

ADAPTING SOCIAL MEDIA FOR FORMAL LEARNING IN NIGERIA: CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS

Sanusi, Bernice Oluwalanu

Mass Communication Department, Redeemer's University, Redemption Camp

Adelabu Omowale

Mass Communication department, Redeemer's University, Redemption Camp

Okunade Joshua Kayode

Mass Communication department, Redeemer's University, Redemption Camp

ABSTRACT

Educationist and communication experts have in the past advocated for a flexible learning aimed at meeting individual needs, while at the same time providing both the learner and the instructor the opportunity to interactively relate outside the structured environment. Thus when social media started out as a fun way to connect with friends and families, experts saw it as a powerful tool for education beyond their uses as avenue to socialize. Today, many students and educationists are using sites like Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Youtube, MySpace, Flickr, Netlog, Slideshare and tools such as Skype, Ovoo, and Yahoo messenger to connect students to learning opportunities in new and exciting ways. As part of the growing influence for enhancing education, the Osun state government recently gave out smart phone dubbed "opon imo" (tablet of knowledge) to all secondary pupils in the state loaded with several learning materials. Using the exploratory method, the authors explore ways in which social media can be used to enhance formal learning by identifying opportunities and challenges inherent thereof. The authors concluded that social media provide better opportunities to help student take their learning experience outside the classroom to wherever they are but noted that cost of acquisition and sustenance could pose as challenge for those in the lower income bracket of the society.

KEY WORDS: Social media, flexible learning, formal education

INTRODUCTION

Education is at the centre of a nation's development; through education people are empowered both academically and in skill acquisition. Research has also revealed that a nation that has a strong stable and functional educational system invariably has not only the powerful instrument to fight and eliminate poverty but also has a solid foundation to build a sustainable economy upon.

The benefit of a good educational system to any nation is further emphasized when the United States Embassy in Nigeria stated that education is the most "important way to approach community (national) development. A sound educational system is [therefore] prerequisite to achieving progress, from the individual to the society to the economy." Manu Goel corroborates this thought when he observed that: "the quality of human resource of a nation is easily judged by the number of literate population living in it." This is to say that education is a must if a nation aspires to achieve growth and development and more importantly sustain it. Perhaps the most captivating view of the role of education in the reformation process is captured by Licuanan (2003:1):

...at all levels of governance, a central role of education has been recognized in relation to poverty alleviation and social development. There is a universal consensus among policy makers on the correlation between education and employment, of literacy and economic productivity and of knowledge/skills and formation of social capital that can withstand the destabilizing effects of sudden economic and political changes."

In light of the above, education can be viewed from two perspectives - broad and technical perspectives. By the broad sense, education according to Wikipedia (2010) can be looked at as any act or experience that has a formative effect on the mind, character, or physical ability of an individual. In this case, the culture of a people, the beliefs and high-held values becomes known to that people as they come in contact and interaction with the environment.

By technical concept, education is seen as the process by which society deliberately transmits its accumulated knowledge, values, and skills from one generation to another through institutions. In this regard, education here simply refers to schooling, that is a formal training acquired in a recognized institution. The objective of education can thus be said to bring about change in the mental, and behaviour of a person.

Yet as Man attempts to upgrade his learning through acquisition of formal learning, modern technology has made it even more possible for him to look beyond the classroom learning arrangement to update, expand and test what he already knows. Today, the development and introduction of new communication technologies has given both the learner and the instructor opportunity to search for more information as well as interact positively and progressively from different locations.

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

Social Media are defined as media that are used for social interaction, using highly accessible and scalable communication techniques. Andreas Kaplan and Michael Heinlein define social media as "a group of Internet-based applications that builds on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, which allows the creation and exchange of user-generated content" [Wikipedia, 2011].

For the purpose of understanding the application, the term web 2.0 is associated with web applications that facilitate participatory information sharing, interoperability, user-centered design, and collaboration on the World Wide Web. By implication a user on the site is not passive but actively participates in the creation and dissemination of information.

Characteristically, social media sites can afford users:

- Architecture of participation that encourages users to add value to the application as they use it through the edit box interface.
- An opportunity to exercise control on the data

- To interact on a more advanced software level, giving access to previously unavailable digital content.
- Create the Web by socializing and gradually moving members from the physical world to the online world.

