Title: If you can’t beat them, join them. (The use of social media as mediating tool for student engagement at an identified tertiary institution located in the Western Cape, South Africa).

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“If a child can't learn the way we teach, maybe we should teach the way they learn.”

― Ignacio Estrada

The right to further education has always been viewed as extremely important by South Africa for the development of the country and its people. As a result it has been included as a socio-economic right in the South African Constitution. According to Section 29 of the Constitution everyone has the right to further education, which the state, through reasonable measures, must make progressively available and accessible (South Africa, 1996: 1257). This right to education was already contained in the Freedom Charter (a statement of core principles compiled by the South African Congress Alliance) as far back as 1955, wherein it was stated that the law shall guarantee to all, the right to educate their children (Department of Education, 2005:12).

Looking through the lens of Human Capital Theory, the 2015 student protests in South Africa should have been expected. Dubbed “#FeesMustFall”, the protests illustrated the necessity for urgent transformation in the higher education system of the country, especially the need to make tertiary education more accessible to the majority of the South African population.

With youth unemployment being a crucial problem in South Africa, improving the university graduate output is essential for South Africa’s future human resource needs in order to ensure adequate economic growth and equality. The growing demand for tertiary education by mostly low-income, first-generation students has transformed Universities from elite to mass institutions where institutions, educators and students are increasingly challenged by governments to contribute to national economic achievement. (Zepke, N. & Leach, L., 2010: 167).

Lecturers often have to deal with overcrowded classes, a lack of resources and students with attitudes and skills that are not suitable for higher education. This places an imbalanced burden on lecturers who needs to provide quality education and develop students according to the needs of industry whilst bridging the significant diversity gaps which exist in the South African classrooms.

Being guided by Astin’s model of student involvement (1999) and Tinto’s retention theory (1987), a pilot study using social media (first Facebook and later WhatsApp) to enhance the
social and academic engagement of students and thereby improve teaching and learning practices, was implemented in 2012 for final year Human Resource students. Astin (1999) advocated active student involvement in the education process. This involved both the physical and psychological energy of the student. In order to achieve success at University it is important for the student to become both academically and socially engaged. Academic engagement will influence grades and grade point average (GPA), whereas social engagement will influence feelings of belonging, increases satisfaction with university life, and provide emotional support for students (Astin, 1999 & Tinto, 1987). Facebook and WhatsApp were found to be ideal tools to give effect to Astin’s theory of involvement and Tinto’s theory of social integration.

In the pilot study, the students were allowed to have discussions with the lecturers, alumni, teaching assistants, tutors and amongst themselves in their own space and time. The ability to learn from a remote location seemed to have been both cost effective and efficient, thus indirectly acceding to the demands of free and quality education. The use of social media assisted students to fully participate and engage in some of the experiences that are associated with success in academia for especially low-income, first generation students according to (Engle & Tinto, 2008:28). Not only did interaction and engagement in the virtual classroom increase, but, it also assisted to develop cohorts of study groups that foster campus community and provide an academic and social support system. Following the principles of Vygotsky’s theory on social constructivism (Palincsar, 1998) social media enabled students from diverse backgrounds to become actively involved in their own process of learning. It further transformed the lecturers’ role from instructors to facilitators promoting student-centred learning.

Using elements of Engeström’s (1987) model of activity theory as a philosophical lens, and applying the principles of Action Research this research investigates the use of social media as mediating tool to increase student engagement (both academically and socially). Both qualitative and quantitative data in the form of document analysis, focus groups, interviews and questionnaires will be used. A census study will be used for the currently enrolled students and a convenience sample for previously enrolled students.

It is anticipated that the research will prove that the students found the tools of social media stimulating, beneficial and cost effective. Hence, a case could be made for introducing social media as an educational tool at the institution where the pilot study was carried out.
Bibliography


