THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE OPPORTUNITIES OF THEIR APPLICATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION FOR ENCOURAGING EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATIONS AND SOCIALIZATION

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Abstract: The paper presents a discussion on the role and the importance of social media in the system of higher education in terms of the opportunities for improvements in communications and interactions between the parties involved in training (teachers, students, university staff, employers, experts, etc.). Advantages and disadvantages of the social networks are analyzed in creating a customized learning environment. Furthermore, the study makes some implications on the issue of socialization and future developments in connection to the new realities of the contemporary digitalizing world.
Keywords: higher education, social networks, communication, socialization.

1. INTRODUCTION

Contemporary development of information and communication technology puts a lot of challenges to the training of students in higher education institutions. It is not only about their direct application into the teaching and learning processes. The importance of communications in the course of training is undisputable but the ways to find effective solutions for interpersonal communications in the university environment in order to foster students' development is a challenge needed to be addressed by a different point of view, even regarding the "gap" between teachers and students generations. In these terms it is worth to consider the way of perception in which the leading factor is the use of Internet and the work with social media sites.

In this respect, it is interesting to cooperate with such educational projects as the Innovations and Sustainability Academy (Plovdiv, Bulgaria) and the Mariinsky International Mariinsky Academy named after M. D. Shapovalenko (Moscow, Russia). Considerable attention is paid to work with universities, institutes and research centers through the organization of work in such major world scientific social networks as ResearchGate, Academia, Mendeley and others. Within the framework of these convenient interfaces, the joint fruitful activity of doctors of sciences and postdocs, professors and students develops. In addition, the nature of hypertext has unequivocal multiple advantages over the text of a regular printed book, even if it is beautifully illustrated and provided with numerous references and an extensive list of used literature. Of particular interest in this case are also the ever growing opportunities of the scientific social networks themselves. They offer more and more effective tools every day to solve various scientific problems in the process of competition and the space of healthy competition with each other. Distinctive features of such effective work arise due to the contact of different mentality, national and cultural traditions of each country, which represents one or another participant in the process of cooperation. It is very useful when a scientist or a student from one country seeks to study the traditions of another country, and in this he/she is remotely helped by scientists/students studying at a university in the country.

In order to establish a reliable and fruitful connection between different parties in the training process various means should be used, especially such which are the most spread and attractive to the trainees. Current paper pays a special attention to the advantages of social media in terms of building social networks and establishing social contacts in support to training in the system of higher education.

2. THE IMPORTANCE OF SOCIAL NETWORKS TO ESTABLISHMENT OF A CUSTOMIZED LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

The growth in the use of Internet for communication and collaboration finds successful expressions in establishing virtual communities and socializing networks (Georgescu & Popescul, 2015). The significance of social media and the high level of its opportunities of interaction influences today's environment of everyday life, doing business, training, career development and more. A shift in the common paradigm is observed towards networks in different spheres and with different goals, transfer of knowledge and innovation, intercultural exchange and social understanding. Nowadays socializing environments are underpinned by the services provided on the Internet (Georgescu & Popescul, 2015) because of a number of advantages in various aspects: user-friendly, non-discriminatory and collaborative. Some of the mentioned disadvantages are connected to addictions, changes in socializing habits and security issues but all these should be scrutinized as open fields of improvement and turning into advantages. In these terms, the advantages of the use of social media are broadly defined as: exchange of information and communication, sharing of data, education, team work, work from home, services, etc. (Drahošová & Balco, 2017).

We understand that the aforementioned costs of working in networks, on the one hand, have not yet been fully investigated, but on the other hand they are not exclusive to network scientific collaboration between professors, students and doctoral students. There are many other kinds of dependencies that significantly affect the nature of scientists' consciousness rather than dependence on the computer, the Internet, a certain site, a specific social network or even the presence or absence there of the expected time for a particular user - a collaborative research colleague in this or that field of science. In our opinion, the dependencies of this character are so clearly expressed beyond the limits of communication in scientific social networks - namely, in personal communication, by phone, Skype, etc. The more fiercely, that when we compare hypothetical harm and obvious benefits, communication in scientific networks proves its unequivocal efficiency.

