

II. THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF DISTANCE LEARNING

SOCIAL MEDIA FOR SHAPING PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE OF MASTER DEGREE STUDENTS

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***Abstract:** The paper focuses on practical results and experience of training specialists in the field of education to the attainment of professional goals with the use of social media. The Institute of Computer Science and Technology Education of Herzen University (Russia) implements jointly with the UNESCO Institute for Information Technologies in Education a course “Social Media and New Education Practices” for master degree students, majoring in pedagogical education. Because of the course, students were able to reach a higher level - to design education practices that run in a networked environment with interactions unfolding in electronic formats.*

Keywords: Social media, professional experience, professional competences, e-learning.

INTRODUCTION

Social media have gained enormous popularity as a means to maintaining social ties among friends, colleagues, and those who have common interests. People today, especially youth, use social networks to communicate, in order to be always connected and informed about current events and news. Social media is widely used to address university education and curricular issues (Benson & Morgan, 2016). Today, social media is treated and used for various purposes, in diverse focus groups of learners (Khatrı et.al, 2015) and as new communication formats (Ricoy & Feliz 2016). Moreover, for receiving feedback (Palaiokrassas et.al, 2016). Therefore, teachers as education experts need to know the capabilities, limitations and dangers of social media in order to get along with students

(Lamanauskas & Pribeanu 2016), to find and use new and unique possibilities for joint training, creativity and professionalisation.

The listed above interrogation are the part of the international research project scope - IRNet (<http://www.irnet.us.edu.pl>). During the past two years, the international research group has studied, among many other issues, the attitude of students to collaboration and cooperation as the basis for a network learning community engagement (Noskova et.al, 2015), social media as a means of university study support (Chmura et.al, 2015).

Modern electronic space is a new environment of interactions. A peculiar virtual medium, to some extent reflecting the social reality, has been formed. At the same time, the virtual world derives a new society with its network norms, rules and ethics. For teachers, it is particularly important that the electronic space becomes a habitat for the today youth - forerunners of the information society. This space is different from face to face classroom interactions. It takes place in a different establishment of social relations. A person receives a large variety of information resources and social contacts. At the same time, there are significant risks to physical and mental health, and personal development of a growing person. Teachers need to “cultivate the culture” in an electronic space, developing new education practices. However, they need to focus not only on their professional and life experience but also be deeply aware of the needs and demands of young people, being active and initiative in the social media environment.

Social media is a variation of mass communication through the Internet, a historically new kind of communication. It is defined as a group of Internet-based applications, ideologically and technologically Web 2.0 based, allowing participants to communicate in social networks and to create content in the process of exchanging it (Lai & Wong 2015). Social media is a part of e-environment interactions in which a user opens a media channel to broadcast content in a certain direction, addressed to a wide audience. This audience is based on self-organization and participants begin to interact with each other in the discussion of media messages and create new messages in this regard as a result of a network of cooperation. Message content producers enter into a relationship with the consumers of these messages and involve them in further content production. Participants of electronic interactions can share knowledge, experiences, opinions, news, videos, photos, music, links to websites, and so on to establish and develop social contacts.

1. THEORETICAL BASIS

Today, various education practices are based on social media implementation. Acquisition of different skills occurs in the remote interactions. Communication includes not only texts but also images and multimedia. A network communication is formed by a variety of dynamic and interrelated resources that are created not

only by experts but also by students. Description of features of these interactions is the subject of research (Patarakin & Shilova 2015, Kommers et.al, 2015).

New professional competences are required from education professionals in the new century. They should learn to solve professional problems through the electronic environment (Bridgstock, 2016). What are the generalised characteristics of new education practices based on social media? On the technical side, they include the use of Web 2.0 technologies and social media channels. On the pedagogical side, these are specially organised education interaction, stimulating activity of electronic media users. On the psychological side, such new practices are creating a unique atmosphere of cooperation, unity of purpose and objectives of joint activities. From a communicational point of view, it is important that online communities are bundles of interactions with students themselves being organisational centres, not just a teacher acting as an organiser of the process. However, all these features are external, formal and simply recognised. At the same time, certain underlying factors exhibit the novelty of pedagogical practices discussed here. These factors are associated with the formulation of new goals and objectives of education activities. Tasks that encourage students to go beyond the education standard, to find their own meanings and motives in the education activity. Finding these new meanings can radically change a course of action.

