SOCIAL MEDIA IN ADULT EDUCATION: INSIGHTS GAINED FROM GRUNDTVIG LEARNING PARTNERSHIP PROJECT "INSTITUTIONAL STRATEGIES TARGETING THE UPTAKE OF SOCIAL NETWORKING IN ADULT EDUCATION (ISTUS)"

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Abstract

Purpose—the **focus** of this article is the role of social media in adult education and their impact on adult students in regards to their educational needs and specific personal situations within the frame of the learning partnership project. The Grundtvig learning partnership project "Institutional Strategies Targeting the Uptake of Social Networking in Adult Education (ISTUS) is an international partnership that includes partners from 7 EU countries. The **aim** of the research presented in this paper is to define cases of the uptake of technologies and applications by MRU students; thus, the **objectives** of the research are 1) to review literature pertaining to the field of social media in adult education context and 2) to analyse the respondents' insights as regards learning/teaching practices, resources, and facilities that affect their learning in relation to social networking and media use (taking into consideration both personal and educational perspectives).

Design/methodology/approach—*the research paper adopts qualitative research approach.*

Findings—*students perceive SM mainly as online communication means (usually informal communication is implied). SM is firstly associated by learners with pastime venue, not educational resource. Thus, methods of teaching/learning in SM and with the help of SM have to be developed and improved. They have to be considered in line with the necessity to develop critical and reflexive thinking skills and media and information literacy skills. The respondents have pointed out both positive and negative aspects of social media use for learning/teaching. Creation of an inner institutional SM type involving qualified people with expertise in SM use for education has been suggested.*

Research limitations/implications—*this article is focused only on the attitudes of MRU students though 105 interviews in total have been conducted within the framework of the project and not only students, but also teachers and administration have been interviewed.*

Practical implications—*From the practical perspective, this research is a starting point for further investigation encompassing findings of all partners of the project. In addition, it provides insights into potential venues for improvement of the teaching methodology in the context of networked studies.*

Originality/Value—*the research is particularly valuable since it is an important step to deeper insights into the existing situation, needs, tendencies, different attitudes and research issues important in the investigated context and developmental tendencies of education in contemporary society. The investigated theme adds to the existing studies of networked education that requires substantive and comprehensive investigations.*

Keywords: *social media, adult education, students' attitudes, the uptake of new technologies, ISTUS learning partnership.*

Research type: *research paper.*

1. Introduction

The focus of this article is the role of social media (SM) in adult education and their impact on teaching and learning practices. The research has been carried out within the framework of t*he Grundtvig* learning partnership project "Institutional Strategies Targeting the Uptake of Social Networking in Adult Education (ISTUS)." The partnership has started building its knowledge about SNS and SM in adult education on the initial premise that new technologies and software under the Web 2.0 umbrella have a strong impact on adult education, independent learning, digital literacy, life-long learning, teaching approaches, and institutional strategies in adapting to rapid technological development. *The general objective of ISTUS* is to define how adult educational institutions embrace SM. The rationale behind this objective stems from a premise that educational institutions adopt various approaches to the use of SM in the educational and institutional contexts. The learning partnership is involved in analysis

of key concepts of Web 2.0 for adult education and seeks to determine strategies for the uptake of technologies and applications from an institutional perspective. *This paper defines* cases of the uptake of technologies and applications by MRU students; thus, (1) in the theoretical part, an analysis of literature pertaining to the field of social media in adult education context is provided and, (2) in the second part, the respondents' insights as regards learning/teaching practices, resources, and facilities that affect their learning in relation to SM use (taking into consideration both personal and educational perspectives) are analysed.

2. Theoretical Background

It is very difficult to define SM since there is no single adopted definition among researchers investigating the phenomenon, more even so when focusing on SM use in educational context. The working definition of SM adopted for the aims of the project states that "SM is an umbrella term covering a potentially unlimited range of online tools and web based applications which enable online social interaction and the creation and sharing of user generated content; it enables people to rendezvous, connect and/or collaborate through computer-mediated communication and creation." Bearing this conception and project aims in mind, an extensive investigation of the available research has been carried out in all participating countries, and a selection of most relevant publications has been provided in http://istusproject.blogspot.com/. Due to limited space, only the most relevant works that address the issues of this paper will be mentioned here.

