

# A Narrative Research Approach: The Experiences of Social Media Support in Higher Education

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**Abstract.** Narrative research is started to be used in educational context recently. This article focuses on a discussion of the reasons for choosing narrative research approach in discovering the experiences of social media usage in higher education. Moreover, the preliminary information of ongoing study is provided. The authors use this method to convey their experiences about using social media for supporting their teaching and learning outside the classroom. The increasing trend in social media usage among new generations is being used as an advantage to interact and communicate with students in ‘their way’.

**Keywords:** narrative, narrative research, social media, collaboration, learning, storytelling.

## 1 Introduction

Once upon a time there was no social media support in education whereas these days there is a torrent of using technology and social media in higher education with the trend of increased usage of mobile devices, tablets and games among learners. Use of technology from younger ages challenges traditional teaching and learning approaches, where students seem reluctant to read books and write reports even not motivated to participate in the classroom. These changes necessitate efficient use of computers and communication technologies in education. Thus, the social media which already entered in student lives should be injected in the educational environments for efficient and demanding daily use. In this way surfing, sharing, and networking facilities of social media may be used more intensely for educational purpose. These will also support the innovative constructivist, active and social learning strategies.

One of the authors has been using social media in various courses since 2007 while the other one 2008 onwards. This paper is a narrative account of their experience. A brief review of social media usage in education domain is being introduced in sections 2-3 together with a literature review focused more on narrative research. The frame of this study in terms of the reason for selecting narrative and the methodology followed is taken up in subsequent sections. Since it is an ongoing study, in this paper it is aimed to discuss the narrative research and the reasons for using it, the findings of the

research study will be provided in another work. Conclusions are drawn at the end and suggestions are offered.

## 2 History of Social Media Usage

Social media and social networking are the communication tools/technologies where people interact for sharing information and having discussions in addition to exchanging content. “They appear in many forms including blogs and microblogs, forums and message boards, social networks, wikis, virtual worlds, social bookmarking, tagging and news, writing communities, digital storytelling and scrapbooking, and data, content, image and video sharing, podcast portals, and collective intelligence” [1]. These different forms of social media enable virtual practice of interaction. Research results revealed that, mostly for first year students, interactive media creates an opportunity to collaborate with their peers and faculty members [2]. Social media such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Wikipedia are widely held emerging technologies within young generation.

Summarizing the history of social media is beneficial to see how it was drawn and how it is now. ‘Friends Reunited’ is stated as the first online social media founded in Great Britain by year 1999, followed by ‘Friendster’ (2002), ‘MySpace’ (2003) and ‘Facebook’ (2004) in USA [1]. Open membership was allowed for everyone in Facebook (2006), where the number of users around the globe hit 200 million in 2009 and recently 1.11 billion in 2013. In addition, Australian survey results claim that 13 percent of social media users were logged on at school.

## 3 Social Media for Education

Many research and practices investigate the use social media as an extension to class learning environment [4], [5]. Even some universities, such as Victoria University in Australia, created their own social networks for students and prepared best practice guidelines for the use of social media for faculty members’ use. Victoria University Social Media Registry [6] shows that they allow institutional social media tools for some purposes, such as record keeping of student participation for assessment, creating “authenticated, equitable, secure, accessible and safe” virtual environment for students.

There are many researches which claim the use of social media by the students for educational purposes. However, some other research [2] shows that higher education students significantly prefer use of social media for social purposes than academic purposes. A similar study conducted by student researchers in New Hampshire show that 96% of students use Facebook where majority of students use it for social (89%) and entertainment (79%) where educational (26%) and professional (16%) use is less [7].

Another remarkable research is the use of blogs in Taiwan [5] where pre-service teachers doing master’s degree were investigated. Outcomes of this study, in terms of pre-service teachers’ professional development on the blogs, the difficulties they have

encountered, problem solving strategies employed, and the students' perception of blogging were documented. The results have showed that blogging helped pre-service teachers to share their reflections of theories and practices, besides developing online interaction with the readers with active engagement.

