

Feeling the Feed: Reflections (Confessions?) of an Online Teacher on Transitioning from Threaded Discussion to Social Media

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Abstract: This paper presents the background and events to date of a continuing case study of a teacher adapting to social media, from the point of view of the online teacher. It describes the ongoing challenges of using now 'traditional' threaded discussion boards, and details events leading to a simultaneous design experiment conducting an instructional activity in the traditional threaded discussion and a social media platform. It further describes how this experiment has led to trialing full scale teaching in multiple units of study supported only by the social media platform. Observations and reflections are drawn from the case experience.

Introduction

For people communicating at both distance and asynchronously, discussion threads are a proven structure upon which to organise online community conversations along lines of content or learning objectives. Such discussion threads have been equally as useful for providing an organic repository which supports open and emergent interactions and knowledge sharing. ASCII Bulletin board system variants predating the Learning Management System (Greenlaw & Hepp, 1999) supported early socialization and knowledge-organising on the Internet with thread-based message board structures inspired what would become discussion boards (DBs) within Learning Management Systems (LMSs). Internet connectivity expanded and computer/disk based learning system scenarios gave way within Web 1.0 to mass deployments of formal online and blended learning systems, especially in higher education (HE). In HE, LMS confined discussion boards became the engine room of online learning engagement. (Horton, 2000; Salmon, 2011).

However, advocacy of their potential effectiveness is not universally embraced. Many university lecturers have testified to experiences with discussion boards where "they built it and no one came." Some resorted to making discussion forum participation an assessment item, and so have gained some increase in traffic and LMS vendors have their applications to integrate this, but still the character of engagement achieved may be compliant and shallow. So, this technological arc has also been accompanied by an orthodoxy about what practices instigated within an instructional/learning design framework make the discussion board work effectively in support of individual and collective learning (Salmon, 2011; Goodyear and Zenios, 2007).. Much has been discussed and explored regarding the impact of social presence and teaching presence in online and other technology mediated environments (Lynch 2002, Schutt, 2008;). These and other research supported accounts and strategies around teaching team participation (Tseng, Wang, Ku & Sun, 2009) and interaction with students (Novais, Ramos, Nappo & Sigule 2010), modeling of desired academic communication styles and presentation of exemplary curricular artifacts (Morgan, Cameron & Williams, 2009) probably have most validity as contributory factors to online educational

outcomes. Indeed, interaction with faculty in the campus based experience of students has been demonstrated to be an important indicator of student engagement and retention (Kuh 2008; Coates, 2007).

In general, the progression of technology has included innovations such as discussion assessment integration (mentioned above) and delivered other enhancements to support presence monitoring, measuring discussion activity and organise and search for content generated on the discussion boards. Not all of these have provided improvement on the efficacy of using simple threads which highlight newer posts via bold screen type. LMSs, both vendor and open source originated, have seemed to galvanise their tribes around them, provoking contention on their efficacies and efficiencies, sometimes the learning process, often as not being critiqued more generally as ‘user-friendly’ (or not) technology. Over time the latest hero platforms eventually have their support base eroded as they become villain encumbrances. This competitive leap frogging, in addition to its associated market dynamics has sometimes led to some subtle improvements: For instance, later applications have improved the way that the discussion forum can fit be available more fluidly as part internal instructional design paths within various LMSs, and Web 2.0 “rich user experience” (O’Reilly, 2008, p. 34) style influences such as participant photographs and chronological screen feeds are also apparent, as are the ability to post asynchronously with audio and video files.

Since the emergence of Web 2.0 and social media, connectivity over distances is now perhaps appreciated to a greater degree than asynchronicity. Even though real time scheduled online meetings have been accommodated by an incredible improvement in bandwidth, device availability and applications which integrate with LMSs, the real story is not about scheduled episodes as it is about continuous narrative. In fact, rather than a mastery of time through the freedom to combine synchronous and asynchronous exchanges, there is a compression of time. Popular wisdom worships real time via ‘multi-tasking,’ (Klingberg, 2009) citizen journalism and other forms of constant techno-mediated connection. Virtual identity and time are more and more merged and blurred together with analog identity and time. The ability to structure conversations and meaning is no longer the prime requirement of the technologies as users, including a growing proportion of higher education learners, are simultaneously immersed in a multiple continuous feeds from communities they have an interest, or at least, are interested, in. It is not only the *what* that online teachers must provide to compete for their attention with these feeds, it is the *when*. And the when is *now*.

