

‘Create a Better Online You’: Designing online learning resources to develop undergraduate social media skills

Abstract

‘Create a Better Online You’ (CBOY) is an emerging initiative from QUT Library. CBOY focusses on developing the social media skills of undergraduates at QUT. While many students will have encountered ‘cybersafety’ training in primary or secondary school, a comprehensive environmental scan revealed little in the way of social media resources targeted at undergraduates. In particular, there was little to no focus on the ways in which social media could be used strategically to develop a positive online reputation and enhance chances of employability post tertiary education. The resources created as part of CBOY are the result of a literature review, environmental scan, and discussions with staff and students at QUT. Following the comprehensive environmental scan, it appears that CBOY represents one of the first free, openly accessible, interactive resources targeting the social media skills of undergraduates.

Introduction

A recent article claims that 90% of jobs advertised in the next year will require ‘social media skills’ (Dishman, 2014). While this claim is difficult to substantiate, it certainly raises questions about the nature of ‘social media skills’. A ‘skill’ suggests something can be taught and, therefore, learnt. Who then is responsible for the teaching? For undergraduates, surely the university bears some responsibility in equipping students with the knowledge and skills needed to use social media purposefully and strategically. QUT’s strategic plan reaffirms the university’s commitment to “the idea of an engaged, relevant and innovative University that makes a real and positive difference to its students and to economic and social development” (Queensland University of Technology, 2014, p. 5). As such, QUT Library received funding to develop a suite of online and face to face learning resources targeting the social media skills of undergraduates. The purpose of CBOY is to assist students in developing digital literacy skills and knowledge by providing online learning resources for students about digital literacies including the responsible and professional use of social media; enhancing opportunities for students to engage safely and appropriately with current technologies; and to capitalise on the affordances of social media both in their learning at university and for their career.

The Environmental Scan

While it is now commonplace for tertiary institutions to have a corporate presence on at least one social networking site, an environmental scan revealed little in the way of social media skills resources and programs for undergraduates. Those universities that had included information related to social media skills had positioned it within information literacy, library and careers modules. Only one institution was found to offer face-to-face instruction on social networking skills, however, this appeared to address basic skills related to the functionality of the technology (such as how to make an account), rather than higher level strategic skills (such as reputation management). In terms of content, the focus was very much on internet security and privacy as well as appropriate online communication (‘netiquette’).

While the environmental scan revealed a dearth of resources targeting undergraduates, there was a plethora of high quality, visually appealing and content-rich online material available for school-aged children. These websites were generally hosted by governments and, in conjunction with the material available for children, also contained supplementary content for parents, guardians, teachers and principals. Like the resources available for undergraduates, the content focus was generally on online security, with an emphasis on cyberbullying and protection from strangers and unsolicited content (commonly termed 'cybersafety'). In summary, though there was a heavy focus on school aged students, there was a paucity of resources available for tertiary students on professional, responsible and strategic use of social media.

Content

While skills development, particularly in an online environment, has been of interest to researchers in library and information science, the specific skills required for social interaction and social media remain vague (Hsieh, 2012). In order to gain insight into what the students themselves expected from a resource addressing 'social media skills', a series of focus groups were conducted. Conducted at each of QUT's three campuses, these groups included undergraduates from diverse socio-economic and cultural backgrounds and from a variety of undergraduate programs. Their responses were wide ranging. When asked what social media skills were, students' responses dealt with the 'vocabulary' of social media, understanding privacy and security settings, digital footprint, understanding the purposes and affordances of specific social media platforms, understanding how to navigate specific sites, managing interpersonal relationships, and specific communication skills. These skills aligned with van Deursen, Courtois and van Dijk's (2014, p. 280) Internet skills framework. Given CBOY's brief to focus on the responsible and professional use of social media, the scope of the skills covered by the resource was limited primarily to Deursen et al.'s (2014) communication and strategic internet skills. Furthermore, Benson, Morgan and Filippaios' (2014) recommendation to focus on employability skills, understanding how to create a positive online identity, privacy and security issues, and netiquette when discussing social networking skills with undergraduates was heeded. It was therefore decided to limit the focus of the online resources to the following social media related issues: Uni, Social Media and You, Managing Security Online, Managing Privacy Online, Social Media and the Law, Internet Addiction, Cyberbullies and Trolls, Social Media in the Workplace, Crafting an Online Identity, and Social Media and Your CV.

A combination of static and dynamic content was created for students. Laurillard (2013, p. 115) argues that when online learning takes a non-linear form, support should be given to learners to help them to construct and maintain their own sense of narrative and support learning. CBOY has been constructed with these criteria in mind. The website architecture is designed so that students can see a menu of all nine of the available topics on the 'social media' landing page of the library website. These are broadly grouped under three main thematic headings to provide an increased sense of orientation and organisation. Additionally, a digital agency was contracted to design a visually appealing self-assessment which could function as a way to engage students in content which they feel they already know about (Benson et al., 2014) as well as direct them to sections of the website most appropriate to their current level of knowledge and understanding. The self-assessment tool is designed to be dynamically updating, so that students can see how their responses compare to other respondents, as well as how their responses compare to interesting statistics. Once students decide which topic to investigate further, each of the pages include brief 'takeaway

points' that articulate the main concept to be learnt from each of the topics (the learning goal). Quotes from the student focus groups are used to frame each of the content areas and to ensure the voice does not sound overly paternalistic. Furthermore, each topic includes links and references to additional resources to encourage students to self-regulate their learning. The online resources are coupled with a handbook containing support for academic staff who wish to broach various social media issues in face to face, online and blended learning environments.

