

The use of social media at Brunel University

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Abstract

Our research shows that students using social media to engage in conversation with their lecturer have a significant statistical advantage over students who don't use social media. Is it the conversation or the medium? It is the belief of the author that any lectures have the chance to change how students learn, how to integrate learning into student's spare time and make sure your message is part of their life. Our research shows that if you use the medium of communication of the student, they will learn.

Keywords: social media, social networking, Web 2.0, university education

Background

I started lecturing at Brunel University in January of 2010. I had just left my job of running a software company (www.Viewlocity.com). I had vague memories of my attending University (Saint Mary's University of Minnesota) lectures 30 years ago. My three children attended New York University, Middlebury and Heathrop College, University of London. I mention my children because I kept thinking about the amount of money I spent to send them to these schools and how I was going to give Brunel Students their moneys worth (Ewing, 2007).

I walked into my first lecture to a room of 100+ students. As I introduced myself I wondered how I would ever communicate with these young adults. I had 3 lectures a day with a total of 370 final year students. The course was Ethics and Sustainability. My section was sustainability. I had 13 lectures, a weekly 1 hour office visitation for students, 3 revision lectures and then a mixture of ad hoc meetings with groups of students. My goal was to teach the concept and best practice of sustainability to students, they were thinking about their exams. We needed to communicate. To get communication going I gave the students my mobile number, my personal email and invited them to my office for help.

The first few weeks no one visited the office, I had no calls on my mobile, but I did get a few emails like in Figure 1. A handful of students would hang around and talk after the lecture, but that was cut short by the next group filling the room and waiting for the lecture to begin. The schedule was lecture 1 hour and then 10 min for changeover, lecture another 2 hours. In class the same 10 students would answer the questions in the lecture and the others would smile as they walk out of class. I was failing to connect beyond being an entertaining lecturer. I used the latest presentation tools (Prezi, 2010), kept my lectures very multi-media based and all the material was on-line for future sharing and test preparation.

Setting up the tracking and reporting

When I started the year I used the company website (OpenCarbon, 2010) to host all the lectures (put the material on-line so they could access the presentation for review). To get

access to the material a student had to register and once registered they had access to all the lectures, web links and backup material from some of the best minds in sustainability. At first I got complaints from the students asking why I didn't use the Universities "U-Link" system. I explained that the U-link allows the viewer to print presentations and this course is about sustainability; no printing. Not printing was one reason, but the real reason was to measure me, my lectures and the use of social media in communicating with University students. The OpenCarbon system would allow us to see who viewed the material, when and for how long. This would give me an indication as to the relationship of time on the site to their grade? Since we are doing these courses for multiple Universities we needed to understand which lectures were more popular, what parts did they not understand or did they continue to go back to them because the message was not clear? The system allowed us to track their real behaviour, not just did they download the paper.

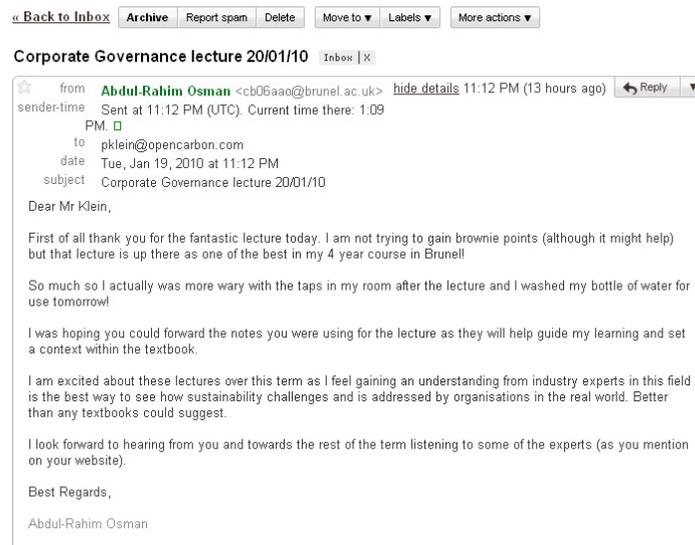


Figure 1. A student's e-mail

Outcome of website

One outcome we noticed is students not attending lectures would scan the material, watch the YouTube videos and spend little or no time on the written content.

