

SUMMARY REPORT ON GINKS ONLINE DISCUSSION

TOPIC - "THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN THE CLASSROOM"

INTRODUCTION

The Ghana Information Network for Knowledge Sharing (GINKS) and the International Institute for Communication and Development (IICD) invited interested participants for an online discussion on the topic “The role of social media in the classroom”. The electronic discussion took place from the **19th – 21st June 2013** and was hosted on the GINKS online Discussion Group (Dgroups) platform. The resource person was Mr. Ogochukwu Chidiebere Nweke, who is a youth activist and counselor, and an IT trainer with special focus in social media and how to use it in achieving change and progress in Africa. He is a lecturer at the African University College of Communications (AUCC), where he teaches New Media (among other courses), and serves also the Director of Students Affairs since 2010. To him, the African child should be encouraged to use the social media platform in doing everything he/she needs to do because the technology had been made available to their generation and for their time.

PRESENTATION

Mr. Nweke introduced the discussion by arguing that social media was an effective tool for teaching and learning, on and off campus. He communicated the direction of his presentation by stating that the presentation was going for an audience who already had basic understanding of social media. He stated that the concept of social media “does not presuppose a platform where irresponsible, aimless people go to gossip” but rather presupposes “a community without boundaries, where information and knowledge are shared without limits, and content is produced and consumed in real time”. Social media, to him, has given a totally different definition to the term classroom.

Mr. Nweke added that the power that social media wields and the benefits derived from it, was extremely overwhelming, as it makes “the student a stakeholder in society, not just because they are beneficiaries, but also because they are benefactors of much needed information”. Social media provides a much needed interactive platform where young people are capable of applying themselves to knowledge and initiatives, in any field of life they find themselves; whether in the area of research, exchange programmes, publicity, advertising, participatory governance,

monitoring and evaluation, or contributions to the quality of information they are fed with, he noted.

He concluded his presentation by noting that a lack of information might not be the issue, but rather the delivery of information; and this is likely to be generational. He added that we must therefore begin to consider how the current and future generations could learn and assimilate information. He also cautioned against teaching them with tools and patterns of previous generations. According to him, more friendly activities should be considered in teaching and learning; and this is where social media stands very tall.

CONTRIBUTIONS

The first contribution acknowledged that effort of Mr. Nweke, and made reference to a noteworthy point he made in the presentation. He expressed a difficulty imagining how social media tools could serve as an interactive platform for learners; and wished that the resource person was more practical with the application of the technology for learners. This was interjected by a second contributor with some practical applications of social media in the classroom. She described how the technology could be used by a teacher to create a virtual classroom by developing a blog or facebook presence, where the teacher could have real-time discussions with students on subjects learnt.

To the second contributor, this could extend teacher-to-student learning periods, and parents could be invited to join such virtual classrooms so they could monitor in real-time their wards' progress. She registered her support for the use of social media platform in education for a major reason that, such platforms allow for the exchange of ideas and information regardless of location and time. She added that students could submit their assignments and homework to their teachers privately in a message, for the teacher's score. This saves valuable man-hours that could be utilized in teaching something else. However, she bemoaned the environment in which we live, identifying access to internet and affordability as major constraints. This notwithstanding, she encouraged the development of social media, but lamented that the benefits might not be enjoyed by the majority of students. She directed the issue of how social media could be employed in research to the resource person.

The resource person acknowledged the contributions that had been made. He defined research as “the act of investigating or inquiring, with a view to achieving clearer understanding as to what, why, when and how; and making recommendations that will add value to an area of interest”. He added that research could be based on qualitative or quantitative analysis of data or information, and these resources are usually gathered through interactions with people. The resource person asked for any other platform that makes interaction more efficient and productive today than social media. Using scenarios, he demonstrated how social media could be practically used to conduct research.

