Social Media: enhancing teaching & building community?
Project report

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This project aimed to comparatively assess the effectiveness of *Twitter* and *Facebook* in engaging students in their course material, while also strengthening links between students and staff in the Politics & IR subject area of the School of Social and Political Science (SPS).

Politics & IR lecturers are increasingly using different forms of social media to keep students informed of news and research relating to courses and subject area events. At the same time, student feedback makes it clear that they desire more community and connectedness with 'their' subject area.

We propose to compare the experience of Facebook groups as used in Dr March's Russian Politics teaching (Russia and Wider Europe) and Twitter as used in Dr Dorman's African Politics teaching (@afr_pol), where they are used in addition to the provision of a Learn page for each course.

We were particularly interested in exploring whether and how social media helps mediate the relationship between student learning experiences and their desire for 'more community', and to what extent this complements or conflicts with the use of a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE).

Rationale
Social media is becoming a 'normal' part of student life, as well as academic practice,[1] and increasingly it is also being used in teaching.[2]

We wish to investigate if social media can enhance student learning experiences, as well as their sense of 'belonging' to the academic community within and beyond our subject area.

Politics & IR has a large student cohort at both UG and PG levels, and a particular problem with student satisfaction (as measured by the NSS). Social media is therefore important as a potential way of building community among our diverse student body, and also a way of adding value to our academic offerings.

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[1] See for instance "A gentle introduction to Twitter for the apprehensive academic" http://deevybee.blogspot.co.uk/2011/06/gentle-introduction-to-twitter-for.html and "Learning the Foreign Language of Twitter" http://occamstypewriter.org/athenedonald/2013/03/23/learning-the-foreign-language-of-twitter/
[2] Alasdair Blair, " Democratising the Learning Process: The Use of Twitter in the Teaching of Politics and International Relations" *Politics* (Advance Access 2013)

For lecturers, the use of social media may save time – it's easier to tweet a link than to set up a hyperlink in a course, or across multiple courses in a VLE. Students have also anecdotally reported a preference for Facebook over Learn forums.

The proposed research was undertaken to assist us in assessing how effectively social media contribute to achieving our teaching and learning objectives, and ways in which we might strengthen our offerings.

Research questions:

Does social media facilitate student learning and enhance the learning experience?
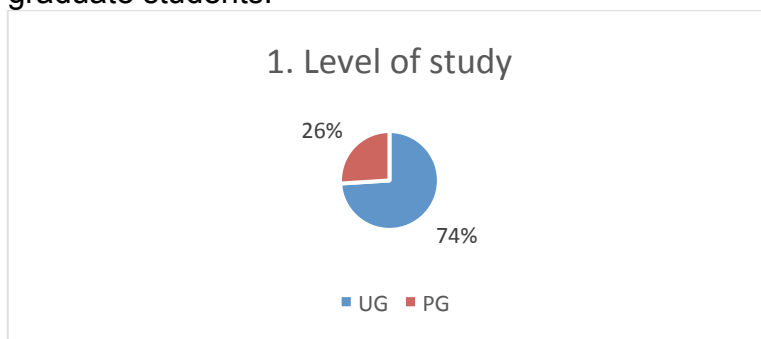
- Does social media enable students to stay informed in the case of rapidly changing events?
- Does it facilitate participation in debates?
- Do they feel more included and valued as part of the subject area?
- Is social media complementary to VLEs like Learn? Does it run the risk of duplicating existing provision? Or does the proximity to and involvement with 'real' academic debate stimulate them to learn more?
- Which medium – Facebook, Twitter, or Learn – works best to achieve these goals?
- Are there downsides to these approaches? Do some students feel excluded?
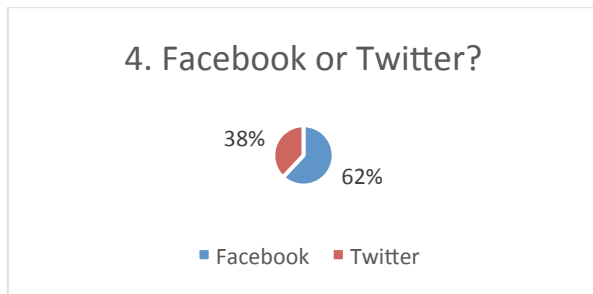
Methods & data

A post-graduate student, Gareth James, worked with us as a research assistant. The assistant's primary role was to designing the survey questions which were included within the standard 'feedback' questionnaire and in conducting focus groups.

Data analysis

The students who responded to the survey were a mix of Undergraduate and post-graduate students:

1. Level of study

26%

74%

■ UG ■ PG

Taking 5 different courses –

3. Course

16%
4%
29%
29%
22%

- ■ African Politics: Theories and Debates ■ Politics of Post-Soviet Russia
- ■ Africa in World Politics ■ Africa and International Politics
- ■ Contemporary Russian Politics

4. Facebook or Twitter?

38%
62%

- ■ Facebook ■ Twitter

The data reveals that awareness and usage of social media were generally high. 70% used resource at least once. Daily usage significantly higher for Facebook, while Twitter more than twice as likely to have never been used. There are also clear difference between UG and PG students, as follows:

UG – Russian Politics/Facebook – 100% daily/weekly usage.

UG – African Politics/Twitter – much more varied. Very few used daily (2.5%); one third used only once or twice; just over one third never used.

PG – Russian Politics/Facebook – one third used daily, one quarter used weekly, one quarter never used.

PG – African Politics/Twitter – one third used one per month; the rest never used resource.

