Benefits and Challenges Associated with the Use of Social Media Applications in Education at the Basic Education Level in the Bolga–East District of Ghana, West Africa

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ABSTRACT

Social Media has taken over the globe by storm. Its effects cut across all facets of humankind. This is especially so in the area of education. Depending on how managers of the education sectors apply it, Social Media has advantages and disadvantages. This study is a case study of the qualitative approach to research. The study sought to explore the benefits and challenges associated with the use of Social Media and its applications at the basic level of education in the Bolga- East District of the Upper East Region of Ghana, West Africa. In view of this objective, ten (10) participants, thus two (2) each from the five junior high schools from the district capital, Zuarungu, who had been teaching Information, Communication and Technology (ICT) were purposely selected through the intensity case sampling technique to constitute the sample size. An in-depth interview guide was employed in collecting data from the participants. The study revealed that benefits or opportunities concerning Social Media usage in education include the crucial role it plays in the search for information for research and collaborations, the sharing of information and other relevant educational materials to group members among others. However, the challenges associated with its usage include exposing young learners to uneducated and morally bankrupt materials, making students and teachers miss instructional hours through its addiction and the spread of fictitious information. Additionally, the study revealed that there are no specific and district- wide guidelines concerning the use of Social Media tools at the basic education level. The study thus recommends that educational authorities of the Ghana Education Service publish specific guidelines regulating its usage to the benefit of students' education. Parents and guardians should also monitor the activities of their wards at home to ensure that Social Media tools are used solely for academic work.

Keywords: Communication, Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants, Facebook, Social Media, WhatsApp

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I. INTRODUCTION

A. Statement of Problem

Social Media is one of the best mediums for quick and fast transfer of information and knowledge in the world. It is imperative to note that the younger generation usually uses Social Media the most.

Social Media can be described as a form of electronic communication through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages and other contents (Endosomwan *et al.*, 2011). Similarly, it is also expressed as a "group of internet-based applications that build on the ideological foundations of web 2.0. Accordingly, Social Media creates and allows for the exchange of content" (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010 p. 61).

Examples of such include blogs, Wikis, Facebook, Twitter, WhatsAPP, YouTube etc. (Trunks, 2012 cited in Shewmaker, 2014).

Since time immemorial, there have been developments of technology that make it easier for us to communicate with others (Carton, 2009). In 1792, there was the use of telegraph to transmit and receive messages over long distance (Ritholz, 2010). In the 1800s, the radio and telephone were used for social interaction (Rimskii, 2011). In 1960's, the advent of email came into being (Borders, 2010). In 1970's, Social Media was further developed using computer technologies, multi-user dungeon, multi-user dimensions (Ritholz, 2010). In the 1990s, many social networking sites were created. Examples, size degrees, black planets, move on, etc. This new development has transformed businesses, economies, politics and education

(Junco *et al*., 2011). A study conducted on undergraduate students demonstrated that students' use of Social Media has increased steadily (Dehlstrom *et al*., 2010). As a corollary, there are a myriad of benefits and challenges regarding the application of Social Media in educational settings (Kaplan & Haelein, 2010). It is in light of this that the current study sought to specifically explore the benefits and challenges that come with the use of Social Media at the basic level of education in the Bolga-East district of Ghana.

B. Objective of the Study

This study sought to elicit responses from teachers about the benefits, challenges and policy guidelines formulated by educational leadership with regard to the use of Social Media for teaching and learning.

C. Research Questions

In order to direct the focus of the study, the following research questions were posed.
1. What are the benefits associated with the use of Social Media applications for educational purposes?
2. What challenges confront the use of Social Media tools for educational purposes?
3. What policy guidelines are put in place to direct the use of Social Media tools in the school?

II. METHODOLOGY

A. Research Approach and Design

The research approach or tradition is qualitative and the design is a case study. A case could be a teacher, a school principal, a class, school or an entire community (Stake, 1995). Qualitative case studies are characterized as being particularistic, descriptive and heuristic (Merriam, 2000). This current study is in sync with this research approach on the grounds that its objective was to get a detailed description of the perspectives of the research participants on the subject. Additionally, the study was specifically bounded to only the five (5) schools in the district capital of the study area.

