Social Media, Teacher-Student Relationships, and Student Learning

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Various social media tools, apps, and programs have emerged in education, and teachers today have to decide whether these tools would be useful for their teaching and consider how they might affect different aspects of their relationships with students. This study examines teacher perspectives on how social media is affecting the teacher-student relationship. Data were collected through qualitative interviews. Findings revealed that teachers perceived social media impacted the teacher-student relationship in terms of their interactions with students, as well as student behavioral and learning outcomes. Overall, the findings enhance our understanding of how the teacher-student relationship and interactions affect student learning and out-of-class communication and support, in real life contexts as well as in online environments.

Keywords: teacher-student relationships, teacher-student interactions, social media, student learning

Introduction

Ample literature has discussed the teacher-student relationship and acknowledged its importance to learning (Banfield, Richmond, & McCroskey, 2006; Bolkan & Goodboy, 2009; Frisby & Martin, 2010; Frymier & Houser, 2000; Gehlbach, Brinkworth, & Harris, 2012; Jones, 2008, p. 200; Pogue & Ahyun, 2006). However, in today's digital world, there exists a question of how social media has influenced that relationship both inside and outside the classroom. Recent research suggests that social media may have positive effects in education (Botty, Mohd Taha, Shahrill, & Mahadi, 2015; Johnson, 2011; Komarraju, Musulkin, & Bhattacharya, 2010; Mazer, Murphy, & Simonds, 2009; McArthur & Bostedo-Conway, 2012; Sakiz, Pape, & Hoy, 2012; Veldman, van Tartwijk, Brekelmans, & Wubbels, 2013). On the other hand, both teachers and students have wondered whether increased social media interaction with one another is appropriate, or even really all that relevant to the learning process (Bongartz et al., 2011; Cain, Scott, Tiemeier, Akers, & Metzger, 2013; Helvie-Mason, 2011; Karl & Peluchette, 2011; Seidel, 2009; Teclehaimanot & Hickman, 2011).

In light of this, the purpose of this study was to examine teacher perspectives on how social media was affecting their relationships with students. The research question that guided this research was: *How do teachers perceive social media is changing their relationships with students?* This question was aimed at examining teacher perspectives on how social media interactions affected their relationships with students both inside and outside the classroom, how those changes came about, and ultimately how it impacted student learning in general.

The research question was also situated in the conceptual framework of Social Penetration Theory (SPT) by Altman and Taylor (1973), which looks at how relationships grow through interpersonal communication and self-disclosure.

Literature Review

There has been research that suggests communication outside of the classroom can increase teacher credibility with students (Mazer et al., 2009), improve student trust, motivation, engagement, confidence, and learning (Botty et al., 2015; Jaasma & Koper, 1999; Junco, Heiberger, & Loken, 2011; Junco, Elavsky, & Heiberger, 2013; Komarraju et al., 2010; Mazer, Murphy, & Simonds, 2007; Sakiz et al., 2012), encourage intimacy and shared control between instructor and student (Dobransky & Frymier, 2004), and even affect teachers' own job satisfaction, motivation, self-efficacy, and wellbeing (Docan-Morgan, 2011; Spilt, Koomen, & Thijs, 2011; Veldman et al., 2013).

Today, it would seem that social media has increased this out-of-class communication, and its usage in classroom settings has led to some positive effects, particularly with students who are already social media users. McArthur and Bostedo-Conway (2012) found that university students who interacted with their instructors on Twitter tended to view them in a more positive light. Johnson (2011) found that instructors' disclosure of personal information on social media increased their credibility with students, particularly students who had a positive view of social media or were regular users. Students tend to value self-disclosure that is positive, honest, intentional, and relevant to the course and content (Lannutti & Strauman, 2006; Zhai, 2012). An instructor's online disclosure also should be consistent with

their teaching style in the class; teachers who are strict in class but have a more relaxed demeanor online might garner negative reactions from students (Mazer et al., 2009). On the other hand, an instructor's self-disclosure online does not necessarily lead to a better relationship with their students (Park, Jin, & Annie Jin, 2011). It is likely that while social media does allow instructors to better connect and interact with students, the appropriateness, relevance, and content of those interactions also matter.

