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Social media integration in higher education. cross-course google plus integration shown in the example of a master's degree course in management

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Abstract

Nearly all web services can be adapted for educational use. Although some instructors do use social media for their courses, privacy concerns always throttle the 'need' of instructors for social media. Google Plus seems to offer the possibility to overcome this privacy issue, in using a methodology to group one's contacts. The course concept shown in this contribution offers a concrete approach for integrating Google Plus functionalities in higher education and benefiting from cross-course interaction. The results of the forthcoming analysis will show advantages and potential for improvement, both of the system and the use of it in higher education.

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1. Introduction

Social media are popular for education, not least because young adults, who attend courses at university, are familiar with these systems and most use them frequently. Social media have been integrated into the daily practices of many users, supported by different websites, tools, and networks. Everyone can add or edit information on social media, supported by digital tools enabling you to create, change, and publish dynamic content (Shafique et al. 2010, Knoke and Yang 2008). Social media focus on the use of accessible and scalable communication techniques and social interaction and have begun influencing organizations in their knowledge sharing procedures: implementing social media in higher education is an innovative process located at many levels of universities (Aharony 2008). E-learning developers, university management and course instructors have to be aware of dynamic technology development, the available tools for social interaction and changing user preferences (Aharony 2008, Boyd and Ellison 2007, Silius et al. 2010, Shafique et al. 2010). 'Social network sites are 'web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system' (Boyd and Ellison 2007).

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2. Cross course Google Plus integration

Google Plus has the potential to improve students' collaboration through circles, conduct research for projects with 'sparks', improve the student-instructor relationship by using social media, and support blended e-learning with the hang out functionality. Circles are contacts that are able to be grouped following a relationship-based approach. Contacts can be added to the circle by drag and drop. The benefit is that this approach enables users to not show all the content to all followers but rather to a selected circle. Instructors can use Google Plus to create a circle, adding attending students. When posting something the instructor can decide manually for which students, or circles, the post should be visible, starting personalized group communication. By creating cross-course personalized circles, instructors can provide information on specific topics for different courses at the same time, avoiding media breaks and increasing the instructor's efficiency (Venosdale 2011, Smith 2011, Lewis 2011, Spencer 2011).

Hangouts can be used as an instant videoconferencing tool with multiple users. This feature is not circle related, which means users from different circles can be added to an active videoconference session. Sparks offers the possibility to enter keywords and shows a list of results matching the keywords. Sparks can be stored and the user can get updates on the stored keyword (Google 2011, Watters 2011, Moran 2011). The results of such sparks can also be shared with circles or selected people. Both functionalities contribute to the cross-course Google Plus approach introduced in this work.

2.1. Design of the main course: 'geographic marketing' (master's degree, GEOM1, 14 weeks)

2.1.1. Course requirements

The designed course is intended for master students from different departments, such as information technology, business administration, engineering, or graphic design. To be able to attend the 'Geographic Marketing' (GEOM1) course there are no prerequisites, it is not mandatory to attend introduction courses, such as 'Introduction to Marketing' (M1) or 'Geographic Information Systems (GIS)'. Considering the last three semesters that the course was given, less than 5% of all the students attending GEOM1, finished before M1 or GIS successfully (they chose the courses as social electives), which led to a significant impact on the GEOM1 course design. In four weeks out of 14, the instructor had to give students in short courses the very basics on marketing and geographic information systems. Only 10 weeks remained for teaching GEOM1 related topics. The limited time for GEOM1 had a negative influence on students' performance: every semester 25% of all students failed, 35% received a grade lower than CC, and from the remaining 40% of the students only 3% could finish the course with an excellent result of AA. In comparison to that, in another faculty GEOM1 is offered as well, with 'Marketing 1' as a prerequisite, and 'Geographic Information Systems' as a social elective (which means the course is an optional one). The instructor has the whole course time (14 weeks) for teaching GEOM1 related topics and the students' performance is as follows: Although the social elective course was chosen by less than 10% of all GEOM1 students, in the last three semesters that the course was offered, less than 8% of the students failed, 12% received a grade lower than CC, and from the remaining nearly 80% of students, 35% finished the course with AA: on the whole, much more time for teaching primary course topics and better students' performance for the foreign faculty course. To overcome the difficulties with the non-prerequisites for the GEOM1 course, the instructor decided to integrate Google Plus in education in a pilot course in the fall term of 2011.