Social media is now ubiquitously apparent (Rainey & Wellman, 2012). However, it has had spottier penetration into the higher education space, even as it contributes, along with headlines about MOOCs (Lewin, 2012) to the hype about ‘disruptive innovation’ and the death of the traditional university (Christensen & Eyring, 2011; Di Mello, 2011). As with all technologies introduced to teaching, sparse numbers of early adopters of blog platforms, twitter and facebook applied to teaching and learning are in evidence (Rutherford, 2010) YouTube is an appreciated filler and tedium breaker in face to face lectures. (Bonk, 2008) At the institutional level, as universities have become more concerned with maintaining enrolments and have upped their marketing budgets and marketing staff numbers, marketing professionals employed by the university are forcing social media into the universities’ marketing mix (Alkas, 2011).

The Transitional Case

The evolutionary description above contextualizes the case to be described and interpreted here in linear-analytic fashion (Yin, 2003). Further contextualization (Richards, 2005) is that this author's experience with threaded discussion boards within an LMS began as a teacher in the late 1990s, then more extensively through completing an online graduate program in the early 2000s, and since then becoming intensively involved with LMSs, including discussion forums, as both an educational/learning designer, curriculum consultant and academic teaching staff developer, and currently teaching into a large enrolment Bachelor of Business program offered solely online through Open Universities Australia. This experience has included exposure to major LMSs, including their threaded discussion forums, such as WebCT, Blackboard, and Moodle. During that time social activity on the Internet has been limited to being a sometime contributor, but mostly lurker, within a number of professional listservs. With regards to social media, the author has engaged, more passively than actively, subscribing to Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter accounts, and also occasionally authoring and sharing via YouTube.

In addition to launching social media sites in pursuit of student market, this writer's university has also employed social media adviser within the central Information Services division, which is not marketing focused, in fact it is the unit that supports all staff administrative and learning and teaching computing resources. One initiative was to introduce the organisational social media platform Yammer (Yammer, 2010) which has gained a following as a corporate 'social' application, including in at least one other Australian university (Uys, 2010). Yammer has gained some limited following within the case study university, mainly with technophile staff from the support divisions, although a few academics do participate regularly. Total user number on the university network is currently about 450, but the number of regular participants is probably less than 100.

One unit of study, entitled Comparative Management, assigned to the author has been taught in two back to back study periods (13 weeks) in the Open Universities Australia calendar. This unit is co-taught with an experienced and decorated university teacher, being her first online teaching assignment. In the first iteration of the unit with an enrolment of 240 students at the start, a conventional threaded discussion board strategy was built into the LMS site, with threads for queries about assessment, as well as a separate thread envisioned for each of the 6 modules comprising the unit. In line with recommended practice (Salmon, 2011) in the first module students were encouraged to do introductory posts and perhaps to comment on a stimulus article on Forbes magazine's rankings of the best countries in which to do business. About 40 students eventually posted their intros, but only 6 commented on the article. See Figure 1

IBA205 COMPARATIVE MANAGEMENT (IBA205_2123_OT) > DISCUSSION BOARD		
Forum	Total Posts	Total Participants
Questions about Assessment If you have any questions regarding the assessment for IBA205, please post your questions in this forum.	431	72
Comparative Management Analysis Paper This forum will be used to familiarise you with requirements for your CMA papers, based upon the scholarly marking criteria. By participating, you will also better understand how to use the Regional Consulting Briefs to give you a jump start toward a good result.	64	19
Module 1 Discussion Forum Take the opportunity to introduce yourself to the class, by telling us your preferred name, where you are studying from (unless that is classified, then tell us a good cover story) and, to get the juices flowing regarding comparative management, browse to the Forbes piece below, and after looking it over, perhaps respond to <i>What do you think of the factors that Forbes used to do the ratings?</i> <i>Do you think that there were other factors they should have considered?</i> <i>Were there any country rankings which surprised you?</i> <i>How useful would this source of information be to you if you were considering setting up a business or being transferred to manage for a global organisation overseas?</i> We determined the Best Countries for Business by looking at 11 different factors for 134 countries. Badenhausen, K. (2011). The Best Countries for Business. Forbes. 10 March 2011. http://www.forbes.com/sites/kurtbadenhausen/2011/10/03/the-best-countries-for-business/ Accessed 1 May 2012	167	70
Module 2 Discussion Forum	62	19

Figure 1 Discussion Board Structure, Participation and Posts during the unit.]

