

Design Guidelines for Graduate Program Social Media Use

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Abstract

Social media provide a promising platform for members of informal and formal educational communities to build community, collaborate, and support institutional goals such as student recruitment. Despite burgeoning research on the educational uses of social media, we are not aware of any to guide graduate program social media use. In order to contribute a framework for the use of social media platforms associated with graduate programs and to provide direction, guidance, and cohesion to a social media initiative began with our graduate program, we conducted a design-based research project. We describe the design guidelines that comprise the framework—establish why, establish how, be authentic, respect privacy, coordinate channels, and engage volunteers—and provide examples of each from our practice and references to prior research. We conclude with potential benefits and promising directions for future research and practice on graduate program social media use.

Social media provide a promising platform for members of informal and formal communities to interact and communicate in educational settings. Research on the use of Twitter, Facebook, and other social media platforms underscores the educational value of integrating social media into teaching and learning (Duggan & Smith, 2013; Shaltry, Henriksen, Lu, & Dickson, 2013). Benefits from social media use also extend beyond its integration into teaching and learning, highlighting social media's ability to enhance student's sense of community (Manago, Taylor, and Greenfield, 2012), to support institutional goals (Pidaparthi, 2011), and to foster networking and collaboration (Moran, Seaman, and Tinti-Kane, 2013).

Despite the growing prior research on the benefits from social media use in educational settings, there is little investigation of the use of social media at the level of graduate programs. We are not aware of any research particularly focused on the support provided by or the intentional use of social media by graduate programs. More specifically, we are not aware of any research to guide faculty, administrator, and students to use social media platforms associated with their programs. Given the affordances of social media, a better understanding of how institutional platforms - those with the name or brand of the program associated explicitly linked - may be effectively used can support the efforts of faculty, administrators, and students who may wish to pursue a social media initiative to enhance student recruitment, retention, and community-building, among other uses.

In an effort to provide direction, guidance, and cohesion to a social media initiative began with our graduate program, we have conducted a long-term, design-based research project (e.g., Cobb, Confrey, diSessa, Lehrer, & Schauble, 2003; Wang & Hannafin, 2005). This design-based research project began in response to an acknowledged need for established advice and guidance research on the use of social media in education (Hendrix, Chiarella, Hasman, Murphy, & Zafron, 2009). In addition, this project reflects the practical need for the stakeholders in our graduate school program to establish a presence on social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. The MSU EPET Social Media Council, a committee of students and faculty, coordinated this design-based research project.

Literature Review

The increasing prevalence of social media has impacted higher education and the way students relate to one another, to faculty, and to university administration. Social media has significantly altered the communication between these groups and impacted students' scholarly lives. A review of the literature led us to induce three general conclusions related to the potential beneficial role of social media from an institutional perspective: 1) social media can facilitate the development of community, 2) social media can support program advancement, and 3) social media can foster networking and collaboration. While the referenced literature supports the integration and intentional use of social media by graduate programs, to our knowledge, no scholarly work has considered how to best integrate social media, specifically practical guidance for doing so.

Community

Students participating in an online or hybrid program seek community from fellow students, faculty, and administration. Social media can facilitate the building of community among students across diverse geographic areas. For example, Manago et al. (2012) found that social media helped support "psychosocial needs for permanent relations in a geographically mobile world" (p. 369). Social media, and particularly Facebook, provides a platform for the building of that community. Schwartz (2009) found that, Facebook can serve as "an extension of the classroom, something like a grad-student lounge in which all kinds of connections take place, some routine and some substantial" (p. 2). Manago et al's (2012) research similarly showed that

college students view Facebook as a tool for procuring social support. Additionally, Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe (2007) noted the value of Facebook use in building social capital, namely in helping users to maintain pre-existing close relationships as well as relationships with distant acquaintances. This research contends that Facebook has the potential to play a significant role in helping students bridge connections beyond the classroom.

