

A SMASHing approach for developing staff and student digital capabilities within a Community of Practice

Introduction

It should go without saying that the pace of change in the way we now use technology to interact with others has been exponential. For some this has been welcomed and embraced, and yet for others it can still be seen as a barrier or at best an uphill struggle trying to keep up. Whilst the use of Web 2.0 and interactive social media has become increasingly more accessible as more individuals have access to mobile devices and connectivity; the application of these tools in a positive context is not always the norm. As with any communication channel, it has the potential to be misused. It is essential to note that the appropriate use of social media needs to be discussed just as the advent of email and talk about netiquette was needed. Anonymity has without doubt increased voices determined to express negativity and this thorny issue needs to be faced and discussed also. With this acknowledged it is also valuable to consider how social media can be used in a positive context and in particular for social and engaging learning. Learning how to communicate professional when used in this way also needs due consideration.

This case study will share the outcomes thus far of a student-staff partnership which focuses on how the use of social media can be used in learning and teaching. The paper reflects on how an ongoing co-learning community of practice (Wenger 2009) has emerged; the affordances this has brought; and the impact upon the students leading this project. It will also briefly share some examples of the outputs which have provided a foundation for ongoing work to develop digital capabilities of both their peers and tutors.

Social Media

Social media spaces have the potential to enable users to connect, communicate, curate, collaborate and create (Nerantzi and Beckingham 2015), through a plethora of mediums. This in itself deserves further investigation. As Weller (2018) posits, within social media spaces, status is not significant and that individuals are judged on their contributions to a given network. Students, staff and professionals can engage in meaningful dialogue and share mutually useful resources. Key to engagement in an educational context is the development of a range of digital capabilities (Jisc 2015) where individuals learn not only what tools are available and how to use them, but how to listen and reflect, as well as question and interact within these spaces. Online participation can provide time and space for reflection and opportunities for co-learning with and from each other. Interactions can be synchronous or asynchronous.

As argued by UNESCO (2013:9) "While mobile technology is not and never will be an educational panacea, it is a powerful and often overlooked tool – in a repertoire of other tools – that can support education in ways not possible before". Social media accessed through mobile technology can provide individuals with opportunities to engage in their chosen personal learning environments (PLEs) and those integrate into the learning experience (Dabbagh and Kitsantas 2012). However the affordances of social media are not always

associated with learning and teaching. As Brown (2018) expounds we must not assume that all students or staff are confident in the use of technology and social media.

The purpose therefore of this project and partnership is to draw out useful examples that are meaningful and valued by the students themselves (as opposed to what the tutor feels might be most useful and engaging). The next step is to develop these exemplars and create an online resource that includes the benefits and also signposts support and resources.

The start of a student partnership

SMASH (Social Media for Academic Studies at Hallam) is a student-led group that was formed in 2017. Having attended inspiring sessions the previous year at the Social Media for Learning in Higher Education Conference hosted by Sheffield Hallam University, four students were motivated to look for ways to enhance learning and teaching in their own course, through the use of social media and other digital apps and technology. Mentored by their tutor they formed the founding group.

From the outset the tutor wanted to empower the students in this partnership to lead the project, and that she would be their 'guide on the side' (King 1993). The students chose the name for their group and over time a logo. At the initial meeting time was spent considering the frequency of meetings and how best to communicate between meetings. It was agreed that social media could provide the means of capturing progress and as a way collaboration could take place both synchronously and asynchronously.

Healey et al (2014:7) suggest that partnership affords co-learning between staff and students as they work together, and through active engagement, all may gain from the process. Discussing what the students would gain as a result of developing a partnership was important, as was recognising and celebrating learning gain and this was therefore considered by the tutor from the start. As an aide memoir all ideas were documented using Google Docs, and this going forward allowed everyone to see the opportunities and progress made; and to share milestones and planned outputs along the journey. This space enabled comments to be added, providing a useful way for everyone to raise questions and contribute to the answers.