According to Siemens (2004), the three most common learning theories in educational context (behaviourism, cognitivism, and constructivism) do not meet contemporary demands of education since they were created when technology did not impact our life so significantly. The researcher claims that "Learning needs and theories that describe learning principles and processes should be reflective of underlying social environments" (p.1). Therefore, Siemens distinguishes what he calls "significant trends in learning" implying that: 1) learners acquire experience in multiple, sometimes even unrelated, fields in their lifetime; 2) informal learning occurring in various ways gains in importance; 3) learning and work are interrelated; 4) technology use influences and changes our thinking; 5) both an individual and an organization learn; 6) many processes nowadays are impacted by technology; and 7) know-where is added to know-how and know-what (p. 2). In the circumstances, according to Siemens, it does not suffice only to modify the existing theories—an innovative, alternative approach has to be offered for consideration (p. 4). Thus, Siemens elaborates on the connectivism theory and states,

"Connectivism is the integration of principles explored by chaos, network, and complexity and self-organization theories. Learning is a process that occurs within nebulous environments of shifting core elements – not entirely under the control of the individual. Learning (defined as actionable knowledge) can reside outside of ourselves

(within an organization or a database), is focused on connecting specialized information sets, and the connections that enable us to learn more are more important than our current state of knowing" (p. 6).

Another aspect that has arisen in the course of the research is related with the process of SM adoption in adult education. Nowadays adult education institutions are faced with the challenge of technology adoption. This perspective is extensively covered by Straub (2009). Straub in his study investigates computing adoption processes from the perspectives of several theories (Roger's innovation diffusion theory, the Concerns-Based Adoption Model, the Technology Acceptance Model, and the United Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology) and claims that these models are rooted in social cognitive theory. Straub concludes that "First, technology adoption is a complex, inherently social, developmental process. Secondly, individuals construct unique (but malleable) perceptions of technology that influence the adoption process. Lastly, successfully facilitating technology adoption needs to address cognitive, emotional, and contextual concerns." (p. 22).

Toole, et al. (2010) in their paper also discuss different types of barriers that have to be overcome in SM adoption processes in adult education. The authors also focus on benefits of using Web 2.0 in adult education and future prospects.

As regards communication among learners and educators, Kop (2010) in her research focuses on specific aspects of SM use in adult learning and investigates effective use of social media in adult learning, the learner's level of control in comparison to the tutor and the institution, facilitation of communication among learners and educators, and other related issues. New technologies are seen as fostering communication, engagement and self-direction while, importantly, adult educators are referred as "trusted 'human filters' of information."

Social networking for educational purposes seems to be a specifically problematic issue for researchers, educators, and learners. Boyd and Ellison (2007) discuss the types and functionality of social networking sites; Boyd (2006, 2007, 2008) has also worked extensively on definitions of social networking sites, focusing on key features or SNS. The use of social networks has been discussed in several works covering different aspects of using SNS in education that are included in ISTUS blog archive as sources providing useful insights (Rainie, Lenhart, and Smith, 2012) investigate social networking climate; IEEE Learning Technology Newsletter (April 2012) devoted an entire special theme section on SNS and social computing-enhanced learning); SNS are also extensively investigated in Scott, Carrington (2011) who provide an exhaustive and extremely useful guide for education researchers.

Finally, media and information literacy is another important issue that has to be taken into consideration in any discussion of SM use for educational purposes (Baran, Davis (2009); Duoblienė (2011); Vaičiūnienė (2007)). Following information published in UNESCO site, "Information Literacy and Media Literacy are traditionally seen as separate and distinct fields. UNESCO's strategy brings together these two fields as a combined set of competencies (knowledge, skills and attitude) necessary for life and work today. MIL considers all forms of media and other information providers such as

libraries, archive, museums and Internet irrespective of technologies used". Lau (2010) focuses on information literacy and media literacy relationships and presents MIL competencies as encompassing knowledge, skills, and attitudes, and specifies core skills (access; evaluation/understanding and use) and subsidiary skills (identify need/ express/ search/locate; analyse/induction/deduction (understand)/process; and apply/learn/ ethics/communicate/reproduce/produce). These sources provide reasonable guidelines for establishing key characteristics of media and information literacy seen as a combined set. In addition, valuable insights for educators and learners can be gained from studies of new media (Lievrouw, Livingstone (2010); Lievrouw, Livingstone (2002); Joinson et al. (2007); Weber (2006)).

3. Research Methodology

The research paper adopts qualitative research approach. The research data has been collected from 5 interviews of Mykolas Romeris University students. The following categories have been singled out in the interviews: 1) personal insights about teaching/ learning practices in this HE institution in relation to the use of SM; 2) the personal perceptions of SM both from the perspective of personal use and the perspective of educational use; 3) the reasons and specific examples of SM use; 4) the pros and cons of SM impact on work and learning/ teaching; 5) type of SM—public or institutional—the respondents consider to be potentially more efficient in their educational context and who should be responsible for initiating activities in SM for education; 6) knowledge and skills that the respondents consider to be relevant in current learning process; 7) the feedback that they give about the courses and the possibility of using SM for providing feedback; 8) the capacities of teaching staff, and 9) the expected changes regarding the use of SM in teaching/learning.