On average, how often did you access the course Facebook page/Twitter account? * type of sm used * UG or PG Crosstabulation

% within type of sm used

UG or PG			type of sm used		Total
			Twitter/ African Politics	Facebook/Russian Politics	
UG	On average, how often did you access the course Facebook page/Twitter account?	Daily	2.5%	90.9%	21.6%
		Once per week	17.5%	9.1%	15.7%
		Once per month	12.5%		9.8%
		Once or twice only	32.5%		25.5%
		Never	35.0%		27.5%
	Total		100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
PG	On average, how often did you access the course Facebook page/Twitter account?	Daily		33.3%	27.8%
		Once per week		26.7%	22.2%
		Once per month	33.3%	6.7%	11.1%
		Once or twice only		6.7%	5.6%
		Never	66.7%	26.7%	33.3%
	Total		100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
Total	On average, how often did you access the course Facebook page/Twitter account?	Daily	2.3%	57.7%	23.2%
		Once per week	16.3%	19.2%	17.4%
		Once per month	14.0%	3.8%	10.1%
		Once or twice only	30.2%	3.8%	20.3%
		Never	37.2%	15.4%	29.0%
	Total		100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Overall, 46% found social media useful to some degree.
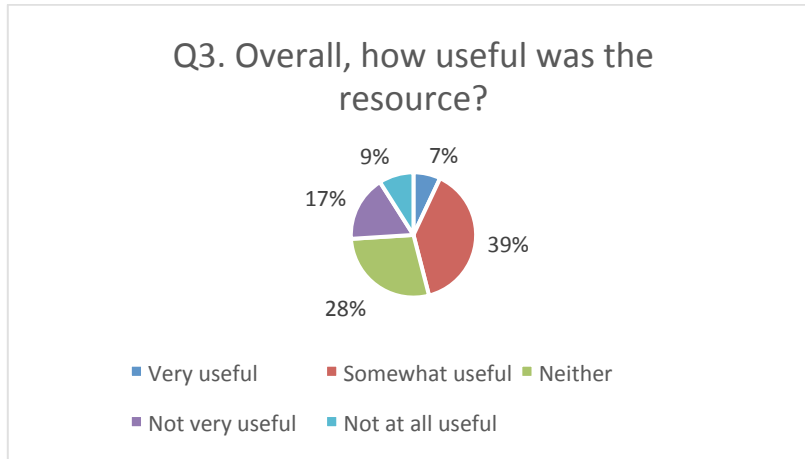
However, the crosstabulation of these results, which reports a strong and statistically significant relationship, shows that Facebook is considered more useful than Twitter.

Crosstab

	Response to Q3			Total
	Useful	Neither	Not useful	
Twitter	33.3%	20.8%	45.8%	100.0%
Facebook	59.1%	36.4%	4.5%	100.0%
Total	45.7%	28.3%	26.1%	100.0%

(n=46; φ_c =.47; p=.01)

Almost 60% found Facebook 'somewhat useful' or 'very useful'; whereas only one third described Twitter as 'somewhat useful' and none described it as 'very useful'. More strikingly, Twitter users were ten times more likely than Facebook users to respond with 'not useful'.

The focus groups revealed that students appreciate potential for sharing resources and staying informed through social media, although sometimes fail to see relevance to course.

They mostly recognise the potential for debate/discussion, but complain both that it tends not to happen, and that when it does happen, it can be intimidating if open to 'real' academics or professionals.

Facebook considered best for 'building community'; Twitter good for sharing information but seen as 'intimidating' and 'noisy'; and Learn seen as most 'academic' and 'safe'. Some concerns expressed about exclusion of students who do not have/want Facebook or Twitter.

Facebook is seen as good for community building but the 'social'/academic distinction confuses people. They tend to regard it as add-on, lower-status and peripheral. While it is good for sharing things, there is also a real danger of information overload.

Learn is perceived as too clunky to navigate and for effective course discussion, but ideally students want discussion among their own cohort. This is at least in part because students feel intimidated – by staff members, other academics or 'high status' individuals, or even anyone they don't know in the discussion group. Similarly, not getting 'likes' or comments is seen as hurtful to some.

Some conclusions

- Facebook far more popular with students than twitter, and also seen as better for community building.
- Clear differences in use of Facebook/Twitter between UG and PG students, as outlined above.
- The data suggests less enthusiasm for social media use in teaching than was anticipated.
- Students are interested in and aware of benefits of joining in discussions but also wary of commenting too much in 'public' (which includes fellow students and instructors). This suggests that we need to 'build community' in order for 'community building' tools to really work *ie* so that they don't feel intimidated. While we had hoped that students might benefit from/be interested in 'real world' engagement, they expressed concern about it.
- There is a continuing problem – recognized by both students and staff -- of lack of integration between FB, Twitter and Learn. The focus groups reveal demand for it to be integrated. But this is problematic as it can't be made compulsory, which would increase engagement but not all can/want to access. Ideally, the solution would be a better course-specific discussion function – some schools (e.g. Law) seem to be better at using Learn for this.

- It might have been useful to ask more survey questions about Learn and about the community building aspect. This might be developed further in future research.

<u>Dissemination</u>

Data and conclusions will be be circulated to Politics & IR staff and Politics & IR session on teaching, as well as the e-learning list-serve.

Secondly, Gareth James will take the lead on writing up the results in more detail, perhaps for publication in *Politics,* a PSA journal, which has recently increased its focus on teaching and learning, and carried preliminary research on social media and politics teaching.

Finally, we're happy to present the data and our conclusions more widely, if there is interest.