**Research Proposal**

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**EDRS 812**

**Title:** Social media instructional strategies that are a potential for enhancing student learning in higher education

1. *Research Purpose- Rationale*

Social media otherwise known as social software or Web 2.0 tools have become an essential component in people’s interaction and communication. These tools have different affordances and can facilitate communication in several ways such as file sharing, networking, media sharing, and virtual worlds, but in general they all redirect the individual from single intelligence to collective intelligence (EDUCAUSE Learning Initiative, 2012). As mobility is becoming central to education where learners can learn anywhere and anytime, many technology tools play an important role in supporting students’ learning. Examples of these mobile tools are Learning management systems (including all media uploaded on these sites), email, and social media tools (EDUCAUSE, 2012).

As a teacher and as a doctoral student, I have experienced the use of social media in education by implementing it as part of my course requirements and by using it as a student. From a personal perspective, I have felt a sense of belonging to a community as a result of interacting using social media in both roles that I have played. The experience had an impact on my teaching practices as well as on my learning. Social media tools are considered informal learning tools as compared to email and LMSs (Chen and Bryer, 2012).As social media is becoming more widespread, it is penetrating the educational field to support formal learning that takes place in the classroom and through LMSs, however, there is a lack in empirical research that shows the effects that social media has on students’ learning and instructional strategies that faculty are using to support student learning through the use of social media tools (Chen & Bryer, 2012) . Hence, the purpose of my study is to investigate any use of social media by faculty in higher education, and its impact on their students’ learning.

1. *Literature Review and Conceptual Framework*

Dabbagh and Reo (2011) emphasize a paradigm shift into a 2.0 education that comprises Faculty 2.0, Student 2.0, Classroom 2.0 and a Pedagogy 2.0 at the heart of which lies social learning theory and the connectivist learning theory (Siemens, 2006). Although Web 2.0 tools had no “educational promises” as Friesen and Lowe (2011) suggested, however, social media tools have been increasingly finding their way in education and some studies have been showing the positive impact of the social media instructional strategies on students’ GPAs and engagement.

Junco, Heibergert, and Loken (2011), present the results of a semester long study on students’ use of Twitter in a pre-health professional seminar and suggest that the experimental group’s (the group who was using Twitter to communicate with the professor or other students) GPAs were higher than the control group’s (students who did not use Twitter). Similarly Churchill (2009) presents the positive learning impact that blogs have on student learning by administering a survey that measures students’ learning in a course that requires the use of blogs as an instructional strategy. Junco (2012) explains that Facebook has a positive impact on students’ learning and overall GPA when students share links and check each other’s statuses. These studies and similar ones that have been conducted provide the overall impact of social media on students’ learning. My aim in this study is to understand more specifically the instructional strategies that lead to student learning from both the faculty and the student perspectives. The students’ perspectives will not be part of this study as I will use the data from the interviews to develop a survey that investigates their experiences using social media in the respective courses that the interviewed faculty members teach.

1. *Research Question*

The main research question that my study will address is the following:

*R.Q: How are faculty members using social media in higher education and how effective do they think these tools are enhancing students’ learning?*

1. *Methods*

I will be conducting a qualitative study because it answers how and why things happen (Maxwell, 2013). I am much more interested in the process of how social media is used in higher education and how it affects students’ learning rather that understanding relationships and variances.

*Participants*

To answer my research question, I am planning to interview 5 faculty members at George Mason University who will be purposively selected depending on their use of social media as part of their course requirements. Participants will be selected through personal references of faculty who are aware of colleagues using social media in their teaching. I will also contact the administrator of PbWorks at GMU who is aware of faculty who use any social media tools in their teaching. Faculty members will be selected if possible from different disciplines to study the variety of learning activities used across departments.

*Data Collection*

I will be using semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions that allow faculty to talk about their experiences suing social media in their respective courses. The interviews will be 30-45 minutes long. The interview questions will ask faculty to describe the tools that they use in their respective courses, the learning activities that their students are supposed to carry through the social software, their experiences teaching with and without social media, their evaluation of their students’ learning as a result of using social media. Interview questions may be modified after recurring interview sessions.

*Data Analysis*

Interviews will be audio-recorded and then will be transcribed by the interviewer. The transcriptions will be coded and I will be looking for recurring themes and instructional strategies that faculty use through their implementation of social media in their courses.

1. *Limitations and Validity*

The study poses a few limitations that could be addressed in future studies. The interviews will measure the faculty perspectives of their students’ learning as a result of their use of social media. Further research needs to investigate the students’ takes on their learning and needs to compare them with the faculty’s perspectives. Moreover, five faculty members using social media tools are not representative of all faculty who use social media tools at GMU or in higher education in general. More faculty using social media need to be interviewed in order to identify a common pattern of instructional strategies that enhance learning.

Validity threats could be a result of faculty’s perceptions that social media tools should enhance student learning due to their initial beliefs that this is true and that is what drove them to include social media in their courses. Another validity threat is the small number of faculty members who will be interviewed since I consider this as a pilot study that could lead to my dissertation. To minimize this threat, more interviews will be conducted in the future and will be added to existing data.

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