

## Student Use of Social Media as a Personal Learning Network

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## **Introduction.**

According to research by Pearson (2013), the use of social media in teaching continues to increase as faculty in higher education use social media for: (1) managing or communicating with students, and (2) teaching social media marketing strategies and practice. As more marketing, journalism, and communication programs add social media related courses to their offerings, there is an increasing need for understanding and developing personal learning networks to support faculty and student social sharing activities.

## **Personal Learning Networks.**

The author defines a personal learning network (PLN) as “a managed group of others that are chosen for potential interaction and as a beneficial resource for continuous learning about a preferred topic/subject.” When considering the three Cs of social networking (consumption, curation, and creation) (Solis 20110), a personal learning network provides support for the consumption of content or knowledge for social sharing. For success on the social web, students need content for social sharing and that content can come from a PLN of other knowledgeable sources such as a collection of favorite blogs organized in an RSS feed reader using Feedly, or from their own blog of original created content.

However, a good PLN has other career related benefits for social media students besides providing content for social sharing and networking. A good PLN can help a student in their chosen career field to: (1) build knowledge and learning, (2) stay current and up-to-date, (3) learn from thought leaders, (4) establish authority on a particular subject for strengthening a personal brand identity, and (5) provide confirmation of a chosen career focus to potential employers.

Besides developing a PLN of favorite career-related blogs using Feedly, the social web provides numerous other sources. Additionally, students can strengthen their career preparation and learning by: (1) setting up a Twitter List of experts, (2) following influencers or joining groups in LinkedIn, (3) creating expert circles or joining Communities in Google+, and/or (4) asking and answering questions in Quora or Yahoo! Answers.

### **The Social Media Course.**

The author has taught a Social Media Marketing course to upper-level Marketing students for 3 years. The primary requirement of the course is for students to define their personal brand identity, and then use social media to market their personal brand across numerous social platforms. Participation in these social networking activities requires that they first develop their personal learning networks so they can have adequate career-focused content to attract and share with their social networking connections.

### **The Student Feedback.**

In the early weeks of the course when students are being introduced to the concepts of personal branding, content marketing, and personal learning networks, students are given a quiz to measure their current and past experiences with using social media for personal, personal branding for their job search and career, and for products/business. For the most recent course, these results indicated that few had developed any kind of formal personal learning networks to support their social sharing experiences on social media.

At the end of each semester, students complete a formal survey that addresses the benefits and skills developed of using each of the major social media for personal branding (i.e., Twitter, WordPress and LinkedIn) and their use of Feedly for developing and organizing their PLN. The preliminary results (that will be presented with more detail) from a total of 65

respondents found that Feedly as a PLN was (on a 7 point scale): social learning (5.77), expertise building (5.66), practical (5.38), beneficial (5.37), skill building (5.29), essential (5.25), brand building (5.33), and rewarding (5.09). Of least importance included: stressful (3.69) and challenging (4.08).

### **Conclusions.**

To support their career focus, personal branding, and social sharing activities, students' learning social media marketing should be required and directed in developing an adequate personal learning network.