

Social Media for Blended Learning in Vocational Institutions

*Muhamad Azhar Stapa**, *Mohamad Ibrahim*, *Amri Yusoff*
Faculty of Art, Computing & Creative Industry,
Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris, Malaysia

**Corresponding author: stapaazhar@gmail.com*

ABSTRACT

Social media has gradually become a must-have necessity in teaching and learning due to its ability in sharing, interaction, and collaboration among students in their daily lives. With the right content, social media can be a suitable choice for enhancing the skills for vocational students. Some of the applications that utilized in social media have been explored, but in vocational field not much research has been done. This article presents an innovative approach of using social media for vocational educational purposes in the specific field in learning skill. A review of literature was conducted to determine the usefulness of social media in vocational setting. Results indicate that a strong correlation among the educators, students and their parents in the engaging process of learning and teaching. Finally, a blended learning model is proposed to enhance learning in the vocational institutions.

Keywords: Social media, digital society, blended learning, vocational colleges, Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

Social media refers to the means of interfaces among people in which they create, share, and exchange information and ideas in a virtual environment and networks (Danciu & Grosseck, 2011). Social media is a category of online media where people are talking, participating, sharing, networking and bookmarking online (Jones, 2012). Social media has become one of the most popular online activities between students and teachers. Social software, including email, threaded discussion forums, blogs, wikis, collaborative bookmarking, and text chat are common examples of social computing technologies that have been used to enhance learning (Ellis & Cohen, 2009). A study by Crie (2006) found that blogs were useful and could become excellent platform to enable learning or mentoring to occur (Crie, 2006). In the past 5 years, social media, especially many applications such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Wikipedia, have dominated the ways in which digital technology is used around the world (Ellis & Cohen, 2009). Social media constitutes an increasingly important context where individuals utilize them regularly in their everyday lives. Therefore, social media poses a potential benefit in assessments, curriculum, and teaching practices in the vocational colleges today.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Digital Technologies

A survey of 2,462 teachers in the USA found that digital technologies have helped them in teaching middle school and high school students in many ways. At the same time, the internet, mobile phones, and social media have brought new challenges to teachers (Purcell & Buchanan, 2013). These teachers state the followings about the overall impact on their teaching and their classroom work: (a) majority of these teachers (92%) say the internet has a “major impact” on their ability to access content, resources, and materials for their teaching, (b) About two-third of the respondents (69%) claim that the internet has a “major impact” on their ability to share ideas with other teachers; (c) 67% say the internet has a “major impact” on their ability to interact with parents and (d) 57% say it has had such an impact on enabling their interaction with students. The study concludes that the teachers have the ability to create and to use material content from the web or blog and place on their own blog for teaching and learning (T&L).

Social software tools that could also be used in a vocational environment are shown in Table 1. These software applications can be downloaded from the internet and fully available for the teachers to use them in their vocational teaching or learning. If the teachers can communicate with their audiences using the local language such as Malay or simple English sentences, vocational students may find this easy to follow these applications. McLoughlin and Lee (2007) further explained that current social software tools not only support social interaction, feedback, conversation and networking, but are also could transform the learning process. In addition, the tools could be combined and built on to create new forms, concepts, ideas and services (McLoughlin, & Lee, 2007). Table 1 illustrates the social software tools and their descriptions.

Table 1: List of social software tools and descriptions

Social Software Tool	Descriptions
Social Software	Category of internet applications to help connect with friends, business partners, group or other individuals.
Facebook	
Twitter	
Yahoo Messenger	
Blog	A weblog or blog is a website where entries are made, displayed in chronological order. It often provides commentary or news on a particular subject typically combining text, photo and links to other blogs, web pages and other media related to the specific topic.
Blogger	
Wordpress	
Blogspot	
Etherpad	
Wiki	Collaborative websites that allow users to add, edit and delete content.
Wikipedia	
Social Bookmarking	A web site that allows users to post their list of bookmarks of favorite websites for others to share.
Delicious	
Media Sharing	Websites that allow users to upload, share and view media (photo, videos, file, screen casting). Snap a picture, choose a filter to transform its look and feel, and then post to Instagram, Facebook, Twitter etc.
YouTube	
Flickr	
Dropbox	
Instagram	
Zippyshare	
MediaFire	

Several different methods, techniques and approaches have been developed and implemented to realize requirements in educational studies. For instance, vocational education is one of critical sectors that use of information and communication technologies in its curriculum and training. Vocational education employs different methods and technologies that enable students to learn new skills.