The first contributor admitted and cheered answers suggested by the resource person and the second contributor on the subject. He also agreed with the second contributor on the major challenge that faced people in third world countries, concerning internet access and affordability. Questioning how the technologies of social media could be successfully diffused to students in such an environment, he suggested a “holistic approach” to the matter. This approach to him should include mass distribution of ICT devices, content creation, and mass connectivity exercises. “This will show real results, even with the few people that get access to these full-pack solutions” he added. Saying this, he recalled another major challenge; ‘digital divide’, which he argued could enable the already ‘haves’, as against the most vulnerable ‘have-nots’.

The resource person acknowledged the comments made by the first contributor on the internet and hardware, and registered his wish for the development of a policy on that. After his acknowledgement of contributions made, a third contributor joined the discussion identifying the use of social media in classroom as a necessary application that strives on reliable and efficient internet infrastructure and technology tools. He added that this could not be achieved when policy directives and capacity building for teachers on how to use social media in teaching and learning are ignored. Making reference to the ban of cell phones use by students in the basic schools of Ghana, he also questioned the ability to use emerging social media in schools if one of the critical tools – cell phones – were banned. To him, if the right policy directives are in place they would set modalities on how these emerging technologies could be deployed.

The third contributor also regretted some tertiary students’ use of materials on social media platforms for their assignments and term papers without making any references. Identifying this

habit as “plagiarism” – which has dire consequences – he argued the need to educate students in higher education on the use of social media in academic work; observing the poor standards of some referred materials. The second contributor remarked that to everything made by man, there were associated pros and cons, and what matters most was the good use of it. She reiterated her earlier comments of social media’s contribution to easy and flexible knowledge creation and sharing. She suggested that the subject under discussion be discussed and developed by all stakeholders, since it was mostly a policy issue. She also challenged GINKS to champion that course since, in her opinion; the organization might have representation of all stakeholders.

After this challenge from the second contributor, a fourth contributor joined the discussion. He registered delight for the subject and made an observation that, discussions on social media were mostly centered on facebook, twitter, and a few other applications; and these discussions limited their use to charting and sending status information. To register his position on such a trend, he identified other tools for collaborative work such as Google doc, Slideshare, Dropbox which were being used effectively in academia. He therefore remarked that “social media offers huge opportunities for teaching and learning at all levels of education”. He identified smartphones and GSM as probable answers to many of the bandwidth challenges; and could enable teachers in remote areas collaborate with their counterparts in the cities to get updated information for teaching, while students could also share and discuss lecture notes using social media.

In the opinion of the fourth contributor, the policy by the Ghana Education Service (GES) restricting students from using mobile phones in school was based on practical issues. Citing examples, he argued that such a step was one in the right direction. In the phase of this discussion however, he conceded that the policy needs a review, which should be preceded by some re-orientation programs on the importance of mobile phones as a teaching/learning aid. In this direction, he advocated a grand agenda to promote the use of social media for education, where students and teachers could be educated on the effectiveness of using social media to enhance their education activities. The fourth contributor attributed the issues of plagiarism to the challenges of the Ghanaian educational system which, according to him, does not encourage students to do analytical work; and not necessarily social media. To conclude, he restated the capacity of social media to make relevant information easily available, and enhance students’ and teachers’ ability to work more extensively with their colleagues.

Following was another contributor who first acknowledged the contributions made on the subject but regretted the policy restricting students from using mobile phones at the JHS and SHS levels. He described it as “one that would make it very difficult for the use of social media in class rooms”. To explain his position, he recalled many challenges that bedevil students in such institutions, including access to computers and electricity. He noted that the most common ICT tool available to both students and teachers in Ghana currently is the mobile phone. Recalling an earlier point made by the resource person, the fifth contributor established that it was possible to integrate social media into the classroom, as this would help broaden the horizon of students; and help make research more realistic. He also gave some examples of how social media was being integrated into online tuition development, and advised that this should at least be replicated to teaching and learning in tertiary education, if not in basic and second cycle education.

