The Journal of Social Media for Learning 2020

Dog filters and flower crowns: Using Snapchat as a Pedagogical Tool in Higher Education

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Abstract

Academics overwhelmingly value social media as a tool for enhancing student learning (Moran et al, 2011). Generally, academics use information technologies and social media to engage with students in a top-down fashion i.e. it is the norm to use whatever the learning technologists deem appropriate (Liu, 2010). Snapchat is a social networking platform that is reserved for communicating with close relationships and, unlike Twitter, is generally not a method for communicating with strangers (Vaterlaus et al, 2016). Thus, any effective use of Snapchat within a learning environment must finely balance engaging with students on social media to facilitate their learning on one hand and invading their private space on the other (Woodley & Meredith, 2012). After all, the main reason that students use social media is for social engagement, not classroom engagement (Liu, 2010).

In this paper, we discuss the use of Snapchat as a learning tool, our own experiences of using this platform to engage students from two very different academic disciplines – Festival Management and Prosthetics and Orthotics, using this platform to enhance student learning and engagement in different ways. From creating 'stories' that help package concepts and theories to make them more accessible; to curating learning and observations from field trips; in addition to creation of learning resources, discussion groups; the possibilities of Snapchat usage within the learning environment are endless.

This paper sets out to provide participants with practical advice on how to use Snapchat within the learning environment. We encourage teachers in higher education to think about how they can creatively use the app to make learning more accessible. Ultimately, Snapchat is a playful app, and the facilitation of playful learning can help promote creativity, engagement and academic achievement among students (Kangas, 2010).

Key words

Snapchat, Social media, Pedagogy, Learning, Higher Education

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Introduction

"Snapchat is a camera. No, not the kind with a flashbulb and lens cap. It's a new kind of camera that's connected to your friends and the world" (Snapchat, 2020).

Snapchat is an app that people use to share photos, exchange messages and to play with (Snaphat, 2020a). Indeed, it is so popular that it has over 180 million users across the world (Snapchat, 2020a). When the Snapchat app is opened on a phone or mobile device, it opens directly to a camera, allowing the user to take a photo or video (snaps), that can then be sent (perhaps with the application of a filter) directly to a friend, a group of friends, and/or added to a 'story' which which makes the snap visible to friends for 24 hours. Snaps sent directly to friends or groups of friends are automatically deleted within 10 seconds, unless they are saved. The sender receives a notification when someone takes a screenshot of any of their snaps. In this paper, we discuss our own experiences of using snapchat within the learning environment, in addition to some myth busting about the app. It has not escaped our attention that this app can (and is) used to 'send nudes' (sometimes referred to among young people as 'dickpics') - both solicited and unsolicited - to partners and potential mating partners (Poltash, 2013). Further discussion on this is outwith the scope of this paper which is focused on the use of Snapchat as a pedagogical tool in higher education.

Using Snapchat as a pedagogical tool to enhance student learning is a novel use of this social media platform. Our extensive literature search has identified that Snapchat is almost entirely discussed within the academic literature as a marketing tool (e.g. Gomez et al., 2017; Tropp & Baetzgen, 2019) or from the perspective of psychology and social media (e.g. Bayer et al., 2016; Utz et al., 2015; Phua et al., 2017).

In this paper, we acknowledge that there are pros and cons to using Snapchat as a tool to facilitate student learning - something we later discuss in more detail. We envisage that academic colleagues will be more familiar with other instant messenger apps such WhatsApp than they are with Snapchat. There are three rationales for the authors utilising Snapchat over Whatsapp. Firstly, Snapchat is where our students are. 77% of people aged 18-24 have identified as Snapchat users (Statistica, 2018). Secondly, from our own experiences, students are reluctant to engage in university-prescribed engagement platforms such as 'forum discussions' within the virtual learning environment. Thirdly, and importantly, in order to communicate with students over Snapchat you do not need the recipient's phone number, and they do not require yours, this is a distinct advantage over WhatsApp.

In the two case studies we present - we created Personal Learning Environments (PLE) for students that integrated formal and informal learning, using social media and supported students to self-regulate their own learning within their social media platforms. PLE's are both a technology and pedagogical approach that not only help integrate formal and informal learning but are effective in learner control and personalisation of learning materials (Dabbagh & Kitsantas, 2012).

