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"Hello, you and I haven't met in person before, but…" Social media for community building and self-development.

Kiu Sum
Solent University, UK

Abstract

Social media has become a significant tool for professional development and community building. This paper reflects on the transformative impact of social media on the author's career within Higher Education (HE). Navigating the challenges and opportunities in HE has been shaped by engaging with various social media forums. The author shares their personal account of how social media has played a pivotal role in overcoming challenges, building a professional community, and fostering growth.

Keywords

Social media, community, professional development, higher education

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In today's digital age, introducing oneself to colleagues often happens through non-traditional networks like social media. Something I never considered, but the above quote has given me a fresh perspective on communication and networking. My journey in professional development and community building within Higher Education (HE) has been instrumental in shaping my career path. As an Early Career Researcher, identifying aspirations is just the beginning; overcoming challenges and navigating the pitfalls of being a newcomer is equally important. Nevertheless, through various HE social media forums, I have had the opportunity to connect with colleagues, explore new interests, and uncover exciting avenues for growth. While it has been all very exciting, the abundance of choices can often be as confusing as it can be. In this paper, I aim to share a personal account that reflects on how social media has played a pivotal role in overcoming my challenges (Sum, 2023), building my professional community and fostering my growth in higher education.

Social media has profoundly impacted my professional growth and community building. It goes beyond simply staying updated on the latest news; it has provided me with a platform to connect with like-minded professionals and develop my professional identity. One unexpected community I stumbled upon was LTHEchat (Learning and Teaching in Higher Education chat), a weekly Twitter chat open to anyone in Higher Education and enables the opportunity for colleagues to share practices with others (for more details: https://lthechat.com/about/). I first "joined" the conversation when someone whom I met at a student engagement conference mentioned it and, by "accident" to my naivety and curiosity, explored what the group is.

Before I "met" LTHEchat, my use of social media was superficial, mainly speculating on following my immediate disciplinary areas of interest. However, discovering LTHEchat and its vibrant community completely changed my perspective on professional development and the wider HE community. For example, participating in the weekly #LTHEchat discussions exposed me to new learning and teaching topics and allowed me to engage with field experts. I can still recall that feeling of intimidation during my initial interactions, lacking the confidence to contribute anything meaningful when I felt so unqualified to other #LTHEchat-ers. Perhaps this was my position at that time, a student still very earlier on in my educational journal, but I did not know what to do other than just passively observe the live conversations to curate content that would "sound satisfactory amongst experts in the area". It is that same feeling when you go to your first "big adult meeting or conferences", and there are the "well-known people in the field" whom you aspire to be but are just too shell-shocked knowing what to do. Except on social media, when everything is online, it is a different experience compared to in-person interactions (well…firstly, there is no eye contact and body language that you can find clues in…but the advantage of this is that you can hide behind a screen..).

However, over time, regular participation boosted my confidence and enabled me to develop my own voice within the community. (Not only that, but if you know about #LTHEchat, then you need to have very good eyes and fingers agility to keep up with the endless stream of comments, not to mention the random multimedia messages!). It has also expanded my awareness of the HE landscape, allowing me to absorb fresh ideas, theories, and practices that I could apply in my roles as an aspiring educator. Being part of the LTHEchat community helped me shape my professional identity and discover how to contribute to the HE sector and the community. Reflecting on my professional development, LTHEchat stands out as a transformative community that has broadened my career horizons, pushed the boundaries of my disciplinary interests, and fostered unconventional and creative thinking. It has undoubtedly shaped my perspective and equipped me with a multidisciplinary mindset, which is increasingly vital in today's diverse and interconnected world of work.

Kiu Sum
Solent University, UK

Participating in #LTHEchat has been a transformative and enriching experience for me, leading to unexpected connections and new projects. Initially, engaging with colleagues I would have never considered meeting (and secretly feeling like an imposter) felt strange, particularly if you are a student. It felt like "I was running late for an important meeting, crept in through the back door of the wrong room, thinking I knew what I was doing, yet the topic was so interesting than I anticipated that I stayed for it". In other words, having direct conversations and connecting with more experienced colleagues in the field felt unexpected. As a result, what makes this experience truly wonderful is the acceptance and openness of the community, embracing newcomers like myself (if you have not done so, I would encourage you to try or observe from a distance). Through #LTHEchat, I have had the opportunity to learn valuable skills that go beyond the classroom and discover unknown gaps, constantly fueling my curiosity and prompting me to ask more questions. This experience has allowed me to apply my knowledge and collaborate with colleagues on projects that have broadened my understanding of higher education. It has provided a taste of academic life and opened doors I might not have discovered otherwise. I am grateful for the chance to gain real-world work experience and expand my perspectives through my involvement in #LTHEchat.

However, social media has evolved beyond a mere global news feed or a leisurely activity of exercising those fingers of scrolling through (or perhaps training those fingers for the next #LTHEchat). But it has become a powerful tool for enhancing learning and technology in education (Dunn, 2013). Research has shown that social media can transform the educational experience, empowering learners to take ownership of their education and fostering professional development (Purvis et al., 2016, 2020). By embracing social media in my role within higher education, I can learn to leverage its potential to enrich the classroom environment. Utilising social media for educational purposes allows for sharing best practices, forming new connections, and exploring disciplinary topics in innovative ways. Thus, if we are to question ways of engagement, social media can serve as a platform to raise awareness, spark conversations, and engage students and colleagues in a non-traditional and dynamic educational landscape.

Conclusion

In conclusion, my journey of using social media for learning and teaching has been a continuous learning experience. It is striking a balance between leveraging its advantages and avoiding excessive use. The evolving nature of technology and social media brings an element of curiosity, particularly in how they can be harnessed for professional development and community-building. It is fascinating to witness the power of social media in fostering connections, facilitating conversations, and building online communities with colleagues. These virtual interactions lay a solid foundation for real-life meetings, eliminating initial awkwardness and enabling meaningful conversations right from the start. Reflecting on my own experiences, I recognise the potential of social media as a valuable tool for students' professional development. By incorporating innovative technological tools, we can offer students alternative approaches to their career growth. As we navigate this ever-changing technological landscape, it is crucial to ponder the personal significance of social media. Has it contributed to your community building and professional development? If so, let us join forces as advocates for its use in learning and teaching, ensuring that students can fully experience the benefits of their own career development.

Kiu Sum
Solent University, UK

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Disclosure statement

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Kiu Sum
Solent University, UK