As a group one of our first objectives was to consider and categorise how social media could be used in learning and teaching. The team identified three key areas where social media could be used: within learning activities; as a means of organising learning; and as a way of showcasing learning. The team went on to create some resources and shared these initially in the form of a blog post. This work was acknowledged by leading consultant in higher education Eric Stoller and referred to in a number of his keynote presentations. This was a motivating factor for the students as through publishing their initial work in this way it reached an audience beyond their own personal networks.

Pedagogic Framework

The founding members of SMASH developed a framework that would contextualise the potential of social media for learning and teaching. Three strands or pillars were identified:

1. Helping staff to identify and use social media tools for communication and collaboration within and beyond the classroom (Learning Activities).
2. Helping students and staff to identify and use relevant social media tools to curate and organise information relating to learning (Organising Learning).
3. Helping students to prepare digital portfolios to openly share outcomes and projects to develop a professional online presence (Showcasing Learning).

The framework helped to focus attention on a 'pedagogy first' approach (Glover et al 2016). When considering pedagogic concepts relevant to technology enhanced learning, Gordon (2014:8) refers to personalised learning, support for synchronous and asynchronous activities, flexible learning, gamification, online learning and blended learning. The opportunity to enhance and engage students with learning through the affordances of social media chimed with these approaches.

Sustaining the student-staff partnership

The students were keen to find ways to continue this work in the following academic year. Despite the fact that one was about to graduate and two had secured placements they felt there was the potential to sustain the group and encourage other students to become involved. Using a Google Form survey and Canvas to develop a flyer to promote the SMASH team, the call was sent out for new members. Despite their efforts response was very low. In the new academic year, two of the founding members (one of whom was on a placement year) looked to recruit further members. A second year student joined the team (who had expressed an interest in response to the call) and also two final year students. There was one other student who did come along to the first meeting, however chose not to continue as he felt he had to focus on his academic studies. It's important to note at this point that students need to be reassured that their studies come first and that involvement in such a project is flexible. The use of social media and technology supported this.

The new members had all expressed an interest in both wanting to explore social media for learning themselves and also to help peers and tutors realise the affordances such tools could bring. Once again the tutor outlined what might be gained from the project and the founding member present at the first meeting shared what she had gained thus far.

Digital Capabilities

Producing a toolkit which could be used by others to plan activities and case studies to demonstrate these in context (Conole 2007) was considered a useful way to support the development of digital capabilities. Jisc (2015) define digital literacy as the capabilities which fit someone for living, learning and working in a digital society. Their framework considers six useful elements. At the centre is ICT proficiency, which is surrounded by developing information, data and media literacies; digital creation, problem solving and innovation; digital learning and development; and digital communication, collaboration and participation. Finally digital identity and wellbeing encompass the use of digital in all forms. These are all relevant to users of social media for learning and resonated with our own framework.

Initial explorations

The students led a workshop inviting students and staff on their course. They had created a series of cards which outlined seven ways to use a given social media tool and these were used as conversation prompts. The attendees were encouraged to share their views and experiences of using social media for learning. Whilst a small group (and already interested in social media for learning), it was useful to gain an initial understanding of student and tutors opinions. Bryson and Hand (2007) advocate that student engagement is increased when students feel supported by teaching staff and when they engage with the students. Having the opportunity to discuss future enhancement of the student's modules was well received and valued.

What we learned from staff:

- Agreed that current university platform requires more flexibility
- Support the idea of tracking student progress
- Feel the need to support individual learning through group work

The staff valued using these social media tools for learning: Google Apps – efficient engagement amongst student groups; Trello – divide responsibility and maintain accountability; Blogging – track student progress; YouTube – more flexible learning; and WhatsApp – generating student community, with direct messaging.

What we learned from students:

- Welcomed the idea of having direct messaging chat support via Twitter for quicker responses
- Supportive of Socrative and working in teams when completing online quizzes
- Learning content can be subconsciously viewed whilst using social media

The students valued these tools for learning: Google Apps – collaboration; Trello – project management on group projects; Twitter – links to resources; Socrative – engaging / option to be anonymous; YouTube – visually appealing and accessible to students.