Case study 1: Prosthetics and Orthotics

In this case study we explore the rationale for using Snapchat as a tutorial tool with second year students studying Prosthetics and Orthotics, within the department of Biomedical Engineering at the University of Strathclyde in Glasgow. The use of Snapchat stemmed from frustration with the lack of engagement from our students with the forum chat function that had been set up within our module on the University VLE. With a small year group size, the opportunity to discuss this frustration revealed that the lack of engagement was due to the number of steps/clicks required to access the forum.

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On reflection, our students are used to communicating with each other with one click of a button - not five. With this knowledge, enquiries were made as to 'where they are', what platforms they frequent and importantly, where they would be happy to welcome a member of the teaching staff.

The resounding answer was Snapchat. With direct input from the students a Snapchat group was created. The aim of the Snapchat group was to give the students an opportunity to engage with course material outwith the classroom, to help consolidate learning and to provide an informal platform where they could ask questions of each other and the tutor.

Figure 1 below is the very first Snap that was sent to the group. This test Snap was sent on a Saturday evening, within 15 minutes there was engagement from around 10 students. These students chose to engage with this Snap on a Saturday evening. The benefits of learning 'on the go' is that the students could have been in the pub or sitting on the sofa at home.

<u>Figure 1 First Snap send in Snapchat tutorial group.</u>
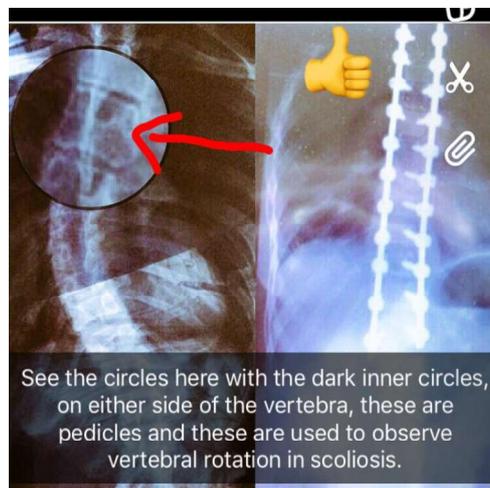
One of the benefits of using Snapchat over WhatsApp is that with Snapchat, no exchange of mobile phone numbers is required. Students can connect with the tutor by scanning the tutor's Snapcode as illustrated in Figure 2 (Overleaf). The Snapcode can be shared in an email, on the VLE or in a PowerPoint presentation. Alternatively, a link can be sent to students to join the Snapchat group.

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Figure 2 Screenshot of presentation delivered by @EricStoller at the Open University Social Media conference commenting on the innovative use of Snapchat in Higher Education.
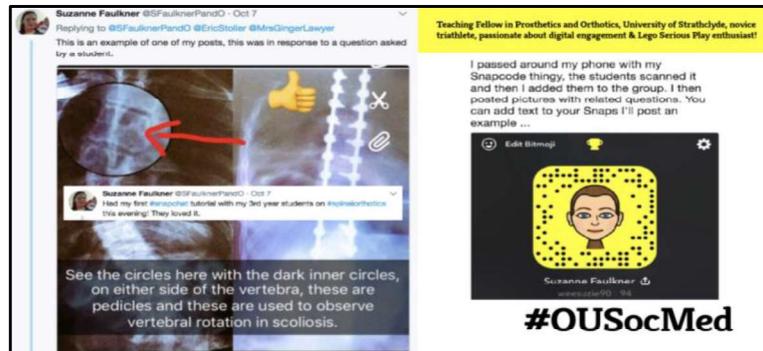
Used with permission of Eric Stoller.

Using Snapchat in higher education is also considered to be innovative as highlighted by Eric Stoller (a higher education consultant who specialises in digital engagement) who used Suzanne's use of Snapchat as an example of the way in which social media can be used effectively in learning and teaching in higher education at the Open University Social Media conference.

Figure 3 An overview of the benefits of using Snapchat as a tutorial tool in HE.
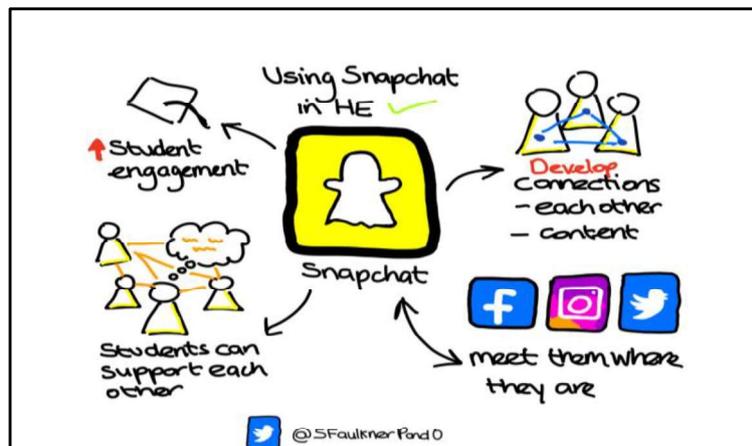
Many benefits have been observed in relation to using Snapchat as a tutorial tool as outlined in Figure 3, primarily a significant increase in engagement between the students and the tutor and their peers. Students report that Snapchat provides an informal platform that facilitates communication with ease, this has led to enhanced connections with the module content and each other. It also provides a platform where students can support each other in their learning.