One of the introductory posts did mention that a Facebook site had been set up and encouraged students to join. The Facebook site was labeled exactly with the unit code. After discussion between the co-teachers, it was decided that we would request an invite to join the site, but would not actively post to it. Instructors asked the person who had set up and posted the invitation to join on Facebook via the discussion thread if that would be acceptable, which it was. They joined the site, and noted that after three weeks about 40 students had joined and about a dozen were fairly active.

In addition to an ongoing thread intended to isolate queries about assessment tasks, the six learning module structure of the 13 week unit included dedicated threads, which were intended to engage students in discussion and sharing of resources relevant to the unit content. This content was concerned with the global regions, cultural contexts, and business cases covered in each module.

Although there were not many posts to these on their intended topics, a pattern of two categories of post did emerge: Firstly, many students ignored the thread structure, especially after one of the teaching team joined the thread, and usually the concern of the posts on the content thread turned to technical questions about assessment, in ignorance of the dedicated assessment thread. The second pattern seemed a bit more sinister, angry and aimed at raising a mob around the issue identified. In reporting or querying real or perceived content errors, it was accusatory rather than consultative: ‘the dates given here and there do not match.’ Instead of requesting clarification on some aspects of assessment by referring to the information given, the mob-raising posts (Russ, 2007) were worded along the lines of ‘Is anyone else having a hard time understanding what is required...’ By sensitive online teachers with a heavy workload, it was pondered whether that these tactics bordered on cyber-bullying (Clark, Werth, & Ahten, 2012) or at least attempts to coerce capitulation and provision of the easiest pathway to completing the learners’ work.

Although participation was not assessed, a specific engagement plan within a dedicated threaded forum was to give the students a high quality interactive experience in preparing for the major written assessment task based on practice in interpreting assessment

criteria (Race, 2007) and social constructivist discourse between teachers and students concerning those criteria (Rust, O'Donovan & Price, 2010). An exemplar paper was created and attached to the main thread. Then, each of the four criteria contained for marking were posted as separate threads. Students were encouraged to read the exemplar paper (which by design had some strong and weak performances on different criteria) and post their opinion as to what performance level they thought was achieved and perhaps why they assigned it that mark. Then in keeping up with practice of reality media, there would be a 'big reveal' of the actual mark from the instructor as soon as 50 votes were recorded. An in-house polling tool, J-Poll (Potter, 2011) embedded within the content area in the LMS was also attempted in order to engage students in voting. As the assignment due date approached, the number of students actually posting or voting via J-Poll was minimal as shown by these statistics for the entire study period. Unfortunately, view frequencies were not recorded. Most of the posts to the criterion threads did not actually hazard a vote.

Thread	Threaded Forum Posts/Participants (non-instructor)	J-Poll votes
Exemplar Paper	14/7	n/a
Criterion 1 Comparative Technique: Uses both cases to demonstrate knowledge, understanding and analytical skill	0/0	10
Criterion 2 Command of relevant concepts and facts for each case, including culture	2/2	6
Criterion 3 Managerial Insights: Reflection and application	3/2	6
Criterion 4 Written Communication: Language, structure, and scholarship	0/0	6

Table 1: Postings and Participants on threaded forum preparing for Written Assessment task

This lack of engagement with the resource, combined with the assessment coming due was a frustration for the co-teachers. The writer thought of Yammer, and that it had a poll function, and wondered whether a social media platform would garner more attention. As mentioned above, Facebook, although students are already self-organising into class sites (get is problematic in terms of protecting student privacy (Diaz, Golas & Gautsch, 2010) and controlling access. Control of access is also important for intellectual property considerations, in particular the use of content under 'Fair Use' provisions for education. After discussion, it was decided to set up a Yammer site, but use it strictly to run the Exemplar discussion activity, which continue to run in parallel with the LMS discussion thread which had so far been ineffectual. The Yammer page format for the exercise and the polling was as shown in Figure 2.

