

Deploying the Affordances of Social Media: Envisioning a University-Owned Platform to Foster Networked Learning

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Abstract

Educational scholars have highlighted how social media platforms can be powerful sites of learning and organizing for social change. Research into informal social media learning has suggested that it promotes life-wide education, offering opportunities to learn through networks of connection, co-create knowledge with others, and foster self-directed learning. Studies of social media-based activism, for instance linked to movements like Black Lives Matter and Me Too, have demonstrated that it leads to the acquisition of subject-matter expertise, development of capabilities such as organizing for change, development of capacity for self-reflection, and personal transformation such as increased belief in one's ability to shift political systems.

However, universities are yet to fully leverage the affordances of social media for learning. Many institutions offer online classes, and many individual instructors utilize social media in their teaching. Yet, university learning has not transformed to a degree that is commensurate with the radical ways in which, in our post-digital era, learning has come to be transformed in society at large. In this context, a question to be asked is why universities, those institutions charged with educating individuals for personal and societal benefit, stake such minor claims in what has emerged as an integral learning space of our era. Universities' slowness to embrace change means they are abdicating important spaces of learning, connection, and change to private corporations like X and Facebook, which lack both the skills and motivation to promote learning in the public interest.

This presentation argues for a university-owned social media platform, which would use the media's affordances to advance a post-classroom vision of learning; classes would continue to be part of the educational experience, but they would be decentred as the primary site of learning. Further, this presentation tells of the presenter's work in exploring the possibility of prototyping such a platform within their own university. It builds on Networked Learning (NL) scholarship, specifically expanding Lee and Bligh's (2023) expanded design framework for transformative NL, and drawing inductively on relevant NL literature to put forward six design principles for a university owned platform. The platform would connect formal and informal learning. It also would connect learners, staff, and faculty to each other and to the community outside the university. It would be comprised of three virtual spaces, dedicated to: (1) learning and organizing for social change; (2) student-initiated community building and learning; and (3) university-led news, events, and discussion.

Keywords

Social media; higher education; networked learning; informal learning; postdigitality; social movement learning

The Need for a Post-Class Vision of Higher Education

Educational scholars have demonstrated that informal learning occurs through engagement in social media (SM) through studies of groups such as students, professionals, older adults, and citizen scientists (Batsaikhan et al., 2022; Esteban-Guitart et al., 2018; Veletsianos, 2012) as well as through studies of various platforms, such as Facebook (Freishtat & Sandlin, 2010), Reddit (Haythornthwaite et al., 2018), and Tiktok (Dezuanni, 2021). SM platforms have been shown to promote lifelong and lifewide education, offering opportunities to learn through networks of connection, co-create knowledge with others, and engage in self-directed learning (Gonzalez-Sanmamed et al., 2020). Indeed, they appear to offer unprecedented affordances for learning and community (Dede, 2016; Greenhow & Lewin, 2016; Reid, 2009; Siemens, 2005).

SM platforms also have potential to advance social justice. As social movement scholars have demonstrated, SM platforms have acted as change-inducing educational spaces (Careless, 2015; Falter & Forbes, 2020; de Veer & Valdivia-Vizarreta, 160; Malone, 2012). Pointing to movements like Black Lives Matter, Me Too, Occupy Wall Street, and the Arab Spring, these scholars have shown that those engaged with SM-based activism acquire subject-matter expertise, develop capabilities such as organising for change, develop capacity for self-reflection,

and undergo personal transformation such as increased belief in their ability to shift political systems (Mercea & Yilmaz, 2018; Schroeder et al., 2020). Importantly, social movement learning impacts those outside the movement, leading to attitudinal and material change in the world (Levy & Mattson, 2022).

In this context, a question to be asked is why universities, those institutions charged with educating individuals for personal and societal benefit, stake such minor claims in what has emerged as an integral learning space of our era. While universities offer online courses and, at the classroom level, many instructors weave SM into their pedagogy, the university's engagement with the digital world can be understood as "wide but not deep" (Hodgson & McConnell, 2019, p. 44). While "technology has reorganized how we live, how we communicate, and how we learn" (Siemens, 2004), the university has largely employed technology to replicate the type of learning face-to-face classroom learning using digital tools. As noted by Cope and Kalantzis (2009), "digital technologies arrived and almost immediately, old pedagogical practices...[were] mapped onto them and called a 'learning management system'. Something changes when this happens, but disappointingly, it is not much" (p. 577).

Concretely, universities' slowness to embrace change means that we who work in education are abdicating important spaces of learning, connection, and change to private corporations like X and Facebook, which lack both the skills and motivation to promote learning in the public interest. Moreover, when learning has become ubiquitous, happening all the time in self-directed and informal ways via SM, universities have maintained a primary identity as providers of formal classes and programs. As noted by Dede, if higher education were to be invented today, it is unlikely that the class—be it digital or face-to-face—would remain the primary vehicle for learning delivery: "The one-room rural schoolhouse, emblematic of agricultural America, was replaced a century ago with the industrial-era schools we still have today. A comparable shift is necessary now" (Dede, 2016, p. 105).

