Social Media and Reflective Practice in Student Affairs

Blue Brazelton
Graduate Research Assistant
Higher, Adult, and Lifelong Education
Michigan State University
East Lansing, MI 48824-1034
806.928.4280
blue.brazelton@gmail.com
www.bluebrazelton.com
http://www.twitter/bluegbb

Peter Magolda
Professor
Department of Educational Leadership
304 McGuffey Hall
Miami University
Oxford, OH 45056
513.529.4950
magoldpm@muohio.edu
www.muohio.edu/sahe

Kristen A. Renn
Associate Professor of Higher, Adult, and Lifelong Education
Michigan State University
425 Erickson Hall
East Lansing, MI 48824-1034
517.353.5979
renn@msu.edu
http://www.msu.edu/~renn
http://www.twitter/krisrenn

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A mere three days after the Susan G. Komen Foundation announced that it was changing its grant rules that would bar Planned Parenthood from receiving some funds, the Foundation reversed its decision. During this turbulent period, Planned Parenthood's Facebook site added over 10,000 new members and the agency received nearly $3,000,000 in donations. Concurrently, Twitter users sent more than 1.3 million tweets protesting the action (Kagey, 2012). Such actions represent irrefutable evidence of the popularity and political power of social media.

Social media's influence on higher education is, too, indisputable. Contemporary collegians can't survive without social media. Faculty and student affairs educators struggle to understand it. During the past decade, social media has grown from online chat boards and digital diaries (e.g., LiveJournal) to blogs, online social networks (e.g., MySpace, Facebook, Google+, LinkedIn), microblogs (e.g., Twitter, Tumblr), and platforms to share photos (e.g., Flickr, Picasa, Shutterfly), music, video games, and more. College students participate in all of these forms of social media and others that emerge regularly from the periphery of online culture (Martínez Alemán & Wartman, 2009). Indeed, college students are responsible for creating and promulgating popular social media concepts, as memorialized in the 2010 film *The Social Network* (Spacey & Fincher, 2010)*,* which depicted Harvard University student Mark Zuckerberg inventing the media phenomenon Facebook.

While social media such as Facebook are relatively new phenomena, Ehsan Khodarahmi, when discussing the origins of social media, reminds readers that it is as "old as the earth; in fact it's been around forever but just in different formats! From biblical and mythical years through caveman and evolution! Social media has been the 'power to connect and engage' with each other!" (2011, ¶ 1). While the idea of connecting and engaging is ancient, the ways that contemporary inhabitants of the world connect and engage is utterly original. Student affairs professionals may encounter students in the world of Web 2.0 as readily as they do in residence halls, recreation sports centers, or campus unions. Social media has dramatically altered campus life, inside and outside of the classroom, expanding the ways college communities communicate, mobilize, teach and learn, as well as produce and consume knowledge—making it worthy of carefully examination and scrutiny.

The proliferation of social media has spawned a flood of technical (i.e., how the technology works) questions such as: How do I setup a Facebook Account? What is a Twitter hashtag? How can I see who is viewing my Linkedin profile? How do I post a video on YouTube? Augmenting these (understandably important) technical questions are moral questions such as: Is social media a friend or foe of the academy? Or Does social media enhance or impede student learning? Too often, moral questions such as these, solicit bifurcated responses (e.g., either friend or foe), which breed partisan enclaves (e.g., social media proponents and opponents) and complicate efforts to achieve a nuance understanding of social media's influence on the academy. In this paper we ignore technical questions about social media and avoid moral questions that yield one-dimensional dichotomous responses. Instead we introduce three tensions—illuminating social media assets, liabilities, and possibilities—that if understood and addressed could lead to complex understandings of "what is good" in the world of social media and more highly reflective student affairs educators, faculty, and collegians. We present these tensions through sections focused on 1) general philosophical approaches to social media in education, 2) affordances and limitations of social media vis-à-vis working with college students, and 3) examples of social media in student activism and student affairs responses to activism.

Social Media: That's (Not Just) Entertainment!