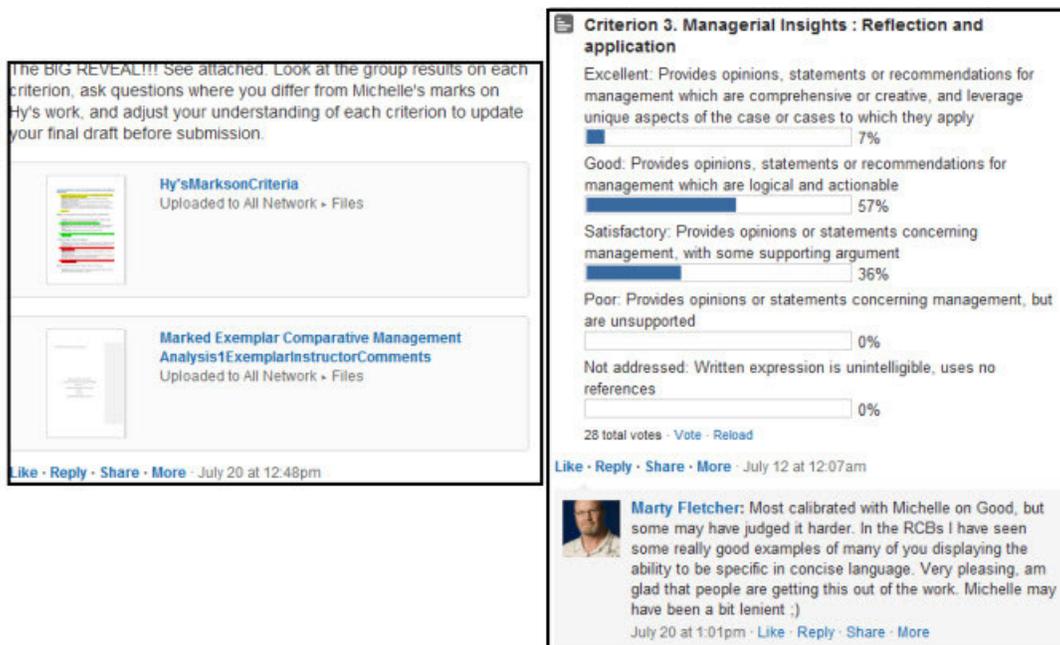


Figure 2: Exemplar Discussion exercise in Yammer]

Within a week after setting this up, there were additional 28 votes on each of the criteria, and some discourse (Rust et.al) on elaborating on the required qualities of achievement and their rationale. Although 2 students expressed preference for the discussion forum and only addition there were many positive comments about Yammer for instance of preference for its Facebook-like interface over the LMS discussion page set up. A number of students advised that they were already on Yammer in their workplaces. Total number of network members in this short window of time peaked at 101. From an instructor point of view, it was noticed that maintaining awareness and accessing the platform to see the interactions was much more fluid and could be done in much less time than required to monitor the discussion forum.

Based upon the experience of using both the discussion forum and Yammer platform side by side, it was decided that in the following study period which is currently underway, Yammer would be used exclusively for discussion activities. This has been implemented in three units in total, and another two instructors teaching units into the same program are also using Yammer, while another instructor is using Twitter and Facebook.

This was decided after further investigation and consideration of access and privacy issues. In terms of access, Yammer has some advantages, particularly for more technologically savvy students, as it is available to run via web browser, as well as in apps provided for IOS, Android, and PC Desktop monitoring and participation. In terms of privacy of discussions at least, Yammer is secure in that access to Private Groups in networks (which will be created for each cohort of a unit) can be nested under networks and access is controlled by invitation from the Network Administrator/Instructor and the policy is to require users to have an email address on the university's students' email domain. In terms of access and integration with the LMS, this is still being perfected, but the Private Group feed can be embedded within an LMS page, as shown in Figure 3 via the Yammer Embed Widget. This works well in some browsers. However other browsers force the user to hyperlink out

and get access their feed in a separate browser window. Many of the students in two of these three currently running study units were members of the original Comparative Management unit cohort, and that has helped adoption somewhat, as they had been introduced to Yammer.

