ascilite

SHAPING THE FUTURE OF TERTIARY EDUCATION

30.Nov-3.Dec: Perth, Australia

ascilite2015
Globally connected
Digitally enabled

The ethical considerations of using social media in educational environments

Leanne Cameron
Australian Catholic University

Miriam Tanti
Australian Catholic University

Kim Mahoney
Hills Grammar School

Students in an undergraduate pre-service teacher education course were asked to utilise Twitter to access the professional educational community. Their tweets were to be used to promote the sharing of educational resources and establish a local supportive community of practice, to keep others informed of their teaching experiences and provide a vehicle for support and advice, both inside and outside the university. The ethical issues in relation to the use of social media in educational environments were wide-reaching and complex. This paper reports on a pilot study that begins an investigation on the practices of university students using social media in their studies. The ultimate aim of the project is to develop workable guidelines on the ethical use and practice of social media use in university education.

Keywords: Social media, Ethical use of Social Media, Professional Learning Networks.

Background

160 students in an undergraduate pre-service teacher education course were asked to utilise Twitter to access the professional educational community, both amongst their peers and outside the university. Their tweets were to be used to promote the sharing of educational resources and establish a local supportive community of practice, to keep others informed of their teaching experiences and provide a vehicle for support and advice. This approach was designed to provide opportunities for the pre-service teachers to create a sustainable culture of learning and build their own personal learning network (PLN) with contacts from both within, and outside, the university via social media. Treadwell (2008) defines a PLN as "a space and place where the learner creates, completes, documents and communicates their learning" within a community of learners. These PLNs offer opportunities for the pre-service teachers to discuss ideas or issues with experienced educators and workshop learning activities. Many practising teachers use their own PLNs to share ideas, resources and experiences and reflect on their own learning.

The lecturers implementing the assignment in the study were aware the ethical issues of using social media in educational environments are wide-reaching and complex. With the increased use of these technologies in educational settings, it has been suggested that the onus be on institutions to develop protocols and policies to enable and support responsible use (Andrews, Dyson, Smyth & Wallace, 2011). This documentation is extremely common in Australian school systems and becoming more common in the Higher Education area. This paper reports on a pilot study that begins an investigation on the practices of university students using social media in their studies. The ultimate aim of the project is to develop workable guidelines on the ethical use and practice of social media use in university education. A description of the social media used in the project and its value in the educational sphere follows.

Microblogging

"Microblogging is the practice of posting small pieces of digital content—which could be text, pictures, links, short videos, or other media—on the Internet" (Educause, 2007, p.1). Twitter was the microblogging vehicle used in this project. Twitter is a social media tool that allows users to send and read short 140-character messages, and or photographs (tweets). Many lecturers see benefits of using social media with their students (Educause, 2007). They enthuse about its potential to promote the sharing of ideas, activities, events and interests within a learning community. It can broaden perspectives, beyond the local, into a more global, world-view. Used this way, social media could be regarded as a conduit to promote learning and an excellent professional development resource. The

CP:42

potential of social media in education is also acknowledged by a number of the school education bodies in Australia:

> "ACCE firmly supports the potential educational affordances of online communication, including social media… Teachers at all levels are demonstrating innovative and educationally rewarding uses." (Brandenburg, 2012)

> "Conversations in social media are a dialogue, an opportunity to listen, share, collaborate and respond to our colleagues and communities. We recognise the importance of participating in these conversations. Because the social media space is relatively new, and comments may be public and potentially permanent, we've developed these guidelines [the DEC Social Media Guidelines] to support staff as they engage in any conversations or interactions using digital media for official, professional and personal use." (DEC, 2012)

Methodology

In this study, the authors analysed and compared the tweets of 160 pre-service teachers as they experienced their practicum experience in schools. All pre-service teachers who participated in the survey were completing a Bachelor of Teaching/Bachelor of Arts Secondary teaching degree. The pre-service teachers (PSTs) were required to tweet and retweet weekly as part of a compulsory assignment for a minimum 10-week period. The theoretical component of the unit included content on the ethical use of technology and cyber safety. The students' tweets were analysed quantitatively for the four main areas of major teacher concern to teachers as identified in an earlier study by de Zwart, Lindsay, Henderson & Phillips (2011).

Research questions
- Can microblogging be used by pre-service teachers as a means of creating a 'professional learning network'?
- What are the ethical issues arise from the use of microblogging in a university course?