Program Advancement

Social media can significantly support external efforts, such as program advancement and growth. For example, Pidaparthy (2011) found that maintaining an active social media campaign can motivate prospective students to consider attending the school or program, while a static or stagnate online presence reflects poorly on the institution. Pidaparthy also found that prospective students utilize social media to glean a sense of campus life via student blogs, virtual tours, or Twitter updates. Institutions often capitalize on this unique conduit and frequently promote student Twitter accounts or blogs, such as Harvard's student blog page¹, where students routinely write about their educational efforts, campus happenings, and personal reflections. Indeed, research shows that universities use a cocktail of social media platforms to reach prospective students; 98% reported using Facebook, 84% said using Twitter, and 66% reported using a blog (Barnes & Lescault, 2011). Overall, universities' use of these social media channels to recruit students has been viewed as an efficacious effort. Barnes & Lescault reported that 95% of colleges found their Facebook page to be a successful recruiting tool.

Collaboration

Social media can foster a network that celebrates research accomplishments, connects students with scholars, and fosters collegiality and dialogue between disciplines. Moran et al. (2011) found that 78% of faculty were using social media professionally. Graduate students also connect and converse through the social media channels, thereby broadening their professional networks. DiVall and Kirwin (2012) found that initial Facebook pages created for particular classes allowed students to further interact on a multitude of issues, even after the class had finished for the term. Perhaps not surprisingly, a 2013 Pew Research Foundation report showed that although Facebook remains the dominant social networking platform, 42% of online adults now use multiple social networking sites (Duggan & Smith, 2013). Ultimately, institutionalized social media can support the development of a community of scholars, thereby prompting varied and diverse learning experiences within and outside the institution (Lai, Yang, Chen, Ho, & Chan, 2007).

In summary, social media has the potential to support the development of a community, support program advancement, and facilitate networking and collaboration. Experiences shared from the EPET program offer insight into how universities can capitalize on these changing opportunities to connect with students and integrate social media into their academic lives.

Method

Design-based research (also called educational design research or design experiments) best supports our efforts to advance two goals: our program-specific goal of enhancing student learning experiences through EPET social media platforms and the broader goal of contributing to the extant literature focused on the use of social media to support graduate programs. Design-based research is a methodology that blends the design of an intervention or learning environment tailored to a particular context with empirical studies (Cobb, Confrey, diSessa, Lehrer, & Schauble, 2003; Wang & Hannafin, 2005). Special issues of prominent journals in educational research (cf. Barab & Squire, 2004; Kelly, 2003; Sandoval & Bell, 2004) have

¹ <https://college.harvard.edu/admissions/hear-our-students/student-blogs>)

explored the methodology, with recent attention dedicated to the design of interventions and also their scalability (Penuel & Spillane, 2014).

Like all research, design-based research contributes to theory, but its theories are necessarily constrained as compared to traditional scientific experimental design or trial-based research. As stated earlier, however, this methodology supports a second purpose of directly contributing to practice. In an influential article, Edelson (2002) described the contributions of design-based research in terms of three products: design methodologies, domain theories, and design frameworks. Due to our focus on design guidelines for institutional social media platforms, we focus on the third – design frameworks. According to Edelson, design-based research contributes design frameworks, “a collection of coherent design guidelines for a particular class of design challenge” (p. 114). Design guidelines “describe the characteristics that a designed artifact must have to achieve a particular set of goals in a particular context” (p. 114). A design framework, and its components, design guidelines, align closely with the more common term, *best practices*, distilled guidance for addressing problems of practice.

In this study, we characterize our framework for graduate program social media use as a design framework with the specific tenants of the framework design guidelines. Design guidelines, like best practices, can inform and guide the efforts of teachers, curriculum developers, and administrators (Penuel & Frank, 2015). The design guidelines were developed through the four processes characteristic of design-based research: a research focus, systematic documentation, formative evaluation, and generalization (Edelson, 2002). During the fall 2012 semester, faculty and students in the EPET program formed a committee, the Social Media Council (SMC), in an effort to proactively manage social media platforms associated with the program and to better understand and study the use of social media in higher education. In the remainder of this section we detail how Edelson’s (2002) processes of design-based research were engaged as part of our programmatic work with the council.

