

# ***Taming social media in higher education classrooms***

Wendy Freeman, School of Professional Communication, Ryerson University, Toronto, Ontario, Canada email: wfreeman@ryerson.ca

## **Abstract**

Social media such as Twitter and Facebook have become a part of our everyday communication networks. As new communication technologies become integrated into our routine practices, higher education is called upon to accommodate these platforms in order to ensure that students are prepared as skilled digital citizens. Technology domestication describes a process by which individuals or groups encounter and appropriate a new technology into their everyday routines by focusing on the social and political meanings that people ascribe to technology as they use it. This study explores the domestication of social media by university faculty who use these tools for their teaching. This paper reports preliminary findings from interviews with six university instructors who describe integrating social media tools into their classroom teaching. Semi-structured interviews were analysed according to the elements of the domestication process proposed by Silverstone (2006). Preliminary findings suggest that: (1) faculty use social media alongside other more traditional educational technologies; (2) the incorporation of social media was considered carefully as part of a fundamentally student-centred, participatory orientation to teaching; and, (3) faculty in the study used social media extensively in their personal lives first before bringing it into their classrooms.

## **Overview**

Social media, such as Facebook, Twitter, and blogs are now an established part of our communication networks and it is through these communication platforms that information spreads across densely interconnected social networks. The ability to navigate these networks and contribute in the creation and distribution of knowledge is now considered to be central to active participation in society; and currently, the impetus for the integration of social media technologies into postsecondary teaching is framed as a call to prepare students as productive citizens in the digital economy. Social media hold great potential for networked learning, in which students work collaboratively, taking advantage of digital platforms that allow them to act as partners in their own learning, both within and outside the boundaries of the physical classroom. However, studies examining specific technologies, such as Twitter (Williams & Chinn, 2009) or Facebook (Roblyer, McDaniel, Webb, Herman & Witty, 2010) in higher education continues to offer a mix of findings (Tess, 2013). Tess' review of studies reporting social media use in higher education classrooms (real and virtual) highlights reasons for this lack of clear direction. Social media are difficult to define, can be used in a variety of ways, for a broad range of outcomes. My goal in this study was to look beyond the specific uses of social media in the classroom to examine how the social, and at times political understandings of technology influence the process by which social media is deployed in educational settings.

## **Aims and Objectives**

The complex discourse of technology and societal need plays out in the push for innovation in the university classroom, with an emphasis on technology use. Assertions about how society has transformed as a result of ubiquitous access to the networked applications that characterize current communications technologies (Jenkins, Ford & Green, 2013; Shirky, 2008) filter into practical discussions of effective teaching and learning (Selwyn, 2007). With this rhetoric of transformation comes a continuing, and at times unquestioned assumption that, technology must be prominent in educational initiatives that prepare students to become citizens within the networked society. The current push is to integrate the social media platforms that students use in their everyday lives to coordinate social activities, connect to friends and acquaintances and create and share information. Selwyn (2009) argues that much of the thinking about these tools in educational contexts is concerned with questions of “what *could* happen, and what *should* happen” (p. 38) that are rooted in an understanding of how these technologies have influenced communicative practices in broader society; however, the way that a technology is designed to be used and the way it is actually used can be very different.

When instructors appropriate a technology for teaching, it is their understanding of the technology, their pedagogical beliefs, and their disciplinary practices that guide their decisions about the place of the technology

in the teaching process. The aim of this study was to explore why instructors were using social media in their teaching in order to understand how these tools have been appropriated or *domesticated* in these seemingly traditional education contexts. The objectives were (1) to develop a baseline for describing social media use in higher education teaching, and (2) to describe the pedagogical and practical decisions that lead to social media incorporation into teaching.