For the past 12 years Peter has co-directed an annual instructional technology institute on his campus. The four-day program: introduces faculty to the latest technologies, demonstrates practical applications of these technologies in classroom and research contexts, and provides human and fiscal support to faculty to enact their technology aspirations. Despite altering the institute's curriculum each year to showcase ever-changing technologies, two noteworthy trends persist. First, the curricular presence of social media continues to expand exponentially. It has morphed from a stand-alone discrete two-hour plenary session to the epicenter of the curriculum. In 2011, facilitators and participants mentioned social media, regardless of the agenda. Second, while most faculty attendees appear curious about social media, their collective sentiment remains unchanged and deeply entrenched—in the classroom, social media is *just entertainment* and thus a threat to teaching and learning.

These faculty members' perceptions differ from the tech-savvy graduate students enrolled in Peter's Fall 2011 *Perspectives on Film, Social Media, and Collegians' Learning Experiences* seminar. For these individuals, social media is so *normal*, legitimate, and woven into the fabric of their everyday existence (on campus and beyond), that thoughtful and substantive reflection is the exception rather than the rule. Admittedly, these reactions to social media are idiosyncratic; yet they are noteworthy because they reveal diverse perspectives about what counts as teaching, learning, entertainment, and "progress."

Regardless of whether one embraces social media (e.g., technology institute organizers), eschews it (e.g., faculty), or fails to recognize the potency of it (e.g., graduate seminar participants), it is a mainstay of the academy and not a fad. Treating social media as a monolithic entity (e.g., entertainment) is as imprudent as uncritically embracing it, or ignoring it. A cursory analysis of the Komen-Planned Parenthood showdown, mentioned in the introduction, reveals several insights about social media's elevated significance worldwide that has implications for higher education and student affairs.

Social media, on college campuses and beyond, allows all proponents and opponents to connect with like-minded colleagues to create opportunities for solidarity and social change. Social media provides an infrastructure that encourages these subcultures to immediately and overwhelmingly express their opinions (i.e., support or outrage) to the masses—in particular giving voice to enclaves whose marginalized voices are seldom heard.

The Komen-Planned Parenthood face-off illuminates social media capacity for mobilizing these subcultures—spawning immediate and profound change. Social media disrupts traditional power structures. Moments after the Komen foundation announced its policy change to defund Planned Parenthood, subcultures began to use social media to immediately shape public opinion. This unique mode of networking quickly eclipsed more conventional (and usually more powerful) broadcast outlets such newspapers and television network news agencies. These more traditional and more powerful broadcast venues played "catch-up" throughout the brief standoff. Defying conventional wisdom, social media influenced traditional media coverage of the story, rather than conventional media's preferred role of influencing social media. These noteworthy dynamics threaten the status quo.

These sophisticated and nimble capacities of social media also altered the power relationships involving the Komen Foundation and its constituents (e.g., Planned Parenthood, the public). Facebook,

YouTube, and Twitter made it nearly untenable for the Komen Board to simply enact an extreme policy change, ride out the storm, only to resume *business as usual* after the storm subsides. These technologies provide instant, overwhelming and unyielding amounts of feedback to decision-makers and media outlets—allowing less powerful subcultures (e.g., the public) to hold decision-makers accountable for their actions. The capacity for social media to address inequity and social injustice by leveling the proverbial playing field and ensuring accountability are two subtle yet important by-products of this technology that are easily applicable to student affairs.

Social media has its critics. At first glance it appears to be an impersonal and superficial mode of communicating and networking with the masses (i.e., high tech/low touch). Yet, its capacity for intimacy and evoking emotion and powerful reactions is remarkable. For example, the emotional and intimate cancer survivors' videos posted on YouTube as well as the health care horror blogs—about being denied access to mammograms—posted on-line had a profound and powerful influence on what appeared to be a Foundation's perfunctory, impersonal, and "apolitical" policy change. Popular culture (especially social media) is both "pervasive and powerful," creating emotional connections to information that leads to social action (White & Walker, 2008, p. 17). Social media—love it, leave it, or ignore it, but it is impossible to deny its power and ever growing influence.