By looking at the features presented above, one may then agree with Ron Jones definition of social media as a category of online media where people are talking, participating, sharing, networking, and bookmarking online. In other words, social media are social instrument of communication where users seek information and also interact. The interaction being referred to here is the ability to provide instant feedback in term of reaction to the subject under discussion, which the traditional media – radio, television, newspaper and magazine - cannot provide. Owing to this special ability, social media have come to be regarded as a two-way communication channel as against the one-way communication channel of the three traditional media mentioned earlier. These channels, of cause, are usually social networking sites like YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn etc., which Boyd and Ellison (2007) described as:

Web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system.

Naturally, because some of these sites incorporate new information and communication tools, such as mobile connectivity, blogging, and photo/video-sharing, they have come to be referred to as web-based and mobile technologies that allows for interactive dialogue among users within a network that transcends space and time. Although there are different social media, ranging from those that provide social sharing, to those that provide social networks for professionals within same field, or to interact with other professionals in other fields, the network however requires users to sign up, create a profile, and begin sending short messages about what they are doing and thinking, or their understanding of the course work. In effect therefore, social media enables users to send and receive updates through email, Instant Message, and in the case of mobile cell phones pings. The bottom line here is that users can access information wherever, however and whenever they want it and at a time they need it without missing out of the conversation or learning process.

Formal education on the other hand entails the process of training and developing people in knowledge, skills, mind, and character in a structured and certified program in a government recognized institution. It can also be seen as the process by which society deliberately transmits its accumulated knowledge, values, and skills from one generation to another through institutions. In this regard, former learning refers to training acquired in a recognized institution.

Consequent upon the above, one can say therefore that the objective of former learning/education is to bring about change in the mental, and behaviour of a person. Again, the benefit of education to the individual and the nation as a whole, is that: “it provides alternatives, answers, views and trajectories in an environment of blame and grievances...the aim (therefore) is to use the texts and contexts of our students and provide diverse ways of interpreting and shaping the history, geography and politics around them.” (Brabazon, 2007:149).

Yet, critics of the structured school learning have argued in favour of a more flexible way to pass knowledge from instructor to learners at the learners’ convinience. What that implies that that learners are expected to have a choice in the learning environment of where, when and how learning should take place. This is what experts call flexible learning or personalized learning. The Macquarie University in Australia defines flexible learning as the one which, “aims to meet individual needs by providing choices that allow students to meet their own educational requirements in ways suiting their individual” (Barbazon, p.80).

Flexible learning as used in the context of this paper is concerned with providing learners with increased choice, convenience, and personalization that suit each learner. It must be noted that

flexible learning as used here does not apply to undertaking a course of study without having to attend lectures on campus or in a designated area. Thus, flexible learning as used in this context and as applicable to the Nigerian context implies learning that promote extra classes like tutorials, posting of notes, lecture updates or notice to students through these social network sites.

LEARNING, COMMUNICATION & SOCIAL MEDIA – THE SYNERGY

One basic factor underlying learning is communication. Communication is an exchange of ideas between the sender and the receiver; and basically, the idea behind every learning process is to either expand the field of experience of the learner or to see a change in the attitude or behaviour of the identified persons, group or individuals undergoing the learning process. Wikipedia (2010) defines learning as acquiring new knowledge, behaviors, skills, values, preferences or understanding, and may involve synthesizing different types of information. Heinich et al (1985:6) sees learning as “a general term for a relatively lasting change in performance caused directly by experience.”

On the other hand, Ogwezzy (2008:18) defines communication as a process by which a sender passes information to the decoder or receiver. According to her, the exchange involves the contacting, relaying and transferring of ideas, news, secrets, messages, orders and information from one person to another person, group or community to others. To put the meaning in a better perspective, Hybels and Weaver II (2001:6) describe communication as, “any process in which people share information, idea and feelings. It involves not only the spoken word, but also body language, personal mannerisms and styles, [that is] anything that adds meaning to a message.”

In effect, learning can only take place when the learner takes in new information which has the same meaning for all participants and which must be communicated through a medium that both the instructor and learner have access to. This is what Oloyede (2008:29) referred to as “information sharing activity”. That is, all participants in a communication process has something to give, either in the form of information which will kick-start the conversation or the feedback which will tell whether the meaning is interpreted as intended by the instructor.

The essence of creating a mutual relationship among learners on the one hand and between learners and instructor on the other hand is to facilitate learning. The mutuality of the relationship will not only eliminate likely problems that may hinder skill acquisition, but will also create instant interactive dialogue where even the least expressive student in class can express his or her feelings on the subject. This is why Moemeka (1981:34) says effective communication can only take place between the communicator and his target audience if there is ‘mutual understanding cumulating from relationship that is aided by rapport, access and participation of all communicators through a medium that is both accessible and interactive.’ Herein lays the need for social media.

