Using social media for learning and teaching

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Staff may be interested in using social media for learning and teaching. What follows are some best practice guidelines for the use of social media at Victoria University.

The Social Media Advisory Group has also prepared social media guidelines (http://intranet.vu.edu.au/webfutures/pdf/Social media - Guidelines for Staff.pdf) primarily for marketing purposes but with some useful information and contacts.

What is social media?

Social media and social networking are "Web 2.0" tools and platforms that enable “user-generated content” through writing and uploading to a webpage. Examples of social media technologies that can be used for learning and teaching include: discussion forums, blogs, wikis, and 3D virtual worlds. External social media sites include Facebook, YouTube, Wikipedia, Flickr, Twitter, LinkedIn and Second Life.

Why use social media?

The use of social media and social networking for teaching and learning has exploded in recent years. Many teachers see Web 2.0 as a means by which more student-centred and social constructivist pedagogies may be designed in an online environment, as it enables students to contribute and collaborate to e-learning environments in a number of ways—a marked difference from first generation e-learning tools that behaved in a more traditional teaching-centred manner and in which social interaction and social learning was much less possible. Social media also provides mechanisms for peer learning and peer assessment, and for the development of active learning communities of practice (Wenger, White & Smith, 2009).

Examples of social media technologies that can be used for learning and teaching include: discussion forums, blogs, twitter feeds, podcasts and videocasts, wikis, and 3D virtual worlds.
Using social media environments at Victoria University

Some of the tools and technologies enabling social media and social learning are available within the e-learning suite of tools and environment at Victoria University. These include tools that can be harnessed from within or linked to the learning management system.

Advantages of using institutional social media tools include:

1. Institutional record-keeping of student participation for assessment and other purposes;
2. An authenticated, equitable, secure, accessible and safe environment for students to participate within, guaranteeing information privacy;
3. The provision of ITS support and troubleshooting for institutional tools;
4. Use of Victoria University login procedures.

VU-supported institutional tools that currently include social media to various levels of integration include WebCT, PebblePad, SNAPVU.

Using social media environments outside Victoria University

Some staff may be attracted to using social networking and social media environments that sit outside the VU domain. A Facebook page or a YouTube channel are examples of this. While Victoria University doesn’t mandate the use of institutional e-learning tools to the exclusion of external sites, there are several issues to be aware of if one is using an external site for teaching and learning:

1. Access to the site should be free, equitable, and accessible, and should not put the student in a position of disadvantage or risk with respect to public or corporate access to their personal information or other content;
2. Students should not be forced to sign up to an external site. If participation on a social media site is expected of students, this should be made clear in the unit guide. Alternative delivery of resources and learning opportunities will need to be developed for those students who opt out of using commercial social media sites;
3. As a corollary to #2, staff and students need to understand issues around appropriate posting and commentary in order to avoid making false, misleading, or deceptive statements, or disparaging statements about others – deliberate or otherwise – which may lead to disciplinary or legal proceedings, or harmful actions, being taken against them. The Staff Code of Conduct (http://tls.vu.edu.au/vu_induction/resources/POH050915000.pdf) and the Student Charter (http://www.vu.edu.au/about-vu/vus-vision/student-charter) still apply to such sites used for teaching and learning purposes;
4. In social media environments that are open to the public (for example, a public blogging site such as Wordpress), students should understand and accept that what they contribute in the way of posts or comments is accessible to a potentially global public audience, and therefore they must not post other people’s confidential or identifying information online. This is true as well for public forums on university websites: see the university Privacy Policy (http://www.vu.edu.au/privacy) under “Public Forums” for more information;
5. Online images, videos, music, text, designs, logos and software can all be protected by intellectual property law so staff and students must always make sure that they have the
right to use the intellectual property, and acknowledge the creator/author where it is reasonable in the circumstances;

6. External social media sites are not supported nor troubleshooted by VU ITS. The responsibility lies with the instructor to provide this kind of support to staff and students; Record-keeping and archiving of the site – especially student assessments – need to be sufficiently addressed to comply with VU Record Management Policy (http://wcf.vu.edu.au/GovernancePolicy/PDF/POU100916000.PDF)

7. For example if students were to upload completed assessments to the external site, the teaching staff member would be responsible for backing-up and archiving these files, as it would not automatically be done by VU ITS. If you have questions about records management or the policy, please contact records@vu.edu.au

While the use of non-institutional social learning environments poses some challenges for staff, there may be, in some instances, advantages to asking students to produce content for a potentially global audience. However, in all cases, use of such platforms and tools should align with intended learning outcomes. The real-world authenticity of social media-based assessment tasks, and the opportunity to engage students in 21st century media literacies and skills (Jenkins et. al, 2009) may be attractive and intended learning outcomes.

