
Malaysia
sharon@utar.edu.my

Abstract: The focus of this project is on the virtual global collaboration in the context of a teaching and learning environment that bridges the gap between two universities and groups of students in two continents. In an era of technological revolution educators must develop robust forms of teaching this would also mean allowing educators to create and explore new teaching methods creatively and using suitable and attractive tools or instruments to disseminate information whilst allowing students to create their own learning identities, reflect and question their own learning methods. While this project aimed at exploring possible use of technology in teaching and learning the findings revealed that the students and learners arrived at three core platforms. The study discovered that collaborative, social and personal platforms enhanced teaching and learning and inadvertently encouraged continuous learning beyond the classroom.

Key Words: Collaboration, Social media, Teacher, learner, Pedagogy

1. Introduction

The mass communication and journalism industries are facing tremendous transformational challenges due to the influx of new technologies. The growths of social media and mobile apps have made media consumers more active than ever advocating amongst others choice, self-censorship and citizen journalism.

The Internet has profoundly changed the human experience. We use the Web to find information, buy and sell products, watch television shows, seek mates, and search for entertainment. We use it to connect with others – three-quarters of American adults have been online, with even more teens (93%) reporting they do so, and almost all Internet users say one of their primary purposes for going online is for communication (Jones & Fox, 2009). The Internet is part of our everyday lives, and who we are guides how we use it. People once went online seeking the anonymity it offered (McKenna & Bargh, 2000); they now more often use the Internet to socialize with people they do know and expand their circle of friends (Jones, 2009). Two of the primary tools that enable these connections are social networking sites and instant messages (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Jones, 2009; Lenhart, 2009; Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008). More than half of America's teens and young adults send instant messages and use social networking sites, and more than one-third of all Internet users engage in these activities (Jones, 2009)

Social media use is a particular consumption of digital media or Internet that has little to do with traditional informational media use. Rather, it provides a mechanism for the audience to connect, communicate, and interact with each other and their mutual friends through instant messaging or social networking sites. To our knowledge, the majority of research on social media use has solely focused on social networking sites (i.e. Ellison et al., 2007; Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008; Ross et al., 2009; Zywicki & Danowski, 2008). These sites are virtual collections of users' profiles, which can be shared with others to create lists of companions and maintain contact with them (Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008).

The existence of social media has brought about tremendous change to the involvement of individuals in society online. Social media has also impacted the involvement of society in current issues through blogs, the creation of forums to discuss aspirations, providing comments about current news, taking part in online discussion, downloading or uploading news in relations to current affairs (PewInternet 2009; Ali & Samsudin 2012). Alexa (2012) documents the top five social media in the world today as *facebook*, Twitter, LinkedIn, Google+ and Pinterest.

As we are in the core of the digital era now, more and more people are being introduced into the current technology. Many of the users of the world's social media are from the younger generation of the 80's and 90's. Nielson (2011) reports users to be mainly women between the ages of 18-34. They are extremely interested and attracted to everything connected to the internet

and its applications and use of social media extensively for various applications such as sending messages, downloading or uploading photos, games, music and video.

With these changes comes the task for educators to incorporate these new technologies into the way they teach and engage students in their classes. Gone are the times when an educator only the chalk board or the mundane power point slides and a projector. Today's students demand for more and the industry insists on this. Social media complements the mass media and they are part and parcel of a youth's life. Social media is now a popular and common medium of fostering relationships among people around the globe. It is the "place" where new ideas are being generated and also serves as one of the most efficient methods in educating oneself and gaining knowledge (Subramaniam 2014).

According to a study conducted by the Pew Research, as of May 2013, almost three quarters (72%) of online U.S. adults use social networking sites, up from 67% in late 2012. Today, social networking site use is a major activity for internet users from a wide range of demographic groups. Younger adults are especially avid adopters, but social networking continues to grow in popularity for older adults as well.

In a study to identify the factors that most influence the acceptance and use of social media among university students, a study by Ika, Ali and Helmi (2013) explored the communication phenomenon that occurs on the internet through the use of the social media in relation to the acceptance and understanding the users' experience. A survey design with the total of 298 undergraduate students in Palembang, Indonesia between the ages of 17 to 25 found that social media adoption is influenced by some factors, particularly perceived ease of use, interpersonal and social networks and relevance which have a positive significant effect on the adoption.