Social media offers many opportunities for the higher education faculty members as well as learners. According to a recent research, it is found that nearly 90% of faculty members have been using social media for the courses they teach and for their professional development outside the class [8]. They also reported that there are no major differences between different groups (online teaching, tenure status, full-time, etc.) of faculty members in social media usage.

Besides using popular social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Wikipedia, users create their own social websites and social networks for specific interest groups. For example, Ning, Netlog, Weebly and Xing networks can all be used both in social life and as an educational learning environment. By being aware of these opportunities, higher education students may wish their faculty members to adopt such new educational opportunities in their teaching.

Since there is an increasing trend in social media use, the authors of this work experimented with using this as an advantage to interact and communicate with their students in 'their way' outside the classroom. As mentioned above, the authors have started using social media to support the teaching and learning in classes since 2008.

The aim of this study is to create a framework to narrate positive and negative experiences of two higher education faculty members in using social media; pros and cons of using social media are offered from the faculty perspective. The narrative research was adopted to discover both personal life experiences. In other words, both narrators tell their stories regarding the use of social media in higher education. This is ongoing study, so in this paper only the groundwork of the research process is provided.

#### **4 The Narrative**

A synonym of the term 'narrative' is 'story' or 'history'. Narrative is defined [9] as "a vital human activity which structures experience and gives it meaning". The process and the product features of narrative and the mode of inquiry differentiate them from each other. Narrative can be seen as a way of structuring and organizing new experiences and knowledge by constructing knowledge and making it more learnable [10]. Studying narrative is a way of studying the ways humans experience the world [11]. There cannot be any person who does not have narratives [12]. Whereas [13] argues that life itself could be seen as a narrative that consists of many other stories. Narrative research is gradually used in studies of education. Teachers and learners are the main touchstone in education and they are the storytellers 'in their own and other's stories' [11].

Narrative inquiry is both a phenomenon and a method where people tell their stories; narrative researchers explain such experiences by collecting stories and writing narratives of them [11]. Narrative inquiry provides an opportunity to the researcher

access to the personal experiences of the participant, the storyteller. Storyteller speaks and declares life as experiences in a narrative form that is called story [9]. Thus, the researcher has an opportunity to study the subjects in their natural setting and understand the behavior, actions and feelings in a whole context.

## 5 The Reason and Context for Using Narrative

Usually narrative research is used in such diverse domains as sociology, anthropology, history, nursing, psychology, and communication studies [14]. Recently narrative research has been used in educational practices, especially in exploring experiences of teachers' and students' lives. However, there is not that much research conducted on the use of Web 2.0 technologies, and Social media by faculty members and their life stories.

We believe that while there is an intensive use of Web 2.0 and social media in education especially in higher education, there is a need to discover and understand lecturers' stories regarding integration of social media into their way of teaching and their students learning outside the classroom walls. One such research conducted [15] aimed to understand faculty reflections during the process of adapting digital technologies by listening to their life stories.

We the authors of this paper, and narrators, have had positive and negative experiences, and in some good and bad examples in practice. However, we wanted to bring a different point of view and carry out personal experiences in different social and disciplinary settings through a longer timeframe. We wanted to better understand our experiences and attitudes as faculty, behaviors to social media by telling our own stories. We chose storytelling because we believed that by doing so our colleagues and even, we as storytellers may better learn pros and cons of using social media in higher education. Telling and hearing our own and each other's stories which are self-reflections of experiences may help to estimate our weaknesses. As [14] mentions, narrating may also engage and convince the readers. Indeed, some people prefer listening to storytelling for better learning. Thus, you will read our stories straight from us; not in the way other researchers molded it [16], exempted from intervention of other professionals [17].

## 6 Methodology

The purpose of this study can be identified with the following research questions:

- How do social media get used in higher education to support learning?
- What kinds of problems are faced while using social media in higher education?