2.1.2. Course content

The main focus of the course is placed on showing students the basics of geographic marketing (14 weeks at 3 hours). Main course topics are location data, location based marketing, geodata, geographic information systems, global positioning systems, national GPS applications and geomarketing services. Because of using Google Plus for

the basics of marketing and geographical information systems, it is possible to include advanced topics to GEOM1 (see table 1).

Table 1. Course content and teaching methods (before and after integration of Google Plus)

| BEFORE Google Plus Integration | | |
|---------------------------------------|---|----------------------------------|
| Week | Content | Teaching method |
| 1-2 | Basics on marketing | Lecture |
| 3-4 | Basics on geographic information systems | Lecture |
| 5 | Geomarketing basics: location data | Lecture, online tool |
| 6-8 | Location based marketing | Lecture, case studies |
| 9-10 | Global positioning systems | Lecture, group work |
| 11-14 | Geomarketing services | Lecture, student projects |
| AFTER Google Plus Integration | | |
| Week | Content | Teaching method |
| 1 | Introduction | Lecture, Google+ |
| 2-3 | Geomarketing basics: Location data, .. | Google+ |
| 4-5 | Location based marketing | Lecture, Google+, case studies |
| 6 | Geocoding | Lecture |
| 7 | Geographic market research | Lecture, field analysis, Google+ |
| 7-8 | Site check: market characteristics, potential forecasts, customer magnets & cooperation partners analysis | Field analysis, |
| 9 | Advanced geographic information systems | Google+ |
| 9-10 | National GPS applications | Student projects, Google+ |
| 10 | Using Geodata for e-Marketing | Lecture, student project |
| 11 | Out of Home Media | Lecture, student project |
| 11 | Household marketing | Student project |
| 12 | Geomarketing and Data Protection | Student project |
| 13-14 | Selected topics | Case studies, field analysis |

Generally, the course is designed in four main streams. The first is the traditional lecture along with class work. The second stream focuses on case studies and field analysis performed by students on their own. In addition, the third stream focuses on projects undertaken by the students. They work in groups of at least 2 (depending on the class size) and carry out their projects, which have to be finalized and the results presented in week 9-12. The fourth and last stream is Google Plus focused, where two sub-streams can be distinguished: the course related stream and the cross-course one. The course related stream is the common one, which means Google Plus functionalities can be integrated in the course. The instructor creates the circle 'GEOM1' in Google Plus and adds all students to that circle (requirement: all students need a Google Plus account). Online office hours can be supported by the 'hangouts' functionality of Google Plus. 'In case students have questions regarding the course or their projects they can contact their instructor whenever available, independently from office hours during the day, using this real-time video functionality. These hangouts can be used for group meetings as well. Up to ten people can join the real time video communication and get in touch with each other. This could be helpful for students, such as starting a successful project management for their semester projects, to discuss open issues, discuss critical paths, or prepare group presentations. The same functionality, hangouts, can be used for group meetings with the instructor, or for meetings of the instructor and selected students, like the designated project managers for the term projects.' (Erkollar and Oberer 2011). For the cross-course stream it is needed to combine different corresponding courses. For the GEOM1 course, these corresponding ones are 'Introduction to Marketing' and 'Geographic Information Systems', which both are given for bachelor's and master's degree students of different departments. The main idea is, in using Google Plus for all three courses, to create a benefit especially for the GEOM1 one, which is an advanced course versus the other two. In practice, this means GEOM1 students should benefit from any relevant posting on Google Plus on one of the two other courses, which all are given by one instructor in the same term. Figure 1 shows the Google Plus circles to improve the performance in the mentioned courses. The GEOM1 circle (currently 4 members), the Marketing M1 course with 3 members, the GIS 1 course, with 4 members, and the

GEO_share circle with 11 members were set up. All members of the first three circles are included in GEO_share. In case you want to share something with all the students from all three courses you can do that by selecting GEO_share.