Building on a Networked Learning Vision

The above points echo those that have long been argued by NL scholars, who were among the first to imagine SM's potential for fostering environments for people to "display a wider variety of their interests and relationships to different networks" (Ryberg & Larsen, 2008, p. 114) and to wonder about the consequent new identities, institutional forms, and "relationships between different disciplines, environments, and people" that might arise (Ryberg & Larsen, 2008, p. 114). So too have NL scholars warned about the ways the seeming "wilds" of SM are "heavily guided by commercial platforms driven mainly by the desire for profit" (de Laat & Ryberg, 2018, p. 18) and articulated the need for an "alternative platform economy" (Networked Learning Editorial Collective, 2021, p. 358). NL scholars also have linked the potential of SM to the broader realisation of what has been termed the mode 3 university, an institution that would be more thoroughly entangled with the world outside its walls, acting on it, being acted on by it and operating in service both of societal betterment and of a more holistic form of individual learning, which acknowledges the import of learners' informal learning and connections to multiple networks (Matthews 2023a; Matthews 2023b; Nørgård, et al., 2019). Furthermore, NL scholars have published multiple case studies of innovative pedagogical designs, in which SM has been used in service of what might be understood as mode 3 ends (Cronin et al. 2016; Dalsgaard & Thestrup, 2015; Lee & Bligh, 2023; Wichmand et al., 2023).

This presentation argues for a university-owned SM platform, which would use SM's affordances to advance a post-classroom vision of learning; classes would continue to be part of the educational experience, but they would be decentred as the primary site of learning. Further, this presentation tells of my work in exploring the possibility of prototyping such a platform within my own institution and proposes a prototype design. This work would learn and draw from NL scholarship, as well as address what NL scholars have communicated as a persistent challenge, which is having insufficient time to realise transformative and emancipatory goals (Cronin et al., 2016; Lee & Bligh, 2023; Wichmand et al., 2023). Time is needed not only to build the trusting relationships between people that are foundational to NL (Networked Learning Editorial Collective, 2021), but also to integrate transformative learning into learners' life, and to sustain a commitment to action in the world. Moreover, time is needed if learners are to experience the movement between diverse ways of being and interacting (e.g between being at the core and the periphery of a network and between forming strong and weak ties), which can be understood as important to NL's realisation (Wichmand et al., 2023). Finally, time is needed to increase the odds of triggering the "unexpected outcomes" (Wichmand et al., 2023, p. 162) and fostering "stigmergic production" ("structures that emerge on their own with no central and determining operator" (Dalsgaard & Ryberg, 2023, p. 32), which are conducive to NL. A canvas that is more expansive than that of a class, module or program would serve NL goals. The prototype design of a university-owned platform draws on NL scholarship in two ways. One, it builds on the expanded design framework for transformative NL advanced by Lee and Bligh (2023), which consists of three levels of interconnected NL communities—internal NL communities within courses, external NL communities

“in students’ real-life contexts,” and “social NL communities in broader contexts that aim to transform social perspectives” (p. 169)—with the goal of “enabling personal, group, and social transformations” (p. 180). Lee and Bligh’s (2023) work, which they have applied to the six modules in the first part of a PhD program, provides a concrete foundation and design template for how “groups,” “sets,” and “nets” (Dron & Anderson, 2014) might interact in service of individual and societal transformation.

Two, in considering how to adapt Lee and Bligh’s (2023) framework to the institutional scale, I have inductively drawn these design principles fully or in part from the NL scholarship:

1. Design for hybridity. Hybridity refers to “the dissolution, fusion or transgression of boundaries between on-line and off-line, on-site and off-site, synchronous and asynchronous, formal and informal, vocational and recreational learning (Norgard, 2021, p. 1717).
2. Design for a variety of experiences and needs. Different people have different needs and seek different types of experiences (Hachmann et al., 2023). Moreover, a given individual will spend time in a space if it offers a variety of experiences and a sense of aliveness (Wenger et al., 2002). Variety also enables the movement between different ways of being and interacting, mentioned above.
3. Design for holistic wellbeing and a sense of belonging. While learners should not be asked to share more of themselves than they want to within the university context, learning and living need not be experienced as separate (Carbonel, 2023; Lee & Bligh, 2023); indeed, it is common in the world outside the class to experience learning as a ubiquitous experience, indistinguishable from living. The affective aspects of learning and engagement are key.
4. Design for (and with) society. Given that learners in a university will be more diverse in their interests than learners in a single program (who are also diverse), An NL-focused university must be broad in defining a social mission. However, building on and adapting the work of Lee and Bligh (2023), it is still possible to use a question like, “What kinds of people do we want our students to be, and how do we hope they contribute to the world?” as a departure point for designing the ways a university might be “in-the-world, from-the-world and for- the-world.” (Barnett, 2017, p. 148).
5. Design for compatibility with existing networks and systems. This refers both to acknowledging the everyday informal learning practices and networks in which students are already engaged and welcoming them under the umbrella of university learning (Lee & Bligh, 2023), as well as, in a case where a new university is not being started from scratch, acknowledging the way in which a new, NL focused must co-exist and complement existing institutional structures.
6. Offer an alternative platform. Any NL-focused university should address the problem of the profit motive underlying corporate SM platforms. Much can be learned from those engaged in “the Good Web” movement, which is founded on the principle that, because of “the potentials of social media and the distance between the real harms and potential benefits...a focus on improving the space is a high priority for advancing social justice.” (Zuckerman, 2022, n.p.). This movement works to envision and make concrete “the possibility of social media that has a salutary role in a public sphere” (Zuckerman, 2022, n.p.). A university-owned platform should provide a space that is as compelling as commercial sites in meeting people’s learning and social needs, but is motivated by individual and societal good.