Domestication theory (Berker, Harmann, Punie & Ward, 2006; Haddon, 2011) provides a useful lens to explore how technology becomes integrated into everyday practice. Technology domestication describes “the process at work as people, both individually and [in groups], encounter ICTs and deal with them, sometimes rejecting the technologies and at other times working out how exactly to fit them into their everyday routines” (Haddon, 2006, p. 195). This approach to studying technology use focuses on the broader social and political meanings held by those who use technology, and not on the properties of the technology itself. In the context of university teaching, transformation that echoes the democratic, interconnected, information-rich participatory culture (O’Reilly, 2005) in broader society should be seen as change in the role of the student as learner, the instructor as collaborator, and knowledge as co-constructed. Technology is inextricable from its social context, essentially receding into the background, just as telephones and email have done. The goal of this study is to explore the domestication process of social media technologies in the higher education classroom. Through interviews with instructors using social media in their teaching, this study seeks to chart the course of pedagogical and technological shaping brought about by the domestication of social media in higher education.

## Research Context

This study took place at a mid-sized urban university in Ontario, Canada. The university is known to have a focus on applied learning and innovative uses of technology in teaching tend to be encouraged through administrative incentives such as small development grants. There is widespread use of a centrally supported learning management system and most classrooms are equipped with a data projector and computer.

## Design

Semi-structured interviews were used to understand how social media was being integrated by faculty into their teaching. Participants were asked about their expectations before using the technology, their experiences using the technology, and the pedagogical choices they made as they integrated the technology into their teaching. The focus was on developing an understanding of how these technologies had become a part of instructors’ everyday teaching practices.

It is not easy to identify faculty who use social media in their teaching. Teaching is a covert activity in university settings, occurring behind closed physical and virtual doors. Moreover, the notion of domestication suggests that a technology eventually recedes into the background of everyday routines, therefore, finding faculty who will consider discussing their experiences was found to be challenging. Over two rounds of recruitment, a total of 12 faculty participated in semi-structured interviews. In 2011, a general call for participants was sent to university faculty through an email list dedicated to learning and teaching topics. In addition, a request for participants was made to the central educational technology group at the university. Six participants agreed to semi-structured interviews. In 2013, a second sample of participants was recruited using a list of faculty who had received funding from a university program designed to encourage technology-enhanced teaching. A further six participants participated in the second round of interviews. This paper reports findings from an analysis of the first round of interviews.

## Preliminary Findings

The domestication framework describes four elements through which a technology is either incorporated or rejected as part of everyday practices. Commodification, the first stage of the domestication process, occurs before a new technology is purchased or used by a consumer. It is at this stage that users of a technology are introduced to a technology and develop a symbolic understanding of the potential of the technology (Hynes & Rommes, 2006). The second stage, appropriation, involves both the integration of the technology into a physical space and the incorporation of the technology into routine practices. Silverstone (2006) describes appropriation as “the transition from public to private meaning” (p. 211). Conversion is described as the final part of the domestication process (Haddon, 2011) and, “involves discourse and discussion, the sharing of the pride of ownership, as well as its frustration” (Silverstone, 2006, p. 234). Silverstone suggests that it is at this stage that policy and politics are implicated as a part of broader decisions about the domestication of a technology. The

findings reported are based on an analysis of the first round of interviews using the elements of the domestication framework (Haddon, 2011; Hynes & Rommes, 2006; Peirson, 2006; Silverstone, 2006).

## **Commodification**

### *Alongside, not replacing technologies*

Silverstone (2006) notes that technologies are the result of design and marketing processes that shape assumptions about what the public needs or wants. In the case of social media, the *public* is more general than the faculty who eventually use these tools. While there are social media-like applications that have been developed for post secondary classrooms (for example blogging and wiki tools built into learning management systems such as Blackboard), in this study the focus was on faculty use of those same applications that are used in everyday contexts in order to better understand how technologies make their way into the classroom. In the interviews with faculty, it was clear that social media applications such as Twitter and Facebook were used alongside the centrally supported purpose-built educational technologies such as the Blackboard learning management system. Faculty developed their understanding of social media by using them in their everyday (non-teaching) lives and it was through this use that they began to understand the potential for their teaching contexts.