General Findings

The majority of tweets made by the pre-service teachers (PSTs) involved the sharing of ideas, resources and experiences. This was a key indicator that PSTs were using the media for professional learning:

> 1.   To anyone teaching RE during their prac, this resource has helped me a tonne! https://www.smp.org/ Goodluck all #acuedu_s

> 2.   Been looking for a great classroom ICT testing app that doesn't require log in & is fun. Thanks Emily Topher for showing #kahoot #ACUedu_s

> 3.   Quick reminder for my fellow prac teachers: http://www.edutopia.org/blog/classroom-management-tips-novice-teachers-rebecca-alber … #ACUedu_s

> 4.   Have you seen the programming support available for History K-10 on the BOSTES website? http://bit.ly/1Hra4EM #BOSTES #HSIE #HISTORY

5.   Some of the PSTs' tweets provided emotional support, especially when the group was about to embark on a practicum and examinations.

> 6.   "Very concerned about not having a school, when it is almost the end of the semester. #acuedu_s"

> 7.   "As a pre-service teacher it's okay to not succeed at first. Regardless of what Aubrey's father says. #ACUedu_s"

> 8.   First day prac teaching. Nervous and excited. #ACUedu_s

9.   Experienced teachers from outside the university also provided advice, support and posed reflective questions to the PSTs. Conversations via the media ensued. This provided evidence that the PSTs were networking with those currently working in the profession:

10. *"When you're a teacher you have to convince the students that you are smarter than they are" - Dr Wendy Moran #ACUedu_s #truth*

11. *@amycottonteach giving great advice for casual teaching: don't handout worksheets and sit at front desk- use opp to teach & engage #acuedu_s*

12. *Do you think wealthy parents should be charged to send their children to public school? #TheProjectTV*

13. *Experiences should never be ignored as they are references to what will happen. TY to all those precious people shared theirs. #acuedu_s*

14. *'Keep calm and pretend it's on the lesson plan' moral: always have a back up plan- @amycottonteach #teachertip #lifetip #ACUedu_s*

15. Lecturers from the university also posed questions to the PSTs while they were out on Professional Experience. This created a three-way relationship between the university, the PSTs out in the schools and teachers currently in the field:

16. *"Should mentors for pre-service or new teachers be experienced or new teachers themselves? Thoughts? Experiences? #acuedu_s #acuedu663"*

17. *Finland's education system always near the top in international rankings - why? http://www.theguardian.com/education/2015/jun/17/highly-trained-respected-and-free-why-finlands-teachers-are-different?CMP=share_btn_fb … #ACUedu_s*

18. *Your responsibility and professionalism as a teacher is always on display eg attendance at schl fete, email, school carnival, etc #ACUedu_s*

19. *I hope everyone is having a great practical teaching experience! #ACUedu_s*

Discussion: The Ethical Considerations

From the evidence above, it is clear that this initial study provides evidence of the successful establishment of a professional community of practice in which PSTs, their university lecturers and currently practicing experienced teachers kept each other informed about resources, their teaching experiences and provided a means of support and advice. However, using social media in an educational context does not come without its dangers. Some educators shy away from using social media in their classrooms because of safety and/or classroom management concerns.

Areas of teacher concern with using social media in the classroom
The PSTs tweets were analysed against the four main areas of major teacher concern to teachers have been identified in an earlier study by de Zwart, Lindsay, Henderson & Phillips (2011). They were:

20. Privacy
A major concern for this project was the issue of privacy. "Nearly every country in the world regards privacy as a fundamental human right in their constitution, either explicitly or implicitly" (Hartman, 2001). The ease of sharing this information via social media communities compounded the need for guidelines for social media usage in the classroom. In Australia, the Federal Privacy Act of 1998 outlines the basic forms of privacy which can be applied to social media (McNamee, 2005). When the PSTs tweets were examined, a number of issues regarding privacy were identified:

*One PST had set up her twitter account so that only people to whom she had permitted to be a follower were able to access any of her tweets; "@*****'s account is protected."*

One student videoed another PST in an outside lecture and then posted it to the hash tag, raising the question was permission sought?

One PST posted his email address; " Pls email me - ###@acu.edu.au"and another posted her personal telephone number – "@xxxxx001 Hey this girl is looking for you, she wants you to text her # xxxx xxxx"

Another tweet included a photo of the student car park with a badly parked clearly showing the car and its number plate. "Not enough self-efficacy to get closer to the kerb? #acuparkingfail #acuedu_s"

21. Sharing inappropriate material

There is an opportunity for photos, videos or sound recordings to be uploaded to social media sites, such as YouTube or FaceBook (Andrews, Dyson, Smyth & Wallace, 2011). The concern is not only that these materials are being used but the ease with which they can be copied, shared, widely distributed (Dunphy, Prendergast & O'Scolai, 2003) and the permanence of the posting (Reilly, 2009). Students can potentially face prosecution under the libel laws by passing what they consider a flippant comment, if it is found they have publicly humiliated a colleague. While no inappropriate material was posted by the PSTs, sometimes the analysis uncovered examples where it might be questioned if students remembered their tweets were publically accessible:

"My dilemma: go to today's lecture or the mother's day afternoon tea at my son's daycare?" – Which was followed later by a photo of the PST and her son at the fore mentioned Mother's Day afternoon tea.