Naomi Rockler (2002) argued, "if Americans reject critical analysis of popular culture and other media texts, they reject analysis of a significant portion of their life activity" (p. 17). Critical analysis is seminal to higher education in general and student affairs in particular. Social media must be carefully and critically examined because it give voice to all (especially those on the margins), profoundly influences the individual and masses, alters power structures, provides feedback for decision-makers and holds them accountable, and encourages mobilization for change. From our vantage point, this undertaking is anything but entertainment.

Barriers to Critically Analyzing Social Media

What are the barriers to critically analyzing social media that would reveal its nuanced influence on higher education? In the next two subsections we briefly discuss two barriers: binaries and hegemony. Carefully examining the argument posited during Peter's technology institute example reveals a major obstacle. During the technology institute, faculty members conceptually embraced social media while

remaining tepid about its utility in the classroom. When sharing personal opinions about social media, faculty members organized their analysis using binaries/dichotomies to efficiently and unambiguously convey their views. They implicitly argued that life in the classroom was either entertaining or educational, but not both. Similar binaries also dominate the Planned Parenthood-Komen dispute: Planned Parenthood vs. Komen …proponents vs. opponents of the policy change …the powerful and privileged vs. the powerless and marginalized …the elite media vs. upstart media …political vs. apolitical decisions …sustaining the status quo vs. change …high tech vs. high touch …large impersonal vs. intimate emotional communication.

Evoking these socially constructed binaries highlights stark differences, which is good news. Unfortunately, these dichotomies stifle rather than facilitate dialogue. They contribute to superficial, deceptive, or skewed analyses and understanding of "the other." Has entertainment no place in the classroom? Implicit in this question is the idea that learning can't be fun. If entertainment has no place in the classroom, does learning occur outside the classroom? Implicit in this question is the arcane idea that faculty should be responsible for learning and student affairs staff should handle the entertainment aspects of student life. Scrutinizing binaries reveal egregious assumptions and subsequent dangers (e.g., unnecessarily constrain the discussion parameters).

Dichotomies, at first glance, appear innocent, descriptive, fair, and balanced. Upon closer examination, inequities become obvious (Aichele, 1995). Within each binary, one item is privileged over the second (depending on the evaluator's values). When faculty members raised the education-entertainment dichotomy, they intend no parity; education, in this context, trumps entertainment, which influenced the *logical* conclusion that entertainment is a threat to teaching and learning.

Americans resist opportunities to examine the ideological underpinnings of popular culture (Rockler, 2002). If popular culture such as social media is to be understood and optimized inside and outside the classroom, dichotomies must be ruptured which would not only reveal political ideological tensions, but more importantly facilitate genuine discourse about what is good, reveal educational opportunities, and mediate possible solutions. Rather than remain an insular community of interest (e.g., proponents) and simply snipe at "the other" by debating which stark dichotomous position is supreme, why not pose different kind of questions, such as: In what ways could social media make the life inside

and outside the classroom both educational AND entertaining? Recognizing the problems with dichotomies and honing one's skills to deconstruct these binaries are two ways to better-equipped individuals to understand and react to foundational arguments about social media.

While faculty members' use of dichotomies in Peter's technology workshop complicated efforts to critically analyze social media, students' ambivalence about social media in his cultural studies seminar was, too, problematic. Many seminar participants portrayed themselves as passive consumers of popular culture—disinterested or reluctant to critique social media because was so engrained in their everyday life, so commonplace, and so normal. Yet this passive resistance seems antithetical to a goal of higher education—developing critical consciousness.