## **Appropriation**

### *Physical access*

Social media use relies on access to computer hardware (including mobile phones) and connectivity that has already been established through the use of other technologies in the learning contexts of higher education. At the time of the first round of interviews in 2011, the problem of ubiquitous physical access to the internet had been solved at the university in which this study took place. Students were coming to school with laptops or smartphones and wireless internet access was fully available on campus. Physically, the conditions pre-existed for the appropriation of social media in higher education learning contexts. However, at the individual faculty level, physical access remained as an issue. One interview participant noted that she had yet to buy a smartphone and that she was relying on a laptop to manage the distributed aspects of her teaching. Although it was her students' use of this technology that provided her with an insight into new possibilities for communication related to learning, she had both a technological and pedagogical conceptual base upon which to build this understanding. In terms of technology, in her interview, she described her growing use of Twitter and her reliance on Facebook. When she described her teaching, there was repeated mention of activities that foster student knowledge construction. Physical access in this case was not a barrier to social media use.

### *Integration into Routine Practices*

As participants discussed the *incorporation* of social media into their teaching, it was apparent that their decisions were guided by a deep understanding of their own pedagogical practices. There was as much discussion of teaching as there was about technology. Through their discussions of how they used social media in their teaching, participants demonstrated an approach to teaching and learning that is consistent with what Kember (1997) describes as student-centered/learning oriented. Specifically, participants described their role as teachers in terms of facilitating student learning and supporting student discussion. One participant discussed how integrating Twitter and Facebook into the way the course is taught required that she re-think her role as teacher. As her students developed resources and shared information through these channels, she found she had to "let go of the lecture". Another participant noted the need for flexibility as student discussion moved from email to Twitter to Facebook and back. There was little to no mention of information transmission (i.e., lectures) common in discussion of university teaching. In this study, the faculty who used social media privileged student involvement with finding course resources, discussing content and sharing in the construction of their own knowledge. For these teachers, there was a close connection between their existing pedagogical values and the perceived potential of social media that drew them to appropriate the technology. In relation to domestication processes, appropriation of social media technologies moved from personal, private uses of technology to public/pedagogical uses of technology. It was the personal experiences of Twitter, Facebook, and blogs that influenced participants' approaches to integrating the tools into their everyday pedagogical practices because they discovered compatibility between the collaborative strengths of social media and their pedagogical values.

## Conversion

### *Taming or being tamed*

New technologies make their way into higher education classrooms through a variety of routes, but they rarely take hold. In 2011, it took considerable effort to locate faculty who were using social media platforms in a way that was authentic to their everyday uses outside the academy. Faculty reported that it was only through everyday personal use that these technologies made their way into their classrooms. In higher education, policies related to teaching continue to interpret learning in relation to pedagogies focused on content transmission; however, social media work in the *wild* through participatory communication models (Tess, 2013). These contrasting positions leads to continuing educational technology commentary that views social media as a distraction to classroom learning (Lederer, 2012). It is too early to determine whether prevalent teaching practices in higher education will be subject to modification to accommodate social media. In his review of literature reporting studies of social media use, Tess (2013) found that studies tend to show that where there is an attempt to tame social media by using it to replace existing technologies such as using a blog or Twitter to post course content, the results are disappointing. This study suggests that by starting with everyday routines and with openness to considering pedagogical change, the domestication of social media in higher education classrooms starts at home.

## Conclusion

In this study of social media use in higher education classrooms, my goal was to look beyond specific uses of technology for teaching to explore the integration of these everyday communication tools into pedagogical practice. Domestication theory was used to analyse interviews with six faculty members who were using Twitter, Facebook and other social media applications in their classroom teaching. The findings suggest that everyday use of technology leads to classroom use and that held pedagogical values are a precursor to technology adoption. The findings demonstrate that for faculty who use social media technologies in their everyday lives, the impetus to use these same tools in their classrooms is distinctly pedagogical and not technological. Further research is being undertaken to explore these implication for the domestication of social media in higher education classrooms. Taming social media may need to start well before the technology reaches the classroom.

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