B. Philosophical Assumption

My philosophical assumption or interpretative framework is social constructivism. "Social constructivists are of the view that individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work" Mertens (2010) and Crotty (1998) cited in Creswell (2014, p. 8).

With regard to my standpoint on ontology, I view reality to exist in multiples out there. Therefore, reality is subjective and is viewed differently by people with their own subjective interpretations. Epistemologically, I stayed long in the field and got closer to the research participants in order that I could elicit their responses so as to make meaning out of what they said. Regarding axiology, I declared from the outset to the participants my values, beliefs and biases.

C. Role of the Researcher

Having been a teacher several years ago at the basic level, I kept at bay my experiences that had the tendency to filter into this study. Furthermore, I relied heavily on the research participants' perspectives in the construction of knowledge. I did so in line with the ethics of qualitative researchers who would usually declare their standpoints at the beginning of the study.

D. Sampling Technique, Size and Data Collection Procedure

I used the intensity case sampling technique to select ten (10) ICT teachers as participants for the study because they were considered to be conversant in the use of Social Media tools. Intensity case sampling comprises information - rich cases that manifest the phenomenon of interest intensely (Patton, 2002).

As regards the data collection exercise, I obtained an introductory letter from the District Director of Education of Bolga - East introducing me to the schools. The letter clearly stated the purpose for the study. Upon my arrival in the schools, I further sought permission from the school heads to undertake the data collection activity.

E. Instrumentation and Analysis Procedure

In-depth interview was the sole data collection instrument. In-depth interview makes it possible for an in-depth exploratory of a particular topic or experience. (Charmaz, 2006). The interview schedules lasted an hour on the average.

In the analysis of data, the line by line coding technique was employed subsequently after the transcriptions of the audio tapes. The codes were then put under the various categories and finally, the categories became the basis for the formation of the themes. Data collection and analysis were done simultaneously as it were in qualitative studies.

III. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

A. Research Question 1: What are the benefits associated in the use of Social Media applications for educational purposes?

In response to the question about the benefits associated in the use of Social Media in education, all ten participants answered in the affirmative. First, all intimated that Social Media plays a very crucial role when it comes to searching for information to enrich teaching. They indicated how beneficial the use of google is as a Social Media tool for research purposes. One participant categorically said that

> "*I use google a lot. Through this Social Media tool, I am able to access a lot of information that makes me become an expert in my subject area. I am therefore able to teach better.*"

The above observation made by the interviewee buttresses Gulbahar (2014) positation that instructors use Social Media for research purposes and these include Google, Google Scholar and YouTube.

Second, Social Media platforms allow for collaboration and sharing of information to all members. This builds collegialities among members and members become professionally competent in their teaching career. Accordingly, WhatsApp and Facebook platforms are mostly used in this regard. Another participant had this to say

"I use whatsApp particularly to get a lot of feedback on the comments that I post on our common platform. This feedback that I receive educates me a lot and I become more of a better professional than before."

It is important to note that the finding above is consistent with that of Minocha (2009) when he intimated that Social Media enables users to connect and collaborate outside of institutional boundaries and also gain practical experience.

Again, participants submitted that the contents of Social Media tools can be used as teaching and learning materials in class. Pictures and videos of Social Media relative to certain topics taught in class would be able to whip up students interest. Students' motivation would therefore be sustained and in the end, stated goals and objectives of the lessons would have been achieved.

Furthermore, all ten participants asserted that the use of Social Media tools enables one to break the distance gap between the teacher and the learner. For example, through the use of WhatsAPP, one can still have interactions with his / her students outside the four walls of a traditional classroom.

Finally, Social Media creates an opportunity for fast and quick communication flow among teachers, students and educational authorities. Added to this, Social Media has the capacity to develop in students, the ability to become creative in their thinking. Students are able to develop their own initiatives leading to further developments of their self-concepts. This observation is in line with Chen and Bryer (2012). In their study, they strongly encouraged students to use Social Media regularly for the benefits of creativity and social connections.

B. Research Question 2: What challenges confront the use of Social Media tools for educational purposes?

On the question of the challenges present in the use of Social Media for the purpose of education, all the participants admitted that some challenges are occasioned. They indicated the following as the associated challenges.