Blended Learning

This article is based on the model that is known as blended learning. Köse (2010) proposed blended learning model supported by popular Web 2.0 technologies and used it in a mathematics course at a high school in Afyonkarahisar (Köse, 2010). The students' mathematics achievements have also improved with blended learning. Figure 1 shows the model of blended learning that combines two types of learning, face to face and e-learning. In this article, e-learning includes social media platform and face to face refers to conventional teaching and learning.

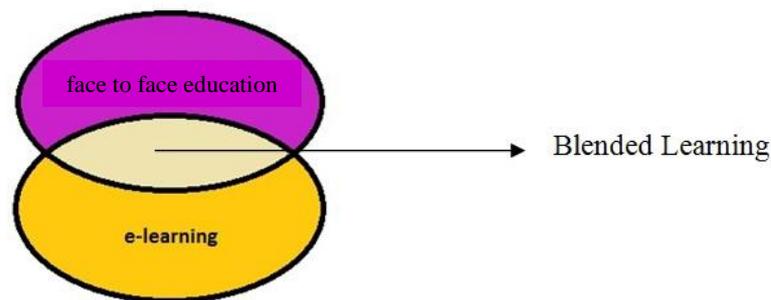


Figure 1: Blended learning formed with face to face education and e-learning.

Ginns and Ellis (2007) studied the relationship between online and face-to-face teaching and learning. The study consisted of 127 veterinarian science students. The students were in year three and four of a five-year undergraduate program. Of the 127 students, 66 were in their fourth year and 61 were in their third year. Data gathering was conducted through two sets of questionnaires. One set of questionnaires measured e-learning experience and the other examined the study process. The study found that students learning outcomes were better when there was student interaction, a favourable workload, a quality of online teaching, and adequate resources. Gins and Ellis (2007) also found that students' outcomes are more favourable when instructors clarify the value of students' posting and interactions as well as seek to understand their students' perceptions in the online part of a blended learning course. For a blended learning course to be successful, the students must be motivated to engage in online activities as well as be made to understand that they are acknowledged and heard (Shivetts, 2011).

Blended learning is a new mode of learning and it depends on the use of information technology in the form of online active learning strategies that improve teaching and learning (Lothridge, Fox, & Fynan, 2013). In general, blended learning has several features of face to face learning and e-learning which makes it a new approach that takes into account the individual differences (Ho, Nakamori, Ho, & Lim, 2014). In addition, Kazu and Demirkol (2014) found students who have gone through the learning process in a suitable environment according to blended learning were more successful as compared to the traditional learning techniques. Looking at this situation, it can be said that learning adapted to the environmental conditions and technology has become more effective than traditional learning as shown in Table 2. The issue of costs should be taken into account for each particular technology when integrating information technology into teaching and learning (Sife, Lwoga, & Sanga, 2007). Blended learning has the potential to revolutionize the educational system (Hollands et al., 2013; Taplin, Kerr, & Brown, 2013; Dankbaar, Storm, Teeuwen, & Schuit, 2014) Integrated productive learning system provides more opportunities for teachers to deepen their skills more efficiently. Vocational institutions can leverage information technology and use blended learning to provide teachers more time to focus on learning activities that engage students and improve their own skills (Hamilton & Tee, 2013).

A study by Mckenzie, Perini, Rohlf, Toukhsati, Conduit and Sanson (2013) showed a reduction in time-to-face class which gave impact on the organization to improve time efficiency of

the learning session. Perceptions of students from the class could be presented by an open comment on the web learning. Teachers can synchronize content between class sessions and online learning (Mckenzie et al., 2013). Table 2 illustrates the differences between traditional and blended learning.