This study is a qualitative research study that used narrative research as a strategy of inquiry. The qualitative research enables the researcher to reach detailed data in its natural setting and since it is interpretative it gives an opportunity to the researcher to interpret the data. It also focuses on participant's experiences and ideas [18]. As a strategy of inquiry, a narrative research aims at understating "the outcome of interpretation rather than explanations" by providing an opportunity to gather data from real

life and lived experiences [9]. Narratives are related with life stories. [13] defines “a narrative is a story that tells a sequence of events that is significant for the narrator or audience or her or his audience” (p.60). Narrative research gives us stories about lived experiences that are not forgotten and the way of experiencing them [13]. In our case, the narrative approach highlighted the way that we integrated the social media into our courses as an educational tool outside the classroom.

Storytelling method was used to collect data in this study which includes the stories of two higher education faculty members who have been using social media as an educational tool in their teacher education since 2008 and information technology courses since 2007. The stories are about participants’ use of social media in supporting their teaching. Stories explained how and why the participants started to use social media, the aims of using social media, the ways of using it. Moreover, the causes of using social media and the difficulties experienced, pros and cons of using social media in educational setting are all told.

In this study we have told our individual stories, which included our detailed experiences of what is done, how it is done, why it is done and our point of views. In the analysis we re-read our stories and reorganized them regarding to the aim of the research. In other words, the participant’s stories [19] were restored.

In narrative study, the cases that told their stories are a typical rather than representative of population [20]. We believed that since participants and researchers are the same persons so the bias is more or less disappeared from the aspect of researcher. There was not a direct interview so at the first hand there was no direct interaction with the researcher and participant.

Validity of the research was ensured as follows:

- After restoring the stories of others, we took them back to story owner in order to confirm accuracy.
- We used ‘peer debriefing to enhance the accuracy of account’, [18] (p.196)
- Actions and applications that were done through the social media was controlled and compared with the stories.

Moreover, since the narrative inquiry provides an opportunity to researcher and participant work collaboratively in understanding behavior and discovering explanations, validity of the participant may be obtained [21].

## **7 Findings and Discussion**

The aim of this research study is to understand and share the experiences of two university faculty members integrating social media into their courses. Since this is an ongoing study, we may only provide preliminary findings and information regarding to the research results. The preliminary findings of the research show that both narrators have started to use social media in order to provide students an opportunity to connect and interact with their peers and lecturer outside the classroom. Another reason both the participants preferred to use specific social media is that they believed that their students use this social media very commonly for socialization with their friends. The instructors wanted to take advantage of this fact for their courses. Furthermore, they aimed to motivate students with different learning styles to participate

in course related activities online for some might prefer virtual learning environments. However, one of the participants stated that “unfortunately, there are still students who do not participate even in Facebook group”.

## 8 Conclusion

Social media is one of the important communication technologies that new generation students use commonly in communicating with their friends in their social life. They are using this technology very commonly within their daily life for socialization. Since they spend a long time with this technology it might be beneficial to use it in lessons in order to enhance teaching and learning in the classroom. The participants of this research study shared their experiences in using social media as part of their course work.

With this research study it is aimed to understand the difference and similarities in social media usage from different points of view of faculty members. Moreover, this paper is expected to review the narrative research and its applicability in technology enhanced learning. The results of this study will enlighten various types of using social media, weaknesses of using it, solutions to strengthen the use of social media as an educational tool in higher education rising from the recorded stories of two faculty members. The real stories that took place may help or guide the others who are willing to go through the process of preparing and using social media learning spaces as educational environments.

Moreover, the studying of life stories of researchers encourages self-reflection which should help participant researchers in understanding their weaknesses of the use of social media for learning purposes, so develop a refined strategy for future application and even may decide that they may need support. Since two researchers who are also participants working collaboratively, their active, collaborative and engaged participation to the research in constructing stories of past experiences may help them to develop new experiences.

We wanted to share our personal experience stories with academia with the belief in storytelling. Having in mind that, as [14] points out, we can engage and convince the readers to for experiencing innovative use of social media in education. Emphasizing that narrative applications are extended “beyond lived experience and worlds ‘behind’ the author” moving towards “human interaction in relationship” [14] (p.392).

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