

The Journal of Social Media for Learning 2020

Co-creating learning experiences with students as partners

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Abstract

Learning experiences outside of the curriculum can provide students with an opportunity to expand their network and to either build upon or gain new skills. Involving students as partners (SaP) in the planning and delivery of such activities can offer a supported way for them to develop more confident leadership, teamwork, and other professional skills. This paper begins by introducing broad examples of SaP projects, the types of roles students might have, and the benefits gained from partaking in such initiatives. A SaP case study is then presented where a co-created extracurricular activity led to a four-year project called Social Media for Academic Studies (SMASH). This initiative has developed over time, with each set of students building on the work of the group from the previous year, culminating in three students leading a workshop at SocMedHE19. Consideration is given to the outcomes of the continued learning experience, the development of a virtual community of practice and potential future steps to continue this work.

Keywords

Students as Partners, extracurricular, social media.

Introduction

Learning as a supported experience can be transformative and enriched through ongoing engagement in lifelong and lifewide learning (Jackson 2011). This can take place both within and outside of a formal taught curriculum. The paper begins by introducing a broad range of activities that students may choose to engage with that take place beyond the formal teaching in the classroom. It then looks in more depth at a case study where a group of students have become partners with their tutor to develop a co-created extracurricular learning experience which has been named the SMASH project. The acronym stands for Social Media in Academic Studies at Hallam. Sheffield Hallam is the university the students attend(ed).

Learning opportunities

There are three predominant modes of learning which can be defined as formal, non-formal and informal. Formal learning in the main is tutor led within the structured curricular delivered. Whereas non-formal learning may be aligned to the institution or outside of it, is instructor led, but tend to be voluntary activities. Informal learning can be serendipitous, happen anywhere, and is usually student led. (La Belle, 1982; Eshach, 2007)

In addition to the formal taught curriculum, students may opt to undertake co-curricular and extracurricular activities. EdGlossary (nd) provides this definition:

“Generally speaking, co-curricular activities are an extension of the formal learning experiences in a course or academic program, while extracurricular activities may be offered or coordinated by a school/college/university but may not be explicitly connected to academic learning.”

Co-curricular activities are usually voluntary and are not graded for academic credit. They have connections with the course of study being undertaken. Examples include visits to organisations, attendance at guest lecture/events, careers fairs, participating in debates/competitions and presenting at conferences.

Extra-curricular activities include examples of both voluntary and paid opportunities. University Student Unions for example provide a wide range of activities. Examples include societies, sports teams, volunteering, and mentoring. Paid university roles include PAL (peer assisted learning) Mentors, Digital Champions, Students as Researchers and Student Ambassadors. Voluntary roles might include course and department representatives who gather the student voice and contribute to meetings at a course, department, faculty, or university level.

Co-created extra-curricular activities

There is a growing collection of literature that expound both the value and different approaches that involve students working in partnership with staff. Bovil et al (2015) have identified four types of student roles, where students engage in the co-creation of learning and teaching. This typology defines the roles as follows:

1. Consultant: sharing and discussing valuable perspectives on learning and teaching.
2. Co-researcher: collaborating meaningfully on teaching and learning research or subject based research with staff.
3. Pedagogical co-designer: sharing responsibility for designing learning, teaching and assessment.
4. Representative: student voices contributing to decisions in university settings (Bovill et al 2015:3)

The HEA (2015) categorise partnership learning communities as learning, designing, and developing or researching and inquiring. Such activities are often referred to collectively as ‘Students as Partners’ (SaP) initiatives. These partnerships may be with individual students, small groups, or whole cohorts; and the formation be either where academics select students or invite expressions of interest followed by a selection process (Bovill 2017). SaP projects can involve working with individuals, small groups of students or whole cohorts of students; and in situations where a subset of students are invited to become partners, they may be elected or selected.

The SaP body of research highlights the benefits for all, where staff and students work together in an authentic partnership (Bryson and Hand, 2007; Healey *et al*, 2014, Snelling *et al*, 2019). Brown (2019) draws the connections between student engagement and the ability for students to develop a sense of belonging. Being active members of such groups can help to develop a sense of belonging. Thomas (2012:14-15) states that this can be achieved through:

- supportive peer relations.
- meaningful interaction between staff and students.
- developing knowledge, confidence, and identity as successful higher education learners.
- A higher education experience that is relevant to interests and future goals.