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The Snapchat tutorials can be tutor led or more likely, tend to be student led with students asking questions on the Snapchat group. The Snapchat groups are particularly active when there is an upcoming class test or end of year exam. Students may ask specific questions in relation to past paper questions or share screenshots of presentation slides that require discussion. The students unanimously agree that Snapchat tutorials are beneficial, the benefits are highlighted in this blog: Top 10 reasons your students will thank you for using Snapchat as a tutorial tool (Faulkner, 2018).

Case study 2: Festival and Event Management

In this case study, we present our experiences of using Snapchat within a first-year undergraduate module within an International Festival & Event Management degree. Snapchat was first used by the lecturer to record observations on a field trip to a mega sports event. The initial idea was that a Snapchat story would be created to record observations of the event, that would serve as a means to engage students who were not able to attend the event. The snapchat story (Video 1) documented operational aspects of producing and delivering a mega sports event including stakeholder engagement, corporate sponsorship, volunteer management, media and press management, entertainments, and logistics management. One of the key themes that arose during the field trip was the role of the public sector in supporting and funding the mega sports event, and in one of the snaps, the lecturer posed the question about why the government was funding a mega sports event, when people are living in poverty in the country.

EMBEDDED VIDEO AVAILABLE HERE

Video 1: Snapchat story of a festival management lecturer
recording notes and observations from a field trip to a mega-sports event

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Through this informal snapchat story, we were able to blend the formal and informal learning, by engaging with students and activity encouraging them to undertake a critical analysis about what was going on at the event. Thus, the Snapchat story created at the sporting event did not only serve its purpose to document the field trip, but served as a learning tool to encourage students not only to reflect on the operational dimensions of event management, but to reflect on the bigger picture - the macroenvironment - and critically reflect on government involvement within the events sector. We are aware that not all students are on Snapchat - and thus not able to view the Snapchat story - so the video was downloaded and then uploaded onto the virtual learning environment. This snapchat story was also shown at the beginning of a series of tutorials, which served as the basis for starting a discussion about the role of the public sector in supporting the festival and events sector, and why neoliberal governments have an invested interest in festivals and events, particularly mega sporting events.

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Myth busting

Myth: Snapchat is for sending dickpics!
This is false. Snapchat is a social media platform that is widely used among young people for sharing videos, pictures, direct chats, and group chats.

Myth: Snapchat is difficult to use.
This is false. Snapchat takes minutes to set up and is easy to navigate once you have had some practice using the various applications of the app.

Myth: Snapchat is time-consuming for academics.
This is false. Snapchat, like Twitter, is something that users can engage with when in a lift or waiting for a bus. It should not be seen as additional work, rather as a fun way to engage with students.

Myth: Using Snapchat sets the expectation that academics are available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.
This is false. We have found that setting ground rules with students helps manage expectations. We have also found that letting students know you will only reply to Snapchat messages during certain times of the day is useful in managing those expectations. Sending group chat messages to say you are having time off also helps manage student expectations.

Myth: Messages disappear almost instantly.
This is true, when sending a 'snap' (message) to someone directly they disappear within seconds however, when using the chat function messages remain for 24 hrs and can be saved indefinitely if you press on the message within the chat.

Myth: Not all students use snapchat.
This is true, and we accept that some students will not embrace Snapchat. This is fine, and we encourage academic colleagues using Snapchat as a learning tool to let students know that they can still use traditional means of engaging with academics e.g. via email, face-to-face etc. For this reason, depending on the intended use of Snapchat, it may be optional to participate.

Myth: Students don't want you in their space.
This is false. No group has ownership over Snapchat. Indeed, we have found that students welcome us into Snapchat, and welcome the group chats to enhance learning.