In general, comparing the new and traditional education practices, we can state the following. In the classroom education practices, the leading role belongs to a teacher, who sets out a content and organises activities of students. Thematic content meets the education standards; it is the same for everyone, and it is obligatory to assimilate for all students. The pedagogical technology of a classroom practice is built as a linear sequence of group activities, with the feedback, provided by the teacher, monitoring and evaluating all activities. All this stimulates the implementation of education standards in the tight time framework of classroom teaching for the whole group of students.

When using social media as a set of arrangements, interactions and practices that aim to create a learning environment based on the use of social services in order to provide users' activity, the situation is changing. Current users of the network are themselves the authors of the network and can add their content - articles, photos, audio and video, leave comments, shape design of their pages, etc. Using the potential of social media requires a different course of education practices that allow evolving initiative, increasing activity through the choice, self-awareness of own meanings in the performed activities. Therefore, the aim of the new education activity is not just the implementation of training on the orders of a teacher, but the exertion of activities and initiatives in learning. In a networked environment, interacting with others, being an avid user of personally learned knowledge, a student carries out an own search for new knowledge, development and competence, and achieves results in the jointly distributed activities. Emotions, motivations, meanings of learning are changing (Pfaff-Rüdiger & Riesmeyer

2016). All this makes it possible to achieve new results, under certain pedagogical conditions during interactions through social media tools.

Thus, through these new education practices, the emergence of learning autonomy can be stimulated. According to such strategy, a learner builds his/her own knowledge independently in a specially created and maintained by a teacher e-learning environment. In this environment, learners are able to transfer their knowledge and skills in the practice of life - to teach others, help them to develop their knowledge, participate in various projects, creative activities. Therefore, in these practices moving beyond the standard of education activities and self-realization is stimulated.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The modern teacher needs competences, allowing them to prepare children and youth to interact with a wide variety of social media environment. This complex problem can be solved on the basis of the use of social media themselves, involving young people in the education interaction, allowing them to realise new opportunities and risks of this medium.

Obviously, the new practices discussed in this paper do not replace the traditional ones but provide a chance for a new way to organise the education process. Therefore, it is advisable to build learning interactions both based on classroom education activity and electronic environment activity.

The Institute of Computer Science and Technology Education of Herzen University (Russia) has been implemented for three years jointly with the UNESCO Institute for Information Technologies in Education a course “Social Media and New Education Practices”. The course is addressed to master degree students, majoring in pedagogical education. The main goal of the course is to form competencies of teaching and solving educational problems in the modern media environment.

The relevance of the course is determined by several reasons:

- extensive use of social media in solving problems of education practice;
- high motivation of young people to use social services;
- renewed education standards demand a revision of education practices.

The course content includes the following issues:

- a new socio-psychological phenomenon in the global electronic environment;
- social media: concept, social significance and pedagogical potential;
- media education problems;

- the role of social media in the education environment: design of media environment to address specific education objectives;
- Internet services of social media and virtual education methodology are based on the interactions based on social media.

In the process of studying each module of the course, students develop their pedagogical projects of an e-learning environment, through which, using the tools of social media, they are preparing for the decision of professional tasks related to the theme of the master thesis.

In February and March 2016 master degree students from the Institute of Pedagogy and Psychology, Institute of Childhood, Faculty of Correctional Pedagogy joined the study of the course. A general outline of the course is presented in Figure 1.