Research with alumni undertaken by Stuart et al (2009) found the extracurricular activities were important to them for developing self-confidence (wellbeing), building a connection with university (belonging) and social development (communication). Furthermore, extracurricular experiences have helped the development of employability skills (Milner et al, 2016).

Wenger's (1998) social theory of learning and influential work on Communities of Practice (CoP), preceded by Lave and Wenger's (1991) analysis of the importance of legitimate peripheral participation have also been important to consider. Kosh and Fusco (2008) take this a step further highlighting the value of developing virtual communities of practice (VCoP) by taking this online. Furthermore, Jackson's research (2011) on both lifelong and lifewide learning opportunities, emphasises the value of taking personal ownership of ongoing learning.

Case Study

The case study reflects on a co-created extracurricular activity that has now completed its fourth year and presents a voluntary Students as Partners project called SMASH. During this time, the students have had a number of achievements. The most recent was where three of the current group members led a workshop at the 2019 Social Media for Learning Conference at Edge Hill University.

Background:

The original formation of this group was inspired by the 2nd Social Media for Learning in Higher Education Conference which took place in 2016 at Sheffield Hallam University. As with the inaugural conference in 2015 there was an opportunity for students to apply for a free place to attend the conference.

Four of the successful students (one final year and three in their second year) that attended the event turned out to be students on the course I was teaching. Following the event, I approached each of them to see if they would like to look at how the use of social media could be explored further in relation to learning and teaching and all were enthusiastic.

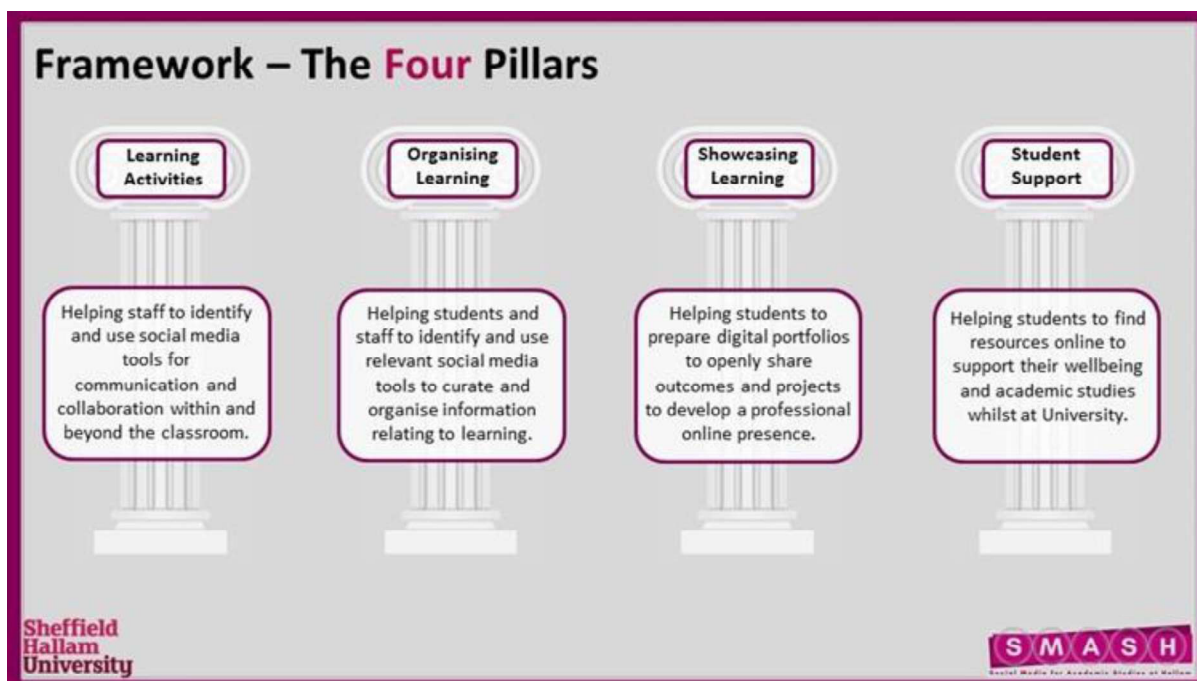
I was keen to create a co-led experience, where we decided together what the group would aim to achieve, how we would approach this, and how often we would meet. One of the first decisions made was to name the group. The students wanted to give the group an identity and collectively came up with the name SMASH which is an acronym for 'Social Media for Academic Studies at Hallam'. The group then went on to look at the affordances digital and social media tools can provide and identified three themes. These were in and out of the classroom; to organise learning; and to showcase learning. This formed the foundation for the SMASH three pillars model and was further developed in 2019 to add a fourth pillar which was student support.