First, a research focus means prior literature guides the rationale and methods for an initiative or project and distinguishes design-based research from design. Our social media initiative was directed in two ways: our desire to effectively use institutional social media platforms in EPET and by a review of the literature, specifically empirical research. This review of the literature revealed a gap – how to best use program-level social media platforms within graduate programs. Most of the literature (cf. Barnes and Lescault, 2011; Duggan & Smith, 2013) focused on general trends around social media use or on the use of social media for learning (Greenhow & Robelia, 2009; Manago et al., 2012), without informing stakeholders about how to successfully use social media at the programmatic level. For example, Wallace (2003) described similar student and program needs, but was primarily limited to undergraduates. The design guidelines identified by EPET contribute to the necessity of research on how graduate school programs can use their affiliated social media platforms. Through meeting the goal of contributing general findings to assist the efforts of others, future empirical studies can be constructed to test these findings.

Next, design-based research projects must be systematically and comprehensively documented at every stage. We documented our initiative both qualitatively and quantitatively. We took detailed meeting notes in a collaborative Google Doc, which provided us with a useful retrospective view of how our design, focus, and lessons developed over time. We also used multiple metrics to measure our impact for each platform. For example, we tracked visitors to the Ideaplay.org blog using Google Analytics, which informed the type and format of the posts we solicited and wrote.

The third guideline, formative evaluation, is essential as it “can enable designer–researchers to identify problems or gaps in their understanding of the design context and to elaborate their analyses to account for them” (Edelson, 2002, p. 117). The data that we collected as part of our documentation empowered us to refine our design and to enhance its impact. For instance, for Facebook, we initialized the service SocialBro in addition to internal Facebook metrics, both of which allowed us to measure followers and impact from 2012 through the present, which led us to change the types of posts to include more media and additional topics of interest.

Finally, in design-based research, the focus is not only on a particular case but also more general findings that can inform other educational contexts. These design guidelines emerged, most importantly, through the documentation of what we did. This documentation, recorded qualitatively and quantitatively, allowed us to review more than two-years of design, development, and iterative refinement. For example, our continual reflection of content-specific posts on various social media platforms has led us to be more critical (and informed) of best post tenets for particular sites. Facebook has proven to be the best site for media-laden posts while Twitter has proven to be the best platform for communal posting and engagement (students a part of the program but not part of the SMC). In order to come to an agreement about the nature of the specific design guidelines, the authors read through the data sources and met to begin the process of grouping individual features of the design into more general categories presented in the next section. Although the findings generated from design-based research and this study do not allow us to make generalized claims about graduate program social media use, the methodology allowed us to contribute guidance for graduate program social media use relevant to stakeholders in other graduate program and to direct the social media initiative began with our graduate program.

Results and Discussion

In this section, we identify and describe the results of our design study through illustrations of six design guidelines for social media use in graduate programs. These design guidelines represent the design framework (e.g., Edelson 2002) component of what we learned from the ongoing design-based research efforts with which we have been engaged, as illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Design framework for graduate program social media use



In the remainder of this section, we describe the design guidelines and provide examples of each from our practice as well as references to prior research. Throughout the results and discussion, we draw connections between our findings and the prior research described in the literature review. Because the extant literature predominately considers the integration and intentional use of social media but not how to best utilize and integrate social media or the design guidelines for doing so, our discussion diverges slightly. As we discuss, our results provide an initial portrait of how graduate programs can use social media and do not directly parallel referenced literature.

Establish Why

We found that it is important first to clarify goals, needs, and opportunities with thorough and intentional respect to a particular audience. Akin to an SMC mission, the *why* drives the five additional design guidelines. It was apparent that we had first to address what function social media would serve for the program, its students, and the university. Initially, it was defined implicitly and later explicitly. The following two options were considered by EPET: A) social media enables program personnel to express a formal perspective for an internal or an external audience (or both); or B) social media would open an authentic portal into the life of the program. Option A is a top-down, more tightly controlled approach, which portrays a particular image/brand. Option A also highlights resources and opportunities consistent with the values and interests of program personnel, such as administration and faculty, and aligns with research showing the importance of a university's use of social media to engage prospective students (Barnes & Lescault, 2011).

Option B is a bottom-up, open approach that fosters a less scripted lens of the program. This second approach reflects the consistent feedback given by multiple EPET student program representatives during the numerous weekly Design Studio graduate assistant meetings facilitated by an EPET faculty member. The first approach, Option A, is more reflective of the

traditional model of primarily one-way scholarly transmission of information from faculty to students.