Rockler (2011) noted that popular culture (e.g., social media) is a medium through which hegemonic views and perspectives are disseminated and reinforced, all under the guise of providing enjoyment. This appears to be the case with some students in the cultural studies seminar. Dominant views—social media is good and indispensible—reigned supreme. Hebdige (1979) defines hegemony as:

> A situation in which a provisional alliance of certain social groups can exert 'total social authority' over other subordinate groups, not simply by coercion or by the direct imposition of ruling ideas, but by winning and shaping consent so that the power of the dominant classes appears both legitimate and natural. (p. 16)

While social media appears to students to be in their best interest, it is also in the interest of those who create and control this commodity (e.g., creators of Facebook and Twitter). Hegemony maintains the values and interest of the dominant group in ways that appear so normal that raising questions about its worth seems abnormal, unnatural, or old school. On college campuses, it is in the best interest of the proprietors of social media to sustain its dominance with students, by normalizing the dominant viewpoint and ignoring or misrepresenting "other" perspectives. Outsiders—individuals not using social media or not having immediate access to social media access devices such as smart phones and I-pads (i.e., the other)—are misrepresented as abnormal or campus aberrations. Hegemony often goes unnoticed in collegiate social media enclaves because the social constructions those in power create are regarded as truths (Charron, 2002) or natural, or reasonable (Bailey & Gayle, 2003). Hegemony contributes to seminar participants' reluctance to critically analyze the messages, politics, and agenda of social media.

The goal of revealing hegemonic structures is to create more critically conscious student affairs educators—individuals who possess a more complex understanding of the mediums and messages we

consume so that we can make good choices about what to consume or endorse versus what not to consume or endorse. These realizations can lead to student affairs educators fully participating in the exchange of competing thoughts and ideas that has historically characterized college and university campuses. Mark Connolly (2011), when discussing social media asserts:

> With Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Wikipedia, and their like pervading nearly every aspect of U.S. higher education, social media seemingly make themselves indispensable before there's any time to consider the full range of their effects—negative as well as positive—on student learning.
>
> I have no doubt that social technologies, when used wisely, can greatly enhance college student learning, especially if their use makes what the student is learning personally meaningful and socially relevant. But I argue that using social networking tools also carries significant hidden cognitive costs that, when taken into account, ought to give students and educators serious pause. (p. 123)

If we are to understand, as Connolly argues, the full range of social media's effects (negative and positive) and harness it to enhance teaching and learning, we must resist efforts to treat it as dangerous, uncritically embrace it, or ignore it. Instead we must develop capacities for critical consciousness that recognize and dismantle barriers (e.g., binaries and hegemony) that thwart efforts to engage in genuine dialogue—and that's certainly not entertainment. We turn now to questions surrounding ways that social media offers increased freedom of expression but requires maturity and responsibility of users.

Affordances and Requirements of New Digital Literacies

The proliferation of social media creates a number of tensions, one of which is between the liberatory and participatory nature of Web 2.0, which affords new styles of communication and personal expression, and the demands it places on individuals for personal responsibility and literacy in new forms of engagement. Student affairs professionals may find themselves dealing personally with this tension and helping students deal with it. Social media provides new ways for students to be engaged and to express themselves authentically (Jenness, 2011; Junco, 2011), yet the shared social media spaces of Facebook and Twitter alone present opportunities to see students in ways that reveal more to us about them than they – or we – wish. In the early months of Facebook's public expansion, for example, student affairs professionals occupied themselves with questions about the legality—and wisdom—of using students' Facebook content in disciplinary cases and to identify mental health and social concerns (see

Marino, n.d.). Such concerns have not gone away, but new challenges in working with students and social media have emerged to join them.

The proliferation of social media creates a number of tensions for us as educators. First, we can embrace new ways that students express themselves creatively, but must also help them understand their responsibility as participants in a globally-connected digital space. Beyond warning students not to put embarrassing photos (of themselves or others) in places where potential employers might see them, we work in a time when bad behaviors—including harassment, bullying, and creating hostile climates – can be enacted virtually (see Kowalski, Giumetti, Schroeder, & Reese, 2012). What seems like creative expression to one student might feel like an invasion of privacy to another. Video of a "harmless" prank may go viral in ways that "old-fashioned" in-person pranks could not, creating digital reverberations that raise the incident to the level of bullying or harassment (see Junco, 2011, Kowalski et al., 2012). Web 2.0 culture rewards displays of extremes (of joy, anger, cuteness, poor judgment, courage, poignance, silliness) with online attention, sometimes spilling over into "mainstream" media and notoriety. Learning how to participate responsibly in this culture, without harming self or others, can be one aspect of college life, though whose job it is to teach is not clear. There is a tension for 21st century educators in encouraging creativity and free expression while also promoting responsibility and maturity.