When Social Media sites are not monitored properly, there is the likelihood that some pornographic materials would be accessed. Children under age could have access to such materials and this may lead to moral corruptibility of the children. There is therefore the need to intensify measures in order to restrict students to such sites by using passwords to prevent easy access.

Furthermore, participants indicated that Social Media has the tendency to make both students and teachers become addicted to it. Instructional hours are lost when teachers rather than teaching in the class are caught in Social Media milieu outside of the class. This observation buttresses Cam and Isbulan (2012). In their study, they revealed that there is some amount of social network addiction of teachers. They concluded that Facebook addiction levels of males were higher than females.

Additionally, Social Media platforms occasionally are avenues whereby false information or rumours are posted. According to the participants, such information goes viral because no attempt is made to double check it before putting same on the platforms. In the final analysis, it causes fear and panic to the populace. One participant said

"It was all over WhatsApp platforms and other Social Media sites that the former electoral commissioner of Ghana Dr. Afari Gyan was no more. This sent shivers down the spines of those who admire him. Fortunately, though, it turned out to be false."

Participants also intimated that the presence of Social Media sites have made it easy for examination questions to be leaked. According to the participants, it is simply a matter of posting the leaked exams questions on Social Media platforms and many students would have easy access to such an illegality.

One participant out of the ten raised an issue of skepticism relative to the use of Social Media in Education. He said

"For me, I use Social Media tools to get more information to be able to teach. However, I am of the conviction that it is more of a distraction to others than a benefit. Added to this, a lot of us are not technologically inclined so using Social Media to teach our students has become a big challenge to some teachers."

The above assertion by the participant is consistent with Blankenship (2010). He talks about two types of generation thus X and Y. Generation X is described as the younger generation and that of Y as the older generation. He posits that the older generation which includes several teachers is forced to adapt to these new technologies and often, teachers under this category find themselves overwhelmed and struggling with change. However, the younger generation appears to be comfortable relative to the use of Social Media applications. Members of the older generation are the digital immigrants whereas members of the younger generation are christened the digital natives.

Finally, another challenge raised by all the participants was in the area of unreliable internet connectivity or network. Many a time one is unable to access information using Social Media tools because the internet is either slow or has connection problems. According to the participants, this makes one to become frustrated in the quest to do a good delivery of lessons.

C. Research Question 3: What policy guidelines are put in place to direct the use of Social Media in the school?

In answer to this question, five (5) research participants acknowledged the fact that there were no established guidelines in the schools spelling out how Social Media applications should be used. They further intimated that, on some occasions, few teachers out of their volition would caution students against bringing phones to school.

A participant intimated that

"For me, I would normally tell students not to bring devices such as phones and tablets to school. I say this because students usually use such tools for the wrong purposes. Even, most teachers are also culprits in this situation."

On the other hand, another five (5) participants also indicated that both teachers and students are prohibited from using their mobile phones in the classroom during the teaching and learning process. They however contended that such an instruction was only limited to those schools and that it was not across all the basic schools in the district.

IV. CONCLUSION

The growing interest in the use of Social Media has led educators to begin to examine its usage for academic purposes. As educational institutions are challenged to enhance collaborative learning and community building amongst students and teachers, the way forward would be to make maximum use of these Social Media tools. This could facilitate collaborations leading to the sharing of knowledge and information. Good efforts should therefore be made to ameliorate the challenges and the abuse confronting the use of Social Media in education.

V. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. District Directors of Education should develop comprehensive district - wide guidelines for the use of Social Media tools or applications in schools within the catchment area. These guidelines should spell out modalities for teachers and students about the appropriate use of Social Media in teaching and learning. Thus, teachers should be encouraged to only engage in Social Media when in school only during the teaching and learning situation with the ultimate aim of promoting students understanding of the lessons being delivered.

2. Ghana Education Service should also provide training and professional development opportunities for teachers. These trainings should review evidence of how Social Media impacts on teaching and learning. Such trainings workshops should provide some general ideas for teachers to integrate Social Media in their classrooms. This to a large extent could lead to maximizing Social Media usage in educational institutions at the basic level.

3. Parents and guardians should be encouraged to monitor their wards activities back home to ensure that Social Media tools and devices provided at home are not used for other purposes aside academics.

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