Croatian perspective(s) on the lecturer-student interaction through social media

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Abstract

During the last decade the application of the concept of social media in the context of higher education emerged from an informal mean of communication to a strategic educational tool. Social media offers the possibility to create and share various content through web related applications. Furthermore, it is a communicational platform and a tool which could be used for interpersonal communication, information exchange, and discussion over a range of topics. This qualitative study provides a limited insight into the usage of social media in formal/informal learning/teaching and for the interaction between a student and a lecturer in the context of Croatian higher education. Through a series of in-depth interviews with both undergraduate students and lecturers, a current practice and behaviour related with the use of social media is being investigated. As it was expected, various types of social media are generally more popular among students, while among certain proportion of lectures social media is usually considered as an informal media whose role in higher education has yet to be defined. This study revealed certain disproportion in the usage and attitudes towards social media among students and lecturers. Students highly appreciate social media as a communicational and content sharing tool. While the most popular social media platforms for students seem to be Facebook and Wikipedia, lecturers prefer to limit interaction via more formal applications such as Blackboard or WebCT, which are under more or less strict control by the educational institutions.

Key Words: social media, higher education, communication, student motivation, Croatia

Introduction

Throughout the history, significant technological developments started many transformations in society (Olson, 1994). Development and commercialization of internet triggered new ways of communication and interaction among people and changed media landscape traditionally dominated by television and print. Probably one of the next most important steps was the emergence of social media which happened during the last ten years. Although, the roots and the first types of social media could be found prior commercialization of internet and development of the World Wide Web (WWW) which took place in early 1990s. Fundaments of today’s social media could be found back in 1970s in internet applications such as Bulletin Board System (BBS) and Usenet (Tiedje, 2011). However, the emergence of social
media is not just a result of technological change and popularization of internet. It is rather a qualitative transformation which profoundly changed patterns of knowledge acquisition and interaction (Forkos-Baruch & Hershkovitz, 2012). So, it is a change in a way how we use internet rather than a technological change per se.

For years, internet has been recognized as an appropriate and convenient media for distance learning. Consequently, the growth rate in the number of learners engaging with some type of online education significantly exceeded the growth rate of traditional classroom lectures (Allen & Seaman, 2007). The reasons for the growth of online education popularity could probably be found in the development and availability of information and communication technologies, globalization, increased competition among higher education institutions which led to the transformation in learning options and convenience (e.g. time saving, no need for travel, availability of international education literally in every spot of the world) which online education provides students with (Clothey, 2011) (Jung, 2007). But, there are also certain downsides. As (Veletsianos & Navarrete, 2012) note, participants in online education tend to complain about issues such as learners’ feelings of isolation and lack of participant interaction. With its dynamic, interactive and content sharing nature, social media could improve online learning environment and create more functional learning communities (Siemens & Conole, 2011).

Croatia is still lagging behind in online education. There are certain informal initiatives which are offered, but traditional higher education system still mostly relies on the traditional education in brick-and-mortar classrooms. However, some lecturers established their presence in social media and maintain contacts with their students. Therefore, the authors would like to shed some light on the current practice of using social media in the context of higher education in Croatia. Since there is a very little, or at least not publicly available, research of this topic in Croatia, this study is explorative in its nature. Furthermore, this study tried to capture both involved sides in the process of higher education – lecturers and students – and presents their respective thought regarding the social media’s potential within the Croatian higher education environment.

Social media in higher education context

An overview of social media:

As Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) suggest, social media is a group of internet applications that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content. In opposite to the one-way-publishing or Web 1.0 concept which simply mimicked publishing through traditional media, social media based on technological and ideological foundations of Web 2.0, represents the concept in which former content consumers became content creators.

According to Mayfield (2008, str. 5), social media tools share most or all of the following characteristics:

- **Participation** - social media encourages contributions and feedback from everyone who is interested. It blurs the line between media and audience.
- **Openness** - most social media services are open to feedback and participation. They encourage voting, comments, and sharing of information.
There are rarely any barriers to accessing and making use of content – password-protected content is frowned on.

- Conversation - whereas traditional media is about “broadcast” (content transmitted or distributed to an audience) social media is better seen as a two-way conversation.
- Community - social media allows communities to form quickly and communicate effectively. Communities share common interests, such as a love of photography, a political issue or a favourite TV show.
- Connectedness - most kinds of social media thrive on their connectedness, making use of links to other sites, resources and people.