Moemeka’s simple assertion in 1981 was a pointer to the fact that there is a need for the country to break away from the rigidity that classroom learning is associated with by incorporating Internet into learning activities. It is also a foundation for a more flexible way of passing knowledge and changing the knowledge-base of the learner - a social learning where the learner is comfortable in his environment and can contribute to learning materials which will help all the participants.

The fact that Moemeka chose to advocate for a medium that is accessible and interactive, leads us to today’s social media. In the first instance the word social suggest there is a process of interaction between two or more persons in communication situation that ordinarily does not exist in the transfer of information from the sender to the target audience in the traditional media. On the other hand, the term media suggest a channel through which information is passed to a large diverse audience that may not be within the same geographical area. Collectively, the two suggest a medium for social interaction among various people that are connected on the same subscribed social network from different locations.

Writing on the differences between social media and the traditional media, Wikipedia (2011) notes that while people obtain information, education, news and other data from electronic media and print media, social media are relatively inexpensive and accessible medium that enable anyone (even

private individuals) to publish or access information, compared to industrial media, which generally require significant resources to publish information.

Beyond this, social media have been said to have and serve in the same capacity as the traditional media. For instance in the area of reach, social media like the traditional media can reach a global audience, whereas the traditional mass media use a centralized framework for organization, production, and dissemination, social media are more decentralized, less hierarchical, and distinguished by multiple points of production and utility (Wikipedia, 2011).

Having differentiated the two media, the question then is, how do people use social media in their daily lives? A research carried out in the United States by Nielson, showed that time spent on social networking sites has increased 83 percent year-over-year. On the global level, the report showed that consumers spend more than 6 hours on social networking sites with most using them to connect with friends and family.

However, a 2008 study found that, of the students between the ages of 16 to 18, in thirteen urban high schools observed in the US, 94 percent used the Internet, 82 percent go online at home and 77 percent had a profile on a social networking site. When asked what they learn from using social networking sites, the students listed technology skills as the top lesson, followed by creativity, being open to new or diverse views and communication skills. When a follow-up study was conducted on randomly selected students about their Internet activity as they navigate MySpace - an online forum that provides users with e-mail, web communities and audio and video capabilities - result showed that the students using social networking sites are actually practicing the kinds of 21st century skills required to be successful in today's environment. The study therefore concludes that:

Students are developing a positive attitude towards using technology systems, editing and customizing content and thinking about online design and layout. They're also sharing creative original work like poetry and film and practicing safe and responsible use of information and technology. The Web sites offer tremendous educational potential.

In a 2011 research on uses of social sites, Nwosu (2011:74) findings revealed the same pattern in Nigeria as those revealed in US, with 170 Of the 200 sample respondents using social media as a platform of chatting, dating, e-mailing, photo/video sharing, and connecting with friends, while the remaining 30 said they sometimes use it to search for information besides connecting with friends.

It is right then to say that an exposure to modern day technology will hasten learning for today's students if the students are properly guided. Other functionality that makes social media right for learning include accessibility that is, it is available to the public without government restrictions as endured by the traditional media; and because it requires no specialized skills or training, anyone with access can operate it and communicate with others.

The two other factors that work in favour of using social media for learning are immediacy and permanence. With regards to immediacy, social media messages give room for instantaneous responses, except where participants determine to delay. Also, arising from this is the fact that there is no permanence in message production; in other words, there is room for editing immediately an error is spotted and the editing does not require technical input as those errors committed in radio and TV demands. Citing Scholastic (2003), Okoh (2011: 14 – 15) comments on how these social networks now revolve round learning:

The Internet which is an integral aspect of the media is becoming an indispensable tool for quality teaching, learning and research in an academic setting...the internet is a useful tool in the "tri-personality" of a lecturer, a teacher, a life-long learner and a researcher. It provides a wealth of resources for optimum achievement of the ends targeted by the personality. Within seconds, a lecturer can retrieve information through the internet to

update his knowledge, prepare lecture, give assignments to students, mark the assignments, and also work with colleagues and specialist.

Describing the merits of digital technologies in learning to individuals, Page (2011) identified three areas where students stand to benefit. The benefits according to him are contingent upon participant's willingness to invest time, effort and readiness to take risks. These include:

- i.) Accessing, searching and sifting information;
- ii.) Communicating with others; and
- iii.) Building peer-to-peer networks.

