FACILITATING LEARNING OUTSIDE THE CLASSROOM:
THE VALUE OF SOCIAL MEDIA FUNCTIONALITY IN “DESIRE2LEARN”

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“I have reviewed the proposal, and I support the request for a course release/cost reimbursement for the project.”

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Head of Academic Unit                                      Date
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Problem Statement:

As a result of technological and societal trends, the line between students’ work, home, school and social lives has become increasingly blurred. One outcome is that students expect to have not only the most useful, but also easiest-to-use IT-enabled tools at hand, without regard to the origin of such tools (i.e., work, school, personal life, etc.). This is especially true of students’ use of social media. Although social media is often assumed to refer to Facebook and LinkedIn (or their foreign equivalents in other countries and professional niches), social media also includes other tools for communication and content-sharing (e.g., instant messaging, discussion boards, Skype, wikis, etc.). While students are accustomed to using – and generally report enjoying their use of such “social web” features – the value of such technology use on student learning is debated (Halic et al., 2010).

Georgia State University is in the process of replacing an old, proprietary Learning Management System (LMS) – initially called “WebCT” and then “ULearn” – with a new platform that will be adopted in the new academic year: “Desire2Learn.” This provides a unique opportunity to conduct a comparative study over a one-year period of students’ use and perceived value of “social media” features in the old (ULearn) and the new (Desire2Learn) LMS. Given the demonstrated value of blogs and discussion boards to students’ sense of community (Rovai & Jordan 2004), as well as their potential (but unknown) value in enhancing students’ learning, it is important to understand and optimize the potential value of the social media features that will be available in the new platform.

Proposal Objectives:

I seek to compare the value of social media features in at least two “blended learning” courses (i.e., courses that meet face-to-face rather than being just virtual or distance-based learning). I also seek to compare business students’ use of such features (i.e., discussion boards, blogs, instant messaging and content-sharing “apps”) with their perceived sense of community, perceived learning, and objective measures of individual and group learning. While most of these constructs are well known, the importance of sense of community in higher education environments is a new term introduced in the last decade (Powazek 2002). The relationship between this construct and students’
satisfaction with their college experience has been widely studied, especially for non-traditional students (e.g., Miller 2003) and “Millennial” students (e.g., Howe & Strauss 2003), but is unclear if a higher *sense of community* enhances students perceived learning or their actual learning (Ruth 2010).

Studies have shown that the use of social features – such as blogs and discussion boards – are especially important and seem to offer the most benefit in “blended courses” (Rovai & Jordan 2004). I will address these questions by carefully comparing MBA students with themselves over time to understand, first: whether having such social features available and related measures of usage affects students’ sense of community, their perceived learning, and evidence of actual learning. This will necessitate comparing the same students in the same course before-and-after such features are made available to them (during spring 2012). Second, I will also conduct a comparison of similar (but not the same) MBA students over time, as they have the opportunity to move from having no social media tools in their LMS to having social media tools available in ULearn (in late spring 2012), and later comparing it to the features in Desire2Learn (fall 2012).

By being an early adopter of the social media functionality in Desire2Learn, I will have the opportunity to be one of the first faculty members to encourage, document, and analyze students’ use of social media features and their associated benefits (as well as any potential problems). Based on several sets of data that I plan to collect – starting in spring/summer 2012 and continuing to the new academic year, my experience with the social media features in both the new (Desire2Learn) and old (ULearn) LMS platforms can be leveraged to offer advice to other faculty who will later adopt them.

**Method:**

I will conduct three sets of comparisons to analyze the value of social media features.

1. **spring 2012** – within the same course, compare students who lack any social media use with the same students as they are introduced and begin using social media tools available in ULearn.

2. **fall 2012** – within the same course, compare students who lack social media use with the same students as they are introduced and begin using social media tools available in Desire2Learn.

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1 Rovai and Jordan (2004) define blended courses as ones that meet face-to-face, but which also employ online tools for group and classroom support. Moreover, the term “benefit” means that such tools enhance *sense of community* the most in blended courses compared to in distance-learning classes. However, we still lack data about whether such use of social media functionality in courses or students’ *sense of community* enhances their learning.
fall 2012 – across courses, compare data for students, as described in steps #1 and #2.

This analytic approach has some advantages, due to the various controls embedded. Steps #1 and #2 both feature the control of having “paired-samples” (i.e., the same students before-and-after they adopt social media tools). It also allows for comparison of post-adoption beliefs between students using similar functionalities in the two different LMS platforms (ULearn and Desire2Learn).

I will administer online surveys twice during each class (in spring 2012 and fall 2012) for:

- Self-reported usage of specific social media features (discussion board only in ULearn; discussion board, plus extra new feature in Desire2Learn – instant messaging, notifications),
- Self-reported beliefs about the ease-of-use and perceived value of each social media feature,
- Self-reported scale for sense of community (Rovai 2003; Rovai & Jordan 2004),
- Students’ self-reports on other perceived measures (perceived learning, course value),
- Objective measures of students’ actual learning (i.e., actual course exams, papers, etc.)

I will conduct the necessary comparisons both over time within a semester (i.e., paired-sample t-tests), and across semesters (standard t-tests). I will conduct standard measures of construct validity and reliability, and then attempt to explain the three dependent variables (perceived learning, course value, and actual learning) based on the predictor variables (perceived value of features, actual use).

**Budget:**

I request one course release for summer 2012 for me to perform the necessary analyses.

**Media/Classroom:**

The first part of this study requires no special media or equipment (other than ULearn, which has been available since 1999). The second part of the study assumes the availability of the new LMS, Desire2Learn, which is scheduled to be implemented in the new academic year (2012-2013).

**References**