Since social media comes in various forms and formats and is ever-changing and interrelated, it is rather difficult to put these applications into rigidly defined slots or subcategories. However, if the major features and the way of use are taken into consideration, the main subcategories of social media are social networks (e.g. Facebook), collaborative projects (e.g. Wikipedia), blogs and microblogs (e.g. Blogger and Twitter), content sharing communities (e.g. Youtube and Prezi), virtual game worlds and virtual social worlds (e.g. World of Warcraft and Second Life), internet forums, geolocation networks (e.g. Foursquare), social bookmarks (e.g. Digg), and various hybrid or cross-over forms (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010) (Mayfield, 2008):

Social media and higher education

With Facebook reaching more than a billion users in September 2012 and 800 million users of Youtube (Smith, 2013), social media became a part of our global culture with high impact on our everyday lives. Besides the existence in the real world, we could also talk about ‘networked self’ – recognizing a parallel identity taking place for many people in the world built around the social media. With social interaction among members, social media has also received certain credits among academic researchers for its potential in improving learning environment. There is a number of studies supporting the idea of using social media for educational purposes, improvement of the learning experience, and student motivation (Taylor, McGrath-Champ, & Clarkeburn, 2012) (Kassens-Noor, 2012) (Pestek, Kadic-Maglajlic, & Nozica, 2012) (Jabr, 2011) (Hung & Yuen, 2010) (McLoughlin & Lee, 2010) (Selwyn, 2009). Furthermore, the UK Committee of Inquiry into the Changing Learner Experience (CLEX, 2009, str. 9) published the following affirmative conclusion regarding the use of social media in higher education:

‘Web 2.0, the Social Web, has had a profound effect on behaviours, particularly those of young people whose medium and metier it is. They inhabit it with ease and it has led them to a strong sense of communities of interest linked in their own web spaces, and to a disposition to share and participate. [...] Higher education has a key role in helping students refine, extend, and articulate the diverse range of skills they have developed through their experience of Web 2.0 technologies. It not only can, but should, fulfill this role, and it should do so through a partnership with students to develop approaches to learning and teaching.’

The previous quotation clearly indicates the desire of students for active learning experience through social media. Furthermore, it also indicated the need of higher education institutions to actively participate and support this process. The specifics
of social media also faced lecturers with many challenges (i.e. social media literacy) and ask for pedagogies that are more personal, social, and participatory (McLoughlin & Lee, 2010)

As Foroughi (2011, str. 3) suggests, there is a number of specific benefits that social media could provide:

- **Learning-related benefits:** facilitation of collaborative learning, development of independent learning skills, problem solving, team work, reflective learning, quick/early feedback from instructors, overcoming isolation of geographical distances, peer-to-peer support/feedback, visibility of students’ work, integration of multimedia assets, and the creation of informal relations between educators and students.
- **Social benefits for students:** increased engagement in course material, development of a sense of community and of transferable skills that enhance student employability, increased sense of achievement, control, and ownership of their work.
- **Benefits for institutions of higher education:** increased cross-institutional collaborations, support and community building outside the course environment, development of communities of practice, increased student enrolment and retention.

Although there is a certain hype and hope surrounding social media in higher education, there are also examples of disappointment due to high expectations and unclear role of this informal educational tool (Gouseti, 2010). Furthermore, the same level of enthusiasm is not being equally shared among students and lecturers, with former being very open to the social media possibilities, while later being rather cautious and sticking to more ‘traditional’ technologies such as email (Roblyer, McDaniel, Webb, Herman, & Witty, 2010).

**Research design**

Due to the lack of research studies focusing on the use of social media in Croatian higher education, this explorative study utilises qualitative approach to the primary research. Within the range of available qualitative research methods, an in-depth or intensive interview has been selected. As Guion (2001) suggests, the goal of the in-depth interview is to yield information and to thoroughly explore a respondent’s point of view and perspective. In order to maintain certain consistency among the interviews, an in-depth interview agenda has been developed with the list of topics that each interviewee should address. The in-depth interviews were semi-structured in order to achieve a wider understanding of the use of social media from perspectives of lecturers and learners, without imposing any a priori categorization, which might limit the field of inquiry (Punch, 2005). However, individual respondents were allowed some latitude and freedom to talk about what is of interest or importance to them in the context of social media in higher education.

