INCORPORATING SOCIAL MEDIA IN BLENDED LEARNING COURSES AT HIGHER LEARNING INSTITUTIONS

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ABSTRACT

Social media in teaching and learning has become the latest trend at higher institutions. The paper shares the reasons of incorporating social media in the blended learning courses at Universiti Teknologi MARA, Sarawak Branch. Five social media platforms were incorporated in teaching and learning. The platforms were Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest and WhatsApp. The social media platforms were fully used during the Week Without Wall which was implemented by university for one to two weeks in every semester. A survey method was used to collect the data. Open ended questions were used to scrutinize the reasons lecturers incorporated social media in the blended learning courses. Google form was used to collect the survey data. The survey form was disseminated via social media platforms. 74 lecturers responded to the online survey. The study found that incorporating social media in blended learning courses were to reduce the generation gap, allowed flexibility, extended face-to-face teaching, ease of use, convenient, easy to apply different teaching approaches, allowed linkage, allowed self-pace learning, enhanced teaching and learning process, monitoring and evaluation, sharing, fast response and learning community.

Keywords: Social Media; Blended Learning; Higher Learning Institution

INTRODUCTION

Social media has increasingly gained attention since Web 2.0 was innovated in early 2000s [1]. This internet-based application has attracted attention of people from all ages to use the tools in this technology advance era. Social media started to bloom rapidly with the massive use of smart devices and portable devices in the digital age. The Global Digital reported the number of social media users has reach 3.484 million worldwide. This has changed the way people live and rooted in the modern culture [2].
There are many types of social media [3] which serve different purposes. The types of social media agreed by most social media expert are blogs, business networks, collaborative projects, enterprise social networks, forums, microblogs, photo sharing, products/services review, social bookmarking, social gaming, social networks, video sharing, and virtual worlds. The platforms have been used for various application. Social media were applied in marketing, customer relationship management, knowledge sharing, collaborative activities, organisation communications, education and training and so on [1].

The millennial generation of higher learning students has grown up in the digital world and they are digital natives. They are connected all time through social media platform. This shows that they are accustomed to access social media in their daily life. The emerging of social media may offer new opportunities for teaching and learning [4] in the digital age and educators need to follow the wave of digital natives and tailored their teaching method into the latest knowledge access method. At the digital advance era, integrating social media platforms in teaching may attract and motivate learners to learn [2, 5]. Therefore, the study explores the use of social media in education particularly in higher learning institutions in Malaysia.

**Social Media in Teaching and Learning**

There are few versions of definition for social media. Raut and Patil [1] summarized the social media definitions by defining the term *social* as activities to carry out and the term *media* as internet-based application used to carry out the activities. Social Media for Education in the study is defined as the use of Internet-based applications for social learning activities to enhance teaching and learning. The context is based on social constructivism theory where knowledge is constructed through constructive activities via social media platform.

There are five characteristics of social media reviewed by Dao [6] when applying it into online education. The characteristics are *participation, openness, conversation, community* and *connectedness*. For the *participation* characteristic, participants are encouraged to actively contribute and give feedback. This characteristic allows the interactions between educators and students and among students which extended the interaction beyond classroom.

In *openness* characteristics, social media platforms are opened to participation to comments, rating, downloading information, and sharing information for users. The characteristic benefits shy and intrinsic students where they are given equal opportunities to take part in conversations and discussions without fear [6]. This feature reduces the barriers to access information.

The *conversation* characteristic in social media is unique where two-way conversation is allowed as compared to one-way conversation in traditional media. This characteristic allows the control of conversations immediately via synchronous communication. This can be done when students post inaccurate
information or comments in social media platforms and the facilitators are able to
response and correct it immediately. The alert feature in social media platform
make the conversations updated and easily controlled.

The community characteristic in social media allows users to form
communities and subcommunities with instant communication in communities.
These characteristic offers educators and students opportunities to create groups
with the same interest and to increase relationships with online friends.
The virtual group can extend the size of local community. Users benefit from the
virtual community where they do not need to move around but gain knowledge
through sharing from the virtual community. The educators are recommended to
use this characteristic of social media in teaching and learning activities.