There is clearly scope to develop more in depth research going forward. It will be important to gain an understanding of the barriers and enablers relating to social media for learning, and identify how any future resources developed can support the development of digital capabilities and the proposed toolkit.

Developing digital capabilities of self

From the SMASH team's perspective the experience of leading their first workshop was valued. They were able to demonstrate the knowledge they had gained and developed confident communication skills through leading the conversations in the workshop and presenting at two conferences. At the end of the academic year the students reflected on their learning gain.

I've learnt how to overcome communication obstacles throughout this year, and the sheer amount of research on social media there is to be done.

(Jess - Placement student)

Over the past two years, I've learnt about the flexibility of social media, how it can be used in education from many different directions and ultimately how to work in a team of diverse people.

(Corran - Final year student)

I've learnt how to create engaging content using digital tools such as Canva. This has enhanced my understanding of different tools that are available to staff and students to support their studying and allowed me to apply my digital knowledge to my studies. I've used Twitter to create a hashtag '#shuSMASH' which has helped to showcase our activities and the conferences we've attended. This has allowed us to engage with followers and gather feedback from people who attended our presentations. Furthermore, the use of Skype has developed my understanding of how online communication tools can be used in a formal and business environment. This will prepare me for future endeavours into the professional environment, where I'll be able to apply my knowledge and digital skills gained through SMASH.

(Matty - 2nd year student)

The SMASH project has increased my efficiency when learning new skills, finding the best ways to collaborate and share ideas between team members. Using a variety of technology enabled each team member to learn in different ways, using what they felt most comfortable. This has allowed me to overcome obstacles, using social media to bridge gaps and bring everyone closer together. Through this project, I was able to reach out and make new connections after attending the conferences and also from university staff and students that we solicited opinions from. Being part of the SMASH group in 2018 has allowed me to develop my skills, meet new people and use new and exciting digital technologies.

(Callum - Final year student)

Through the SMASH group I've developed many of my digital capabilities and been able to adapt and use these skills in a completely new environment. Developing these skills has supported me in finding new and creative ways to utilise social media whether it be for academia, social or personal use. I've become more confident in exploring new digital applications that can support me in my personal life.

(Abby - Final year student)

The value of being a member of a virtual CoP

Reflecting on the students it became clear that a virtual community of practice (vCoP) (Kosh and Fusco 2008) was forming spontaneously. There was early evidence of both cooperative and collaborative learning where the students developed their own digital capabilities and those of others. They actively used social media to communicate and plan, and were able to work virtually both synchronously and asynchronously in-between face to face meetings.

They developed their own vCoP using Skype, FaceTime, Facebook messenger and Google Apps. See Figure 1 for initial thoughts shared at the CAN Conference 2018.