The in-depth interviews were conducted on a convenient sample of ten lecturers/professors employed in various Croatian higher education institutions (i.e. Zagreb School of Economics and Management, University of Zagreb, University of Spit, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Centre for Croatian Studies, Faculty of Tourism and Hospitality Management, Polytechnic of Pozega). Furthermore, the in-depth interviews were also conducted on a convenient sample of ten undergraduate
students enrolled at Zagreb School of Economics and Management. Although the sample size is relatively limited due to time and financial constraints, the findings could be considered as indicative and relevant, since, in some cases a number of ten interviews is already considered as large (de Ruyter & Scholl, 2004).

In the first phase of an interview, the participants have to answer more general questions concerning their overall knowledge of social media in order to gain an impression about their familiarity with the topic. During the second phase, the participants were asked how extensively they use social media throughout their course, what is or could be a positive or a negative side effect of using social media, and what would motivate them to use social media more often. Subsequently, they were asked whether they distinguish their social media appearance in formal and informal occasions. Furthermore, the respondents were asked to comment the level of acceptance of social media among professors and students and pros and cons of the usage of social media within the higher education environment.

The data collected through the in-depth interviews was interpreted by content analysis. As Shapiro and Markoff (1997, str. 14) suggest, content analysis refers to ‘any systematic reduction of a flow of text (or other symbols representing the presence, the intensity, or the frequency of some characteristics relevant to social science’.

Research results

The lecturers sample

All respondents are relatively familiar with the concept of social media. As expected, Facebook is the social media form that lecturers are the most familiar with, followed by YouTube and Wikipedia. However, respondents’ familiarity with other types of social media seems to be relatively limited and most of them are not aware of the vast number of subcategories within the world of social media. All of the respondents use certain form of social media privately, but the frequency of usage quite differs among them. Some of them use social media on a daily basis, while the majority uses them on a weekly basis.

When it comes to the usage of social media in the context of higher education and lecturer-student interaction, the opinions are far from being unanimous. Some respondents use various forms of social media in order to improve lectures. Probably the most used form is YouTube:

‘I found very useful and motivating for students to illustrate some of the theories with the appropriate video materials available on YouTube... it could be some funny commercial or a short documentary presenting some business case.’ [Respondent L3]

‘You could find interesting content on YouTube which could improve the learning environment and additionally motivate students to pay attention during the lectures.’ [Respondent L7]
Although Facebook is the most popular form of social media today, only few respondents mentioned the usage of social networks in a positive way for the interaction with students:

‘Besides my private profile, I also have a separate Facebook profile which I use for the communication with students... I have very positive experience with that.’ [Respondent L1]

‘I use both Facebook and Linkedin. The former I use for the communication with students, while the latter I use for the communication with former students... I am filling my Facebook profile with various content at least once a week.’ [Respondent L2]

‘I have a Facebook profile and I am encouraging my students to become my Facebook friends. I believe, I am improving my communication with them this way and, well, I think they like it... I am also getting more acquainted with them since we are expanding our interaction into virtual world.’ [Respondent L9]

Most of the respondents consider Wikipedia as a not very reliable source of information for students. Furthermore, they would discourage students to rely on this source and this is something usually stipulated in institutions’ internal regulations. However, one of the respondents pointed that there is probably more errors in Encyclopaedia Britannica than in Wikipedia.

Since some of the higher education institutions in Croatia introduced learning management systems (LMS), such as Blackboard or WebCT, respondents from those institutions prefer the interaction with students through these formal and institutional platforms, rather than through social media. However, most of them also admitted relatively limited two-way communication through LMS which in many cases consists of information posting.

In overall, the sample of lecturers expressed certain level of optimism towards the use of social media within higher education. Only two of respondents expressed certain reservations. However, the respondents are not sure about the way how the interaction between them and students should look like and how frequent it should be since there is no formal regulation which would provide necessary information. Respondents are well aware of the popularity of social media among students, especially on mobile platforms, such as smartphones and tablets. Therefore, they consider social media as a communication and collaboration with a significant potential.