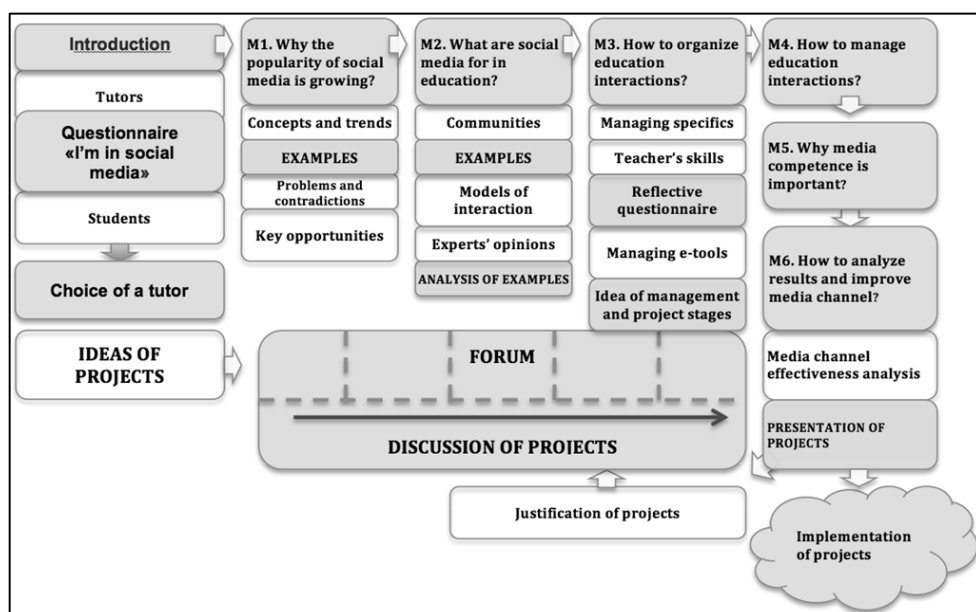


Figure 1. Social Media and New Education Practices. General course outline.

Source: Own work

On entering the course, prospective participants were questioned about the main reasons that prompted them to enrol and study it. Answers to this question were formulated, “the course was recommended by scientific adviser”, “it is interesting to explore something new, and then put into practice in real life”, “the desire to gain practical experience”, “the motivation to apply new knowledge in professional activity already being implemented”.

How were interactions of academic teachers and students undertaking the course organised? The course has been implemented in a blended model – both face to face and distance forms, with the use of LMS Moodle. It is necessary to underline

the fact that students were to be acquainted with the course materials, perform tasks, as well as describe the conceptual idea of their project in a very short period of time - a month and a half. Participants coped with this challenge. There were of great importance not merely methods of material presentation (problematic issues, case studies, presentations with narration, etc.), but also methods of interaction with academic teachers. All problematic issues were discussed in the course forum, many tasks required mutual commenting and peer assessment. The academic teachers who supervised the course were mostly in the role of tutors and facilitators, guiding the activity of participants. A teacher consultant was appointed for each student. Of course, students have to link their projects with the directions of their master studies and it can be claimed that the results of the course were created innovative education practices.

What was the main idea of the course? All the materials and tasks were organised in a way to help students reflect on their professional involvement into social media, both actual and prospective. There were six modules of the course; each was to be fulfilled on one week:

- Module 1 “Why is the popularity of social media growing”?
- Module 2 “What are social media for in education”?
- Module 3 “How to organise educational interactions in social media”?
- Module 4 “How to manage educational interactions in social media”?
- Module 5 “Why is media competence important for teachers and learners”?
- Module 6. “How to analyse results and improve a media channel”?

Each module necessarily supposed discussions of some controversial issues on the course forum. For example, in Module 1 were discussed several questions. What is characteristic of modern youth you agree with most and why – “digital natives”, “homo virtualis”, “net generation”, “the millennials? Why are young people active in the social media environment? Make a hierarchy of motives for the use of social media and give specific examples (prestigious, fashionable, comfortable, socially significant, different data formats, different styles of communication and behaviour). In addition, in Module 4 were discussed two main question. What is the specificity of the interaction management in a networked community of educational purpose? Why does a teacher who uses social media in education, need special skills? Which skills do you consider the most important? Together with thematic discussions, students talked about their projects to receive feedback from both peers and tutoring teachers.

One more important point interesting to emphasise in this paper is a wide list of examples on social media use that were not only presented to students, but also they took part in expanding the range of examples. All examples were categorised according to the models of education interactions. For example, joint collection of resources (blogs of teachers and experts, wikis), discourses of problem discussions

(conference communities), projects (Letopisi.ru – a well-known Russian education project, Big History project on Twitter), PR (Twitter accounts of schools, universities, ministries and public persons), professional experience exchange (professional communities of teachers), role and developing games (multiplayer educational games for children), social projects (projects for the virtual reconstruction of historical monuments).

3. EXAMPLES OF STUDENTS' PROJECTS

Of particular interest is the result of the innovative transformation of the observed education practices patterns with the use of social media. In education, the practice has become popular such a model, implemented on the basis of social media, which takes place parallel in – in a classroom and an e-learning environment. In social networks, examples that implement educational activities based on social media are available. For example, the use of blogs to address specific learning tasks, the use of network services, bookmarking, wiki services for project activities of students, etc. (Noskova et.al, 2015). For example, students' communicative competence development based on the use of educational blogs proved its effectiveness (Noskova et.al, 2014).