In addition to this "producer-side" tension, a second major tension lies in the "consumer" side of social media. Becoming a literate user of social media and new digital forms extends well beyond the question of whether or not Wikipedia should count as an academic reference. (For the record, we believe that like other encyclopedias and reference materials Wikipedia is, in many cases, a fine starting place for information, but it is rarely a good ending place for scholarship.) As Katlin Tillman wrote, "I think social media literacy is having the proficiency to communicate appropriately, responsibly, and to evaluate conversations critically within the realm of socially-based technologies" (2010, ¶ 3). Student affairs professionals have a number of opportunities, whether in partnership with or in addition to faculty, to be involved educating students in social media literacy.

Many K-12 schools teach students basic knowledge and skills necessary for using the internet for academic work (Technology in Education, 2011). Students learn that they are not to copy and paste into their papers and not to rely solely on user-generated and crowd-sourced material (like Wikipedia,

Youtube, and so forth). What they may not learn, however, is to critically analyze Web 2.0 material for its validity and influence in non-academic contexts. They may not understand, for example, how search engines work or that they customize their output based on a user's previous searches (Kolowich, 2011). The same google search conducted on our three laptops will result in different output for Peter, Blue, and Kris, based on the terms for which we have searched in the past and the links we have clicked from those searches. If we keep our computers signed into google while we go about our daily online lives, the search engine can customize our output even more selectively. So even what seems "objective," like google search output, cannot be assumed to be so. Research shows that college students do not fully understand how search works, even if they say that they know that not all internet content is equally reliable (Hargittai, Fullerton, Menchen-Trevino, & Thomas, 2010. Student affairs professionals have a role in teaching students how social media and digital content is constructed and presented to the user.

Student affairs professionals have a role to play in other aspects of social media literacy, including how to access multiple forms of information. Students turn swiftly to search engines or queries through social media, but are not always as quick to consult specialized data sources. Higher education libraries, in particular, are hubs for information resources and have highly trained professionals (reference librarians) to help users access that information efficiently and accurately. Inexperienced students and staff may conclude that "there's nothing good out there" or "there are thousands of useless hits" about a topic (sexual assault prevention, binge drinking, addressing student apathy, programming events on controversial topics) later to find that there are abundant reliable resources easily accessed through indexes and specialized portals (see the American Library Association's online Guide to Reference at www.guidetoreference.org). Knowing how (through reference librarians) and when (after about 10 minutes of fruitless searching on one's own) to consult experts is part of digital media literacy, and student affairs professionals are in a key position to help students develop this habit of mind.

In sum, student affairs professionals can interact with students in ways that address the tensions created between the participatory, liberatory nature of Web 2.0 and demands it places on users to be responsible for their postings and critical consumers of material. Just as social media creates tensions related to student activism and understandings of education and entertainment value, it creates tensions related to responsible participation and critical interpretation. Student affairs educators have opportunities

and a responsibility to help students learn from the moral, ethical, and intellectual decision points presented by digital media. In the next section, we offer the example of student activism as a location for learning and development in the digital age.

Student Activism and the Digital Generation

The digital generation, also labeled Millennials or Generation Y, recently participated in possibly the largest student movement–the Occupy Wall Street protests–since the network of campus protests condemning the Vietnam War in the 1960s (Mandle, 2011). But the world is much different from what it was 50 years ago, and the existence of social media has provided opportunities for and challenges to student activism. Among these opportunities and challenges rest the strengths and weaknesses of social media as mobilizing networks, as seen when individuals quickly turn a smoldering ember into a roaring bonfire (for example, the spring 2011 riots in Egypt or the response to Lt. John Pikes pepper spraying of protesters at UC-Davis). However, in the language of the 1960s, the first rule of student activism is "if you're going up against the Man—don't inform the Man" (Markowitt, 2009, para 10). Before the digital revolution, it was relatively easy to keep demonstration plans from the man. Phone trees, secret message locations, and word of mouth movements were the social media of the day (Bailey, 1999). It was also easy to tell who the man was, as he was sitting in an office in the administration building. Now, a protest organizer can send an email to a previously organized group, somewhat ensuring the security of the message but only reaching those who are already involved. The administration's response is just as complex, as camera phones and social media can depict or distort the response. Social media has changed both how students engage in activism and how institutions respond.