The last characteristic is connectivity where social media sites enable other
users to imbed personal of other resources, people and links in the site.
This eases the users to access other links by providing the convenient linkage.

Ling et al. [7] have matched the social media functionality blocks of
Kietzmann et al. [8] for blended learning courses at higher education institution
and found that all seven social media functionality blocks were fixed into learning
at higher learning institution. The seven blocks were identity, conversations,
sharing, presence, relationships, reputation, and groups. They summarized that the
three functionality blocks which contributed the most were sharing, groups and
conservation.

There are many reasons of incorporating social media into blended learning
courses at higher learning institutions. One of the common reasons is to extend
academic discussions beyond traditional classroom [9]. According to Manca and
Ranieri [10], the openness, interactivity and sociability are the key drivers for
social media which transform teaching and learning practices into social, open
and collaboration. Educators also find social media as an impactful
communication platform [11]. The platforms enable participation and cooperation
between educators and learners which extended the involvement of peers from
different parts of the world [12], [13]. With that, it can foster students’
engagement, control, interest and responsibility in learning.

Social media platforms also extend the diversity of teaching styles to foster
students active learning [5, 14] and increase teachers’ pedagogical choice [15].
Besides, these social media platforms are used for sharing, publishing, creative
expressions [9] entertainment [10], develop leadership skills [2], and
collaboration [11]. In social media, students have equal resources for them to
access [16]. The community and conversation feature in social media can improve
students’ personal interactions which create and sustain a sense of belonging to
overcome students’ isolation issue. Beside this, an assortment of tools enables
learners mix and match the best tools and features that suit individual learning
styles to improve their performance [2].
METHODOLOGY

The study was an exploratory study. The data were gathered from lecturers at Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Sarawak Branch. The instrument was adapted from Zakarian [17] with two parts. The first part of the questionnaire collected demographic data where the second part collected information on the reasons of incorporating social media into blended learning courses to answer the objectives of the study. The items were open ended questions. Data were collected via online between January to May 2019. The linked of the questionnaire were circulated to the respondents via social media.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

There were 78 lecturers from 15 faculties who responded the survey. 71.8% were male lecturers and another 28.2% were female lecturers.

The highest response rate was lecturers from category 31- 40 years old (46.2%). This was followed by 24.4% from category 41-50 years old, 15.4% from category 21-30 years old and 9% from category 21-30 years old. The least respondent (5.1%) was from 51-60 years old category.

There were 97.4% of the lecturers who incorporated social media in their blended learning course. This showed that the lecturers were catching up with the emerging of social media and they were riding on the wave of digital advancement. Another 2.6% of the lecturers were not using social media in teaching. The reason given by the respondents for not using social media was no privacy.

There were different social media platforms used by lecturers. Some of them used more than one social media platform. There were 36% of the lecturers using Facebook and another 36% using WhatsApp. This was followed by 21% of them using Instagram, 15 % using WeChat, 14% using Google+, 12 % using YouTube. Only 8% of the lecturers use Twitter and another 8% use Pinterest. The remaining 1% use Windows Live.

There were 94.9 % of the lecturers have used social media for teaching more than a year, two of them (2.6%) have used it more than six months but less than 1 year. Another two (2.6%) just started to incorporate in their blended learning course.

There were many reasons for the lecturers to incorporate social media in blended learning course. One of the reasons was to reduce the generation gap between lecturers and students. They expressed, since young generation were so attached to social media in their daily life, therefore, incorporating social media in blended learning course put them under the same wave length with students. They hope to reduce the generation gap between lecturers and students through this method. The reasons stated by two lecturers are:
Easy to engage with the new generation as they are very attached to social media as their source of information and social communication.

Students are very happy if we integrate social media in teaching as they like to use the platforms.

Social media platform allows flexibility. 50% of the lecturers said that they could interact with students anywhere and anytime. They could upload teaching materials or teach online when they could not physically appear in the lecture hall due to official duty outside the campus.

All lectures said that they used social media to extend their face-to-face lectures. Some lectures replaced their lecture via social media platform. They also used social media platform to teach during Week Without Wall implemented by the university. One lecturer said:

Last time, we have problem to find a suitable time for everyone to conduct a replacement class. Now, we can easily replace our lecture using social media platform when we have others duty during our lecture time.