As the year progressed YouTube videos were a hit. These videos gave us the ability to have segments by the people who created the idea and could get their message across better than any lecturer. As the lecturer I could stop and comment on the speaker, playing the devils advocate as I ask questions of the students.

Videos got the information across and this was proven by links being shared outside the students that attended the course. This behaviour reinforced they were interested in the material as the links were going well beyond the 370 students. After some lectures we saw a significant increase in unique visitors a week, triple what visits normally are (Figure 2).

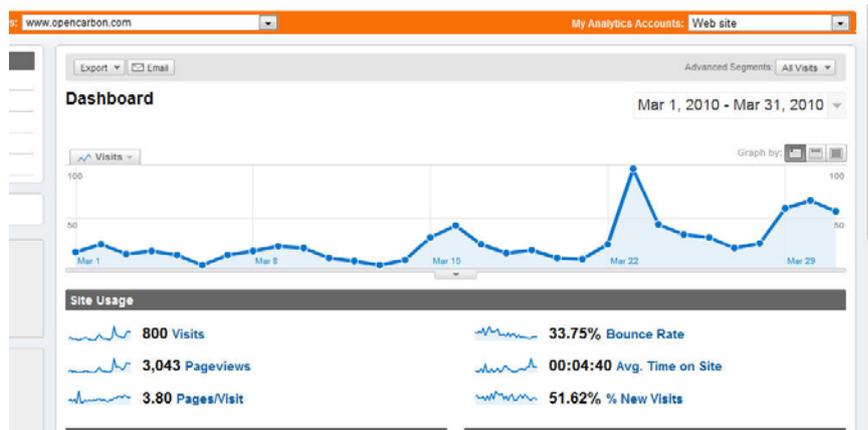


Figure 2. Visitors of the lessons' website

Reality Check

All sound good, not really, I still did not have the communication that I felt helped Students achieve good grades. I need to do something different if I was to give these Students their moneys worth.

Doing something different

A few lectures into the year I asked the students to follow me on Twitter. Here are a couple things that are interesting about adding Twitter to my work load. Students started to show up during my office hours, sometimes as many as 10. Introducing Twitter gave them the ability to have something to talk about outside class material. I believe this was a simple step to connecting.

From a social media standpoint; less than 20% of the class had a Twitter account and most of those were not active users. 90% had Facebook and they were active users. Many said they did not have time to set Twitter up (it takes 2 minutes). I don't care for Facebook as a method of communicating because too many people abuse it and it is harder to filter data unless you are in the system. I personally keep a Facebook account for family and very close friends. I chose Twitter because I believe this will be the next communication medium because everyone has time for short messages.

More thoughts on social media

Knowing Twitter seemed to connect me with some of the students. I then took the material from the course and developed a publishing plan for the balance of the Year. A publishing plan is about what you are going to say to who and when. One thing we have learned at EducatedChange (2010) is to not start using any social media tools without a plan. My publishing plan directed the students to material that would open their eyes to the issues on sustainability. I mixed in some personal things, job related links and next thing over 100 of the students were following me. I started with 1 or 2 tweets a week, that turned to about 6 per week as I responded to some of the students that responded or pointed me to great material that I will be using next year.

These are some of the Tweets and the kid's responses (Figure 3).

