

9-2019

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Ashley Johnson-Holder
Fayetteville State University

Terrie Bethea-Hampton
Campbell University

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Recommended Citation

Johnson-Holder, Ashley and Bethea-Hampton, Terrie (2019) "Educational Leaders, Professional Learning Communities, and Social Media," *Journal of Research Initiatives*: Vol. 4 : Iss. 3 , Article 2.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.uncfsu.edu/jri/vol4/iss3/2>

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Educational Leaders, Professional Learning Communities, and Social Media

About the Author(s)

Dr. Ashley Johnson-Holder is an Assistant Professor at Fayetteville State University.

Dr. Terrie Bethea-Hampton is an Assistant Professor and Director of Teaching Scholars at Campbell University.

Keywords

MeWe, Mastodon, Google+, learning management systems, Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram

EDUCATIONAL LEADERS, PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES, AND SOCIAL MEDIA



Ashley Johnson-Holder, Fayetteville State University

Terrie Bethea-Hampton, Campbell University

Abstract

Though social media is at the forefront of technology strategies in the effort to close the digital divide, many educators fail to find the benefit in platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and MeWe. On the other hand, for many educators, social media has become the “go-to” resource, now that face-to-face communication is decreasing and social media is becoming the popular platform for keeping audiences engaged and informed. Social media has the potential of giving educational leaders the opportunity of communicating with multiple users simultaneously. Since students, parents, faculty, and educational stakeholders are using social media; this makes it an excellent avenue for receiving the most current trends in education (Corrigan & Roberson, 2015). The purpose of this paper is to provide educational leaders with possible social media resources to expand their geographical communication among other educational leaders and their stakeholders. According to Davis (2015), ignoring social media as a tool in the world of education is like dismissing the ISTE Standards.

Introduction

Social media platforms dominate the attention of many K-12 and university students. This intense attention given to social media by students gives way to an excellent opportunity for educational leaders to integrate learning with collaborative platforms. Leaders can support learning in a variety of ways through social media to includes communication, collaboration, knowledge management, multimedia, and entertainment. The growing scope of collaborative supports also includes social networking sites, blogs, microblogs, chat platforms, wikis, multimedia platforms, photo and video sharing, virtual game worlds, and virtual social worlds (Parusheva, Aleksandrova, and Petrov, 2017). Educational leaders must take the initiative to accommodate the needs of various learning audiences. Perhaps social media platforms are one

route to reach many, but others may be more accepting of face-to-face communication or other more traditional approaches. Educational leaders should tailor the technology communication within their learning institution to mirror the needs of the population served.

Studies on Social Media and Educational Leaders

According to one study, school administrators (vice-principals) refrain from using social media for personal use, but they do use it for professional use as it relates to their school building and distributing information. Additionally, the authors went on to hypothesize that administrators possibly do not use social media beyond the scope of their school day due to their negative experiences with the platform in schools (Corrigan & Roberson, 2015).

In Bulgaria, social media is dominant in education, social, and business practices. A 2017 study on the use of social media in fourteen higher education universities was conducted through a group of 378 full-time Bulgarian students at the bachelor and masters level. The study revealed that almost 100% of the students that responded to the survey subscribed to a social network like Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Instagram, or Google+ (Figure 4). The study found that Moodle and Blackboard were the most used learning management systems (LMS). The figure below shows the results of the number of students subscribing to a social media platform (Figure 1).