However, master degree students who studied the course “Social Media and New Education Practices” were able to reach a higher level - to design such education practices that evolve in a network environment with the interactions unfolding in electronic formats. Such types of models are characteristic of international educational Internet projects such as Wikipedia and virtual chorus presented on YouTube. They are widely used in the interactions of innovative teachers for the exchange and dissemination of best practices, for uniting all, wishing to work together and achieve results.

Many projects developed by students had a social orientation. Projects can be divided into two groups - projects aimed at changing the corporate university environment (support for student initiatives, social projects at the university auspices) as well as projects designed to changing the general socio-cultural environment (development of the professional activity of social pedagogues, inclusive non-formal and informal education, the creation of communities, sharing positive experience).

For example, a student of the Faculty of correctional pedagogy presented the project “Where happiness lives!” The main idea of the project is developing a media resource for children with intellectual disabilities and their parents. The purpose of the project is the organisation of environmental cooperation of parents, children, correctional pedagogues and psychologists.

A student of the Institute of Pedagogy and Psychology presented the project “Community of a happy family”. It aims to organise community network based on the social network VKontakte. VKontakte (vk.com) one of the most popular social

network in Russia. The author of the project plans to create network self-help groups as a form of social work, which will focus on the exchange of experiences, positive examples of family relations, ways to overcome various difficulties and challenges of life.

One more student of the Institute of Pedagogy and Psychology presented the project “#This is Herzen - freshmen!” The main idea of the project is the creation of a site for informing the 1st year students about the opportunities offered them to our university in additional education and extracurricular activities. The author suggests to use the potential of social media - an exchange of views, reviews, photo and video reports, demonstration of achievements, learning - to engage in joint content of this site students and supervisors, as well as to attract students and to create an attractive image of the university and to develop students' community.

A student of the Institute of Computer Science and Technology Education presented the idea of creating a website, a virtual creative space, a platform for the implementation of creative ideas for the participants of The Herzen University Fashion Theatre. The focus of the media is discussing topical issues, news, perspective directions of development of the Fashion Theatre community. For example, participants who have already had the experience of creating a collection of clothes will be able to share existing knowledge with the new participants and to give advice. At the same time, the media will provide the current achievements of Fashion Theatre: photos from fashion shows, collections of different years, and the gallery of graphic design. It will also contribute to the growth of the Institute's rating, and to the attraction of new members from students. It is important that the Fashion Theatre as a creative association has existed for quite a long period, and the establishment of a virtual platform will allow the association to enter the current level of self-presentation and interaction.

The results of the course show that learners are able to transfer their knowledge and skills in the practice of life: to teach others and to participate in various projects and creative activities. Learners are active and their self-realization is stimulated. The course helped students to become aware that teachers need understanding not only the capabilities of social media, but also limitations and dangers, and, moreover, methods and ways of achieving new results that will not merely duplicate face-to-face educational interactions.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

For the dissemination of results, it is important that researchers from European universities took part in the discussion of students' project – the representatives of the University of Potsdam, as well as the members of the international research project IRNet from the University of Silesia (Poland), University of Constantine the Philosopher in Nitra (Slovak Republics), the University of Extremadura (Spain). It is planned to expand the access to the course for the Herzen University

master degree students of different faculties, as well as for teachers within the system of professional training through the extensive use of distance learning technologies. The international IRNet project shows the need to expand the geography of the course and allows determining the near-term objective – to translate the materials into English and to upgrade this course for the international students.

CONCLUSION

New education practices implemented based on social media is not just the expansion and enrichment of the traditional educational activities in the auditorium. They can be considered the prototype of the future when students themselves will demonstrate conscious educational initiative in finding solutions and adopting the goals and objectives of the educational activities for building competencies. In search and acquisition of electronic educational resources, they will start looking for network partners to work together, provide mutual support and share knowledge. Sharing knowledge helps to achieve the intended results better and to correct actions. They will seek the assistance of teachers for the evaluation and correction of their knowledge and skills, building up a more optimal education path. These network communities of practice will stimulate the productive activity of students, their initiative based on the generated motivations to use acquired knowledge, to carry them into practice, exchanging them with other users, discuss, create, and act together.

Essential competences will be formed in such organisation of education interactions of students - not only professional but also social competences. The most significant educational activity is personally meaningful; it has the true sense and strengthened motivation. All this is necessary to the further education path, to the aspiration for lifelong learning in a dynamic knowledge society.

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