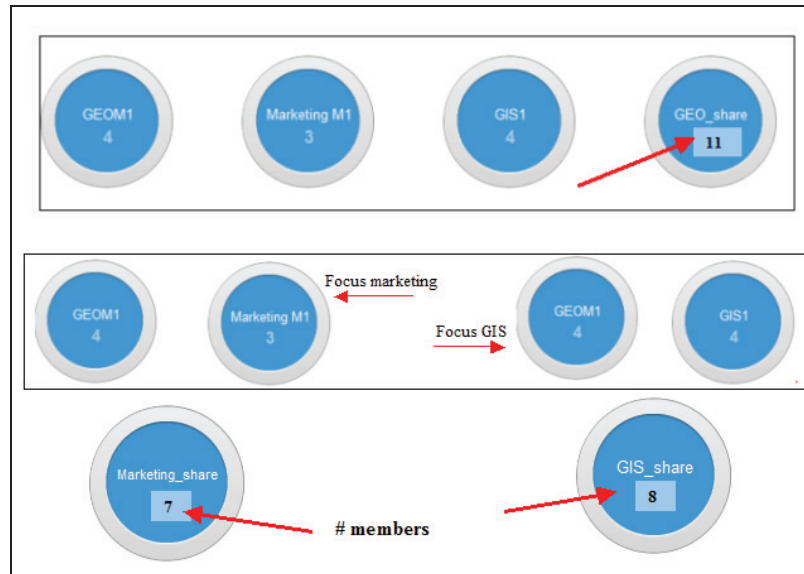


Figure 1. Google Plus circles created

For marketing based information you want to share with the marketing M1 and GEOM1 students, the Marketing share circle was created, including all the students from GEOM1 and M1. In case GIS related topics should be shared, GIS_share was created to do so, with currently 8 members, which is the sum of all GEOM1 and GIS1 course students. GEOM1 students can benefit from the latest updates in the corresponding courses and the instructor can use one media for sharing files, links, or thoughts with selected groups of students. This is a significant improvement compared to the situation the instructor had to deal with in the past: Blackboard was used to provide information to students, place announcements, and hand in homework. Infrequent access to the system was recognized and although necessary information was available online and (partly) email announcements were sent, students were not informed about those issues. The reason for this lack of knowledge could be that students did not want to access an additional system frequently and in case email announcements were used, a weak management of students' email addresses caused information packages to not be received. (Erkollar and Oberer 2011).

In addition, the instructor used Facebook communicating with students. In general, at some universities or schools, adding students as a friend on social networks is not allowed or undesired. That is mainly because there is a mixture between the private sphere and the school's sphere, such as you cannot separate between friends being your students, your family added as friends, or members of a research community, added as friends. It is important to mention that you can distinguish between 'friends', 'friends of your friends', and 'all'. You cannot define further categories for your friends, dividing them according to your relationship, interests, demographic data, or other attributes. 'Whenever the instructor was online and students asked questions regarding the course, these were answered. In case they were of relevance for not only the individual student but for more or all of them, the questions were answered as well using the Blackboard to ensure that all the students receive an answer to that question. Therefore, the instructor had to overcome communication restrictions, knowing that there is still at least one media break and increased effort still facing the limitations mentioned before.' (Erkollar and Oberer 2011). A sample stream posting is shown in figure 2, where a video on GIS is posted for 'marketing M1' students and students added to the circle 'marketing_share' as well.



Figure 2. Sample stream

Conclusions

Social Media have an increasing influence on higher education. While in the past mainly privacy issues discouraged educators from using social media in teaching, but with Google Plus a new way of communicating is promised. Apart from the possibility to post information for students, use a videoconferencing tool, or a tool to get updated on selected topics, instructors can also use Google Plus as a tool for cross-course communication. In general, nearly all web services can be adapted for educational use. It requires some experimentation from research and educators in order to find out ways to use Google Plus to improve education, and cross-course communication is only one part of it.

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