The goal of designing such a platform would be to offer a space for “collaborative, co-operative, and collective inquiry, knowledge-creation and knowledgeable action” (Networked Learning Editorial Collective, 2021, p. 320), with an underlying and pervasive “commitment to equity and social justice” (Networked Learning Editorial Collective, 2021, p. 314). It would also offer people an alternative to current corporate platforms, in which there is increasing disenchantment (Chen, 2023; Mahtani, 2023; Jones, 2023).

Research-in-Progress—Prototyping a Post-Class Vision

To explore potentially moving forward with prototyping such a platform, I have planned the following steps, some of which have already been completed:

- Learning from the Networked Learning community and other relevant scholars who are advancing a vision of a university that is more connected with that which happens outside its classes (e.g. Barnett, 2017; Hilli et al., 2019; Nørgård & Bengtson, 2018).
- Learning from the community industry. While universities do not want to replicate the corporate sector, there are lessons to be learned from practitioner experts who have dedicated themselves to building engaging virtual communities (e.g. Bacon, 2012; Bacon, 2019; CMXhub.com; Powazek, 2002; Spinx, 2021), as well as from those companies, many which have an educational focus, who have grown through community (e.g. duolingo.com; femaleinvest.com; womenwhocode.com).

- Learning from universities who have launched similar initiatives, even if significant differences exist. Examples include Athabasca University’s “Athabasca Landing,” a social media platform for students and staff, intended as “a rough and ready social space where people can set up homesteads or coffee shops, get together, exchange ideas, and share common spaces and artefacts” (Dron & Anderson, 2014, p. 145).
- Interviewing internal stakeholders within my institution. The draft vision for a university-owned social-media platform, described below, would connect learners, faculty, staff, and community members, including prospective learners; alumni; private citizens; and representatives from the public, private and nonprofit sectors. It would also advance the strategy that has been adopted at my institution to engage with community for the purpose of fostering positive social change. Consequently, it would be important to interview those faculty members leading research centres focused on social change, to ascertain whether and how they would be interested in engaging with community, as well as what they are already doing. It would also be important to interview staff from departments such as marketing and alumni relations, to understand how they could foresee that such a platform might contribute to their work.
- Creating a draft vision of the platform, and launch 4-5 learning experiments.

At each step, I am consulting with university leadership, such as my Dean and the university Vice President.

A First Draft of the Vision

The draft vision is still in progress and a primary goal of presenting would be to promote dialogue and seek input. However, at this point, the long-term vision would be to create a virtual space where students would want to spend time, while also learning. Concretely, when a student enrolled at the university, they would become part of a community where vibrant conversations, centred on addressing society’s grand challenges, were happening. For example, there could be several “grand forum” conversations on responses to climate change, responses to social injustice, responses to economic injustice, healthcare challenges etc. Formal classes would remain important, in that students from different programs would bring their various classroom learnings to the dialogues. The aim of the grand forum conversations would be organizing for social change in the world.

However, this would just be the foundation. A key aspect of virtual community spaces is their ability to grow organically according to community members’ interests, with groups/discussions being formed & dissolving over time. Any university community member could initiate a new dialogue, which could be “academic” or not. For example, a student could start a “single parents in grad school” group. Or a faculty member could start a group on ethical business practices. Someone could share their personal expertise through a single event or a series of workshops. The initiator of a group or event could decide the degree of openness. For example, some groups might serve as university-wide forums, whereas others might be contained to a single program or class or group of classes. Others might be open to alumni or the public.

Finally, there would be a space for university-led discussions, events, and communication—a single place for learners, staff, faculty, and the community to access university news and events.

Figure 1 illustrates the three primary focuses of the envisioned social media platform.

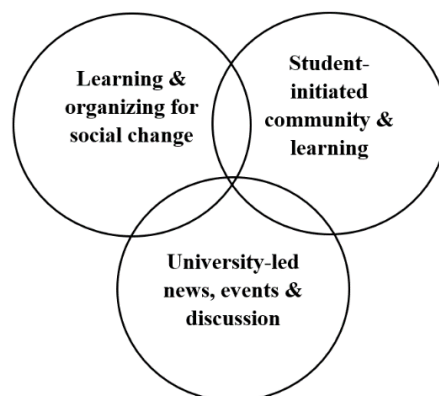


Figure 1: Three areas of Focus for a University-Owned and Managed Social Media Platform

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