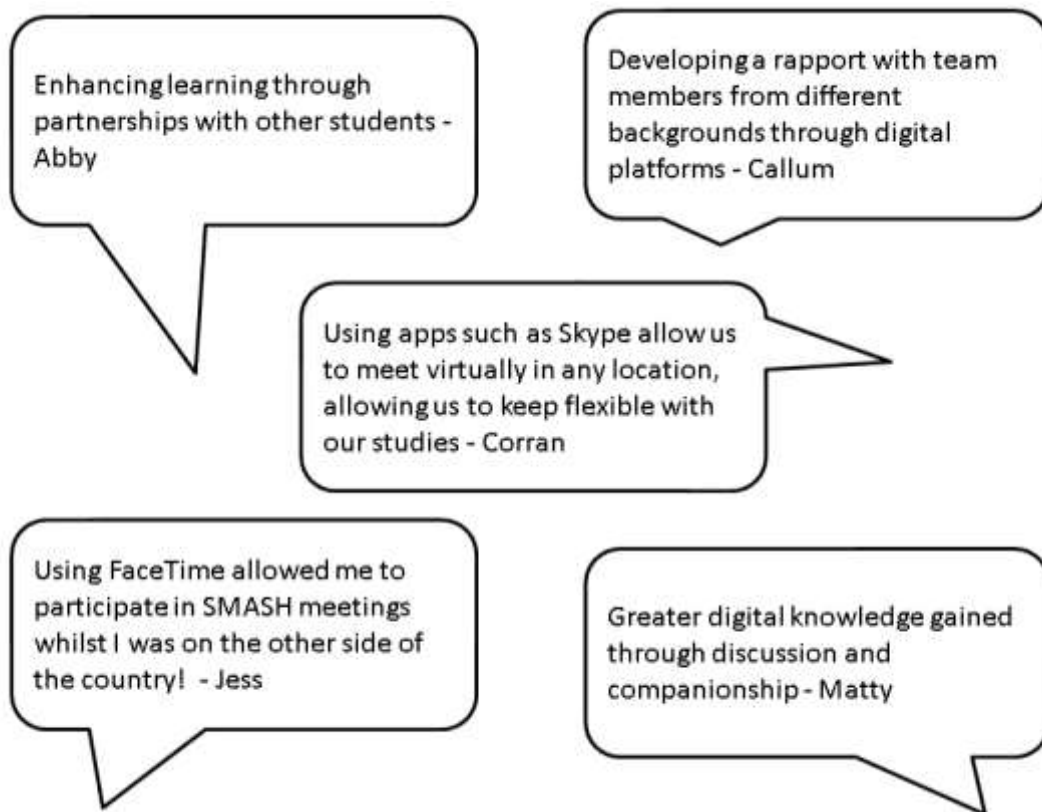


Figure 1: SMASH Team reflections

The students highlighted that they had established a sense of belonging and identity as a result of being part of this vCoP. Each brought different skills and experience to the group and despite not initially knowing each other they quickly bonded and became co-learners. It was interesting to observe how they each took turns to lead on a particular approach and actively coached each other. At the end of the academic year the team went on to further reflect.

Being a virtual member of a CoP has allowed me to gather a wider understanding of digital applications gained through discussion and companionship. By exploring a variety of tools and apps that I wouldn't have necessarily ventured into if I wasn't a member. It adds value by being part of a social group that share similar interests in social media from different backgrounds. In addition, I was able to learn from other members whilst also passing on my own knowledge. Moreover, I've been able to develop my team working skills and how to work with new people that I haven't worked with prior to this year. This in turn, has prepared me for my placement year where I'll be working in a team on projects with new people. The value of teamwork through the use virtual communication tools such as, Skype and Google Apps has created a sense unity which has projected my confidence at conferences and presentational events.

(Matty- 2nd year student)

Being part of the SMASH group has helped me develop a rapport with multiple students and has allowed me to develop my skills, meet new people and use new and exciting digital technologies. Through this partnership multiple digital technologies have been utilised and supported the group when we were unable to physically meet. These technologies were very valuable as they allowed us to prepare for meetings, conferences and workshops.

(Abby - Final year student)

The SMASH project has enhanced the flexible learning of our virtual community, using Skype to communicate from different locations when meeting together wasn't a possibility. This enabled me to be inclusive, using social media to allow anyone to contribute to the work and encourage collaboration with me. This project developed a strong rapport with a wide range of people, as a result generating partnerships that opened up new project opportunities. I've been able to increase the digital skills and knowledge of myself and also other individuals that took part in our workshops. This can be applied to the workplace, as I'll be able to take the lead in new projects that arise.

(Callum - Final year student)

Conclusion

We feel our student-staff partnership has been successful as we have a mutual interest in the research topic; from the start discussed what the benefits are for everyone; and were clear that engagement is flexible. Also whilst it's important to capture all ideas, we recognised that only some of these will be achieved and that's ok!

The opportunity to engage in research on the use of social media for learning with peers and tutors, go on to develop tangible resources, and then present this work was in itself motivating. Whilst not expected at the start, recognition for this work is an important factor. The interactions and dialogue within social media spaces as a result of sharing the project and this being re-shared provided affirmation that other educators recognised and valued outputs.

The students and tutor have learned so much through this partnership. We look forward to seeing how the incoming SMASH team will take this journey forward.

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