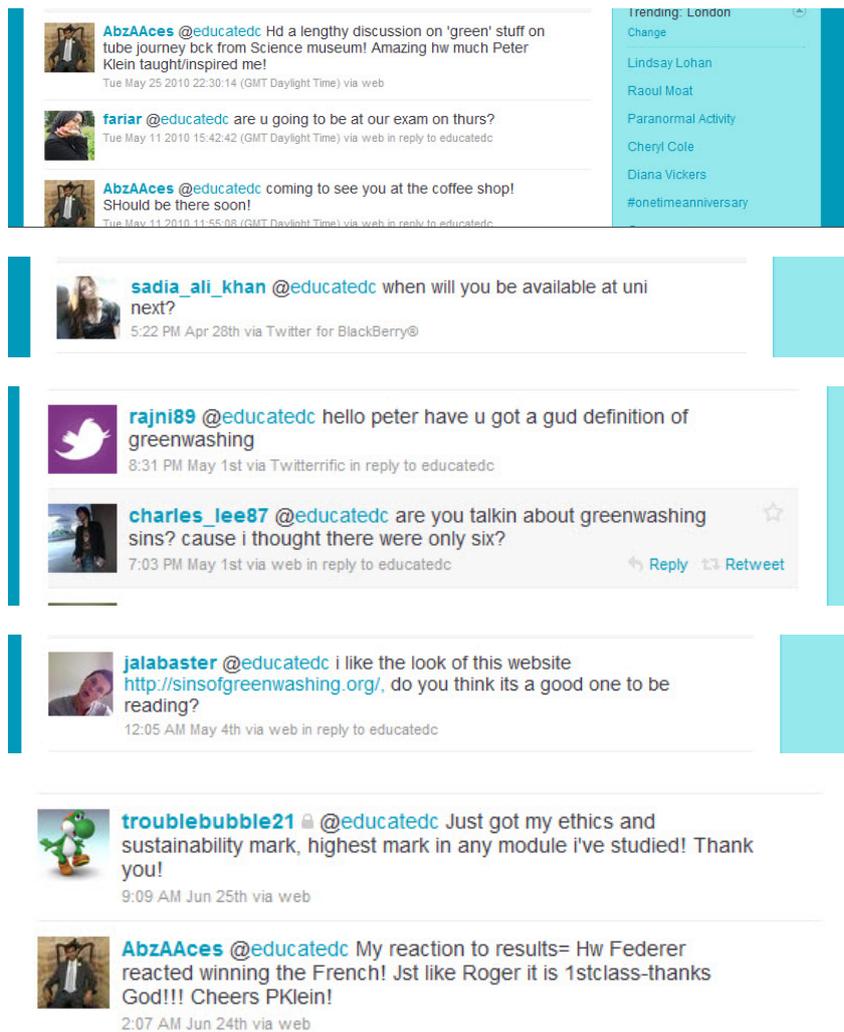


Figure 3. Users' responses

More measuring

Our motto is "only in measuring can we see if we are doing a great job". To measure correctly we also tracked the value of a Tweet (message). We believe the value of a Tweet can be measured by the number of visits to the recommended reading material. The more students that read the material the better the Tweet. Measuring was done using Bitly (2010), a free tool that shrinks web addresses. What we see from Bitly is that more than 3/4 of the students were following the links to the articles or website (Figure 4). This is an amazing statistic, in the business world less than 2% follow a link.