Our initial approach in the EPET program was option A. Full-time employees of the program published information that was deemed appropriate, useful, and purposeful to the Twitter and Facebook accounts. The intent was to serve the internal audience (primarily current and past students) while also providing value to prospective students. However, following some



time with this approach, analytics showed lackluster usage by students. In addition, a fundamental problem was that no one person had the time, vision, or skills necessary to implement this task successfully and consistently. In sum, it was formulaic to the detriment of

vibrancy and it was given insufficient attention resulting in a sporadic, out-of-picture presence. Subsequently, it was evident that we needed to engage multiple people in managing the various social media platforms. This need created an opportunity to reopen discussions about the best way to manage the platforms and engage the EPET community.

Reflecting on the dissatisfaction with the early attempts and given the necessity of involving additional people in publishing to multiple social media channels, we considered a shift toward option B. Rather than operating the social media with full-time employees, we engaged students who would actively feed content to the various social media channels. This shift coincided with our formation of the informal SMC, the members of whom are collectively the authors of this paper. With this change, we also shifted our focus toward giving the public - including prospective students - a portal to the life within our program from the perspective of current students and faculty. This approach aligns to Pidaparthi's (2011) research that found that prospective students utilize social media to understand camp life, so that social media supports program advancement and growth. Rather than crafting an intentional message, the social media posts became a real-life sampling of research, news, and events in the program with that hope that it would more richly capture program benefits for others. With this shift, students began posting celebratory kudos (e.g., defended dissertations or completed practicums, as in Figure 2), playful photos (e.g., graduate students together in the joint areas or with faculty during seasonal potlucks), and thought-provoking links or posts related to research and scholarship (e.g., Gradhacker posts, Mind/Shift articles, or Educause links).

Figure 2

A Facebook post by a face-to-face graduate student congratulating the defense of a hybrid graduate student's dissertation proposal

The evolution of the EPET SMC's approach to collaboration underscores the important role that students play in communicating the program's brand to potential students and outside constituents through authentic student perspectives. Now, EPET social media provide real-time reporting of current students' activities, experiences, and achievements. For example, a group of EPET hybrid students were on campus for a two-week intensive of practicum-based coursework in the summer of 2013. During this time, the students were encouraged to participate in a Twitter campaign using the #EPETsummer and #MSUEPET hashtags in an effort to share their perspectives from the unique experience. Although the collection of further empirical evidence is ongoing, we believe these unfiltered messages and experiences provide prospective students an opportunity to follow along and consume a "behind the scenes" experience, a perspective rarely found in traditional university program literature. For example, one student tweeted about the summer solstice with a sunset picture taken from within the library where the student was studying. Another student tweeted about a lunch meeting with their advisor and fellow advisees. These candid posts provide a unique and authentic glimpse of the program and student experience and would not have been fully realized if the program had continued a top-down approach such as that discussed above in option A.

Establish How

Once the goals of our social media initiative were identified, we found it critical to identify and pursue strategies to achieve those objectives. Even our bottom-up, organic approach still necessitated considerable intentionality, forethought, and critique. For example, the council realized the need to establish a consensus on what constitutes appropriate content, to identify social media member responsibilities, and to carefully evaluate the affordances of various social media portals, with great consideration of their unique affordance or modality-qualities, so as to best align posts with media. As our practice and experience evolved so did our consensus on policies and design guidelines.

This approach benefitted from faculty oversight and support, akin to the role of a faculty advisor to a student committee or organization. Moreover, this approach benefitted from the introduction of traditional roles such as Chair and Secretary. The Chair, for example, manages larger scale initiatives and schedules meetings while the Secretary handles meeting notes, correspondence, and necessary logistics for the council. These initially unwritten policies have slowly formalized based on arising needs, situations, and issues. It is important to note that these traditional positions served to uphold and progress the non-traditional mission of the SMC—authentic and transparent proliferation of the EPET experience told by all members of the community. On Facebook, the evidence that this is working is 410 "likes" of the program page, with average posts reaching 60 – 160 people depending on the content, despite no specific advertising or promotion of the page.