Table 2: Differences in traditional versus blended learning method

	Traditional	Blended learning
Classroom	Face to face	face to face / Online
Practical	Face to face	face to face / Online
Assignments	Individual group	Individual Group
Workshop	College	College Online
Learning Materials	Teacher	Teacher Group of teachers
Online support	None	Conversations Talks Submitting assignments online Decision assignments online

Why Social Media?

Social media application became popularly known as “Web 2.0” and it really gained popularity with Friendster around 2002-2003 followed by MySpace (2003-2006) and then Facebook (2007- current). Social media is suitable as a medium of learning for vocational students because the attraction of the application and easy to use. Some of the advantages of social media are: (a) mostly are freely available or at a fraction of the cost, (b) easier and faster access to gain information as and when or where it is needed, and (d) the seamless integration of a variety of Web 2.0 technologies in the teaching-learning activities.

A survey conducted by Ottenbreit (2010) has shown that the more years of digital experience and a higher frequency of Internet usage, the more positive is their perception of the impact of the internet on their learning and future work. The study has also shown that when teachers believe technology issues are valuable; they are more likely to integrate technology into practice. Thus, teachers’ belief can promote or hinder their use of technology in the classroom. Teachers should be getting more opportunities to leverage information technology to enhance their knowledge. They need to use internet resources to promote knowledge and professional development in their own (Gialamas et al., 2013).

Why Vocational Education?

Vocational and Technical Education is an important part of modern education. The demand to improve productivity and the employability of individuals through the development of work-related competences brings the vocational transformation at the vocational colleges (*Kolej Vokasional*) under Ministry of Education Malaysia (MoE). In 2008, the Ministry of Human Resources (MoHR) reported that the lack of skilled human resources of more than 700,000 workers in manufacturing, agriculture and construction. Demand for skilled workers in the future will continue to increase. By the year 2020, about 3.3 million jobs will be created under the NKEA, at least 46% will require vocational qualification certificate or diploma, compared to 22% who need a university degree qualification (Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia, 2013). To bridge the gap of this demand, there is a need to provide an additional 50,000 places in vocational education each year. In addition to these challenges, there are also other challenges, namely to ensure the quality of vocational education. Lack of qualified coaches, out-of-date curriculum, weak collaboration with industry as well as limited in-service

training are the critical factors causing vocational graduates fail to meet the industry needs. Malaysian Ministry of Education (MoE) has proposed Vocational Transformation Plan to strengthen the training for skilled graduates in 2012 (Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia, 2013). By 2015, vocational colleges are expected to increase the intake of 10% of the total secondary school enrolment. Implementation of the education transformation process requires new approaches and strategies so that every student can master the skills needed in the 21st century. Thus, the transformation of education should lead to the efforts to understand and improve the dynamic process of teaching and learning at vocational colleges (Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia, 2013). Mastering relevant knowledge and skills (e.g., technological knowledge, flexibility, productivity) becomes increasingly more important than being educational achievers (Pavlova & Maclean, 2013). Modernization of educational process is highly needed in the high school system where the knowledge growth is rapid and it demands constant redefining and acquiring of new methods for efficient learning. The social media as e-learning method could provide a better platform for efficient technological integration in vocational education in our country.

FUTURE VOCATIONAL TEACHING

Vocational Students

Vocational students prefer something that is easy to use and meaningful in their learning process. In fact, today's students are ready to accept change. It also reveals that students do take it seriously when it comes to maximizing the use of technology such as smart phones that come with a social software facilities for the purpose of getting information as part of their learning preference. In spite of these tools included with some aspects that are not considerably high-end but merely acceptable, the general perception is that the tools are something that can be accepted and used. This led them to place great importance on the teacher–learner relationship and on the educational values and norms of conduct on which that relationship is based. In order to be effective learning tools, student needs to possess:

1. a clear understanding of the concept of social media.
2. oral or written communication skills, and teamwork skills.
3. competence to develop their own opinions.
4. computing skills.

Students need to have adequate knowledge in order to identify the characteristics of the subject matter from several points of view. Future vocational graduates who go out to work are expected to provide the best value to their employers. Employers prefer technical, social, interpersonal, innovative, and thinking skills (Mishra, Yorkshire, Alseddiqui, & Pislaru, 2009).

