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The Learner Who Used a Social Networking Site for Online Learning

When I talked to Maxine, she had just completed her third online course. The first two had been writing courses that “just [involved] a string of assignments” and mostly required her to write papers, send them to peers, critique papers she received, revise her own papers, and submit them to the instructor. The third course was different. It encompassed “a whole lot more interaction” through a different kind of platform, a social networking site.

But social media was a foreign concept to Maxine. Before the course, she “had never used Facebook or MySpace or any of that stuff,” and even though she had watched videos on YouTube, she had never uploaded one of her own there or contributed any other content to the internet for broad consumption. As a graduate student and mother of three, two of whom were still teenagers living at home, Maxine also had little time for social media. She felt overwhelmed, nervous, and “really scared” when, on the first day of her third online course, she was informed that the course made use of a social networking

site through which she would have to write blog posts and connect with others in a more social way than that afforded to students via typical online learning platforms. “I didn’t know how to post information or friend people or anything like that,” she told me. At the age of 39, Maxine was apprehensive about social media because she was “just kind of afraid of the different privacy issues and who does the content that you put on there really belongs to.”

As time went by, though, she felt “more protected,” having realized that the site had been created solely for the group consisting of herself, her peers, and their instructor. Maxine also decided that she was not going to post anything on this site that wasn’t related to the class, a decision that made her feel more comfortable. The longer she was in the course, the more the technology started making sense to her. She saw its use as “making the most of all the tools that we had and using them as tools to support our learning.” She even enlisted the help of her 12-year-old daughter to hold the camera to record a video and made sure to keep her on track: “She was playing with the focus and all those sort of things,” she said laughing, and by the time she was able to complete her assignment, “it ended up being sometime after midnight.” A number of factors thus mitigated the challenges and risks of the social networking platform that she was using, including the fact that it was not a public social media site and that the course seemed to make appropriate pedagogical use of it.

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Online education has traditionally been organized, supported, and delivered through Learning Management Systems (LMS) such as Canvas, Blackboard, and Moodle, which draw together a variety of technologies that enable institutions and instructors to provide a structured, efficient, and secure learning ex-

perience (West, Waddoups, and Graham 2006; DeSchryver et al. 2009; Lee and McLoughlin 2010). Such systems serve as one-stop locations for students to engage in a variety of activities, ranging from retrieving a syllabus to engaging in peer discussions to viewing course grades. Despite these platforms' many benefits, a number of researchers have argued that they have generally been used as static repositories of content rather than providing the kinds of rich social experiences found on digital platforms of the likes of Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube (Brady et al. 2010; Lee and McLoughlin 2010; Schroeder, Minocha, and Schneider 2010; Whitworth and Benson 2010). LMS have also been criticized for suppressing student motivation and enthusiasm (DeSchryver et al. 2009; Naveh, Tubin, and Pliskin 2010) and inhibiting pedagogical innovation through their default settings and familiar features (Lane 2009).

As a result, about a decade ago, educators and researchers began exploring alternative platforms to provide learners with social communication tools that could improve ease of use, pedagogical freedom, fluid online discussions, and identity management (Webb 2009, Brady et al. 2010; Lee and McLoughlin 2010). Some faculty and course designers began to appropriate popular social media tools for use in higher education because of the perceived opportunities and benefits they present for improving pedagogical practices and student engagement. Instructors have employed these tools by asking students to reflect on their learning in blogs, contribute to publicly available resources such as Wikipedia, connect with communities of interest through LinkedIn and Reddit, and participate on a variety of other platforms that exemplify the “read-and-write” ethos of the contemporary internet. At the core of these participatory practices is the internet’s ability to provide users with

opportunities to contribute, consume, share, and remix content (Greenhow, Robelia, and Hughes 2009).