1.1 The Malaysian Scenario

In Malaysia, the adoption of social media in particular has shown significant growth in the last few years. Nine of the top 20 websites in Malaysia are social networking sites and the top five are Yahoo, *Facebook*, Google, *YouTube* and Blogger. There are several social media sites established in Malaysia such as, *myfriends2u.com*, *ruumz.com*, *Friendster* and *Twitter*. *Facebook* is currently the most visited social media website in Malaysia. (Subramaniam 2014). Statistics in May 2013 showed that some 13.3 million or 45.5 per cent of the total populations in the country are *Facebook* users. This puts Malaysia on the 8th spot in Asia and 21st place in the world. From

the total figure, those aged between 18 and 24 were the highest users, contributing 34.5 per cent followed by those aged 25-34 years (29.5 per cent) and 13-17 years (16.3 per cent).

Technology advancement saw the new media play an important and dominant role compared to traditional media, especially with the presence of social media platforms, including online social networking. According to Mustaffa and Azizah (2011) the trend in social networking use among Malaysian active users through a survey to 369 respondents showed that more people use social media technologies with the majority having more than one account or social network profile and logging in a few times a day and spend one to two hours in each session or up to 20 hours per week to communicate or social integration and interaction purposes—besides information sharing, entertainment, convenience factor, and formation of identity. It is also found that the use also provides some forms of gratification. The findings further show that the respondents seemed to agree that the media is an extension and addition to the offline interaction and that it would replace other communications media in the near future.

1.2 The Honduran Scenario

Only 16% of Honduran population have internet access (UNICEF, 2011), and are basically used to socialize and build friendship communities, but are not used as primary news information vehicles and other applications in marketing and academia are yet to be exploited.

Internet represents a very small part of the Honduran news industry. The main reason is based on the fact that only 18.1% percent of the population has access to (UNICEF, 2012). As such, social media in Honduras do not have the reach that they've obtained in other nations in Central America. In addition, social media are primarily used to build common interest communities, extend ties with friends and family abroad and meet new people. Tourism is widely advertised and promoted through various social media, but little or no commercial, political, citizen-interest groups or academic activities are registered. Mainstream media is still found on print, TV and radio, and every traditional media has a web page targeted mainly at Hondurans living abroad. Only three exclusive online Honduran dailies can be found on the web: Hondudiario, Quién Opina and Diario La Noticia, in contrast with 4 newsprint dailies, dozens of local/community dailies, 1042 radio stations and 474 TV stations, for a population of 8 million. (It is important to point out that every TV station produces at least one newscast a day.) (Conatel, 2014)

1.3 Social Networking and the Learning environment

Social media is a 21st century term used to broadly define a variety of networked tools or technologies that emphasize the social aspects of the Internet as a channel for communication, collaboration, and creative expression, and is often interchangeable with the terms Web 2.0 and social software (Dabbagh & Reo, 2011a). With the growth in the use of social media technology over the past decade with most students using *Facebook*, *YouTube* and *Twitter*, technology today has formed the center of the way students learn, socialize and communicate.

Research findings in recent years provide compelling evidence of the importance of encouraging student control over the learning process as a whole. The socially based tools and technologies of the Web 2.0 movement are capable of supporting informal conversation, reflexive dialogue and collaborative content generation, enabling access to a wide raft of ideas and representations. Used appropriately, these tools can shift control to the learner, through promoting learner agency, autonomy and engagement in social networks that straddle multiple real and virtual learning spaces independent of physical, geographic, institutional and organizational boundaries. As argued in this article, however, in order for self-regulated learning to come to fruition, students need not only to be able to choose and personalize what tools and content are available, but also to have access to the necessary scaffolding to support their learning. Emerging practices with social computing technologies according to McLoughlin and Lee (2009) signal the need for pedagogies that are more personal, social and participatory. The authors conclude with a discussion of some of the key implications for practice, including an outline of the current challenges faced by tertiary educators.

Blogs have been used in many domains and they include that of advertising (Hall & Davison, 2007), business (Kharif, 2004), medicine (Herper, 2003), journalism (Chung, Kim, Trammell, & Porter, 2007), news dissemination (Hall & Davison, 2007; Wu, 2006), and education (Kreul, 2001; Ray, 2006; Smith, 2007). In educational circles, blogs are frequently known as 'edublogs'. Gant and Hadley (2014) study shows that undergraduate students can gratify cognitive, affective, social integrative and personal integrative needs microblogging via a leaning management system discussion tool. The researchers conducted a taxonomic analysis of the gratifications of microblogging about news regarding mass media events and issues via Blackboard in several undergraduate introductory mass communication classes with a total of 83 students' assertions regarding news tweets across four semesters.