SOCIAL MEDIA - A TOOL FOR LEARNING

Social media can take many different forms - Internet forums, weblogs, social blogs, micro blogging, wikis, podcasts, pictures, video, rating and social bookmarking. Many of these social media services can be integrated via social network aggregation platforms like Myblog, Plax blogs, vlogs wall-posting, e-mails, Instant Messaging, and music-sharing among others. What this means is that the teachers will become facilitators of the learning process, by directing students to the appropriate resources, tasks and learning outcomes.

Although while attempting to create a flexible learning, there is the fear that students may rely too much on the internet which may erode the place of books, but in spite of this fears, many scholars have enumerated several ways students and instructors can use social media to search for information and expand knowledge or teach difficult course in an interesting manner. All these may not be covered within the scope of the paper; however some general methods of using social media for learning are discussed here.

- **Get Instant feedback & Take Attendance:** an instructor can create a link that will connect him with his students then he can ask all his students after lecture to tweet about the topic and comment or seek more clarifications. If this method is adopted, it means that the instructor must be available for answering students' questions via the site he has chosen as the learning site. The merit of this method is multi-facet:
 - (i) The method helps the instructor keep tracks of the number of students that attended lectures especially when it is a large class;
 - (ii) The instructor gets instant feedback on lectures delivered; and
 - (iii) Students who are reticent can speak up (so to speak).
- **Post notes.** Another way of helping students learn within an environment that is friendly is to post class notes on the chosen social network so that student can consult it and use it for further reading. Beyond that it will also help students who missed out of the lecturers to find out what they missed, they can also read others reaction to the lecture and if need be add to the reading materials posted on the site. The danger here is that some student may stay away from class since they knew that lecture notes are available online and attendance can be generated online too.
- **Professional collaboration:** There are sites that linked professionals around the world together. Such sites like LinkedIn provide the opportunity for professionals to learn from and share with others in their field of specialization. For sites that provide learning environment for every one from all works of life, it is a platform that could expand field of knowledge of individuals. Thus, by sharing ideas, tips, and techniques through any of the social sites knowledge and teaching skills can be broaden.
- **Make Learning real for student through social sites:** it is possible to create page wholly dedicated to making presumed hard where student can research and contribute to. The merit of this method of learning lies in the fact that boring and brain tasking subjects can be made interesting. Sites in this category include Twitter and Google Earth etc.
- **Engage students in ethical discussion:** one way to get student to use social media other than for chatting, sending racy pictures or searching for porn sites is to engage them in discussion

that will be thought-provoking and which will at the same be a renaissance of the Nigerian value system especially for courses like social studies in secondary schools or Nigerian people and culture and some others in the university curriculum. For instance there are sites on Facebook that encourage freedom of expression and as well talk about the values of the land like The Connect African magazine,

MERITS OF USING SOCIAL MEDIA FOR LEARNING

- **Exposure to modern technological skills:** when students use social networking sites to learn, they are exposed to new technology, by using these sites they develop a positive attitude towards using technology systems; they are able to edit and customize content and think about online design and layout. Besides that, it affords them the opportunity to share creative original work as well as practice safe and responsible use of information and technology.
- **Student support learning:** when instructors know what skills students are learning and what experiences they are being exposed to, they can help foster and expand those skills by directing them to the appropriate sites. The essence is to provide information about the experiential background of the students so as to build learning material around it.
- **Fun and easy creative way to learn:** learning is more interesting when it is interactive and when it is done in less structured environment, particularly when the learner is in his own environment without fear of being castigated or condemned.
- **Social Bookmarking:** one advantage of social media is that students and instructors can enjoy one of such services as social bookmarking service. The implication of using bookmarks is that bookmarks can be saved online so that you can access them from any computer anywhere. It also comes with the options of either making the bookmarks public or making it private. For purposes of learning bookmarks can be made public so others too can visit and discover how such sites can be useful to them. In addition, most social bookmark sites keep track of how many times a particular link is publicly bookmarked, and the more a site is bookmarked the higher it appears in search results in that service's search engine.