**Best practice use of social media for teaching and learning**

For examples of using social media in these ways, go to the social media page on the Learning and Teaching Portal [link] or see the Appendix.

**Communicating expectations**

If the expectation is that students will be using social media in your unit, you will need to communicate this to them, let them know what type and level of participation is expected of them, and whether this will be assessed. Students who opt out of social media will need to have an alternative venue for participation.

**Moderating and facilitating**

With any social media environment, success in creating a vibrant learning community is dependent upon the establishment of **social presence, authentic voice, and a sense of trust** (Preece, 2004). As a facilitator and moderator of the environment, the teacher has the opportunity and responsibility to ensure that these qualities are present; in fact, this is not so different from establishing a welcoming and comfortable environment in a face-to-face classroom.

**Peer sharing**

One of the great advantages of social media is the opportunity it provides for students to learn from each other in the content they produce. There are many ways this can happen, whether they are showcasing their work or collaborating on a project or workshopping in an instance of formative assessment or reflective practice.

**Critical literacy skills**

Social media provides a perfect opportunity for students to engage in critical thinking and digital literacy skills development. While many students use social media sites, many also do not use them critically, or deeply. Yet there is an opportunity to encourage students to become more critical and more discerning about the information shared on social media sites, and to nurture the graduate attributes of lifelong learning.
Informal and participatory learning
Much of what we learn we learn informally, through conversations with our peers and through experimentation. Social media provides an opportunity to engage students in these important informal dimensions of learning, in informal discussion, practice and creative solutions. The opportunity to participate and engage as a novice, without the inhibition of assessment, is often where learning occurs.

Things to look out for in social media

Inappropriate postings
Staff and students must ensure that they do not make disparaging remarks about other staff or students, or any other persons, and staff must ensure that all postings and commentary are not false, misleading or deceptive about VU’s services.

As with any teaching and learning environment, the instructor has a duty to ensure that the environment is free from stressful or inappropriate behaviours from and toward other students. Cyberbullying in the form of “flaming” (unconsidered angry comments), racism, sexism, or other postings that compromise the safety of the environment should be monitored and mediated. A screenshot record of the offending content should be kept, along with date and time of post. Staff who are being harassed can contact the Senior Employee Relations consultant in HR; students bullying other students can be referred to the Student Complaints Manager or the Student Advisory Service.

If you are unsure how to proceed, contact social.media@vu.edu.au or check the Student Incidents and Crisis Counseling webpage (http://www.vu.edu.au/facilities-and-services/advice-and-counselling/counselling-services/student-incidents-and-crisis-counselling) for contacts and advice.

Privacy and confidentiality issues
Students should not be unwitting participants in a social media platform in which their postings are made public. Talk to them about any privacy or confidentiality concerns and be prepared to make alternate allowances for those who choose not to participate (for example, where a student may choose to not use Facebook due to privacy concerns). If assistance is needed with this check the Counselling Services webpage (http://www.vu.edu.au/facilities-services/advice-and-counselling/counselling-services). The VU Privacy Policy states that “the University is not responsible for the privacy practices or content of other sites,” so you should be aware of the terms of use and privacy policies of external websites before you use them. Make sure you and your students carefully read the terms of use of any social media platform and that you have established the appropriate privacy settings. Make sure too that both students and staff are aware that they will still be obliged to abide by VU codes of conduct, which includes obligations in regards to confidentiality and privacy.

Staff should also ensure that student names are not linked with student IDs on any social media site – including those offered internally at VU.

Equitability and accessibility
An instructor should be sure that all students have equal access to the social media site being used. This includes students from partner institutions overseas and students with various disabilities.
Copyright and other intellectual property issues
The unauthorised use of online material is common on many social media sites. Nevertheless, it is important that instructors have an understanding of copyright and other intellectual property issues and what is allowed within a locked-down LMS, and ensure that they and their students do not post restricted material.

Images, videos, music, text, designs, logos and software can all be protected by intellectual property law so you must always make sure you have the right or ask for permission to use the intellectual property, and acknowledge the creator/author where it is reasonable in the circumstances.

For more information on copyright and open educational resources (OERs), see the VU copyright website: http://w2.vu.edu.au/library/copyright/default.htm.

Existing institutional social media channels
There are many Victoria University social media channels already—on Facebook, Twitter, iTunes, LinkedIn, etc. Many of them are marketing-related but some, such as the SNAPVU YouTube channel (http://www.youtube.com/snapvu), are related to learning and teaching. The VU Social Media Registry (https://docs.google.com/spreadsheet/viewform?formkey=dHZWRkJXVkhHaVg1Q1Vkc0pRNNkZXc6MQ-gid=0) can give you ideas as to how social media is being used at VU for various purposes, and who is using them.

Further information
For additional resources around the use of social media for learning and teaching at VU and best practice examples, please visit the Blended learning – Social Media section of the Learning and Teaching Portal.