The Journal of Social Media for Learning 2025

PDT1076 – An Exploration of Foundation Degree Student Experiences of Navigating Digital Communities to Inform Their Undergraduate Studies

Adam Chapman
University of Northampton, UK

Context

PDT1076 is a module undertaken by students enrolled in the Foundation Degree in Learning and Teaching (FDLT) at the University of Northampton (UK). These students are typically employed or volunteer in support roles with children and young people in various capacities, including Teaching Assistants, Sports Coaches, and Unqualified Teachers (UQTs). The module allows students to engage with a variety of digital technologies, such as BookCreator, Canva, ThingLink, and AR/VR tools, which can provide transformative learning experiences for the children they teach and also inform their pedagogical thinking when teaching children within their individual contexts. The #pdt1076 community was established in the Autumn of 2020, at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, as a way of introducing students to another means of professional networking.

PDT1076 – An Exploration of Foundation Degree Student Experiences of Navigating Digital Communities to Inform Their Undergraduate Studies

#pdt1076 has been used as a means for student practitioners to engage with different communities of practice. Students are provided with scaffolding to support those with different technological affiliations; this involved providing a guide of different communities that support different sectors within the education sector. The purpose of digital networking is emphasized using Siemens' (2005) idea of 'Connectivism', which provides a foundation for #pdt1076. The notion of Connectivism complements how technology can be used as a force for good, rather than being approached using a deficit model. Connectivism supports the idea of social media creating networks and establishing a forum for discussion and sharing practices in all fields, including education.

As a result, students were provided with the time and space to navigate and create a profile on Twitter in line with the university's social networking policy. A Wakelet has been created to capture the learning from the 2022-23 academic year, which can be found here. What can be seen from the Wakelet is a mindful and progressive approach from student practitioners who are motivated to develop their practice through connecting and establishing a secure sense of what it means to have a 'digital identity'.

Boyd (2014) details how educators can benefit from frequent interactions on Networked Publics, with interviews with teachers and practitioners in the USA providing evidence of how their practice has benefitted from engaging in Communities of Practice. Boyd (2014) coined the term 'Networked Publics' as a way of demonstrating the power of social media in creating hubs of communities based on interests, values, and offline dynamics. Students have observed their online communities grow in a meaningful way, with the 2022-23 academic year being the best year for engagement with #pdt1076.

From the perspective of the facilitator of learning, due consideration is needed for how students engage with the subject matter. Consequently, students have been observed sharing their practice within their communities, thereby contributing to their day jobs and creating transformative opportunities for children in their contexts. Increased engagement has led to some interesting opportunities for their own CPD, including potential dissertation participants. However, there are some further considerations to be had. Facilitation can often lead to engagements taking place outside of the classroom, especially where student absence has meant students have had to catch up in their own time. Due consideration is needed for those who deem themselves to be 'technological novices'. Frequently, students have become upset when they feel they are 'out of their depth' at this stage of their degree. This is common, particularly for first-generation Higher Education students (Day et al., 2005), as students often reflect on their experiences of starting undergraduate study as overwhelming. The subject matter pertaining to sessions like #pdt1076 can sometimes exacerbate feelings of imposter syndrome.

Adam Chapman
University of Northampton, UK

Concluding Thoughts:

With the increased use of online networks by educational professionals, it is hard to ignore the benefits of networking, particularly for students who are returning to their studies after a prolonged absence, whereby being introduced to online networking can provide a platform for deeper learning opportunities. However, it is important to be aware of the nuances that could be introduced when introducing students to the concepts mentioned. Students can often feel overwhelmed and may need reassurance when introduced to online networking as a concept. Platforms such as TweetBeam and Wakelet can provide a better sense of immersion within the learning environment. The stance taken when introducing #pdt1076 was progressive but aware of the issues some students may face when engaging with online technologies.

References

Boyd, D. (2014) *Its complicated: the social lives of networked teens*. New York: Yale.

Day, A., Kingston, A., Stobart, G and Sammons, P. (2005) 'The personal and professional selves of teachers: stable and unstable identities'. *British Educational Research Journal*, 32 (4) pp. 601-616.

Siemens, G. (2005). Connectivism: A learning theory for the digital age. *International Journal of Instructional Technology and Distance* Learning, 2(1), pp. 3-10.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Adam Chapman
University of Northampton, UK