The finding was consistent with the findings of Lubua et al. [9] where they shared that social media platform extended lecturers’ academic discussions beyond traditional classroom.

There were 92.3% of the lectures who agreed that the social media is easy to use. They said, most of the applications were user friendly. They only used the platforms that most students used such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and WhatsApp. Beside this, all lectures consensually agreed that the platforms were convenient for them. They could use their mobile application to access. Therefore, they could response to students’ questions as soon as possible. They shared that the fast response from them solved student’s problem and students could proceed to their learning without delay.

Lecturers used social media to enhance teaching and learning process. They said that different social media presented different approaches and students had the freedom to select the delivering approach which were fixed to their learning style. They also believed that students could understand better when different methods of delivering were used. One of them said:

We can employ different teaching method using social media for different learning style students.

Other respondents shared:

Social media can present the content using different approaches.
We let students try a different platform for learning.

The qualitative data extracted from three respondents were:

Social media provides more teaching tools (software) and idea how to teach for certain subjects.
Since the generation nowadays are more responsive towards social media activities, hence by incorporating lecture with inputs from YouTube can boost their interest in learning the subject. They can complete the assignment given by discussion.

The finding was coherent with Selwyn [5] and Anderson [14] where they shared that social media platforms also extended the diversity of teaching styles to foster students active learning. The finding was also consistent to McLoughlin and Lee [15] where they reviewed that social media increased teachers’ pedagogical choice. Beside this, the findings also shared the same thought as Ngai [2]. They agreed to offer an assortment of tools where learners could mix and match the best tools and features that suit their learning styles to improve students’ performance.

Besides this, lecturers revealed that they evaluated students through monitoring the discussion among themselves. They also said that social media enabled lecturers link to knowledge related to what students needed to learn. Lecturers also reported that incorporated social media in teaching encouraged self-pace learning.

Fast response in Social media platform is another reason given by lecturers to use social media in teaching. The news, message, assignment, learning materials shared via social media would reach students immediately. Students could response to lecturers instantly. This reduced the communication time in the teaching and learning process, and this could let students to have more time to prepare for the coming lecture. Thus, this make the learning more efficient.

Some information I send via social media, I get instant response from students. If I am available I also response to students immediately after I receive the message from them.

Another lecturer shared:
With social media, students can easily access information and learning materials.

One of the obvious changed in students observed by lecturers was motivation to learn. One of them said:
My students were attracted to learn, and they said the learning is much more interesting using social media. They also said the learning had more fun now.

Learning community can easily be formed using social media platforms. Lecturers let students form the learning community to help and support each other in learning. They said this was good platform for them to share, interact and collaborate either news, learning materials or others topic within their community and link to others communality with same interest. This encourage intrinsic students to participant actively in the virtual community. With active communication and interaction in virtual learning community, students have the sense of belonging. One of the lecturers shared:
I observed one student very quiet most of the time. She seldom talks in the class, but she is actively involved in the learning community discussion.

The findings also confirmed the findings of Bartosik-Purgat et al. [11] where they said the educators found social media as an impactful communication platform. Bartow [12] and Kim et al. [13] mentioned the social media platforms enabled participation and cooperation between educators and learners which were also found in the study. This feature extended the involvement of peers from different parts of the world. The findings also confirmed that social media platforms were used for sharing, [9] and enhanced collaboration [11]. Beside this, students have equal chance to access learning materials [16]. As revealed by Raut and Patil [1], the community and conversation feature in social media improved students’ personal interactions and it created and sustained a sense of belonging of students.

The findings in the study also confirmed all five characteristics for online educations revealed by Dao [6] were related. The seven social media functionality blocks for blended learning courses suggested by Ling et al. [7] were also confirmed in the study.

CONCLUSIONS

The use of social media has already become part of the people daily life. Therefore, educators may ride on the wave by incorporated it into blended learning courses. The reasons of incorporating social media in blended learning courses at higher education level may serve as a guide for them to plan and incorporate it into their blended learning courses.

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