Be Authentic

Getting the right "tone" in our social media initiative came through authenticity, which brought life to social media platforms. As detailed earlier, instead of crafting a top-down strategy, we sought to provide an authentic representation of daily experience in the program. This approach was easier than creating something formally scripted, and we believed it was the most honest representation of our day-to-day practices for prospective students. Akin to Schwartz's (2009) metaphorical community-supporting grad-lounge, it was not unusual for SMC members to interact or even to banter with members of our community through official program channels, especially others in the EPET program but also those in our department and university. For instance, one doctoral candidate has been the recipient of many jokes related to her love of Carly Rae Jepsen's song, "Call Me Maybe". This authentic and personable approach has allowed

public opportunities to share program news and events, and also celebrate individual or collective accomplishments and achievements.

In conjunction with this authenticity and transparency, we recognized that guidelines for appropriate participation in our program-supported social media channels were necessary. However, we wanted the policy to be as simple and clear as possible. We believe that a simple and clear policy could be readily adhered to by the many contributors from the EPET community, therefore working most effectively. The policy is as follows: *We expect that all contributors to the resources will do so in a professional manner that is consistent with the values and acceptable use policies of Michigan State University (values and acceptable use policies are hyperlinked to corresponding pages that further detail each notation).*

To extend the goal of transparency, prospective students, and outside colleagues are invited to, and often do, communicate with the EPET community through the social media platforms, especially Facebook. SMC members are encouraged to welcome outside communication with prospective students, research colleagues, and various constituents. Moreover, they are encouraged to relay questions or inquiries to EPET administration, especially with regards to prospective student's interest in the program.

The EPET program uses a multi-faceted approach to allow for this authenticity and to lay a foundation for the facilitation of community that would tie geographically diverse students together (Manago et al., 2012), building community. For example, in addition to the Facebook page and use of the #msuepet tag, Ideaplay.org, an EPET blog, centralizes students' and faculty's blog posts, creating a hub for sharing current studies, interests, and questions. Ideaplay.org also recognizes successes such as achievements in research and has prompted collaborative writing efforts and future research directions among faculty and students. Given the unique challenges of our PhD program with significantly diverse students (geographically diverse, professionally diverse, age diverse, culturally diverse, etc.) our social media efforts support Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe's (2007) assertions related to social capital and social media; we have provided a variety of platforms allows for multiple avenues for students and staff to share ideas authentically and to build connections across significant geographic space.

Respect Privacy

We realized that creating spaces for semi-private and private communication is important. The policy of authenticity and transparency described is not without limits. Instead, we believe an aspect of the graduate school experience involves many acts of private communication. For example, administrative communications pertaining to student or program expectations or course requirements would not be applicable or relevant to those outside the program. Indeed, research argues that privacy within social media sites can be an invaluable option (Manca & Ranieri, 2013). Furthermore, we acknowledged the need for a virtual place for students to explore new, evolving, and highly dynamic research ideas without public display. As a result, the EPET program faculty established a weekly EPET Brownbag discussion among current members of the EPET community. These discussions are broadcasted and posted in private portions of our social media channels; they are not broadcasted beyond members of the program. In addition, portions of the EPET Hub are private – only viewable by members of the program, as illustrated in Figure 4.

Figure 3

The privacy information related to how graduate students and faculty may access content on the EPET Hub

EPET HUB



The EPET Hub is community site for and by students and faculty of the Educational Psychology and Educational Technology (EPET) doctoral program at Michigan State University. Welcome! Click the login button on the left to login with your MSU email account.

This allows for internal correspondence on community member information, such as changes in course offerings or personal contact information. In short, understanding the need for and cultivating spaces for private and semi-private communication within the program has become an important part of our work. For example, individual cohorts of incoming students formed private Facebook groups.

Coordinate Platforms

We also discovered the importance of leveraging the affordances of different social media platforms and of establishing a reasoned pattern for official communications based on the different platforms' purposes and audiences. With many social media platforms available, it was clear that our different channels needed to work with one another. We chose to coordinate our efforts with each social media channel through periodic meetings with those responsible for each platform. These meetings provided an opportunity to discuss strategies, successes, and challenges, as well as an opportunity to ensure that social media efforts were complementary. As part of their stewardship of each channel, Council members were asked to consider the general vision and audience of each platform, and the unique affordances and audiences respective to each. Below are our general guidelines for each platform.