The educational technology literature on the use of social media has investigated a wide range of topics, including both students' and faculty's attitudes toward, use of, and experiences with social media. This research has shown, for example, that although faculty members increasingly appear to use social media for scholarly purposes (Veletsianos 2016), they seem more cautious about adopting them for instructional purposes. Ajjan and Hartshorne (2008) found that 74% of the faculty they studied did not plan on using social networking tools for instruction; Coddington (2010) reported that 79% of approximately 4,600 faculty surveyed had never used collaborative editing software (e.g., wikis) and 84% had never used blogs in their teaching; and Roblyer et al. (2010) uncovered that higher education faculty seemed more inclined to use more traditional technologies, such as email. Although such findings might appear to suggest that faculty unfamiliarity and resistance is primarily responsible for the limited use of social media for instructional purposes in higher education, Ajjan and Hartshorne argue that the larger reason is that such tools are incompatible with the way that higher education is generally organized and delivered. In particular, they point to important structural and philosophical differences between how participatory technologies such as social media envision the relationships between participants and how higher education institutions envision the relationships between faculty and students. For instance, whereas social media tends to collapse hierarchical structures, the higher education classroom has traditionally valued the voice of a single expert (i.e., the faculty member). This explanation is consistent with Coddington's finding that, despite the low social media use

they uncovered among surveyed faculty, 72% of those faculty members used course management systems such as Blackboard, which generally support instructor-centric learning environments.

Despite the common view among proponents in the field that social media can be useful in addressing problems that have traditionally plagued distance education, such as a lack of interaction between participants, there is still a paucity of research examining student experiences with social media in online courses. In a study of students' experiences using a social network in a blended course, Arnold and Paulus (2010) found that students believed that the social networking features of the site encouraged community-building and that the public nature of the tasks allowed for modeling and feedback. The authors also observed that students may have also engaged in additional learning activities that were invisible to the researchers, such as reading other students' entries without responding to them (see chapter 9). In a study of an online undergraduate course, Dron and Anderson (2009) reported that learners in their course had a generally positive learning experience but sometimes also got "lost in social space" and needed support and scaffolding from the instructor to effectively participate in the social network. In our own investigations, we discovered similar patterns: though students enjoyed and appreciated the social learning experience, they limited their participation to course-related activities and devised strategies to manage the expansive amount of information generated through the social space in order to focus on the activities that they deemed most valuable to their learning (Veletsianos and Navarrete 2012).

While education researchers have generally been hopeful about the positive impact of social media on education, others

have been more skeptical about its actual educational benefits (e.g., Manca and Ranieri 2013; Selwyn and Stirling 2016). Selwyn (2009), for example, dismissed the kind of learning that occurred in a study of undergraduates' naturally occurring Facebook interactions as representing the "chatter of the back row of the lecture hall" (170). Schroeder et al. (2010) also offered a long list of potential concerns that may arise when using social software in higher education, including workload concerns for faculty and students, lack of trust in peer feedback, ownership issues with regard to social media spaces, and difficulties in adapting publicly available tools and protecting the anonymity of students. Furthermore, Madge, Meek, Wellens, and Hooley (2009) have suggested that social networking sites might be more useful for informal rather than formal learning, as 91% of the undergraduates in their study had never used such tools to communicate with university staff and 43% believed that SNSs have no potential for academic work. Beyond these concerns, others point to ongoing scandals and concerns facing technology companies in recent years (e.g., Facebook and Cambridge Analytica, the possibility of YouTube's recommendation algorithm favoring extremism, Twitter's ongoing failure to address harassment), and wonder whether these online environments are hospitable for learning.

Like many technologies, social media may be a useful part of a toolkit in designing effective online learning. While some evidence seems to suggest that social media can be an effective pedagogical tool, enabling such synergistic activities as collaboration, social interaction, reflective practice, situated learning, and authentic assessment, we need to approach them with an ethic of care and consider that adopting these technol-

ogies in our courses means inviting their business practices and their ideologies in our classrooms.

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- The flat organizational structure of social media may be incompatible with the traditionally hierarchical structure of the classroom. In this respect, social media technologies are congruent with progressive pedagogical approaches that value social interaction and participation.
- Researchers have generally been hopeful about the role of social media in online learning. Nonetheless, the learning that happens on social media most often seems more fitting for informal learning settings.
- An emerging tension around the use of social media in education revolves around the question of whether the environments fostered and cultivated by technology companies are hospitable for learning.

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