According to Chung, Kim, Trammel and Porter (2007: 307) teaching journalism and mass communication has become a "technology-intensive occupation" with those educators encountering technology in their academic lives more frequently than educators in other academic disciplines. Technology has, in essence, placed journalism education at an important turning point in curriculum development. Chung et al. (2007) examining whether journalism professionals and educators see eye-to-eye on emerging trends and factors influencing current journalism practice and culture. As journalism educators equip their students with tools and skills to succeed as working professionals, it is important to assess how educators evaluate current trends and whether the views that they have on the current news media climate properly prepare the next generation of journalists in the converged digital media environment. A national online survey of journalism professionals and educators found that professionals use blogs significantly more than educators. Educators had similar views of blogs, but professional journalists' uses and perceptions of blogs varied depending on type of organization they worked for and occupational position in their news organizations. Educators are quick to catch on to national trends in journalism even though they do not routinely use blogs, as they are trained to assess the impact of critical trends in the discipline.

Similarly in a comparative study about the research made on teaching cyber journalism in Rio Grande do Norte and Mato Grosso do Sul by Martins (2014) with the objective of mapping the availability of the disciplines associated to Cyber Journalism in the universities and colleges, the study portrayed the importance in updating the curriculum, especially the tools used in the web adopted a research method to interpret of analysis data of the curriculum structures in the Journalism courses. The research showed, among other aspects, in both situations that the importance of teaching cyber journalism is very clear for the journalism studies. It was also observed that Cyber journalism is still an area in expansion; there are courses that still haven't, or just included the course in their curriculum structure. The researchers call to incorporate blogs, as well as, emails, discussion forums, chats and sites are tools available on the internet as a resource of a much wider use and can collaborate to insert the students in this new mean of journalistic production, providing the development of digital competencies required from a Journalism professional (Martins 2014:150).

According to a study by Hazari, North, & Moreland (2009) it was found that college faculty is increasingly using social media to support teaching and learning activities

(EDUCAUSE Learning Initiative, 2007, 2007). For example, some are encouraging students to use blogging platforms (e.g., WordPress) for the development of e-portfolios which have become an important authentic assessment tool in higher education (Rosen & Nelson, 2008). Others are using *Twitter* (a micro-blogging platform) to stimulate student engagement in the classroom (Rankin, 2009) and wiki software (e.g., PBworks) to engage students in collaborative projects that support the creation, editing, and management of content.

These efforts by faculty and students are creating new ways of teaching and learning leading to the emergence of constructs such as e-learning 2.0, pedagogy 2.0, student 2.0, faculty 2.0, and classroom 2.0, with the suffix 2.0 characterizing themes such as openness, personalization, collaboration, social networking, social presence, user-generated content, the people's Web, and collective wisdom, and demarcating areas of higher education where a potentially significant transformation of practice is underway (Alexander, 2006; Dabbagh & Reo, 2011b; Jones, 2008; Lindstrom, 2007; Norton & Hathaway, 2008; O'Reilly, 2005; Sessums, 2006).

The call by scholars to incorporate technology in the curricula seem to be a tangible one as there is a great need for journalism and media educators to be at par with the industry. Students of today who are technologically savvy and who have already incorporated applications and various social media networks into their lifestyle seem to demand for it in the classroom.

2. Study Objectives

The focus of this project is on the virtual global collaboration in the context of a teaching and learning environment that bridges the gap between two groups of media students in two universities - Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman, Malaysia and Universitas Technologica Centroamericana, Honduras. To the domains of reading, writing and traditional print illiteracies one could argue that in an era of technological revolution educators must develop robust forms of multiple literacy and must explore possible ways and means of teaching in this new environment. This would also mean allow educators to create and explore new teaching methods creatively and using suitable and attractive tools or instruments to disseminate information whilst allowing students to create their own learning identities, reflect and question their own learning methods.

This project aims to explore possible use of technology in teaching and learning and suggest a deeper look at creating new and interesting learning experiences simultaneously. The

study will also discover ways and means in which the co-sharing and co-learning between two cultures about the media enhances media literacy in terms of gaining competencies involving effective learning and using socially constructed forms of communication and representation.

3. Method

The research method adopted here to gain insights into the use of social media in a four week exchange between first year journalism students from the Tunku Abdul Rahman University in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia and first year Communications students from the Central American Technological University ((UNITEC) in Tegucigalpa, Honduras is a qualitative one. The researchers who are also the lecturers or teachers in this class conducted this class for a span of 5 weeks simultaneously. The participants in this study were 17 Malaysian first year media students, consisting of five boys and 12 girls, taking Introduction to Journalism as a subject while in Honduras there were 18 students – 14 girls and four boys taking Communications and Society as a subject, both with a median age of 19.