Student Activists

As mentioned previously, the Occupy Wall Street protests arose across the US with a strong representation of college students, and numerous institutions found themselves home to an Occupy demonstration. As with all student activism, the message may be different but the core theme is the same: We want to be heard. Occupy protests evoked activism in students of all demographic backgrounds, as the movement is tied to socioeconomic inequity of 99% of the population in time of recession (Bradford, 2011). One of the unique aspects of the Occupy movement is that by reaching a

diverse population of students, it has decreased the stigma associated with the concept of "activism" among convention-abiding Millennial generation students. Not every student will agree with every protest, but at a time when the current student generation is labeled as apathetic, the increased number involved in activism through the Occupy movement paints a different picture. Do college and university administrators, however, want more students to be involved in activism? That question proves difficult to answer.

Student activism is a form of civic engagement, with a particular bent toward advocacy and social change, demonstrating the kind of concern seen in involved citizens. Increasing student engagement is one of the hallmarks of the student affairs profession. Civic engagement can play a role for some students as a predictor of academic success and post-college community engagement (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Social media itself can play a role in increasing civic engagement in part by allowing for meaningful opportunities to participate in and contribute to the process and through communities of practice (Biddix, 2008). With such potential positive effects of increased student activism at stake, institutional responses must be thoughtful and careful to support students during and after a disruptive demonstration.

Administrative Responses

During student actions, the student affairs practitioner often finds herself in a tense position, deciding whether and how to support students engaged in them or institutional policies designed to control for safety and security of everyone during demonstrations (Markowitt, 2009). Sometimes these needs can both be met, but at other times they cannot. Here is another example of how social media complicates the matter, as a trusted administrator might be privy through Facebook of plans for an unapproved rally. Surely this situation could have happened before platforms such as Twitter and Facebook, where an administrator stumbled upon information about an upcoming demonstration, however never before have institutions had the capacity (and legal backing) to observe any communication that takes place using college networks. Whether institutional representatives gain the information casually and accidentally or through more intentional means does not change the tension between what they know and what to do.

Historically institutional responses to student protests have ranged from overtly accommodating to dangerously aggressive (Bailey, 2005; Rhoads, 2000), so how does social media's presence in higher education impact how an administration reacts? Does the student affairs professional who encounters the information prepare herself and the institution to be proactive or reactive? Does she reach out to students and educate them about policies, procedures, risks, and other avenues to voice concerns, risking the trusting relationship that gave her access to the information in the first place? The answers are not going to be easy or obvious, as social media strengthens students' ability to organize but for the most part only increases the institution's capacity to observe student behavior, not to respond to it or counter it. The overall impact of social media on the Occupy movement in particular is yet to be understood, but it will most likely stand out as a case study for how higher education understands the power of digital media and student activism. Considering the larger context of debates about the uses of social media in higher education, and the responsibility of student affairs professionals to help students use it wisely and ethically, student activism provides a rich forum in which to explore the impact of increased digitization on students, educators, and their relationships with one another.

Conclusion

In this essay we have explored philosophical and practical aspects of social media in student affairs and higher education. Our goal was to probe some underlying tensions related to social media, not to provide a "how to" – or even a "when to" – guide for using it. Social media are the latest iteration of changes in technologies that have shaped education and society for centuries, from the introduction of written text, to print books, typewriters, computers, and fully online media. As important as learning to use new technologies is learning to help our students understand their potential and their impact. Taking a step back from "how to," "whether to," and "what to do," we aim to enrich conversations about social media in student affairs with questions about the tensions introduced by new media and the challenges and opportunities they pose for us as educators.

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