Table 1

Guidelines for the use of different social media channels supported by the Social Media Council (SMC)

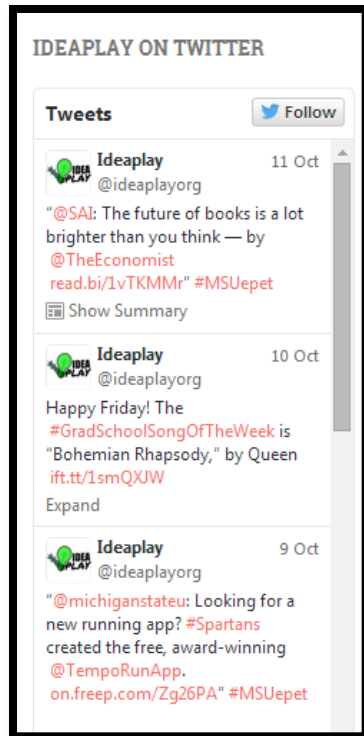
Platform name and URL	Description
EPET Hub	An online community primarily for students and faculty in the program to share resources, news, ideas, such as EPET Brownbag speakers.
Edutech	The public face of our program (especially for recruiting purposes); this channel is most directly linked to the College of Education at Michigan State University.
Ideaplay	A shared blog for public thinking and exploration by students and faculty on topics related to educational psychology and technology.
Facebook	A community page with news, notes, photos, and media about the EPET program, students, and faculty.
Twitter	News and notes from the EPET program. In addition, relevant and thought-provoking news from the disciplines of educational psychology and technology.

The affordances provided by Facebook are different, yet equally valuable, to those afforded by Twitter or Ideaplay. In our approach, Facebook best supports photos, semi-brief postings (150 – 300 characters) and linked users (where program students and faculty can be tagged). Twitter best supports short, quick announcements (140 characters or fewer) and hyperlinked stories on a more routine basis. In contrast, Ideaplay.org supports longer postings (200+ words), less regular postings, and more in-depth exploration of a particular research topic

as presented first-hand by the writer. Regardless of conduit, consideration is given to the platform's best use, thereby also considering the platform's constraints. To tie these together, we used automatic cross-posting of updates (when appropriate), as in Figure 4.

Figure 4

Cross-platform postings between the Ideaplay blog and the Ideaplay Twitter account



In addition, consideration is given to the myriad of student- and faculty-held accounts. As Duggan and Smith (2013) noted, adults now use multiple sites or platforms. For our program to authentically converse in a social media dialogue with many stakeholders, our social media sites aim to link, capitalize, and appropriately engage with our colleagues' accounts. By doing so, we have prompted and presented a dynamic and diverse learning "out-of-class" experience, rich with scholastic inquiry, networking, and exploration, akin to findings related to collaboration from Lai, Yang, Chen, Ho, and Chan (2007) and DiVall and Kirwin (2012).

An additional key question was how our social media sites would best align with official communication and sites of the program. We have created an archive within our social media efforts – on the EPET Hub (<http://epethub.educ.msu.edu>) – of formal communication and resources. In addition, we have cross-links to <http://edutech.msu.edu> where official program resources such as the Program Handbook are available. Acknowledging the prevalence of use among faculty nationally (Moran et al., 2011), we intentionally look to link with faculty-held social media accounts within and outside of MSU. As a result, the participant experience, especially for those outside the program, is intended to be seamless. For example, an official distribution positioned within a click of an informal Twitter posts about a program-sponsored lunch with the dean of the College of Education.

Engage Volunteers

Each MSU hybrid Ph.D. cohort relies on social media to support the development of community across diverse geography encompassing at least ten states and three countries. The 2010 cohort relied on regular discussions via Google Hangouts whereas the 2012 cohort built a

thriving Facebook group to offer support to one another². The 2012 cohort Facebook group has generated hundreds of professional and personal postings including videos, photos, document attachments, and links. This type of social networking use is a common practice among affinity and special interest groups (Manca & Ranieri, 2013). Social media initiatives have also supported the development of community between hybrid and on-campus learners in EPET in the form of shared research interests and research opportunities (e.g. webinars, lectures, conferences, etc.), thereby breaking down experiential and geographic differences between the two student types. Like many post-secondary courses who yield the unique affordances of social media (Manca & Ranieri, 2013), some EPET doctoral courses are intentionally designed to support hybrid and face-to-face students simultaneously through the use of social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook.