4. Results and Findings

Teaching/learning practices. In general, the support for professional and personal development received from institution has been assessed by the respondents as good and even excellent. Various resources and facilities are used for professional and personal development (regardless whether this is intended by teaching staff) with the exception of one interviewee who does not use textbooks, only interactive and online sources. In addition, all interviewees (except one respondent) think that all resources are integrated systematically by the institution; the only differing opinion (that textbooks are not integrated systematically by the institution) arises out of the tendency of the university to use distance teaching online tools in a more systematic manner.

SM definitions. In comparison to the working definition of SM provided above, the student respondents defined social media as: 1) Internet and telecommunication technologies that are used by individuals, groups and organizations for communication;

2) software for communication and cooperation; 3) Internet sites for communication and information sharing; 4) social sites in Internet; and 5) information that is provided by people who are not necessarily experts of relevant fields and that is available online (e.g., in Wikipedia). We can infer from these ideas that students mainly correlate SM with online communication tools and their perception of what SM are is very broad and unspecified. This is also obvious from the reasons and specific examples of SM use that the respondents provide.

The reasons for using SM. SM are used by the respondents in this research entirely for communication purposes. Normally, this implies communication with friends (further not specified) or communication with group mates for learning on one's own initiative. Only one respondent claimed that the reasons for using SM are communication with teachers and communication with group mates for learning directed by institution.

Examples of SM use. When asked to describe particular examples of SM use for learning, the respondents maintained the same focus on communication (with friends or any communication); cooperation, reading articles shared through SM; information search and sharing have been considered in the second place. Besides, SM are used for sharing one's ideas, opinion, experience. In addition, SM are a way of spending one's pastime when feeling too tired for any mentally-demanding activity. Thus, SM are primarily associated with leisure activities, not learning.

SM impact on work and learning. This question led to gaining insights into perceived pros and cons of SM use for education or work. The *positive* aspects implied that 1) SM are a place for communication with friends and acquaintances that one cannot meet face-to-face or that one would not otherwise communicate with (because they live abroad or in another city, they were one's high school mates, classmates or ex-group mates at university) about their hobbies, situations and experiences; 2) it would be impossible to collect all the information that is available in SM on your own; 3) one can find out a lot about the people one knows, about activities of relevant institutions, news, etc. One stays up-to-date and instantly communicates with people; 4) the respondents find it easier to locate the required information in a short time, to communicate with group-mates and colleagues; and 5) it is easier to maintain at least certain kind of relations with a bigger number of people. The *negative* effects of SM that have been indicated are the following: 1) SM are time-consuming and tiresome; 2) a negative habit of constant urge to plunge in Facebook starts annually forming; 3) the time spent in Facebook could be better used for studying, work, sports, etc.; 4) people do not know how to communicate in reality because they do not care about each other: everything can be found in Facebook; 5) SM take a lot of one's time and thus reduce the efficiency of studies. In general, respondents believe that SM should be used in learning/teaching though the efficiency, purposes, and methods of SM use for teaching/learning still raise a lot of questions.

Public or private/institutional SNS and SM used for teaching/learning two respondents believe that both public and private SNS and SM should be used for learning, and three respondents prefer only public SNS and SM.

Initiating activities in SM and SNS One more point for consideration has been the source of initiative for starting activities in SNS and SM for teaching/learning: three

respondents claim that both institution and learners should initiate the activities, but two interviewees think that, in educational context and for educational purposes, the teaching staff should initiate the activities. *Knowledge and skills needed in current and on-going learning process* Analytical thinking skills and information and media literacy skills have been rated as most important. Secondly, social skills were indicated. In addition to these, creativity, specific knowledge, collaborative skills, and computer skills have been indicated.

The skills supported by a study programme. These skills have been specified as follows: collaborative skills, creativity, social skills, specific knowledge, and computer skills.

S*kills and qualities developed by SM in teaching/learning.* The rating of the skills has been different when focusing on SM impact on individual skills: collaborative skills, computer skills, social skills, specific knowledge, and creativity. Though collaborative skills are considered to be the most important ones (just like in the rating of the skills supported by a study programme), computer skills are placed in the second position in the order of importance under this heading: efficient SM use for teaching/learning naturally implies improvement and development of computer skills.

Feedback about the courses, feedback data collection, and use of SM for providing feedback. Differing answers have been provided regarding institutional initiative of getting feedback on the courses and teaching practices from students. When asked for feedback, traditional on-line questionnaires, assessment scales, and open discussions have been mentioned. When asked to describe exactly what feedback they provided, only one respondent pointed out that, depending on subject and teaching method, the assessment ranged from good to satisfactory. As regards providing feedback in SM and whether it would differ from feedback collected in traditional ways, the feedback in SM would be 1) only positive for the sake of PR, 2) all aspects should be pointed out since students' opinion forms the overall image of an institution; 3) SM provide a perfect platform for one's suggestions and observations not expressed so far in traditional ways; or 4) the feedback in SM would not differ from traditional ways of getting feedback.