In Honduras every quarter, students in this course at Universitas Tchnologica Centroamericana (UNITEC), must conduct an investigation project conducive to learning of civil liberties such as freedom of expression, freedom of press or the right to demand government accountability among others. The results are usually the same: a series of essays that better resemble copy/paste puzzles, with little or no personal opinion, in depth observation and lacking in analysis. These works are usually loaded with empty data without social background and no relationship with the individual's development and its role in society.

In Malaysia, students taking this course at Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman (UTAR) must conduct investigative research and journalistic writings. The results generally are a forced classroom environment where students have to read and write and most times this does not include referencing and additional readings. Students' lack of observation skills and resourcefulness can be seen through their output in assignments and projects where depth in critical thinking and general knowledge is obvious.

For this project, students enrolled in the course had to investigate about the role of the media in Malaysia, state censorship, general contents and compare their findings with the media situation in Honduras. Apart from using valid academic resources, students had to interact with their Malaysian peers and vice versa, asking questions and providing requested information through different social networks. Students from each country had to conduct research on

communication/information media, censorship and content. For four weeks the lecturers from both classes lectured on four common topics including media freedom and ethics, media culture, race, religion and sensitivities, social networking sites and the effects of media contents on the audience based on the syllabus where students were allowed to discuss, debate and share information on a common blog. In an attempt to create learning opportunities that surpass geographical, language and time-zone barriers, both researchers opened special accounts in Blogger and *Facebook*.

Although synchronous communication tools such as Skype and Fuze were used to deliver the classes to each other's students, it was the first two networks here mentioned which allowed for better collaborative and meaningful learning experiences. During the course the students through *Facebook*, shared personal, tourist, cultural education, posted and answered current events questions as well as country, family and personal photos and videos. Blogger became a means of in depth discussion, opinion and formal academic postings that included links to news media supporting individual viewpoints.

4. Results and Discussion

At the start of the course both sets of students were asked what they knew of the other and in Honduras 11 students did not know anything about Malaysia, four citing the capital of Malaysia being Kuala Lumpur and two referring Malaysia to the missing plane (MH370) whilst out of 17 Malaysian students only two mentioned the Honduran team in the FIFA World Cup and one in reference to Miss Universe. This clearly shows how students in different parts of the world are unaware or are oblivious to the world around them or are not in touch with various communities apart from their own.

Throughout the weeks that ensued, students were tasked to read up and communicate with each other. After the four weeks of intensive discussion and writings, students were given the same questionnaire of which 16 Honduran students provided three or more relevant or correct facts about Malaysia and similarly 13 students provided three or more relevant or correct facts about Honduras.

In terms of sources of information, all students in Honduras and Malaysia felt that the information they received were from the class blog which also included links to various sites the

students had referenced, the *Facebook* page, discussion (chat) with each other and the Skype/Fuze lecture between the two researchers.

Group presentations that reported findings proved to be better structured than those in previous grading periods. They also included cultural information that supported personal perspectives, in depth analyses of media differences in both countries and more sources consulted to illustrate opinions based on findings.

When interviewed the students in Malaysia and Honduras without a doubt admitted that they enjoyed the use of social media to conduct the class. The researchers found that students' attendance in class was exceptional with 100% attendance rate and students were more interactive and pro-active in class activities. The students showed a favorable attitude to lecturers using social networks as an academic resource. In our study, students displayed a positive attitude to using social networks with educational purposes and virtual classrooms were beneficial in a learner's global growth and approach. Some of the quotes from students include Peter who mentioned that he prefers lecturers using a variety of ways to teach students as it was more attractive.

"I'm from a generation which is more towards technology and the use of Facebook, YouTube and blogs in this class made learning more impactful"

Peter added that the class had kept him interested and he used other means to reach out and interact with students in Honduras.

"... it was fun. I also IM-ed the students in Honduras on my own time and they responded. I was very curious and so were they."

Ezra mentioned that the social media used was a platform to boost knowledge stressing that not only did the use of social media beneficial for his learning but it also made interaction with students in Honduras real because of the concept of '*real time*'. Kent concurred mentioning that the use of blogs in the class ensured that he was able to share his viewpoint on lecture topics and '*cultivate global view*'.

Johanna and Cynthia both felt that the blogs were something they had used all the time in sharing their personal thoughts with their friends but never thought it could be used in a classroom setting. They were fascinated that a discussion could be pursued.

Oscar mentioned that he had fun in class and enjoyed it a lot. He had heard about Malaysia it had no substantial information until he took this class. He didn't know that Malaysia

was formed by many cultures and for that they were represented by people of their culture in the government.