DEMERITS OF USING SOCIAL MEDIA FOR LEARNING

- **Fear of Information Overload:** Internet is a database new media; as such students and instructors have access to so much information that experts are now expressing fears of information overload. Although the students particularly have more information they need to complete any given assignment, there is however the fear of what information is right, enough or should be rejected.
- **Drop in the Reading Culture:** different studies have shown a drop in the reading habit of the Nigerian child as a result of the thirst for entertainment programmes in the media, yet that may be insignificant compared to the affinity most youth are now developing for the social networks over reading and other things. In a study of two high schools in Australia, Jacinta Squires and Lee FitzGerald discovered that students use Google as the first search and mobilize the internet ahead of books. The study has monitored by Brabazon (2007:20) also showed that students hardly ever read learning outcomes, marking criteria or the library catalogue. The overall effect of relying too much on the Internet is that students reading and writing skills has dropped, a situation that may not help the already entertainment-craze generation.
- **Lack of comparing views:** amazingly what the result of the group Brabazon (2007:21) monitored also showed is that students do not seek out diverse views to construct argument, rather what they do is to presume that if something appeared online, then it must be correct. Brabazon then concludes that "Making students think, rather than assume, and read rather than cut and paste is proving a challenge".
- **Lack of opportunities to have personal interaction between teacher and learner:** one of the major criticisms of using the social media for education is the elimination of face to face that the traditional learning environment provided whereby teacher and learner see themselves

and can learn and interact through verbal and non verbal cues. This is a legitimate challenge but with the increasing interactivity of social media technology, this fear is gradually being address. Yet the place of face to face in learning cannot be totally eradicated in the education process.

CHALLENGES OF USING SOCIAL MEDIA FOR LEARNING IN NIGERIA

- **Lack of basic Amenities:** Nigeria, like many Third World countries constantly battle outage of power across the country so much that even when the learner has the means to access information through these social sites, the unavailability of power supply has always had a debilitating effect on the desire to source for information.
- **Lack of Conducive environment:** Again, because there are no constant power supply, learners may not have access to the site as and at when due; and when he does he may be doing so at a business venture centre which may not be conducive for learning purposes.
- **Access to computers:** despite the prevalence of computers in the Nigerian market, not many Nigerians have access to computers, and when they do it is but for a few working hours except for few who have laptops and modems at home. Thus when an instructor creates a link where students are expected to interact with him it becomes too difficult to encourage learning through social media since students have no access to Internet. Access to computers and Internet may not be particularly noticed among the privilege students who go to private schools or private university because most of the private institutions in Nigeria have Internet facilities, but for those who attend publicly financed schools this may turn out to be just only a dream. But the Osun state example of giving *opon imo* (tablet of knowledge) if replicated across the country can help address this challenge.
- **Structure of educational system:** as the educational system in Nigeria is structured presently there may be no time for students to have the time to use these media except for socialising for few hours before bed time. Moreover, the teacher too may not have the time outside his busy schedule to create learning at leisure for the students. Unfortunately, the dwindling economy as force private secondary schools in Nigeria to promote extra lessons outside normal school hours 8 am to 2.pm – obviously not the benefit of the concerned students. By the time the extra lesson ends at four, both student and teacher still had to battle the traffic to get home, at the end of the day both instructors and the students are tired from hours of learning to do any thing meaningful let alone create the time outside the working hours to manage and be ready for online learning.
- **Cost of internet connection:** the cost of connecting to the internet is high in Nigeria as most telecommunication providers now see it as a new way of making more money. What this means is that, only a selected few may have access to computers outside their offices, while those that don't have access in the office may still not have access outside their working environment. Beyond that, those who could access it through their mobile phones are often handicapped by the monthly subscription to be paid to the service providers, and until the subscription rate is reduced learning through these social sites may be handicapped.
- **Lack of enthusiasm on the part of instructor;** most teachers and lecturers in the university are more at home with reading students assignment on paper than have them submit it online. Two factors are responsible for this;
 1. The instructor's knowledge of computer and how to use the interface on dedicated sites are limited;
 2. Many of the learning institutions in Nigeria are not ready to organize training for staff and those who do organize training do it in an un-conducive environment as such instructors are reluctant to attend and those who attend do so without enthusiasm.

CONCLUSION

We must submit here that the traditional media, and now the social media sites can only enhance learning they cannot replace the role of the instructor or the role of the structured classroom learning

that breeds discipline and commitment in the life of the learner. Though social media may make learning easier, comfortable and more fun for the students, learning through them demands that the student is:

- highly discipline by not getting sidetracked by other websites that has no learning material to serve;
- concentrate on and stay committed to the tasks ahead, taking cognizance of the challenges within the environment of his/her is learning, and
- As Brabazon cautions, Flexible learning – when simplified and reduced to internet-mediated education – must be introduced carefully and critically. (p.80)

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