Observations and Reflections

Based on the above, observations and reflections can be divided into 3 categories:

1. Observations and reflections about the difference between legacy platform and social media:

- The most marked realization about the difference between legacy and social media systems is that posts in social media tend to be to the person, and not the topic.
- Some students who don't use social media bemoan students posting off-topic, even though they present the benefit of organised threads as an argument to avoid trying the newer platforms.
- The legacy discussion forum does have search functions which can mediate this and find wanted content on all threads, but it is relatively slow compared to the speed of the Yammer and Facebook applications.
- User management, access and security issues are more complex when using social media, but strategies are available to streamline user management, including registration and sign on, and access can be embedded into the LMS.
- A user guide should be developed and made available to support students who are less experienced or comfortable with social media interfaces, as well as to highlight procedures and rules which will govern the use of social media in the university learning context.

2. Observations about students' behavioural repertoires being already shaped by social media:

- As mentioned above students seem to direct their response postings more at the person who last posted, rather on the topic. Unfortunately, this disregard of an old convention creates extra cognitive load for the facilitator of the learning, and is exacerbated by the relatively slow screen loading speeds of the legacy applications. It also results in a feeling on the part of the teacher that whenever he/she does appear on the forum, students are likely to gang up on them about any and sundry issues.
- As mentioned above that social media has a fast search facility, it seemed as if few were willing to use it, but would prefer to stand and shout 'I don't know if anyone has asked this before, but ...' Searching is actually easier in the Yammer site which has a fast and powerful search function. Perhaps because it is also so relatively easy to generate a new post on a smart phone or tablet, for instance they don't consider trying to harvest older content. So class members need to be reminded of this so they have an sympathetic awareness of using it as a strategy to rationalize repetitive response workload for their teachers and classmates.
- The use of superficial engagements like polls and 'likes' is more powerful than thought before the case experience. Previously the writer's view was that they were not critical engagement. Now realizes that they are about presence, as a precursor to critical engagement.

3. Observations about pedagogy:

- An appropriate communication strategy in relation to developing graduate attributes, as social media finding its way into business and so Yammer is an appropriate platform, especially for business students.
- Regardless of technology, the idea that technical/assessment questions can be disembodied from other discussions in the unit may be problematic. The conversations are going to be more and more emergent in nature, and fundamentally , assessment should reflect and be aligned to all aspects of learning design (Biggs & Tang, 2011)

4. Observations about teaching work practices:

- Having only recently begun working daily with smart phone and tablet technologies in support of workload, the Yammer experience has coalesced the writer's understanding of the power of mobile devices (Metcalf, 2006).
- Working with desktop browser based LMS discussion forum creates a feeling of having to set aside separate time for discussion monitoring and facilitation, having to mentally prepare to 'gear up and go in,' and upon arrival, there may be absolutely nothing happening or all heck may have broken loose. Some email notification systems are available but still involve logging in to respond.

- Whereas, in the experience of working with students via the Yammer application it was understood how the ability to continuously monitor through graphical notifications creates a level of continuous visibility, transparency and control.
- Owing to the visibility and transparency, supervising and supporting junior teaching team members is much more efficient and timely, being able to monitor that they are responding within agreed time to students' queries, can use private messaging to ask you if they get a sticky situation, coaching is also more continuous through private messaging.
- Notifications are by unit of study, so there is no need to try and force subject line data conventions with students or to insist that they use their institutional email addresses to avoid spam filtering.
- Some of the negative behaviours (as perceived by the teaching team) may have been set up by a lack of teaching presence in their preceding units, which highlights the need for consistency in engagement expectations across a program between units,
- Above mentioned consistency is still problematic in a program which combines study experiences delivered by a number of diverse universities.

Conclusion

This case study has reported on the use of the social media tool Yammer in online teaching of undergraduate business students. It was trialed in a stretch situation driven by a desire for greater student engagement and a need to achieve better productivity serving a large student community with new expectations. After a short but intense time trialing and adapting to use Yammer while continuously monitoring discourse in multiple large enrolment units of study, this writer has realized that there is indeed some substance to Web 2.0 hype, in regards to social media communities. The finding is that although disruptive, implementation of social media might be powerful and useful toward supporting both engagement and productivity while 'feeling the feed.'

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