Methodology

The study involved ten teachers who taught at multiple levels of education in four institutions in Brunei Darussalam, and who utilized social media to interact with their students inside and outside the classroom. This provided an overview of different levels, teaching styles, backgrounds, and experiences.

The data used in this study was gained through qualitative semi-structured interviews on teacher perspectives. All interviews were conducted in English and were guided with specific questions, while still permitting participants to determine the depth and direction of their responses with minimal constraints. Subsequently, in-depth analyses of participants' thoughts and perspectives were conducted by grouping the text of transcribed recordings into larger collections and applying codes, categories, and themes. In doing so, a rich complex picture emerged and this ultimately allowed the examination of the central phenomenon in question through the lens and contexts of those directly engaged in it.

Analysis of the data took the form of qualitative comparative analysis, specifically the inductive form of constant comparison analysis in which codes emerged from the data (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007, 2008; Mayring, 2000). This was followed by analytical coding to find commonalities and group coded chunks together into categories and themes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Major ideas and conclusions were related to the research literature, as well as the relevant aspects of Social Penetration Theory.

Findings

Table 1 lists brief details for each participant, including their assigned pseudonym, age, and the number of years they have been teaching. The participants are also grouped according to the school where they teach.

Table 1

Participant Information

School	Participant Alias	Teaching Level	Age	No. of years teaching
School 1	Nancy	Secondary	27	5
	Paula	Secondary	~ 50s	28
	Shawn	Secondary	26	2
School 2	Dan	Secondary	31	8
	Fiona	Primary	26	2
School 3	Claire	A Level	32	7
	Lisa	A Level	33	8
	Oscar	A Level	61	38
	Zara	A Level	~ Mid-30s	10
School 4	Tina	Secondary/ University	32	7

The themes that emerged involved how social media affected two things in the teacher-student relationship — teacher-student interactions and student learning.

Social media and teacher-student interactions

Participants found that in real life interactions, students were often "intimidated in face-to-face conversations" and were unable to get beyond the teacher-student divide: "When I'm talking to them personally, it's more on a teacher-student relationship. You cannot remove that." (Nancy). Conversely, many participants found that their students were more "daring" and able to communicate more freely via social media and "say what's going on."

> Sometimes, students are intimidated in class. But when it comes to social media, they are braver because it's faceless. They wouldn't say such things bravely in class. Some of them are introverted or intimidated or whatever, but they are able to talk on social media. They are more casual when it comes to social media, whereas in a formal setting they are more reserved. (Oscar)

Claire found that her students in the past were not as outgoing and she had to take the first step in connecting with them, though that has since changed given today's ubiquity of social media.

> The students now are more out there, so to speak. They see using social media as something that is normal, like you know, asking for a teacher's mobile number, for example. In the past they would feel a bit hesitant to ask for your mobile phone, but now even on the first day of school when you see them, they would straightaway ask you, "Oh Miss, can we get your mobile phone number? Because we want to create a WhatsApp group." (Claire)

When I asked participants about the social media they used, WhatsApp stood out as a common platform, one which changed the way they interacted with their students: "WhatsApp has been used all around. I would say WhatsApp has been multipurpose and plays a huge part in teachers' lives now" (Shawn). While most of the participants used either Facebook or Instagram (or both) in varying degrees, WhatsApp was something that they all utilized regularly, and in many cases used the most, particularly in academic contexts. Of particular note was WhatsApp's 'groups' feature, where multiple people can be added into a group chat by an 'admin'; participants found that this aided organization, as they could group students by class or subject and tailor their interactions with each group accordingly.

