

Developing Guidelines for the Use of WhatsApp as a Back Channel in Higher Education

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Abstract

The authors completed a mixed methods study on student engagement in the online virtual classroom with three successive cohorts of students from the Masters in Special Educational Needs (MSEN) between 2014 and 2017. The first year of the study revealed extensive use of the social media tool WhatsApp by the cohorts, and the use of WhatsApp was explored in more detail in subsequent years of the study. In 2018, the authors published findings relating to use of WhatsApp (Stone & Logan, 2018). One recommendation emerging from the research was to develop support or guidance around the use of WhatsApp for students. This paper draws on those findings to offer a rationale for a further phase of this study presenting the rationale for taking a 'students as partners' approach in the development of the guidelines. The proposal to work in collaboration with students connects with the sub theme of the conference: student as pedagogy partners. The paper also connects to a second sub theme namely ethics and integrity, as the intention of providing guidelines for students around the use of social media is to support students to reflect on the use of social media in an ethical manner.

Keywords

Social Media, Social Media in Higher Education, Back Channels in Education, Belonging in Education, Students as Pedagogy Partners, Ethics and Integrity for Social Media

1. Introduction

During the academic years 2014-2017, the authors conducted a study on student engagement in the online virtual classroom with three successive cohorts of students from the Masters in Special Educational Needs (MSEN), a blended programme at the Institute of Education, Dublin City University. A key finding emerging from this research was the widespread use by students of the social media tool WhatsApp and in subsequent phases of the research the extent and nature of this was investigated in more detail. In 2018, we published findings from the WhatsApp focus of the research which revealed the student experience of WhatsApp as a supportive tool both for building a sense of community for a blended programme and as an information source (Logan & Stone, 2018). However, some of the data uncovered a less positive experience. Some students found the sheer volume of messages overwhelming, while others found that at times the WhatsApp messaging was placing pressure on them in relation to comparing their progress with the overall group.

Given the positive experience of using this tool and the positive contribution of a back channel in building a sense of community, the authors considered the development of a set of guidelines as a natural development from this study. In line with our values and our commitment to including the student as a pedagogy partner (Matthews, Dwyer, Hine, & Turner, 2018; Wallin & Aarsand, 2019) we believe that graduates of the programme are well placed to offer insight into current students' needs. Therefore, we intend to work with graduates in the development of guidelines on the use of WhatsApp as a back channel for supporting students to develop a sense of community and as a support for learning. It is proposed to develop these guidelines as an interactive online artefact using the open source content creation tool H5P. We envisage that introducing interactivity to the online resource will support reflection for students around the ethical considerations in relation to engaging in the use of social media. This online artefact will be shared with the higher education (HE) community through creative commons¹ licensing structures.

¹ [Creative Commons](#)

2. Rationale

Since the publication of our paper in April 2018, further feedback from the 2017/2018 and 2018/2019 MSEN cohorts has reinforced our initial findings with similar themes emerging. Students from these cohorts also found WhatsApp to be supportive of the development of a sense of community.

I was part of the What's App group. I found this very useful as there was a sense of community which would not have been possible without it as most of the course was on-line.

Students continued to find the channel a useful point of information flow, “*Great benefits when you have a quick question in relation to submission or assignment presentation etc.-answer guaranteed straight away.*” However, student feedback also reflected previous cohort’s concerns of the volume of messages coming through the channel. “*I found the group very challenging at times as it was constantly active. I actually muted the Whats App group and only looked at it every couple of days.*”

Interestingly, the need for guidelines around WhatsApp usage has been articulated by the students explicitly.

Whatsapp: Beneficial mostly and not so beneficial towards the end when people that were finished before others were commenting on minute details like where page numbers should be etc.. so perhaps more guidance in understanding the situation of others at all times.

This explicit call for guidelines from students has given an impetus to progress the plan to develop such guidelines over the academic year 2019/2020. The development process entails three stages as outlined below.

3. Methodology

Firstly, we are currently conducting an updated literature review in relation to WhatsApp in education, with a particular focus on ethical guidelines around the use of social media. Initial searches have uncovered studies which echo the authors' initial study in terms of both the negative and positive aspects of the use of WhatsApp to support HE (Igbafe & Anyanwu, 2018; Rosenberg & Asterhan, 2018). For the purposes of developing the guidelines, it is intended to also draw on the experience of those in the primary and second level sector in relation to social media use (Aizenkot & Kashy-Rosenbaum, 2019; Belgrove JBS, 2019). This updated literature review will allow us to confidently move to stage two which will involve an in-depth analysis of the qualitative data from the 2017/8 and 2018/9 surveys relating specifically to the use of WhatsApp.

We will use the methodology developed for the initial phases of the research for this purpose (Stone & Logan, 2018), analysing the qualitative data using an inductive approach in the style of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and informed by Rosman & Rallis (2012). We will first engage individually with the data, identifying patterns and considering emerging themes. We will then share our individual analysis and through a dialogic process identify themes for presentation. This will be guided by the literature and also by the emergence of three key themes within the 2018 paper: the distraction aspect of back channels; social media and inclusiveness and the need for informal learning spaces.

The final stage will involve the development of guidelines for students using WhatsApp as a back channel on educational programmes drawing on the literature review and the data analysis. We will take a 'students as partners' approach to this process. A high level of student insight around the use of WhatsApp is clear, particularly in more recent data from 2017/2018 and 2018/2019 as the use of this tool has become more established as a back channel. Given this level of insight, and experience of these cohorts in relation to WhatsApp, we believe that working together with previous cohorts as

partners will be of great benefit to the project. In early 2020, we will apply for ethical approval to invite, recruit and conduct focus groups around the use of WhatsApp with the 2017, 2018 and 2019 graduates of the MSEN. To facilitate as much engagement as possible, we will offer both face-to-face and online focus group options. Graduates will be invited to take part through established alumni communication channels.

Students as pedagogy partners is an emerging field of research over the last decade to such an extent as to see the establishment in 2017 of a journal focusing on this topic, the *International Journal of Students as Partners*. There are many conceptualizations of this partnership approach with benefits outlined in the literature as an increased responsibility for and therefore motivation in the learning process and a transformed sense of self-awareness for both staff and students (Matthews et al., 2018). The approach for this particular study will draw on a recently published study which describes the use of a perspective dialogue approach in research concerned with learning environments in HE (Wallin, & Aarsand, 2019). This methodological approach is similar to focus groups with the educator/s and students engaging in dialogue around a topic. However, instead of adopting a passive interviewer role, the educators' role is also to offer reflections on the student feedback thus encouraging further discussions and reflections. The aim of this dialogic approach is to allow both students and staff to negotiate a collective perspective and gain deeper insights.

4. Conclusions and Future Work

We have outlined above our rationale for extending our research by focusing on one key finding from our previous study - the need for student guidelines around the use of WhatsApp. The development of such guidelines will be a collaboration between the authors and former students using the perspectives dialogue approach outlined by Wallin & Aarsand (2019). We intend to publish our findings in the near future and as outlined above, offer the guidelines as an open source resource through creative commons licensing.

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