Given that social media is a natural medium for hybrid programs, the SMC found that it has been vital to encourage engagement between members of the group responsible for the management of the social media initiative and others in the program to capitalize on their current use of social media and to ensure a lively presence on the program's official channels. Most contributions outside those posted by SMC members were entirely of individuals' choosing. Some encouragement, however, has been needed. As new ideas and research come to light, SMC members will often call on faculty and students for assistance/contributions. Faculty instructors and advisors have supported this effort through a "volun-told" approach with their students. The SMC has found success through routine and consistent posting. When individual platforms have been dormant or less active, user engagement with the platform drops precipitously. Many of the social media sites provide built-in analytics to monitor activity easily. Many of the platforms, including Facebook and Ideaplay.org, can also provide usage reports on a routine (weekly or monthly) basis.

To maintain outside interest and engagement, we have found great value in ensuring that the social media platforms are active and engaging for our students and faculty. On Twitter, members of the program who are not members of the SMC frequently reference the program account or hashtag (#msuepet) in the hopes of fostering conversation or soliciting a retweet to share additional information.

Conclusion

We have thus far discussed the need for institutionalized social media policies, reviewed the extant literature, and identified and described six design guidelines that emerged from our experience facilitating an ongoing design-based research project focused on a social media initiative. Throughout the previous section, we drew connections between our findings and the prior research described in the literature review: social media can facilitate the development of community, support program advancement, and foster networking and collaboration. In conclusion, we briefly outline the benefits of a social media initiative from the perspective of those involved as well as the potential significance of this work in research.

In addition to the general benefits discussed in the literature review, we have identified specific benefits of a social media initiative from the perspective of those involved. First, members of the EPET SMC have found that coordinating a social media initiative provided a rich context for learning about social media. This example of learning about technology (social media) through the use of technology has strong support in the literature (Mishra & Koehler, 2006). Second, this initiative has heightened opportunities to practice informal academic writing. For the graduate student, writing in a common language based on scholarly ideas mirrors formal

² Hybrid students are accepted every two years; hence 2010 and 2012.

writing practices without the high stakes associated with formally assessed assignments. Informal writing opportunities significantly support concept exploration and gestation (Kim, 2008; Kjellberg, 2010). Third, similar to heightened informal writing, institutionalizing social media afforded opportunities for collaboration and numerous entry points for faculty and graduate students to engage in collaborative scholarship. Fourth, lessons learned from an institutionalized social media effort have been immediately available for use outside the program. For example, lessons learned from the creation of Ideaplay.org were applied to create a faculty teaching and learning WordPress site (teaching.nmc.edu) at a small, rural community college affiliated with a member of the SMC. Finally, we have found that an institutionalized social media effort shared between students and faculty enhanced program investment and authorship, as well as program advancement.

The SMC is currently considering and executing ways to validate our anecdotal and experiential observations with data. In addition, the unique format of the EPET program illuminates the lack of research that examines interaction dynamics among face-to-face and online hybrid students of the same program. As research related to social media have shown (Greenhow & Robelia, 2009, Wallace, 2003), there exists significant value in directing the unique affordances of various software platforms to the benefit of increased engagement, invested interest, and dialogue. Student-run institutionalized social media can bolster student, faculty, and program opportunities related to community, research, recruitment, and engagement.

There exists significant potential value with an institutionalized social media initiative in graduate programs. Such initiatives can emphasize the universal mission of programs to cultivate creative and collaborative writing and research. Moreover, these actions can foster program community, greater collegiality and scholarship among faculty and students, and further transparency with program accomplishments. These benefits can span all audiences from prospective students to current students to tenured faculty. Through persistence and coordination, social media initiatives in graduate programs can provide opportune ways to significantly bolster the graduate program, graduate experience, and graduate scholarship.

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