Video has been used due to its ability to add what Koumi (2006) calls 'nurturing educational value', that is, the ability to connect with an audience through the affective domain by incorporating humour, entertainment and inspiration. In order to make effective videos for the online learning resources Thomson, Bridgstock and Willems' (2014, p. 73) four principles for planning educational videos were adopted: (i) Give context and align purpose; (ii) Tell (show) a story; (iii) Keep it as short as possible; and (iv) Present with authenticity. Context and purpose for the videos was fairly simple to establish as they were embedded within a webpage and context was provided by the surrounding text based information related to specific content areas. The videos also served to provide feedback to students about the social media issue at hand. In order to tell a story, undergraduates were interviewed using 'vox pop' style questions about various issues related to the content and social media. Including the voices of real students increased engagement and made the tone of the videos appear more conversational than didactic including questions such as, "If I Googled you, what would I find?"

Mission accomplished?

The finished resources, comprising the combination of the handbook for academics, interactive self-assessment tool, and videos, meet the criteria outlined by Littlejohn, Falconer and McGill (2008, pp.764-769) for effective online learning resources to varying degrees:

- 1) *Easily sourced.* Resources are open access and supported with metadata to enable access via the university site or through a search engine.
- 2) *The resources are durable and maintained.* The resources will be reviewed on a quarterly basis to ensure they retain currency.
- 3) *Quality assurance.* The resources comply with branding and marketing guidelines, adding to their credibility due to positive associations with the university brand.
- 4) *Free from legal restrictions.* Creative Commons licensing removes legal restrictions commonly associated with digital resources (such as copyright).
- 5) *Appropriate cost.* The library's commitment to open resources and freedom to information meant that the resources were provided free of charge.
- 6) *Formats that are accessible and ubiquitous.* The resources function on a variety of platforms and are designed to meet web content accessibility guidelines.
- 7) *Media that present intelligible representations in terms of language.* Verbatim student quotes were used throughout the resources. Images used in the resources incorporate iconography and technology prevalent amongst the target audience.
- 8) *Easily repurposed.* Academic staff are able to repurpose the general online content to suit their specific unit needs by using the handbook.
- 9) *Of a critical 'size'.* Each topic had a variety of components that could be used in isolation or in conjunction with other resources. These components included images, videos, activities, quotes from students and 'takeaway points'.

- 10) *Be presented in a context that is meaningful.* Relevant images and text aim to contextualise each topic. The interactive self-assessment tool contains options for students to share their results via email, Facebook or Twitter.
- 11) *Engage the learner.* The use of the peer voice, combined with the interactive activities aims to enhance engagement with the content and tools. For example, the handbook for academic staff also included suggestions to use Instagram to create a short video marketing oneself to a potential employer.
- 12) *Reusable in a range of educational models.* Handbook activities can be utilised in face to face, online or blended learning environments and adapted to asynchronous or synchronous learning contexts.

Despite the short time frame, modest budget and limited staffing of CBOY, the resources still managed to address the key aims of the project. A freely accessible, Creative Commons licensed suite of resources was created providing online learning for students on the responsible and professional use of social media.

Expected impact

CBOY is expected to facilitate the use and discussion of social media in teaching and learning at QUT. QUT is currently developing a university wide social media framework. The purpose of creating this framework is not to ‘clamp down’ or restrict the use of social media amongst staff at QUT (McNamara, 2011). Rather, the purpose is to create clear policy and guidelines to enable staff to use social media in a supportive environment that maintains balance between freedom and responsibility (Bordeaux, 2011). It is hoped that CBOY will be used by academics as a supporting resource as the use of social media in teaching and learning becomes more widespread and governed by the university wide social media framework. CBOY will be piloted in a first year Education unit which looks at teachers establishing a professional online reputation and a first year Science and Engineering unit which equips students with teamwork, communication and design skills in an Information Technology context. Once feedback has been received from these two pilot units, it is anticipated that CBOY will be rolled into a first year nursing unit whose first assessment task requires students to keep a reflective journal related to the AHPRA social media policy. A further use is as part of the University’s Transform project which aims to provide small, flexible and innovative online learning for busy professionals. CBOY may be used as part of a suite of learning modules that focus on knowledge and skills in leveraging social media networks through network analysis and social media strategies.

Concluding thoughts

Underpinning CBOY were two key assumptions. First, that undergraduates require access to resources on social media skills. Second, that social media skills can be taught. The former assumption was, in part, addressed by the comprehensive literature review undertaken in the planning of the resources. The second remains largely unanswered. If one accepts the assumption that social media skills can, in fact, be taught, it stands to reason that they may also be assessed. Some attempts at formalising and assessing social media skills have been made by The University of Manchester’s Digital Society unit which aims to enable students to “explore the implications of being digital citizens and encouraging you to take a critical stance towards your use of information, as well as using online technologies to find creative solutions for a real world client” (University of Manchester Library, n.d.). While van Deursen et al.’s (2014) internet skills framework provides a starting point, if social media skills are to be assessable in the future, it may be prudent to develop a typology of social media skills

against which students could be assessed. Given the fluid nature of social media and the rapid degree of change social media platforms, developing such a typology might be optimistic. As CBOY is one of the first attempts at creating freely accessible online learning resources focusing on undergraduates' social media skills, it is hoped that other higher education institutions will take advantage of the Creative Commons licensing and build upon the work. CBOY raised a number of interesting questions related to social media skills that can be posed to STARS delegates: What are they? Can they be taught? Whose responsibility is it to teach them? Do undergraduates need social media skills? As well as questions about technology and online learning design within higher education: Can publically accessible, free, interactive learning be achieved within higher education?

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