At this point the resource person showed appreciation to all contributors for making the discussion a fruitful one. He humbly categorized the issues raised by the fourth contributor into two namely; not restricting social media to facebook and twitter; and the downside of the use of social media. Acknowledging the fact that the two media (facebook and twitter) were dominant in social media discussions, he explained that his use of them was for illustration purposes. Using statistics, he justified the two media’s domination in social media discussions. On the downside of social media use, he once again agreed that the problem was not with the technology, but with the people using the technology. He blamed this on society, expressed through weak laws and policies. But with an optimistic view he noted that it was possible to teach “our children” the constructive use of social media and make them recognize how important they were as a unit of society.

Joining the discussion at this point, a sixth contributor showed disapproval with the suggestion for a policy backing on social media adoption in Ghanaian classrooms. To explain his position, he used the proverbial saying ‘you can get the donkey to the riverside, but you cannot force it to drink’. He explained that tertiary institutions for example would have to hire people with instructional design or educational technology backgrounds to evaluate courses and technology circumstances of the institution and clientele (students), in order to determine the choice of appropriate web 2.0 tools. “Just because a technology exist does not mean it needs to be used”, he added. He chastised a Ghanaian attitude of ignoring value for projects. Another contributor

joined the discussion at this juncture, taking on a philosophical position. He noted in his introductory statements that “the use of social media ought to be an integral part of the ICT curriculum in schools from basic through to tertiary levels, but unfortunately, several occurrences seem to point to lacunae in our educational policy and implementation”. This gap between policy-makers and implementers has led to distortions in various ICT in education projects, he observed while citing examples. He added his voice to the call for wider stakeholder consultations in order to take future developments into consideration. He suggested the starting point to be tertiary institutions.

The third contributor tried to address some issues raised by the sixth contributor. While acknowledging the sixth contributor’s position against a policy backing for social media adoption in Ghanaian classrooms, he argued that there were certain inhibitions with regards to ICT integration in education at both the basic and higher educational levels. And such inhibitions needed to be dislodged using policy. He supported his argument with examples and statistics. He also disagreed with the assertion that ‘just because a technology exists does not mean it needs to be used’. To him, such technologies could be used based on local context, implying the development of local (digital) contents for the schools. He however conceded that people with backgrounds in instructional design or educational technology need to be hired to evaluate courses and technology circumstances of the institution and clientele. To this effect he cautioned as alarming current developments where some tertiary institutions were engaging the services of vendors to deploy ICT in education. He also joined the second contributor by giving responsibility to GINKS as an entity to take a formal position on the issue.

Rejoining the discussion, the sixth contributor maintained his position against a policy backing for social media adoption in Ghanaian classrooms. Beginning from scenarios, and submissions made by the fourth contributor, he gave two reasons for his take on the issue. To him, students have full access to their phones outside of the classroom, and could therefore use them for any purposes they desired. But if their teacher(s) lack capacity to harness the power of social media or cell phones, or to design lessons that require the use of such technologies, a policy from above will make no difference. Secondly, while admitting his limited knowledge of the ban policy details, he imagined that the G.E.S would not penalize any student or teacher, if the teacher requested for the use of such technologies for a specific educational project. Instead of

advocating for policy, he concluded, “let us inculcate in our teachers an appreciation of web 2.0 as a communication approach, and once they are capable of designing learning approaches that justify the use of these technologies, the gates would open automatically”.

CONCLUSION

In his concluding remarks, the resource person showed appreciation for the trend of the discussion. He highlighted the impact of social media on African culture for the past ten (10) years, and advocated a use of such media to project the African identity. He sought pardon for law and policy makers on the continent, whom he described as “being unable to anticipate the impact of social media to the extent that they are struggling with provisions which will sustain best practices and discourage abuse”. “Technology is always generational. If we overlook this cardinal truth, we will not be able to make our classrooms what they ought to be for our children” he remarked.

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