The students sample

As expected, the sample of students seems to be much more familiar with the range of social media applications. Furthermore, respondents are more frequent users of various types of social media, especially through mobile platforms. Facebook is again the most popular application, but students also tend to use other types of social media, such as YouTube, Tumblr, Instagram, Wikipedia, and LinkedIn.
When it comes to the usage of social media for the communication with lecturers, the respondents are mostly positive, but some of them also have certain concerns. Most of them welcome the idea to use some form of social media for communicating with lecturers and some of them even have positive experience. However, some respondents consider communication through social media too informal. The most typical responses could be found in the following quotations:

‘sometimes, I use social media, mostly Facebook, to communicate with lectures and their assistants... During these occasions, I approach my lecturers with different questions regarding the topics we were taught in class.’ [Respondent S7]

‘I use Facebook to communicate with my lecturers and assistants... I like this way of communication because I always get fast response... This is, probably, less formal type of communication, but it feels friendlier.’ [Respondent S9]

‘I mostly use Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and Wikipedia... I don’t communicate with my professors via social media. However, I would welcome that possibility. I would prefer some kind of communication and content sharing related to the particular course I am taking.’ [Respondent S10]

‘I use various types of social media, but I would not prefer to communicate with my professors through social media. I wouldn’t even approve this kind of communication... I think communication through social media could have negative impact on professor's authority.’ [Respondent S5]

‘Rather than communicating with my professors through social media, I prefer more formal communication through email.’ [Respondent S8]

While opinions on the usage of social media in communication with lecturers differ among students, they are mostly enthusiastic towards the usage of YouTube video materials. They consider that as an improvement to the traditional lectures.

Although the usage of Wikipedia did not receive much approval among the sample of lecturers, students showed more enthusiasm towards this form of social media. Although some of them claimed that they would not use Wikipedia as a source of valid information, majority of student admitted to use Wikipedia as a starting point for their research.

Conclusion

As this research study revealed, there is still a big gap between lecturers and students in perceiving the role of social media in higher education. Similar situations were also reported in other countries. In overall, students are more motivated to interact with their lecturers through social media, while lecturers showed some level of concern and scepticism towards the concept. The resentment is mostly grounded in their belief that the lecturer-student relationship needs to remain professional, which implies the use of formal communication channels. Lecturers are also concerned that more informal communication via social media might erode
their authority. Still, they have an overall positive attitude towards the use of social media in classroom, but are on the other hand not familiar with all the aspects and forms of social media available on the institutional learning platforms like Blackboard such as wikis, video sharing, forums, online simulations, and other tools. In conclusion, we believe that lecturers need to approach social media in teaching with more passion and need to be more open towards learning about the possible options offered on the learning platforms.

When it comes to students, they are generally supportive regarding the use of social media in the lecturer-student interaction, but what surprised us was their viewpoint how social media could have a negative impact on the professor’s authority. For now, students as well as professors prefer more formal communication via email or in person, but they welcome the use of social media as a way of content sharing, creation of student-generated content, and improving classroom experience.

References


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Managing cash and liquidity of the budget: A case of regional and local budget

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Abstract

The main objectives of cash and liquidity management are control of government spending and effective implementation of the budget. As there is an ongoing drop in budget revenue in the Republic of Croatia coupled with increasing problems of non-liquidity and servicing obligations, sound management of financial assets and liquidity is required.

Firstly, the purpose of this study is to explore assets and liabilities of local and regional public sector in order to develop appropriate financial ratios for measuring liquidity of the budget, thus helping to manage liquidity effectively.

Secondly, to analyze possibilities for implementation of a cash budget as a useful technique in managing liquidity of the local and regional budget on the daily, weekly and monthly basis.

Thirdly, the aim of this study is to explore inflows and outflows of the local and regional budget in order to develop a simple model for calculating surplus or lack of cash available during any observed budget period, which can help optimally in managing cash and liquidity of the budget.

Key Words: liquidity, budget, financial ratios, cash budget

Introduction

Regional and local governments need to ensure both efficient implementations of their budgets and good management of their financial resources. Cash management and control of cash are the most important elements in budget management. The main objectives of cash and liquidity management are control of government spending, effective implementation of the budget and the minimisation of the costs of borrowing. Sound management of financial assets and liabilities as well as liquidity is required in budget systems at regional and local level.

The main objective of this paper is to explore how regional and local governments can manage cash and liquidity of the budget system effectively by ensuring an orderly meeting of liabilities as well as efficient and effective allocation of available resources. Management of cash should serve regional and local treasury through which governments ensure control of cash flows.

The aim of this paper is to contribute to the debate by, firstly, exploring assets and liabilities of a local and regional public sector in order to develop appropriate financial ratios for measuring and managing liquidity of the budget, secondly, by investigating the inflow and outflow of a regional and local budget, and by developing a simple basic model for calculating surplus or lack of cash available during any observed budget period. This can help in managing cash and liquidity of