Vocational Teachers

A vocational teacher is required to know about recent technologies and applications. The ability to use diversified learning methodology in order to convey knowledge and skills is critical. The vocational teachers must respond to the students' need for information, guidance and counseling. They should be a good communicator and be able to express a strong interest in students' learning and have an adequate didactic knowledge to teach the students to learn by solving problems and participating in discussions. Feedback is also essential for maintaining and increasing the efficiency of the learning process. Teachers in newly designed vocational programs should provide opportunities for students to make connection with their own life experiences. Rather than helping students to memorize facts, vocational teachers should teach students meta cognitive and self-evaluative skills so that the students can assess what they need to learn in order to solve a problem or complete a project. Students who learn these skills will be able to direct their own learning to recognize what skills they need and learn new skills on their own (Jamaliah, Rohana, & Aede Hatib, 2012). Moreover, the vocational institutions should award vocational teachers for excellent teaching and provide incentives for teachers to use new technologies (Chin-Pin, Hui-Min, Chang-Lin, & Chang, 2012).

Future Vocational Teaching

Different methods could be used to deliver vocational teaching. But every alternative will have its own advantages and disadvantages such as:

1. Class learning. The classical “class” is still the most commonly-used method in most educational institutions and it is potentially beneficial, as it is associated with the social interaction among students and between teachers and students (Danciu & Grosseck, 2011).
2. Collaborative learning by-doing. Cooperative learning with social media is now is more effective and efficient than traditional form of individual learning. Social software is used when students are intended to work together in small groups for significant stages of their learning process (Danciu & Grosseck, 2011).
3. Peer-learning.
4. Demonstrating in groups. Several types of projects can be set:
 - a) Individual project. Students produce individually assigned tasks and manage the projects. Students learn through the hands-on activities and the experiments they conducted.
 - b) Team projects. In this case, there can be situations in which only one student does the work but the project is presented as being a collaborative effort, although tasks are allocated separately to each member of the group (Google docs, dropbox, video on YouTube).
 - c) Final project. For final projects that the students have to complete at the end of the course, students can employ different types of audio and visual materials.

Regardless of the method employed, the method that is most suited to the learning process would be the one that meets the vocational students’ expectations.

CONCLUSION

This article has described about learning in different ways in vocational setting. When teenagers play online multiplayer games, or when they share and remix web content, they collaborate to reach a common goals. The technology of Web 2.0 or social media is fundamentally interactive and collaborative. As a result, Web 2.0 can foster teamwork skills. Moreover, collaborative skills are essential to living in the digital world and to dealing with the ever-complex problems faced by students. Vocational institutions should prepare vocational students for collaborative team-work and there are many ways to do so. For example, vocational teachers can organize collaborative writing with Etherpad (a collaborative text editing web app), ask students to prepare a joint project with a wiki or to share documents with dropbox (a shared online folder), Google Docs or one of the numerous tools available online for free. Social media are a source of intellectual optimism, a fact of life, and they will increasingly become a fact of learning. Web 2.0 technologies into vocational education are useful, but ultimately worthless without experience, creativity and innovation – the desire to think of the educational process in completely new terms. However, this does not mean that the things we have learned so far need to be forgotten. We need to remember that we are at the beginning of a new era and, inevitably, the end of another one – this is the era of change. The digital society, students can easily have access to different historical or scientific interpretations, thus bringing them to question the models conveyed in the classroom. The students can identify multiple opinions and contradictions, but they don’t necessarily have the key to deciding whether a piece of information is relevant. The original idea to implement social media as e-learning and face to face in the classroom, in order to modernize the educational process has come as the new hardware and software tools have already been available at vocational institutions and it has been expected that the vocational teachers would be motivated to use new technologies to improve their teaching. The new method would provide an alternative to the classical educational method where the students are in the passive position and often are not well motivated for learning. The “e-learning with situated learning” teaching strategy allows students to learn anytime and anywhere as long as they have a computer and Internet access, this strategy is highly flexible. It can improve participation, make students read on their own initiatives, and increase in-class responses and overall communications.

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