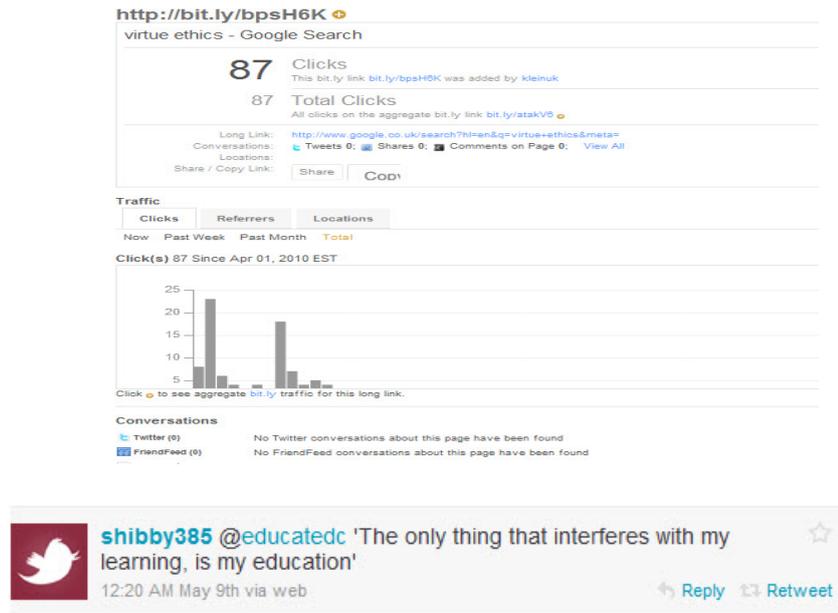


Figure 4. Twitter message visits

Take-a-ways on behaviour and how Education needs to adapt

Out of the 370 students 8% never visited the OpenCarbon (2010) site to get the lecture material. Of students that received A's all of them spent over an hour on the material outside of the lectures. Our data from debriefing students told us that the Students spent more time on the material then we estimated but our system lost the ability to track them after they learned how to get to the lecture materials without going to the website. Once they had the link for the Prezi site they did not need to go to OpenCarbon and we lost track of the student usage.

If you came to the special review secession (announced on Twitter) and followed me on Twitter you had a 90% chance of getting an A. If you followed me on Twitter you had an 80% chance of getting an A. The conclusion: the more you communicate with your professor outside of the lecture the better will do better on your exams.

What to do next year

As this was my first year I gave out my personal email and mobile phone number not realizing what would happen. About 10% of the students called, those calling did not seem to do well on the test, but I also did not have all the names from the phone calls so I could be wrong. Most of the calls were about specific problems so I am not sure we can use this data. I did feel that it gave them some comfort just being able to talk. I would still give out my mobile again but with very specific guidelines.

Conclusion

We must reach out to the students in their language, using the medium of the day. I recommend the use of social media, but as important we need to develop relationships with the Students. Let's implement multiple communication/relationship programs because there is a person in the back of the room that wants to ask question but is not confident enough to talk in a room of 100 people. Do it for the person for whom English is the second language and it is easier to type than stammer in front of everyone and lastly it is for the Student sitting alone in his room and wants to connect to another person about a subject they chose to study. The social media revolution is about relationships and communicating. Look at the research, it has now shown that using social media makes you feel better (Fastcompany 2010) and if this social media movement helps one student we should act on it. I feel the students got their money's worth for this course and I will leave it to you to answer the question "is it the conversation or the medium"

Next year I will be using Twitter and Message Board Live in the class room so students can comment in class in real-time. I will keep you posted on the success at our website www.educatedchange.com. I continue to get feedback from the students (Figure 5).

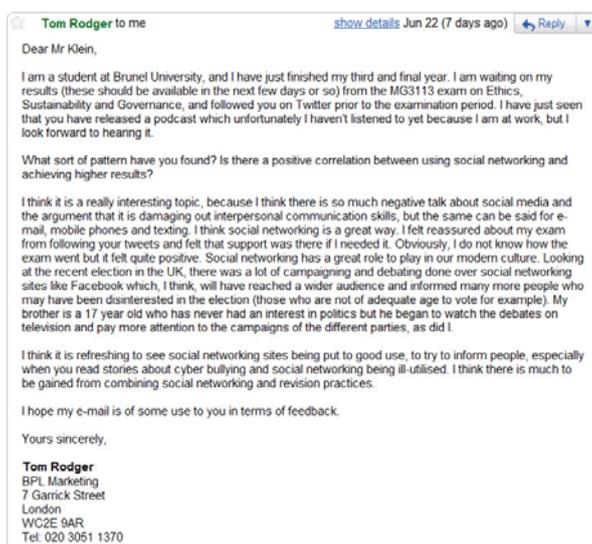


Figure 5. Student feedback message

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