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From tweeting to tweetposium. So what? A reflection.

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Abstract

In this reflection, a learner shares their experience of engaging with other like-minded individuals in the online higher education community, @SocMedHE. Furthermore, how engaging the community has enabled their development from observing from a distance to active participation (e.g., #SocMedHE20 tweetposium) and subsequently using that knowledge and experience for other online activities.

Keywords

Social media, community, network, research, PhD

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If you ask me to participate in a tweetposium before the pandemic, I would have looked at you blankly. Not just because the word “tweetposium” does not roll easily off your tongue, but I never knew that a symposium could be adapted for inclusivity and accessibility.

The COVID-19 pandemic has increased the number of opportunities to build a community and for everyone who might feel isolated during an unprecedented time to come together for care and compassion, despite miles apart. For others, it was during this period where new connections were made, finding other like-minded individuals to develop similar or new interests, creating a new network, expanding our connections far and wide-reaching the unexpected places. For me, it was reflecting my time as a learner as I navigate across a wobbly bridge with a glass floor from a skyscraper height looking across the city. It is incredible how a community like @SocMedHE has provided many insights into my experience in higher education, and more so, during what seems like an isolated journey initially.

In-person classes, symposiums, and conferences were the norm before the pandemic. The excitement of travelling and visiting new places, spending time understanding the local traditions (including the food cuisines) before arriving at the actual venue were a few notable perks. However, the pandemic offered a quicker and cheaper travelling alternative via a few clicks on the computer from the comfort at home. Still, the excitement has somewhat differed. The opportunity to sightsee and engage with other delegates has limited the chance to have those random and personal conversations, with the limited opportunity to engage with the local culture and settings. Nevertheless, technology has enabled endless ‘online travelling’ and participating in activities across the globe that you never thought of doing before the pandemic.

From a mere stumble on following staff members from the educational sectors such as educators, learning developers and technologists, librarians, academics, and other researchers via social media has opened a new door of insights into the diversity of roles and activities in the sector. I never knew about the @SocMedHE community until my discovery a few years ago when other individuals I follow were in online dialogues sharing their work using social media with students. A short trip up to the Midlands in the UK and I discovered a somewhat unique conference format (unlike a typical academic research conference). Of course, I previously sat in workshops where you are taught to be prepared to have an elevator pitch ready for those awkward situations when I do not know anyone at a conference. However, all that training went out of the window as I arrived at my first ever @SocMedHE conference. I experienced the unexpected. I was unsure what I should be feeling while being in the same room as the experts (or, should I say, influencers) in the higher education sector. It was such a weird feeling, which felt like you were at a festival rather than a conference. For example, all the session incorporated creativity and fun aspects whilst enhancing and emphasising the meaning behind learning and teaching in education. From the individualisation and personalisation (for example, the first task at the conference was to create and design your name badge) to the community who shows care and compassion made me felt like I have been part of this energetic community for a long time, despite stood there by the registration desk. It is a community where you could engage in conversations and not judged by random and silly questions. It is a community where there are justifiable reasons to have fun in nearly, if not all, sessions (where is part of the programme), and simultaneously learning the latest research using social media in higher education. Ultimately, it was enriching to meet and be in the same room as the experts behind those online conversations. Thus, the opportunity to participate in those forward-thinking and provocative discussions on how we could collaborate on cross-institutional projects with the same vision, enhance learning and teaching using social media from our lenses.

The experience gained from @SocMedHE has shown how social media and technology can connect individuals no matter where they are and be in a community where everyone has a shared interest, especially during a year where everyone has been working remotely. When the opportunity arose to present at a tweetposium, I was intrigued by this innovative approach, with the curiosity to see how it work. With more remote working since the pandemic, I found myself, like everyone else, engulfed in online webinars, symposiums, conferences, etc., where attendance is easier than before. However, I miss the local traditions and the sightseeing and meeting people in person for those weird and random conversations during this pandemic. Nevertheless, the concept of a tweetposium was simple. Scheduled tweets curated by the presenters were tweeted out in the time slots by the host organiser's Twitter account, in this case, from @SocMedHE. Moreover, during the "presentation" slot, participants and the presenter could engage in real-time conversations through tweeting comments and sharing resources to other information. It was somewhat an interesting experience. There were no direct audio or video engagement with participants, but rather all done via 240 characters composed in a series of tweets (courtesy of Sue Beckingham for collating the tweets). With the opportunity to share my perception on the #SocMedHE20 conference's topic on community, care, and compassion, I shared how technology provides an innovative approach to connect with others, building a community and finding your sense of belonging. Furthermore, how social media has facilitated my experience of a transparent learning approach, breaking barriers down and working collaboratively to enhance our digital capabilities for the wider higher education community.

Taking this experience of #SocMedHE20 tweetposium, I adapted this idea to a Twitter Takeover I led in a weeklong Graduate School Festival (#UoWGradFest2021) in May 2021. The overall aim of the festival was to showcase the research carried out by the doctoral students at the University of Westminster through a series of workshops, panel discussions, screenings, competitions, exhibitions, keynote talks, podcast. The concept of the Twitter Takeover (#PhDShowcase) was to showcase the doctoral students from across the different disciplines across the university, taking a glimpse into their research, the importance and impact of it, and their favourite moments so far at university. In total, 41 PhD students participated following a mass invitation on the weekly graduate school newsletter, of which they answered three questions based on the above. Working with the festival organising team, we scheduled over 120 tweets out to spread across the week. Though it seemed like an impossible task with a large number of tweets, it was a good opportunity for students who may not be as 'social media savvy' to participate, communicating their research and university experience out to the wider community. For me, this Twitter Takeover activity highlighted the diversity of our research, bringing our PhD community together to have those conversations we normally have when on campus during the festival. But ultimately, reconnecting ourselves back into the community we have at our institutions and encouraging and supporting one another in our PhD journey.

The pandemic has certainly encouraged us to view our learning and teaching community like no other than before. Over time, social media is becoming a prominent tool not just for social interactions and communications but instead emerging as an educational tool for knowledge exchange and extending our network and collaborations to unexpected areas. Attending meetings, symposiums, and conferences via traditional format is no longer the only option, but rather utilising social media to stay connected and partake in discussions with others based in other locations. Though virtual attendance can never replace in-person experience, remote engagement presents the opportunity to develop our community, care, and compassion in similar and meaningful ways.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.