Information and communication technology (ICT) affects almost all the activities in education (Liu, 2012) facilitating the exchange of ideas and information about science and technology, using new methods for interactions between teachers and students, offering new administrative services, and not last – organizing electronic and distant forms of learning. Now students are provided with many opportunities to enroll in universities and to keep their jobs, to study in a flexible way but in somehow isolated environment. The overcoming of the disadvantages of self-learning in regard to the socialization aspect could be made by the use of social media along with the information systems and distant learning platforms provided by the universities.

It should be recognized that the time spent by the student at the computer during the distance learning is properly spent. Classes in distance form seem to us sufficiently effective, important and inalienable in the life of students and faculty of universities. Along with this, we should appreciate the efforts of all those who combine distance and electronic forms of learning with full-time and part-time forms. The latter have proved themselves well for many years of implementing the educational process in the system of higher professional education. The role of social media in the socialization of students cannot be overemphasized. We express the hope that in the future their role in the life of universities and institutions will be strengthened until they take their proper place in the system of student socialization.

This provision is of particular importance in those cases when a student or a professor has limited physical capabilities, and the distance learning form is absolutely irreplaceable, and sometimes the only possible one. Also, a student or teacher for one reason or another is absent from the university and seeks to make the learning process uninterrupted, and on this basis also refers to distance learning as the most convenient one in this case. Of course, there are other circumstances that encourage the preference for distance learning. However, in all other cases, training can be conducted not only in front of monitors of stationary computers, but also in museum halls, in a foundation of archaeological excavations, geological expeditions, during folkloric student practice in a remote village or town. Full-time communication between students and teachers is an unquestionable priority in all the above cases, as well as in a large number of conditions unnamed here. The variant of full-time communication is here the alternation of full-time and correspondence, or full-time and distance communication. This seems useful to us in cases where a group of students can participate, for example, in dialectological practice in the territory of a neighboring region, and one of the students traveling on a wheelchair is not able to overcome numerous descents and ascents of a natural character not having the appropriate equipment. Classmates and teachers communicate with them remotely at this stage in order to soon return from the expedition and go to the full stage of communication with his classmate.

A similar model can be applied also in the case when one of the professors is at an international conference in another state, but in the native university at this time his/her expert assessment of the situation that has arisen in

the educational process is required. At the same time, another professor conducts classes with students in full time, while the professor, named first, takes a distance part in a lecture, seminar, colloquium or other scientific event during a break between sessions of the conference at a university in another country.

Interaction plays an important role in training and because of the scarcity of physical environments new learning environments are needed to help in building bridges between the word inside and outside the university putting the student at the center (Mesquita *et al.*, 2017). Learning is no longer limited to the university and it is expanded to the whole students' personal environment accenting on the importance of the complex of informal and formal learning approaches and the inclusion of other key players to participate in learning as experts, employers, etc.

Fig. 1. *Schematic presentation of the model of Customized learning environment*
Source: Mesquita, A., Moreira, F., Peres, P., & Oliveira, L. 2017. Customized x-Learning Environment: e-portfolio integration. EURASHE's 27th Annual Conference "Professional Higher Education 4.0: A Change for Universities of Applied Sciences", Le Havre (France), 30-31 March 2017.

In this context a model of a Customized xLearning environment (where the X can take the form of electronic, mobile or ubiquitous) was developed (Mesquita *et al.*, 2017) which unites the learning management systems, the personalized learning environment, the social networks (horizontal and vertical) and the knowledge sharing networks. It enables the interactions between parties involved in the training process.

