

Social Media Utilization: A Critical Journey

Alexander McAulay

Yokohama National University

Contact: mcaulay@ynu.ac.jp

The potential to utilize social media to enhance and enrich students' language learning experience beyond the confines of the classroom has been noted by various commentators (e.g Dabbagh and Kitsantas 2012; Wodzicki 2012). Surveying the literature, Thorne (2010) notes "the mercurial rise in the use of communication technologies that enable language learners direct interaction with speakers of the language they wish to learn, independent of spatial location" (p. 139). Despite these opportunities, many university teachers remain reluctant to engage with students across social media. Sometimes there may be institutional restrictions in place preventing such interaction, but often, according to Cox (2013), the cause is "a lack of understanding of its educational value" (p. 22).

At JALT2015, the TED CUE SIG Joint Forum on "Learning with the Learners: Stories of Student Input Leading to Changes in Teaching Practice," afforded me the opportunity to critically reflect on my own social media use, and the journey that led me, prompted by students, to connect classroom practice with social media in order to benefit the language learning experiences of my students. Drawing on Moon's (2004) maxim that "experience must be processed in order that knowledge can result from it" (p. 113), I outline the implicit negotiation that allowed me to learn from learners and change my practice as a result.

I am a teacher, writer and filmmaker. As well as standard EFL classes, I teach screenwriting in content-based courses, including my Seminar for junior and senior students at Yokohama National University. I also run various Study Abroad programs in my role as Director of Study Abroad in the Department of Economics.

Rouse (2012) defines social media as a "collective of online communication channels dedicated to community-based input, interaction, content-sharing and collaboration". The key word here is interaction. I often focus on social issues in my teaching. In the past, I have used textbooks such as *Impact Issues* or Kinseido's *Understanding BBC News*. In the classroom, I am comfortable with a fairly high level of self-disclosure. In social identity terms (Tajfel 1979), I talk with students as a teacher, but also as an expat, a Scot, a European, a foreign-language learner, a parent, a football supporter and a filmmaker. Outside of the classroom, all of these social identities and more are represented on social media. However, until recently, the only online presence I brought into the classroom was an email address: one address, for students to submit their work to. Basically, I tried to maintain strict boundaries between the self in the classroom, and my online self.

However, as websites and apps became more multi-functional and interactive, maintaining those boundaries became more and more difficult. If you have any kind of online presence, especially one where you use your own name and include image content, then one thing is certain - your students will find you. Despite occasionally using pseudonyms and making no mention of my online presence in class, students would pop up to comment on my Flickr photos or, more problematically, send me Facebook friend requests.

Reflecting on this, I realized there was a contradiction here. I had nurtured a classroom culture of sharing ideas, opinions, and experiences, but was attempting to block that sharing when it led to a natural curiosity about me. I was encouraging interpersonal communication, but not taking full advantage of the opportunities our digitized, globalized times offer to expand this beyond the classroom. Of course, in any age, maintaining public/private boundaries are important, but I was missing a trick here. Instead of shunning interaction with students on social media, I should be exploiting it as a learning opportunity, all the while managing it, and controlling it. The solution was not to shut students out of my online world, but to invite them in to designated spaces where we could foster learning opportunities together beyond the classroom confines.

The result is that these days, come the beginning of term in April and October, I begin every new course by giving out a handout that tells students all about me, and where we can and cannot interact on social media. That handout still includes an email address for students to submit work to. However, they can also interact with me on selected social media, and in some cases are even required to. For example, on my screenwriting course, you have to follow my Twitter feed, which allows us to discuss the film-related articles that I re-tweet. EFL Writing students are required to post film reviews on IMDb.com, where they can also read and respond to my film reviews. Students interested in the various Study Abroad programs I run can follow my Instagram account. In 2015, I took 30 students to University of Edinburgh for a one month summer intensive, and then in autumn took 10 students to Rome and Venice on our Euro-Japan Dialogue program, where students present and debate on economic topics with their European peers. Prospective participants get real-time updates from these overseas locations and through word and image can anticipate the experience that awaits them should they apply for the following year's program. To access these social media resources, all the information you need is on the handout.

Significantly, the handout also clearly states that we cannot be Facebook friends until after graduation. Various studies have investigated the utility of Facebook in tertiary education (e.g. Selwyn 2009). However, in the context of university teaching in Japan, my personal opinion is that you can't be friends with someone you may have to give a grade to.