SocMedHE19:

The focus of the workshop was an activity to look more deeply at using social media for student support. It began with an introduction to the work the students had completed thus far and the SMASH Four Pillar Framework (See Figure 1). The four pillars are:

- Helping staff to identify and use social media tools for communication and collaboration within and beyond the classroom. (Learning Activities).
- Helping students to prepare digital portfolios to openly share outcomes & projects to develop a professional online presence (Showcasing Learning).
- Helping students and staff to identify and use relevant social media tools to curate and organise information relating to learning (Organising Learning).
- Helping students to find resources online to support their wellbeing and academic studies whilst at University (Supporting Learning).

Figure 1: The SMASH Four Pillars Framework.



Two card sets had been created by the students providing examples of how social media can be used for learning and teaching, and these were passed round the workshop. The students then led a discussion where participants were asked to consider what forms of student support there were in their own institutions and then how social media as a communication channel could help to support these. This was a rich discussion and was well received by those who took part. It is anticipated that this activity can be undertaken again with other groups.

Impact of this co-learning experience

From the student's perspective this learning experience for each has been for a duration of between 1 and 3 years. Collectively the SMASH team have led workshops with staff and students. Using the cards sets they co-created, participants have engaged in conversations about how social media can be used to enhance learning and teaching; aid collaborative group work and showcase the work students are doing. They have written guest blog posts which collectively have seen more than 15k views. The students have presented at two SocMedHE conferences as well as other external conferences at the University of Winchester, Edge Hill University, and the BETT conference. They have published an article: 'A SMASHing approach for developing staff and student digital capabilities within a Community of Practice' in the Journal of Educational Innovation, Partnership and Change, where they reflect on their own skills development as a result of being part of this students as partners initiative. These achievements and a dedicated space to share the resources they have co-created can be found at <https://socialmediaforlearning.com/smash/>

The students have developed an ongoing virtual community of practice (VoP) (Kosh and Fusco, 2008) and continue to stay in touch through social media, despite now being alumni. The key themes that have emerged from this work align with Thomas's research (2012) and include:

- Peer learning - the significance of helping others learn.
- Confident communication skills - learning to utilise different media to suit the situation and task at hand.
- Companionship and teamwork - taking ownership and supporting each other to work collaboratively.
- Transferable skills - recognition that these skills can be applied in the workplace. (Beckingham et al, 2019)

Summary and further work

Overall, the SaP initiative has been a success in so much as both the students and I have learned so much together. Their feedback and reflections have demonstrated that they have developed valued skills and have used the learning experience as a focus for applying for the Hallam Award, an initiative where the students must evidence skills development. The students that have been part of the SMASH community have had learning experiences that extend beyond the formal learning of their degree, providing opportunities to publish, present at conferences and lead workshops.

As indicated at the start of the paper the range of extracurricular roles opens the potential for new pathways for this SaP initiative to explore. Anderson (2019) reminds us of the importance of going beyond the case study and argues that there is a gap in the research that evaluates the effectiveness of technology on the improvement of student learning. With this in mind, there is scope for further research to consider the following:

- What are the impacts of extracurricular activities on student and graduate achievement?
- A critical evaluation of the use of social media in learning and teaching using the SMASH four pillars framework, considering both student and staff perspectives.

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Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.