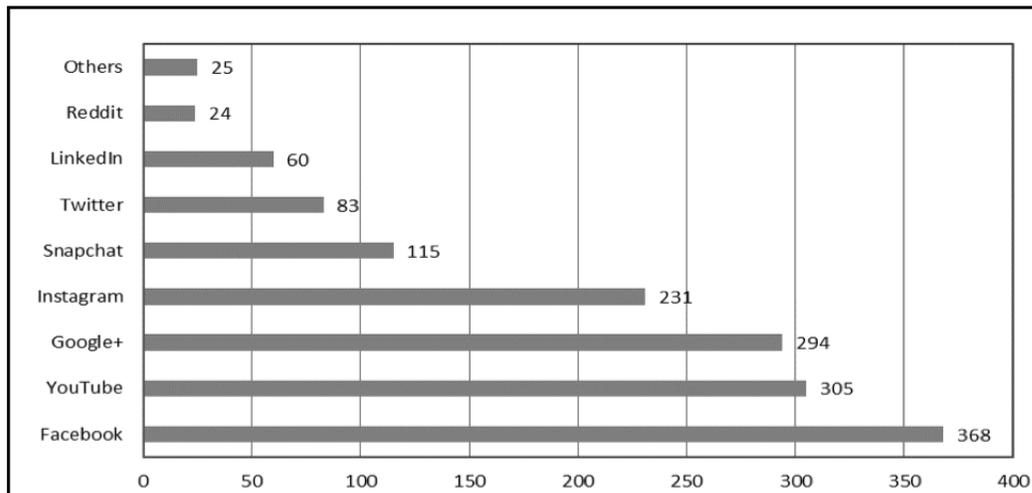


Figure 1: Frequency of use of leading social media platforms

With this high volume of students using social media, the question is how leaders of Bulgarian and other institutions can make the most of social media platforms. One of the significant possibilities is to couple LMS with social media platforms to make the most of the tools and

resources offered. LMS can be enhanced through collaborative groups, online communities, discussion forums, wikis, blogs, and real-time chats (Parusheva, Aleksandrova, and Petrov, 2017).

Hughes (2018) mixed-methods study, the researcher found that school district superintendents used social media to bring awareness and feedback to parents as well as to increase collaboration. Educational leaders can demonstrate awareness through social media by making communication clear through concise and appealing visuals. If leaders feel the need to refine their visual skills, there are many free tools on the web to assist with photo editing (Manganello, 2018). Educational leaders can use social media for feedback by asking followers to vote and respond to school initiatives. Also, they can inform a broad audience about school events and opportunities to get involved. Social media is a great platform to increase collaboration as leaders can converse ideas with other educational leaders and promote professional development through professional networking communities (PNCs), professional learning communities (PLCs) or professional learning teams (PLTs). Advocacy is demonstrated through social media as leaders can lead district projects and create new opportunities and ideas to increase student achievement. School community advocacy teams that consist of social workers, school counselors, student success, and other student support organization can use social media as a means for communication, online discussions, and public forums.



Figure 2: Dixon Ongoing Social Engagement Model

Twitter and Professional Development

Several studies have been conducted that looked at educational leaders and Twitter usage. One study revealed that K-12 school leaders overwhelmingly used Twitter to form collaborative groups of practice focused on educational issues (Sauers and Richardson, 2015).

Educational leaders can also use Twitter for professional development opportunities and to engage in Professional Learning Communities (Xing and Gao, 2018). It is important to note that tweets can include links to various Web 2.0 and 3.0, as they can connect followers to academic circles which span to high-quality professional development. When deciding on how one wants to utilize social media, they must keep in mind that not all will have access to a Twitter account. In a 2018 study conducted by Kimmons, Carpenter, Veletsianos, Krutka, they found that Twitter usage differs based on demographics. Therefore, schools in more affluent populations are more likely to engage in Twitter than schools in deprived areas.

Instagram

Instagram, a photo-sharing social networking site launched in October 2010, is proliferating and receiving attention from educational leaders. Instagram is used by all age groups and is reportedly the fastest growing social media platform with 80 million users in the United States, 600 million users a month, and 400 million users a day (Manganello, 2018). Instagram allows users to upload pictures and videos up to fifteen seconds. Users can then distribute their information to a broad audience on their Instagram account or share via other social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter.

Educational leaders can use Instagram to promote their institution, school, or facility. By making posts visually appealing, leaders can develop a strong Instagram presence with several followers. Like Twitter, Instagram users can also use hashtags to increase their visibility and to connect with other leaders in the field, parents, and various stakeholders of K-12. Hashtags (#s) are a way for individuals to appear in searches and categorize information. Different than Twitter, Facebook, and Google+, Instagram allows educational leaders to post a single photo, video, or a compilation of pictures and videos into one posting (Manganello, 2018). For example, educational leaders could post about Family Literacy Night or Freshman Orientation

with a video and multiple pictures to reach a broad audience and possibly bring in more massive attendees.

Google for Education and Professional Learning Communities

Google first launched in 1998. Since then, over 30 million primary, elementary, and secondary students use Google applications daily in the classroom. At the 2018 International Society for Technology and Education (ISTE) Conference, Google introduced 12 new or updated features for Google for Education. Included in the applications were Google Plus (Google+), a valuable social media platform like Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook was among the updated programs with the ability to create online communities. Today, Google+ hosts approximately 2 billion registered public members (Stout, 2018). Unlike institutional learning management systems like Blackboard and Canvas, Google+ allows access to all and offers several collaborative resources and a shared document drive.