This way of studying at the university now seems to us to be the most preferable, because it to some extent "reconciles" the supporters of various forms of education in the university, and also allows to obtain the greatest cumulative effect by combining the merits of different forms of organization of the educational process. At the same time, we are ready to assert that the models described here, which have unequivocal advantages over separately taken distance learning, can play a much larger role in student socialization. This is achievable through experimental verification of the effectiveness of these models and comparison of their key indicators with the usual indicators of traditional distance learning.

Each scientist, the experimenter, the organizer of the educational process of the university, should realize that in the implementation of these forms of education, not the first generation of students is already participating. And the perception of what is happening in the new student generation has significant differences from the previous ones. For example, if we take into account that with the participation of students which studied at universities in the 2000s, approbation of forms of distance learning was under way, intensive reflection was required. It was expected that students will share their feelings, delights and doubts that arise in their participation in distance learning. And the success of students at the same time could play the role of one of the key indicators of student socialization. Arbitrary and organized discussions took place, as a rule, in the real world, and implied peculiar ways of communication, exchange of emotions, feelings and sensations. In addition, smartphones were a significant rarity and were much more expensive than now. Therefore, the students had much more reasons to unite in the collective creative work, jointly solving a wide variety of educational and other tasks. Now the question posed by one student to another is often regarded as his/her inability to use digital organizers or an antisocial situation, which is associated

with a lack of financial resources to purchase a modern smartphone model that can be "asked" for everything without resorting to a roommate in the student room hostel.

Now there are cases when the attempt of a student to enter into communication with oneself similar not only does not lead to the previously expected and legitimate socialization in the student environment, but on the contrary - to serve as an unexpectedly powerful destructive factor. "Unrobotized" student, who have their own non-standard thoughts, feelings, ideas, often cannot show them to the community of their classmates, because they are afraid to be ridiculed. On a personal example, or watching someone else's fiasco in this way, a student who is outside of the box and thinking about the world around will be least motivated to establish contact with peers in the real world. Most likely, he/she will become a member of the interest group in any social network, whose members live in different cities and countries, in different time zones and even in different hemispheres of the Earth. There he/she will be perfectly understood, will give a high evaluation of his/her spiritual and intellectual quest, invited to a huge number of virtual events. And at the same time the virtual aspect of socialization will be realized. Participants in such communities will be able to meet in the real world with the least probability. But even if this happens, it is possible that instead of real communication, they will sit on one bench, habitually looking at the screens of smartphones.

Given this state of affairs, we consider it our duty to state the necessary role that social media must take on. The task of their organizers is seen in the balance between virtual and real events. Sites, newspapers, magazines should be constantly held festivals, competitions, Olympiads and other events that require frequent face-to-face meetings of at least some of the representatives of their readership. The forms of holding such exciting and memorable events should assume the maximum number of opportunities for direct communication of participants, open friendly attitude to every attempt at real human communication, even if the young people behave somewhat stiffly and awkwardly at the same time. Of course, the work of scientific social networks, backed by real meetings at conferences, symposiums, congresses and other scientific events, tends to a greater extent to a strict form of communication, free from the emotional self-expression of its participants. But even so, it is necessary to take into account the need for informal communication to your audience, as, for example, Mendeley does.

3. CONCLUSION

Discussing the accent on social networks it should be underlined that there are aspects to be considered as diversity and purposes, privacy and specialization but what is more important is the focus on the support to the learners in establishing a personal learning environment. Concerning disadvantages as security problems, addictions to Internet, information overload and loss of social contacts it should be noticed however that those come from the traditional conservatism to change and the refuse to accept the entrance into the new digital era and new realities. Despite the lack of the physical contact, the social contacts could be even better because of the sense of freedom and confidence expressed when people are out of the obstacles and prejudices raised during direct physical contacts. New generations / students are different and the dialogue with them will be impossible if it is not in their environment taking into consideration their interests and ways of building knowledge, skills and competences. This is a huge challenge to the educational systems worldwide which should be addressed in a proper way in the near future. Otherwise the education will not answer the needs of society and economy and the topical problems related to quality assurance and discrepancies in the expectations of the parties in it will continue growing and becoming even deeper.

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