I learnt about the mass media and the regulations and that you have many newspapers unlike Honduras that we only have like four and so on I learned a little bit of everything.

Some students in Honduras preferred to conduct research by using the social media and having a cultural exchange and felt that it was a new way of knowing about a country instead of just researching general information.

I feel the information obtained is concrete and to the point. Besides, I liked sharing with people from a different part of the world.

The class proved to be fruitful for the students in Honduras who felt that the assignments were dynamic and entertaining and much better than doing traditional research. The students seem comfortable and enthusiastic about having this sort of discourse and felt it was a better way to learn. Some of the feedbacks include comments such as:

It's interesting to do cultural research while interacting with people from that culture through social media.

I liked knowing about personal opinions, not only information found on the web.

The traditional way of doing research is easier, but I prefer the social media exchange because of the sharing experience.

Regardless of their personal reasons, all students felt they had performed a better research project through the cultural exchange carried during this assignment, than research usually done through the investigation of online and library resources. Even when students remarked that “traditional form of investigation” is easier and can be done “on one’s own time”, the social network exchange helped them build a sense of community and create ties with their Malaysian peers.

In-class presentation of results reflected what appeared as first-hand knowledge, rather than memorized facts that are usually forgotten by the end of the grading period. Furthermore, the final research works showed knowledge of cultural elements such as tradition, language, gastronomy, countries' infrastructure, along with facts of the task at hand: media content, prior censorship and media vehicles.

Finally, students' didn't limit them to the information provided in the class blog and *Facebook* page, but went on to investigate links and resources sometimes mentioned in passing on posts and comments. This led to the use of other social networks as research resources; *YouTube* being the most common. The researchers also found that the number of absentees were obsolete as every class was attended by students in these two classes in these two universities. Students also came in early and stayed after class discussing issues with the lecturers and found other ways such as email or face to face discussions about the topics discussed during lecture or comments on *Facebook* and blogs.

5. Conclusion

It cannot be denied that with the advent of e-learning, we have managed to overcome the confines of the traditional, four-walled classroom. Based upon the data obtained, university students made intensive use of the social networks through the academic application recommended. Students were supportive of the lecturers use of social media to bring the class to 'live' and the collaborations made this even more exciting and productive. Our research has disclosed that the use of networks for academic activities occurred at the initiative of the lecturers through the posing of questions and thoughts or comments for discussion but at the same time the students also created or substantiated discussions through their personnel chats. We also acknowledge that fact that the collaborative teaching conducted was beneficial as it not only created a meaningful interactive social platform but a continuous personal learning space.

Unlike Gutiérrez, Palacio & Torrego (2010), who states that educational innovation occurs at a slower rate than that at which society evolves and is consequently slower than the rate of technological innovation, the interpersonal communication and collaboration afforded by the networks were fully utilized and made use of in this study. We also disagree with Gomez, Roses and Malaga (2012) who deduces that formal traditional learning is still very deep-rooted in universities, where communication is always unidirectional (teacher-pupil) and where the student

finds it more difficult to participate and feel integrated. The researchers felt that this situation can be altered if tertiary educators of today acquire training and skills in the use and handling of such tools and adapt to these new environments to define their teaching methods. Teaching plans cannot ignore the active and social use of the social networks (Duart, 2009).

It cannot be denied and the researchers acknowledge the fact that in many institutions of higher learning there may not be technological infrastructures to help in enhancing teaching and learning but there is a possibility of using other forms of technologies or tools available at local centers.

We also recommend that other forms of technology be used in teaching and learning such as *Twitter* and *YouTube* as well as Pininterest. We highly recommend that teachers and learners engage in mobile applications where both groups are connected and this makes for speed and a test of accuracy and objectivity. Teachers should encourage students to use social media to engage in basic sharing and collaborative activities which will also allow feedback from other students. This not only allows the student to receive questions about a particular post but to engage students to react proactively and positively to criticisms.

In this study it was clearly found that there are three major platforms which arose that bridged the learning gap of students. The first platform was the social platform where various technological tools were used to 'break the ice' and to help students as a medium or channel to disseminate information and to learn. These tools and many others alike can be seen as a modern classroom instrument to help learners grasp knowledge they did not have before with skills they have acquired. The second platform was the collaborative platform where teachers allowed learners to interact with each other from a different cultural background. This did not only help students enhance their knowledge about the social cultural dynamics of a foreign nation and community but it enforced their own knowledge about their own socio-cultural dynamics. Finally, the personal platform where learners continue to learn beyond the classroom, the semester and the subject and form a more meaningful nucleus of bridging a diplomatic borderless world.

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