The goal of professional development, both online and face-to-face is for educators to learn from the training sessions, take the training back to their prospective learning institutions then, implement the practice in their classrooms. In the past, traditional routes of providing educational training and professional development have included: workshops, watching others implement strategies, viewing videos, face-to-face sessions with other professions, and attending presentations by in-house or outside agencies. Face-to-face professional development often includes meeting in Professional Learning Communities (PLC), Professional Networking Communities (PNC), or Professional Learning Teams (PLT). PNC, PLN, and PLT are mostly the same which is a group of educators that regularly collaborate to share ideas, experiences, and to offer their expertise in a variety of areas (Partnership, 2018).

In the past, educational leaders found Google+ to be a useful online resource for providing professional development opportunities to faculty and staff. The research revealed that the capacity of technology is essential to learning and contributes to the increase in student achievement. A 2015 case study, drawn on Actor-Network Theories (ANT) examined professional learning programs hosted in online Google+ communities. The focus of the research was to explore the complex interactions within a blended learning course between human/human; human/non-human; and nonhuman/nonhuman. The study involved a collection of postings in the Google+ community which included email correspondence, meeting minutes,

workshop summations, and results from evaluation forms. The pedagogy of the blended learning environment was supported in the study by socio-constructivist theories whereby students learn best through participation over learning as an acquisition. Google+ functions that supported the study were the ability to chat, create closed groups, post comments, links, and photos. The social component of learning through collaboration in this study was a significant factor. Higher education students enrolled in a professional development module served as the practitioners engaged in family learning on a variety of levels.

The study considered the competition between social networking platforms, virtual learning environments, and the nature and use of technology. The study explains the conceptualization of material in social-materialist theories such as ANT. The study found that learning through socially facilitated groups promoted achievement. This finding was in direct contrast to pedagogies consistent with online learning. The investigation also revealed the effects human actors have on the complex set of interactions they encounter with nonhuman components as related to the dynamics of social learning networks (Ackland and Swinney, 2015). The study shares the positive experiences that can be drawn through using Google+ such as an emphasis on relational aspects of a learning community. However, the ability to organize a synchronous meeting was inhibited by the inability to find acceptable meeting dates for the course members involved.

On April 2, 2019, Google plans to shut down the consumer version of Google+ because of underdevelopment and limited use of the application. The shutting down of Google+ is important to educators and a few disciplines because many educators used the platform to create and develop Professional Learning Communities (PLC) for specific curricula. There were countless educational communities set up inside Google+ to include communities for STEM, STEAM, literacy, math, National Boards, edTPA, Vocational Education, Higher Education, and Praxis Prep. Google+ is a social networking platform whereby Google set out to duplicate the way people interact in real-life online. The slogan for Google+ was “Real-life sharing rethought for the web”. Unlike other social networking platforms like Facebook and Twitter, Google+ provided opportunities for Professional Learning Teams, Professional Learning Communities, and teaming groups to function very close to how they would perform face-to-face. The Google+

design team sought to replicate the way people interact offline. The project's slogan is “Real-life sharing rethought for the web.”

The problem Google faced was that Google+ never really claimed the number of consumers projected and now the application will shut down in the spring of 2019. At which time, all profiles, pictures, videos, posts, pages, and Google+ comments will be deleted. Since Google+ is shutting down, according to the editor of Makeuseof.com a special community of 5,000 plus consumers called Google+ Mass Migration are looking for alternative replacements for the application. According to users of Google+ there is no perfect alternative because at present, there is not an application that offers the exact same features. This paper reviews several applications that have similar features and functions to Google+. Because Google+ allowed users to create and/or join specific communities the following applications may be an alternative to consumers seeking specific audiences. This paper will explore four possible alternative applications to Google+; MeWe, PumpUp, and Mastodon.

These innovative tools enable educational leaders to deliver updates, establish PLCs and PLTs, and deliver relevant content to parents, students, and stakeholders in real-time. Each platform contains thousands of communities directed to an array of professions, businesses, and social groups. Educators can join either of the communities that include a wide variety of topics from cyberbully to educational leadership. Features that make these applications different from other social media platforms is that there is fewer advertisement distractions, PLCs, and the ability to create collections within communities. Collections within communities include articles, blogs, posts, and videos (Livick, 2016).