In contrast to Facebook or Instagram's more open social network space, WhatsApp offered a more direct line between participants and their students for both academic and non-academic usage, and does not possess many of the extraneous features that often come with more 'mainstream' social media. Lisa mentioned that when she first started teaching in 2009, "we did not have WhatsApp back then" and she used Facebook with her students because it was the easiest way to communicate with them at the time. However, WhatsApp had since supplanted Facebook as their preferred tool because it was "the easiest to use, rather than Facebook or Instagram." Oscar also used to utilize Facebook a lot with students, but saw it fall somewhat out of favor with parents and students due to "fears of children being misled". Over time he found students used Facebook less and less, and in searching for an alternative to ensure student engagement, WhatsApp emerged as an acceptable tool he could use to directly connect with both parents and students. Though he still used Facebook to build and maintain learning communities between classes, Oscar had since included WhatsApp as a common part of his workflow. He found that the direct accessibility with his students helped him to interact with them outside of class time: "We only see them one hour per day in Form 6, so it's too limited a time for me to share everything I want to share with them." Tina felt that social media and communication tools like WhatsApp opened up opportunities to further the academic relationship between teachers and students, something that might not have been as readily available in the past:

> There's something to be said about having a good working relationship with your teacher. And back when social media wasn't so widespread, the only way for you to have that was to spend a lot of time with the teacher, whether in the classroom or outside of the classroom, to get more time beyond classroom time. That's not really possible for everyone. But with social media, there's a wide world opened up for you, because it's not limited to classroom time. It's not limited to the time you see the teacher inside the school, so there can be a lot of opportunities for you to build that link with that teacher. (Tina)

However, given that students had a direct line to them on one or more social media platforms, participants found that students — and sometimes even students' parents — would contact them "everywhere, anytime" at inconvenient moments, and even sometimes late at night. One such participant mentioned that he had to learn how to balance his home life and work life, as he often found himself torn between spending time with family and helping students who needed him.

> The disadvantage is, of course, sacrifice. Family and students, sometimes we do not know how to balance them. Sometimes some students that need help, even midnight they will just message you, "Sir, help me, help me please. I don't know how to do this question. I'm doing my revision." Stuff like that, because the next day is exams. Then they will message me, midnight, and sometimes if I'm still awake I will reply them. So I think that's a disadvantage. It steals away our private time with our family. (Dan)

Some participants were also often unsure about whether their students got as much out of their online interactions as they expected or desired: "I don't even know if they worry about it or if they care that they participate" (Lisa). In comparing face-to-face class interactions with online interactions, Oscar said:

> Some people are active in just seeing the post. Some people are active because they respond. So in terms of the receptivity, it's not comprehensive. Not everybody accesses on an equal basis. I mean, those are individual constraints. We can't solve that issue, whereas in class it's face-to-face and everybody gets. How much they receive is another thing, but the thing is, the same information is put forward to everybody. That's a formal setting, you see, whereas this is informal. It does not reach everyone equally. (Oscar)

Other participants were concerned with issues of fairness. Fiona stated that she did feel a connection with some of her students, and used an analogy of "breaking a barrier, that wall between your student and you." However, she stated she tried not to let that affect the way she treated students she did not connect online with because she felt it would not be fair. On the other hand, Nancy stated that because she understood some of her students better through her online interactions with them, she knew of problems and issues that they had and tried to give them more attention in class or spend more time to ensure they knew how to perform tasks. As a result, she wondered whether some of her other students felt like they received less attention.

> So I have a tendency of teaching more to this side because I know they have problems. … I teach them more because I know their parents will not help them when they go home. So I need to teach them in class how to do this, how to do that, which is affecting also the other students maybe, because maybe I don't give as much time to them as compared to the other students. (Nancy)

Thus, while participants endeavored to treat all their students the same regardless of who they connected with online, there were a couple of participants who wondered if it affected their students nonetheless.

