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Watson Moffat Manduna

To cite this article: Watson Moffat Manduna (2016) Social media (SM) use by technology education students on field placement, *Journal of Psychology in Africa*, 26:2, 186-188, DOI: [10.1080/14330237.2016.1163913](https://doi.org/10.1080/14330237.2016.1163913)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14330237.2016.1163913>



Published online: 03 May 2016.



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BRIEF REPORT

Social media (SM) use by technology education students on field placement

Watson Moffat Manduna

Department of Mathematics, Science and Technology Education, Faculty of Humanities, Central University of Technology, Free State, 20 President Brand Street, Bloemfontein 9300, South Africa
Author email: wmanduna@cut.ac.za

This study explored the intuitions and usage of social media (SM) for communication and instructional support by information technology (ICT) education students on field placement. A random sampling procedure was used to select 37 pre-service teachers (female = 65%; mean age = 24, SD = 2 years). Students responded to a questionnaire on SMs about enhancing communication and instructional support during field placement. Descriptive statistics were used to profile the student's use of SM on field placement. The results suggest students use SM for peer mentoring, instructional support by lecturers, social support and creative learning experiments. Results also indicate that SM augment communication and instructional support for ICT students while on field placement.

Keywords: teaching practice, instructional support, informal learning, social media

Introduction

Knowledge and skills in educational institutions are mainly imparted to learners or acquired by them through formal and informal systems. Formal learning systems utilise instructors identified as official sources of information (Johnson, Donohue, Atkin, & Johnson, 1994). They also have rules and schedules for information dissemination and evaluation which also serve as learning system control mechanisms (Waldstrøm, 2001). However, formal learning systems may ignore the social needs of individuals, such as their social affinities and identities. Informal/grapevine networks can fill that social-learning-supported needs gap since they are interactional, functional, irregular and not prescribed (Waldstrøm, 2001). They are based on social relationships that exist among individuals, families, peers and colleagues (Waldstrøm, 2001; Antal, Arshad, Ballinger, Berry & Bowles, 2013). SM grapevine networking usually takes place during face-to-face conversations or virtual contact (e-mails, text messages and phone calls) between socialising partners (Waldstrøm, 2001; Maloney, 2007; Bran, Grosseck, & Tiru, 2011). SMs allow for the sharing of photos, videos and posts to support learning and to schedule appointments, et cetera (Bran, Grosseck, & Tiru, 2011). However, there is very little evidence of SM in the context of ICT education's field-experience teaching (Chen & Bryer, 2012). For this reason, this study seeks to investigate typical uses of SM by ICT education students in enhancing their field-experience learning or work-integrated learning.

Students on field experience have opportunities to learn from each other and SM can be an important resource for them. Use of SM can help expedite learning by eliminating inhibitions such as communication costs and inappropriate or untimely feedback. Since SM allows for privacy, students may be comfortable interacting with instructors perhaps more than would be the case with face-to-face

interactions which some would find confrontational. The study was guided by this research question: What are the uses to which ICT education students apply SM during field placement experience?

Method

Participants and setting

A random sampling procedure was used to select 37 pre-service ICT education students (female = 65%; mean age = 24; SD = 2 years) (see Table 1). They were all in their senior year of education for an Advanced Certificate in Education: Computer Application Technology qualification.

About 99% of students use one or more social media tools available (Table 1; sub A) for different reasons (Table 1c), predominantly for social networking (informal networking) and instructional support. WhatsApp (WhatsApp, 2014) was used in the study as a type of SM because it was the most used application among the students. About 66% of the students used SM at least once a day, between 4:00 pm and 8:00 pm.

Data collection

Students self-reported their SM usage and preferences in the context of field placement utilising a semi-structured questionnaire. They also reported on biographical information, perceptions on teaching practice and job placement, networking and social media usage in teaching and learning.

Procedure

Authorisation for carrying out the study was obtained from the head of the school at the technical university they attended. Students consented to respond to the questionnaire. The students individually consented to the study. Confidentiality, anonymity and non-traceability

of the respondents' answers were explicitly stated. Data were collected using the Blackboard survey tool at a time convenient to the respondents.

Data analysis

Matlab software was used to descriptively analyse the data, because of its flexibility, interactive graphics capabilities, user-friendly documentation and ease of use. Coded Microsoft Excel data was exported to Matlab for analysis purposes.

Results

The use of SM in teaching and learning

Students reported that they got help quickly on assignments, test preparations, examination preparations from peers through SM (85%) (see Table 2). About 73% stated that they also use WhatsApp to record their questions/answers and send them to their peers/promoters.

Approximately 96% of the students used the WhatsApp group facility to brainstorm ideas emerging from their field placement experiences. For example, student #21 observed that the group facility provided by some SM (e.g. WhatsApp) helped them to prepare for their field experience, whereas student #15 noted that her SM group helped her in reflective learning with regard to lesson preparation, record keeping, self-evaluation and new ideas to try out. About 97% of the students also noted that

informal learning and teaching provided by SM improved their analytical, comprehension, and collaborative skills.

Communication support

The study revealed that 98% of the students used SM to network informally with their peers and family. For example, students #5 and #8 noted that they always received and send current news (text photos) to their distant family members and friends.

Discussion and conclusion

Students used SM for collaborative learning during field placement. They found that SM enhanced learning support by their mentors, peers, and lecturers, and eliminated the barriers of time and geographical location. These findings are consistent with those reported in previous international studies (Stutzman, 2006; Selwyn, 2009; Jalal & Zaidieh, 2012). Students experienced social support with SM, including through sharing photographs, videos and posts. These are standard features with SM (Bran, Grosseck, & Tiru, 2011). Thus, SM can be used to complement information being circulated through formal learning networks. Students reported that the use of SM helped their creative learning with peers, and bolstered their sense of belonging to their learner cohort and school (see also Maxmen, 2010; Jalal & Zaidieh, 2012). From these findings, it is apparent that the blending of SM and other learning/teaching methods is desirable.

Table 1: Sample demographics

	Number of pre-service participants	Occurrence of pre-service participants
Pre-service males	13	35%
Pre-service females	24	65%

Social media sites type usage

Social networking site type	Respondent numbers	Observation
Facebook	33	90%
Twitter	16	43%
YouTube	24	64%
LinkedIn	2	6%
WhatsApp	36	98%
Skype	28	76%
MySpace	1	3%
Badoo	2	6%
Hi5	1	3%

Table 2: ICT usage types on field placement

Item	Rate	Rank order
Extended learning opportunities with peers/mentors/educators	99%	1
Providing appropriate and timely feedback	97%	2
Critical information exchange between teachers, learners, mentor and mentee	87%	3
Active, creative, integrative, evaluative and collaborative teaching and learning support	86%	4

C: Social learning support

	Rate	Rank order
Expressions of emotions in a free and quick way	91%	a
Social affinity reinforcement (e.g. feel valued when getting an instant response to a message sent)	87%	b
Communication with family and friends	85%	c
Convenience (i.e. user friendly)	79%	d
Belongingness (from sharing of resources: photos, video and postings).	78%	e

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