Myth: Snapchat is not GDPR compliant.
This is false. Snapchat is GDPR compliant and their GDPR policy can be found at Snapchat (2020b).

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Advantages and disadvantages of using Snapchat as a learning tool

In these case studies, we have presented two very different usages of Snapchat within the learning environment, from two different academic disciplines. There are, however, a number of commonalities - advantages and disadvantages of using Snapchat within the learning environment - that we have identified in these case studies. These identified advantages and disadvantages of using Snapchat as a learning tool are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: Advantages and disadvantages of using Snapchat within the learning environment.

Advantages	Disadvantages
- Communicating in real time with many students at the same time. - Ability to communicate with students quickly and informally. - Increased engagement from students and between students. - Breaking down of barriers between academic staff and students. - Engaging students to develop their critical analysis skills. - Facilitating learning - albeit informal - on-the-go. - Students feel more at ease communicating in this way. - Using Snapchat provides opportunity for opening discussions in classes. - We have found that Snapchat has helped move students away from positive silent engagement to actively contributing to class discussions.	- Maximum group size of 32 per Snapchat group. - Not all students embrace the use of social media and may be disadvantaged. - Need to set up ground rules and manage student expectations around academic staff member workload and response time and availability. - Increased use of social media for work purposes, particularly out-of-office hours. - Extra labour, not included within day-to-day workload.

Tips for getting started

We encourage academic colleagues to start to explore the Snapchat app, and to experiment with different functionalities of the app. There is no right or wrong way to use the app to engage with students - we encourage you to do what you are comfortable with, and use functionalities depending on need. We do, however, offer some tips for academics that will be useful for all:

Create a great avatar. Creating an avatar does not take up too much time, and you can create an avatar with a likelihood of yourself, enhancing engagement and demonstrating fun and playfulness - afterall, it is an informal learning environment. The app used to create your avatar within Snapchat is Bitmoji.

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Manage expectations. Be clear on what you will and will not use the app for. If you are engaging with students in the evenings, make sure students know it is a one-off or what your digital office hours are. Make it clear from the outset what you are trying to achieve, how you will engage with students, and when you will use the app. No one expects you to be responding to messages 24/7, so make this clear and set the tone from the beginning.

Activate ghost mode on Snap Map. Snap Map allows users to share their location with their friends with alarming accuracy. The idea being that you can find your friends on a night out or to keep up to date with where they are and what they are doing, should you wish to share this. Selecting ghost mode on Snapchat means that your location on Snap Map will be visible only to you. Ghost mode can easily be turned on or off.

Students as partners. Answer each other's questions and encourage students to be active participants in the community of practice. This can be achieved from the outset by encouraging students to help each other set it up, and by encouraging students to set up the group chat.

Images from camera roll. When sharing images through Snapchat ensure images are shared from the camera roll. This will mean images can be saved and will remain visible within the chat. When images are captured and sent within the app, they are visible only twice and then are not accessible.

Go for it and have fun. Download the app and get started and start playing. If you are having fun and enjoy using the app, the students will enjoy engaging with you.

Closing remarks

In this paper, we have presented our experiences of using Snapchat as a pedagogical tool in higher education from two very different academic disciplines: Prosthetics and Orthotics (case study 1) and festival management (case study 2). In doing so, we have demonstrated that Snapchat can be used in very different ways to facilitate student learning and enhance engagement with learning materials, opening up the notion that Snapchat can be adapted in various ways to suit the academic who is using Snapchat as a tool within their classes. Despite using Snapchat in very different ways as presented in both case studies, we have found strong commonalities in our experiences. Both case studies presented in this paper have found many common advantages despite the divergent approaches. In both case studies, we have found that Snapchat has actively engaged students who normally are positive silent engagers. We have been inspired by very notable changes from such students who have shifted to become actively engaged in class discussions. We have found many other advantages to using Snapchat within our learning and teaching practices (as outlined in Table 1) but most notable in both case studies is the improved engagement of students in the classroom. It has not escaped our attention that there are some disadvantages of using Snapchat as a pedagogical tool to enhance student learning (as outlined in Table 1) but in both case studies, we report that the advantages have outweighed the disadvantages. We encourage academic colleagues to take an experimental approach to the use of Snapchat and to approach this novel social media platform with an open mind. We highly recommend co-creating the learning space as a community of practice, bringing in students as an equal partner to create the learning environment on Snapchat. Finally, we recommend this 'how to' video (Faulkner, 2020) for academics who are keen to get started with using Snapchat as a learning tool.

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Acknowledgements

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Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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