Social Media and Student Learning

Most participants saw an impact on their students' learning. Tina felt that social media opened up new avenues for all parties involved to work together in teaching and learning: "Sometimes you and the students are co-constructing knowledge together, so you really need to have a platform for that to happen." Other participants seemed to echo this — both Shawn and Lisa found that many of their students had better understanding and would "catch on faster" in class. They knew what their teacher was talking about because they had seen what had been shared or discussed online or had asked their teacher questions online prior to class. Zara asserted that sharing resources online with students sometimes made learning more efficient because students are "on their phones all the time. So sometimes when they want to revise, they don't need to have a paper. They can just take a look at summarized notes in PDF in their phones." Oscar often used social media to clarify any confusion he might have noticed in his students, "intensifying what they learned in class." In addition, although he consciously tried to treat all his students equally, Oscar recognized that students who participated actively online often benefited more, while those who did not join in and add to the discussion were "compromising" because they lacked that "additional input".

> When a question is asked, I don't answer. I let the other members respond. I wait for a few answers to come in. Then I respond accordingly by crediting them for their viewpoints and then I will tell them that it could also be seen this way. So, obviously those who participate are benefiting more and they are gaining more confidence, self-confidence. They are gaining more insight into it as opposed to those who are not participating. (Oscar)

Social media interactions also seemed to have an effect on students' enthusiasm when it came to learning. Claire observed that "with the availability of social media, it sort of enables you to get students to learn more willingly." She felt that she did not have to force them, as "they're more willing to put effort into their own learning." Tina hazarded a guess as to why this was:

> Even for me, if I were a student, I would be more willing to learn if you know the person behind the desk. … You'd be more invested in learning. … Maybe it's just me but I think because, "Oh, this teacher, he's actually fun outside the classroom." Even though the subject is dry, I would be willing to give them the benefit of the doubt. (Tina)

Although some participants stated they did not see any major changes or improvements in the way their students learned, they did acknowledge small advances here and there. Dan said he saw a slight improvement and that the students who interacted with him on social media usually did better in their exams as "compared to those who shy away with me." Paula stated that her students with online interaction "find that their doubts are cleared up maybe a day earlier or a couple days earlier than the others because they have the direct line and they choose to ask." She also discovered that many of her students "learn by proxy"; students who did not connect with her online would often

simply ask those who did, thus gaining any extra information and learning through them. Other times, the online-interaction students would approach her to discuss something, and the non-online-interaction students would "tag along". Thus she felt she was able to reach all her students, whether directly or indirectly, and "at least, come what may, everybody learns."

On the other hand, social media usage is not always a boon and could distract students and cause them to digress. Paula emphasized that social media could often diminish time spent on academics because students today "juggle" their real and social media lives as they get "carried away" trying to build popularity with friends and followers. Zara felt that students were "quite hooked" on the Internet and social media, and she wanted to prevent them from using her to justify wasting time online: "I don't want to let it be an excuse for them to say that, 'Oh, because my [Science] teacher says I have to go online to see all these things. I have to be there'."

Discussion

Teacher-Student Interactions

The connection between relationships and interaction was discussed by Frymier and Houser (2000), who stated that the teacher-student relationship is content-driven but also relational, and both content expertise and personal communication between teacher and student are crucial to effective teaching. They further held that the formation of interpersonal relationships led to greater trust and respect between teachers and students, which in turn allowed students to ask "stupid" or risky questions by providing a safe learning environment where students do not have to fear being seen by their peers as foolish. In this current study, teachers utilized social media to improve and maintain both their academic and personal communication with students, and this impacted teacher-student interaction by providing a less intimidating environment, more directness of communication, and increased accessibility between teacher and student. In addition, teachers found that social media allowed students, particularly the shy or quiet ones, to be more open and able to connect with their teachers. An example of providing a safe space for learning was seen in teachers' use of direct online communication through texting and instant messaging services like WhatsApp. The group chats in WhatsApp provided a collective learning environment for each class, while one-on-one chat options allowed students to directly approach teachers if they desired to seek aid away from the eyes of peers. Thus, the findings in this current study posit social media as a useful and flexible avenue that provides opportunities for the formation of a safe and less intimidating learning environment.