MeWe, PumpUp, and Mastodon to Replace Google+

MeWe, a social media site challenging all others, now has over 30,000 members joining daily. In December 2018, MeWe was named the leading social app in the Google Play Store. The rapid growth of MeWe is contributed to the announced closure of Google + in 2019. This social media site is free for individuals who wish to connect with their friends, families, or colleagues. MeWePro is free for all educational organization and non-profits. One feature that educators and educational leaders are taking advantage of is MeWePages which allows users to create open or private groups. PLCs can use MeWe to collaborate on issues related to cross curricula planning, lateral and vertical planning literature, school functions, curriculum nights,

and other school initiatives. MeWePages enables PLCs to stream live video discussion around current program topics relating to EPPs. Additionally, individuals of the PLC can post pictures, current events, flyers, legislative announcements, and videos for the community to view (PR Newswire, 2018). Other features present among MeWe include voice messaging, secret chat, personal social cloud, video conferencing, and custom group profiling. Individuals can access MeWe via their computer or phone making it convenient and easy to release pressing news relative to higher education matters (MeWe, 2019).

PumpUp, an Ontario based company has created a health and fitness application which claims to be the “most positive fitness community”. The PumpUp application is comprised of a community of subscribers focused on a healthy body and a healthy mind. Subscribers of the app focus on inspiring and motivating members of its community. This application can be used for PLCs in the areas of health and PE teachers, Exercise Science majors, and other sports-related curricula. To date, makers of the application boast that there are over 6 million users, in over 150 countries, and available 24/7 (Whittaker, 2018). Users of the application can send and receive messages from other subscribers. The application is available on IOS and Android. Users are able to choose from 100’s of fitness workouts and programs. The app offers video demonstrations, voice prompts, and customized workouts. This application is comparable to Google+ in that subscribers are members of a community (a culture within a culture) that provide positive feedback and support to the members of the community 24/7 from motivational supporters all over the world. Like Google+, members of the PumpUp community can identify with others that have the same or similar interest. For example, PumpUp offers categories in the following areas: workout, weight, running, walking, cycling, and weightlifting. Subscribers that use the elliptical and the treadmill have access to a personal trainer via audio. Currently, the application is free with a 30-day trial (Whittaker, 2018).

Mastodon is a networking and social media service that can be likened to Google+. Mastodon’s application has more than 2 million users and is much like Twitter in that it allows microblogging and allows anyone to host their network and prides itself on being community owned and ad-free. Mastodon can be used for STEAM, STEM, and gaming curricula. Mastodon is 1000’s of communities that form one network. Subscribers are can publish links, video, pictures, and text. The slogan for the application is “Social networking, back in your hands.

Users are spread out over many sites that are called “instances” with over 1000 communities available. Users can find communities in which they most identify with in terms of security and privacy against abuse and harassment. Though Mastodon does not have a tamper-free system that protects subscribers, Mastodon deliberately does not support arbitrary or random search.

Therefore, when subscribers want searchers to locate their posts, they can browse with a hashtag which decreases the number of searches by people outside of any given community. Another feature is that unlike Twitter or Facebook, with Mastodon users can search post they created, received, or favorited. Contrastive to Twitter, which forces followers to choose between messages that are entirely public or protected; Mastodon subscribers can make their messages fully public, unlisted, private, or direct. With a fully public account, posts can appear to followers, on the timeline, or be seen by anyone viewing the owner of the account’s profile. An unlisted account appears to the owner's followers and anyone that can view the owner's profile. However, with an unlisted account, the subscriber’s timeline is not viewable. Another alternative is to have a private account which only appears to the subscribers' followers and people mentioned in a message. Subscribers can have a direct account which appears only to people mentioned in a message. Either of the options can be set as a default and provide the owner of the account the autonomy to choose how public or private they want messages to be. Finally, owners of accounts can choose to lock their accounts which prevents unwanted followers (Rochko, 2018).

Conclusion

The possibilities for using social media in the world of education are endless. Researchers claim that social media assists in provoking, forming and developing leaders’ interest in a variety of academic fields, along with stimulating engagement between stakeholders. Therefore, when leaders are forming PLC, the basic essential element for an online community is collaboration (Parusheva, Aleksandrova, and Petrov, 2017). This ties back to Dixon’s social engagement model which consist of awareness, feedback, collaboration, and advocacy. Even if educational leaders are hesitant about joining the world of social media, Manganello (2018) suggests that it is vital to stay ahead of current trends and take advantage of these platforms to assist in telling their story. Social media is a phenomenon of the Internet regarding information and communication.

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