More problematic is LINE. LINE is an application often used on smartphones to exchange text messages and images, amongst other things. In Japan, applications such as LINE are strongly associated with the negative aspects of the digital age such as cyber-bullying (Shariff 2010, p. 111). On Study Abroad programs, I would insist that students use their university email for all contact, but I was aware that students formed their own groups for information sharing using LINE. In fact, Wi-Fi access problems when overseas would compromise the effectiveness of my email-only policy, and students preferred LINE groups to communicate with each other, especially while abroad. In 2014 the student cohort visiting universities in France and England on Euro-Japan Dialogue asked that we, the accompanying teachers, join those groups. We did so - a little hesitantly, to be honest.

However, the decision to engage with students over LINE was justified by events on the Euro-Japan Dialogue program in November 2015. My colleague and I took ten YNU students to two European universities, one in Rome and one in Venice, for presentations and discussion. This was the 10th year of the program, and the second year that we had a dedicated LINE group. On Euro-Japan Dialogue we meet our students in Europe, and say goodbye to them there. This allows them to travel for a week or two before and/or after the program. This is an aspect of the program that is particularly popular with both students and teachers, as it allows flexibility for each to prioritize their respective concerns.

On November 13, 2015, I had been back from Europe less than a week when I woke on that Saturday morning to the news of coordinated terrorist attacks in Paris, and immediately thought of my students still in Europe. At 9:18 AM I posted a message on our Euro-Japan Dialogue LINE group, and 20 minutes later knew that we had one student in Paris, who was safe, but based somewhere close enough that she could hear the gunfire, and she was scared. I was able to offer reassurances on LINE, and minutes later my Japanese colleague was responding on the feed, giving the student updates and advice in Japanese. Our university has crisis management policies and practices in place to deal with such situations, but on reflection I wonder if we could have dealt with the situation as swiftly and effectively as we did had LINE not been part of our process.

As the above shows, not only does social media interaction with students offer up opportunities for language input and authentic communication, it also aids the logistics of running programs in terms of effective information sharing and crisis management.

In summary, my own personal journey has been one of shunning social media interaction with students, being met with pushback from them, which led me to critically reflect on how to make judicious use of social media to enhance my own professional teacher-student relationships. Moon (2004) discusses the "emotional insight" that can come from critical reflection, noting "[t]here can be learning that results in a behavior change that seems to be more profound than simply knowing something" (p. 51). Looking back on my own personal journey towards the judicious use of social media with students has afforded such emotional insight. It will undoubtedly continue to do so, as the digital era continues to evolve and challenge the ways we teach and learn.

References

- Cox, J.B. (2013). Twitter, Facebook, blogs, and media-sharing sites in the classroom. *Social Media: Pedagogy and Practice*, 21.
- Dabbagh, N. and Kitsantas, A. (2012). Personal Learning Environments, social media, and self-regulated learning: A natural formula for connecting formal and informal learning. *The Internet and higher education*, 15(1), pp.3-8.
- Langmia, K., Tyree, T., O'Brien, P. and Sturgis, I. eds. (2013). *Social media: pedagogy and practice*. University Press of America.
- Moon, J. A. (2004). *A handbook of reflective and experiential learning: Theory and practice*. Psychology Press.
- Rouse, M. (2012). What is social media? Accessed on January 25, 2016 from <http://whatis.techtarget.com/definition/social-media>
- Selwyn, N. (2009). Faceworking: exploring students' education-related use of Facebook. *Learning, Media and Technology*, 34(2), 157-174.
- Shariff, S. (2010). Truths and myths of cyber-bullying: international perspectives on stakeholder responsibility and children's safety (Vol. 38). Peter Lang.
- Tajfel, H. (1979). Individuals and groups in social psychology. *British Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, 18(2), 183-190.
- Thorne, S.L. (2010). The "intercultural turn" and language learning in the crucible of new media. *Telecollaboration*, 2, pp.139-164.
- Wodzicki, K., Schwämmlein, E. and Moskaliuk, J. (2012). "Actually, I wanted to learn": study-related knowledge exchange on social networking sites. *The Internet and Higher Education*, 15(1), pp.9-14.



Bio: Alexander McAulay (MATEFL, MASW) teaches in the Graduate School of International Social Sciences at Yokohama National University. His duties also include Director of Study Abroad for the Department of Economics. A dedicated teacher, writer and filmmaker, his research interests include EFL in Japan, and screenwriting in transnational cinema. Recent publications include *Based on a True Story: Negotiating Collaboration, Compromise and Authorship in the Script Development Process*. In *Screenwriters and Screenwriting* (Batty, C., ed). Palgrave Macmillan UK (2014).