Moreover, as teachers and students today have more open access to each other outside the confines of the classroom, this enables the extension of the teaching and learning environment. This assertion would seem to be connected to Dobransky and Frymier's (2004) discussion of out-of-class communication (OCC). Interestingly, while the OCC reported in this current study matched Dobransky and Frymier's definitions as "interactions outside the formal classroom that may be initiated by students or faculty" (p. 213), one notable difference is that Dobransky and Frymier characterized OCC as primarily face-to-face and often relatively infrequent. This is not too surprising given that their study was conducted in 2004 when social media as we know it today did not exist — Facebook and Twitter launched in 2006, WhatsApp in 2009, and Instagram in 2010. As such, face-to-face interactions were probably the most common form of OCC at the time. To reiterate how one participant in this current study put it, "the only way … was to spend a lot of time with the teacher, whether in the classroom or outside of the classroom, to get more time beyond classroom time." However, social media today has allowed much more OCC to take place without time or distance as major constraints. Thus, the findings in this current study indicate that social media provides teachers and students with additional platforms for OCC beyond face-to-face interactions, and thus the findings extend and reinforce the idea of OCC as a space for both safe learning and increased communication.

Postiglione and Tan (2007) contended that teachers in Brunei have "little autonomy and professional freedom. They cannot with impunity criticize the education system, education policies, or curriculum. The teacher is not a change agent" (p.31) and is expected to adhere to school procedures and policies, which leads to a focus on learning as "the transmission of standardized accepted sanitized knowledge" (p. 27). As a result, there is often less room for intellectual creativity and curiosity outside pre-determined curricula, a situation compounded by the examination-oriented focus on results and grades. One possible impact of this could be the lack of student interaction, where many students choose to stay quiet because the atmosphere does not always promote boldness or independence in seeking knowledge beyond what is being transmitted. Thus, given the tendency for classroom culture in Brunei to focus more on content than the relationship between teacher and student, the findings in this current study would suggest that OCC serves to bridge perceived gaps in these relationships. Using social media for OCC can enable teachers to interact with their students both academically and personally, outside the confines and limitations of a more teacher-centered classroom.

Student Learning

The findings in this study showed that the usage of social media had an effect on student learning, at least from the perspectives of the teachers. These findings help corroborate past research and also add an insight on how this might play out at different educational levels. For example, Bolkan and Goodboy (2009) examined how a teacher's transformational leadership had positive effects on student learning, student participation, and teacher credibility. This current study suggests that social media usage allowed teachers to demonstrate elements of transformational leadership outside the classroom: direct online communication let teachers demonstrate individual consideration in how different students' individual needs were often considered; and teachers were able to practice intellectual stimulation by using social media to continue and intensify learning and push students to consider topics deeper and on different levels. This ultimately had a positive impact on student learning as students gained additional input and feedback and seemed to put more effort into their own education. These findings are also in line with Duncan and Barczyk's (2013) study that looked at how Facebook facilitates the building and maintenance of communities of practice, and how it fosters collaboration and interaction and enhances student learning. Some teachers in this current study maintained communities of practice on Facebook and WhatsApp for each of their classes or student groups, using them to encourage learning and supplement what was taught in the classroom.

Similar to what Jones (2008) found examining the positive effects of out-of-class support (OCS) on student motivation to learn, this current study provides further evidence that suggests OCS is a useful tool to help students cope with academic obstacles and pressures they might encounter. Teachers used social media to help allay student apprehension, clear up misunderstandings, clarify school-related information, and provide further opportunities for learning by providing extra resources and more instantaneous and accessible feedback. These support behaviors seemed to have positive effects on students' desire to put effort into their own learning.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine the teacher-student relationship, and how social media interactions influenced how that relationship changed and progressed. Results showed social media has the potential to promote positive educational outcomes; as teachers spent time interacting with their students beyond the classroom, they also worked towards the enhancement of academics and learning.

This study adds to the existing literature considering the importance of the teacher-student relationship and offers insights into how social media affects the teacher-student relationship in terms of its interactions. It also enhances our understanding of how that affects student learning and out-of-class communication and support, in real life contexts as well as in online environments.

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