Capacities of educational staff. According to the respondents, all teachers know what SM are, some of them are interested in SM, and use them a lot. Besides, the university offers qualification courses and other events for teachers where they can develop new media skills.

Expected changes regarding the use of SM in teaching/learning. The respondents ideas stemmed from considerations about 1) creation of a specific SM type for discussion and accumulation of information for those interested in the use of SM for educational purposes; 2) a possibility to participate in inner (institutional) SM that would involve qualified people from university who could answer the questions important for students and would maintain communication with students; and 3) students becoming more active and conscious in expressing their viewpoint as regards learning/teaching based on SM more often, and educational staff should be more responsive.

5. Conclusions and Suggestions for Further Research

Generally speaking, the institutions of adult and higher education inevitably have to face the technology-driven challenges. The use of SNS and SM for educational purposes raises considerable controversies and the research of the issues in question on European level and also globally is not sufficient. As regards the insights gained from the framework of the ISTUS project:

- It is clear that students perceive SM mainly as communication means (usually informal communication is implied).
- Methods of teaching/learning in SM and with the help of SM have to be developed and improved. They have to be considered in line with the necessity to develop critical and reflexive thinking skills and media and information literacy skills.
- Another specific point highlighted by the respondents is the suggestion to create an inner institutional SM type involving qualified people with expertise in SM use for education.

In general, SM use for educational purposes should be fostered, and awareness about possibilities offered by SM in teaching/learning should be raised so that SM start to be perceived not only as a pastime venue but also a potential multi-faceted educational resource.

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SOCIALINĖS MEDIJOS: ĮŽVALGOS IŠ GRUNDTVIG MOKYMOSI PARTNERYSČIŲ PROJEKTO „INSTITUTIONAL STRATEGIES TARGETING THE UPTAKE OF SOCIAL NETWORKING IN ADULT EDUCATION (ISTUS)"

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Santrauka. *Straipsnyje tiriama socialinių medijų įtaka suaugusiųjų švietime ir analizuojamas studentų požiūris į socialinių medijų naudojimą. Literatūros apžvalga atlikta remiantis projekto dalyvių sukaupta informacija apie socialinių tinklų ir socialinių medijų*

naudojimo švietime tyrimus, kurie archyvuojami projekto tinklaraštyje. Projekte ir šiame tyrime socialinės medijos apibrėžiamos kaip platus terminas, apimantis potencialiai neribotą interaktyvių interneto įrankių skaičių; šie įrankiai ir jų teikiamos galimybės įgalina socialinį bendravimą ir vartotojų kuriamo turinio sklaidą. Kalbant apibendrintai, šiuolaikiniai mokslininkai ir praktikai, susiduriantys su dinamiškai besivystančiomis socialinėmis medijomis ir jų poveikiu studijoms ir mokymosi fenomenui, pabrėžia, kad populiariausios mokymosi teorijos edukaciniame kontekste jau nebepaaiškina besikeičiančio mokymosi pobūdžio dėl didžiulio technologijų poveikio mokymosi procesui. Straipsnio teorinėje dalyje apžvelgiami mokslininkų siūlymai pažvelgti į šiuolaikinį mokymąsi iš kitokių perspektyvų, nei siūlo tradicinės teorijos, ir pastebėti kliūtis, kurios trukdo švietimo įstaigoms suvokti, kokios reikšmingos tampa socialinės medijos šiuolaikiniam besimokančiajam. Straipsnyje aprašomas nedidelės apimties kokybinis tyrimas, vykdytas Mykolo Romerio universitete: apklausta 15 dėstytojų, administracijos darbuotojų ir studentų. Šio straipsnio uždaviniai yra apžvelgti turimus tyrimus ir pateikti 5 MRU studentų interviu kokybinę analizę. Studentai socialines medijas pirmiausia suvokia kaip neformalios, kasdienės komunikacijos priemones, kurias taip pat naudoja ir kai kuriems studijų tikslams. Socialinių medijų naudojimas švietime ir aukštojo mokslo studijų procese yra aktualus tyrimo laukas. Tyrimo rezultatai leistų suvokti, kaip galima tobulinti socialinių medijų naudojimo studijose metodus. Pravartu būtų sukurti institucijos socialinių medijų tipą, kurio kūrime ir naudojime dalyvautų patyrę žmonės, galintys pagerinti mokymo(si) procesą. Be to, būtina ugdyti ir vystyti studentų kritiško ir refleksyvaus mąstymo bei medijų ir informacinio raštingumo įgūdžius.

Raktažodžiai: *socialinės medijos, suaugusiųjų švietimas, studentų požiūris, naujų technologijų diegimas, ISTUS mokymosi partnerysčių projektas.*