22. Illegal downloading and Plagiarism

Having access to vast amounts of information in easily malleable form is often a temptation for many students to make it their own. Breaches of the copyright law and the protection of intellectual property are commonly found on social media sites. This study found there were a lot of images posted to the unit hash tag. Fortunately it was found that the PSTs did not infringe copyright, however, because the posts are public, there is nothing stopping someone else from downloading them and infringing the law. The recommended YouTube clips may not be free from copyright if used in the classroom. Example of a tweet that falls into this category:

Doing a unit of work on a fictional novel. Looked at Alice in Wonderland & found a hello kitty version.Ha! #acuedu_s https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m6tllkG8flk …

23. Cyber bullying

Schools have a fundamental duty of care to their students and site blocking is a necessary a key component of their cyber safety strategy (Millea, Galatis & McAllister, 2009). The use of social media by bullies who can hide behind its anonymity and send off offensive messages to their victims anytime is an issue with which our students and teachers must be made aware and be taught to recognize the symptoms in the students they will be supervising. The PSTs in the sample group had been given a lecture on cyber safety as part of their course work which could explain why there were not more examples of inappropriate and unethical tweets. This was an attempt to adopt an approach of appropriately managing the risk of students participating in unethical behaviour through highlighting the potential dangers. Most PSTs refrained from posting inappropriate comments and provided support to their peers. However, there were some examples where the PST tweets were not always kind. A number of tweets made disparaging comments about what people had for lunch, and another commented on a staff members' shoes. The following comment was made about teachers at the school:

Observed an ICT failure today + not being able to help students with an online assign cause teachers don't even have the skills #acuedu_s

Conclusion

This initial study provides evidence that by using social media, PSTs can successfully establish a professional community of practice in which the PSTs, their university lecturers and currently practicing experienced teachers can keep each other informed and provide a means of support and advice. Although this study did not discover any major ethical breaches in the data, it is recognised that it is extremely difficult for educators to monitor interactions on social media between their students and the wider public. For this reason, the authors will continue to explore class protocols and guidelines that could be established to ensure the safety and the ethical behaviour of all involved when using social media in an educational context. This study has identified that discussions on privacy, appropriate material, downloading, copyright law and cyber bullying would be minimum requirements for any educator planning to embark on using social media in their classroom.

References

Andrews, T., Dyson, L.E., Smyth, R. & Wallace, R. (2011). The ethics of m-learning: Classroom threat or enhanced learner agency? *Proceedings of the 10th World Conference on Mobile and Contextual Learning* held in Beijing, China, 18-21 October, 2011, pp. 295-302.

Brandenburg, A. (2012). *Submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Cyber Safety.* Retrieved from: http://acce.edu.au/sites/acce.edu.au/files/Joint%20Standing%20Committe%20Cybersafety.pdf on 17 July, 2015.

De Zwart, L., Henderson, M. & Phillips, M. (2011). *Teenagers, Legal Risks and Social Networking Sites.* Victoria: Monash University.

Dunphy, J.M., Prendergast, G.J., O'Scolai, P. (2003). The emergence of camera phones – Exploratory study on ethical and legal issues. *Communications of the International Information Management Association,* Vol. 3, pp. 121-133. https://doi.org/10.58729/1941-6687.1009

DEC. (2012). *Social media guidelines.* Retrieved 14 July, 2015 from http://www.scribd.com/doc/54221457/Social-Media-Guidelines-for-Teachers

Educause. (2007). *7 things you should know about … Twitter.* Retrieved from www.educause.edu/eli on 17 July, 2015.

Hartman, L. (2001). *Technology and Ethics: Privacy in the Workplace* . Retrieved from http://www3.nd.edu/~rbarger/privacyintheworkplace.html on 17 July, 2015.

McNamee, A. (2005). *Ethical issues arising from the real time tracking and monitoring of people using GPS-based location services*, Wollongong University: Thesis.

Millea, J., Galatis, H. & McAllister, A. (2009). [SICTAS] *Annual report on emerging technologies: Planning for change, SICTAS report*. Adelaide: Education.au Limited.

Reilly, D. (2009). *Ethics 101: 5 online pitfalls that destroy students.* Viewed 10 March, 2012, http://www.educationau.edu.au/jahia/Jahia/home/SICTAS/pid/852.

Treadwell, M. (2008). *PLN: Personal Learning Network: Connect. Collaborate. Contribute*. Retrieved from https://21clc.wikispaces.com/PLN on 17 July, 2015.

Note: All published papers are refereed, having undergone a double-blind peer-review process.