Social Media in Educational Contexts: Implications for Critical Media Literacy and Ethical Challenges for Teachers and Educational Institutions in Namibia

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ABSTRACT

The proliferation of social media and its use by students has raised a lot of research interest in attempts to seek ways of appropriating these new technologies for instructional and learning purposes. Critical media literacy deals with the critical analysis of various popular culture media in terms of their ideological and power implications, as well as the meaning of their messages. Although critical media literacy views new media as beneficial in their democratised nature, concerns remain about students' ability to decipher and analyse the content that they both consume and create through social media. The two can be termed critical consumption and creation respectively. Similarly, social media poses potential ethical challenges for the teaching profession and for educational institutions. This is a qualitative research that employed the Phenomenography method where data was collected through focus group interviews. The paper sheds light on student teachers' current social media practices. Analysing student teachers' social media practices through the lens of critical media literacy, the paper highlights potential ethical challenges that are encountered while using social media in educational contexts. Recommendations include critical and ethically considerate approaches to using social media in educational contexts, as well as methods of incorporating the teaching critical media literacy skills in teacher education curricula.

Keywords: Critical media literacy, social media, teacher education, teaching profession ethics

1. INTRODUCTION

The 21st century has ushered in an era of ubiquitous access to information communication technologies that are popular with the digital natives as coined by Marc Prensky in reference to a generation that grew up with technologies. According to Prensiky (2001, p.1) digital natives "spent their entire lives surrounded by and using computers, videogames, digital music players, video cams, cell phones, and all the other toys and tools of the digital age", the list to which one can add social media. It is debatable whether this generation is found equally everywhere in the world or whether it has uniform characteristics and access to the same technologies in equal measure.

However it is arguable that for most countries in the world, younger generations are more comfortable with and have better access to technologies compared to older generations.

The generation of current university students in Namibia falls within Marc Prensky's characterisation of digital natives. Their technology of choice is the mobile phone and their popular pass time is using social media. A survey on Namibians' use of the popular social media site Facebook by Christoph Stork found that the age group 18 – 24 used social media more (36%) compared to age groups 25 – 34 (29%), 35 – 44 (10%) and 45 – 54 (5%) respectively (Stork, 2012, p. 23). The 18 – 24 age group is a university going generation that this paper focuses on. The paper discuses Namibian student teachers' social media practices through the lens of critical media literacy and analyses the potential ethical challenges that these students may face later in their practice as teachers.

2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The main concepts that frame this paper are social media, critical media literacy and teacher professional ethics. These are heavy concepts, each a discipline in its own right with its research field. As such, it is important to clarify that it is not within the limits of this paper to give a fair description of each of these concepts. Thus the purpose is simply to give a brief insight the concepts in order to show the context in which they are used, illustrate their interrelations and connect them to this study.

2.1 Social Media

Social media is "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content" (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, 61). Social media includes social network sites such as Facebook and Twitter, blogs, wikis and other content creation and sharing sites. The most widely used social media technologies are social network sites, of which the most popular is Facebook with over 1.4 billion users worldwide, the majority of whom are 18 – 24 years old (Statistic Brain, 2014). Social media online social interaction whereby users create a profile where they can post information about themselves, express their views on various subjects, share content such as text, pictures and videos, chat in real time with friends or join groups of their choice (Hughes, Rowe, Batey, & Lee, 2012, p. 561).

The openness of social media offers both opportunities and challenges for its users. There are issues of privacy in terms of how much personal information should be shared and with whom. There are also challenges of responsible sharing of content, particularly with regard to legal and ethical considerations. Given the fact the most users of social

media worldwide and in Namibia are the youth, these challenges are particularly accentuated since they lack experience and may also be reckless in their sharing of content on social media. This concern is specifically relevant in relation to students that are on the way to becoming teachers for the reason that teaching is an ethical profession that demands high levels of moral and ethical standards, as well as modelling of appropriate behaviour. It is from this perspective that this paper interrogates student teachers' social media use practices.

2.2   *Critical Media Literacy*

Critical media literacy is concerned with "cultivating skills in analysing media codes and conventions, abilities to criticize stereotypes, dominant values, and ideologies, and competencies to interpret the multiple meanings and messages generated by media texts" (Kellner & Share, 2005, p. 372). Through critical media literacy, people learn to use media "intelligently, to discriminate and evaluate media content, to critically dissect media forms, to investigate media effects and uses, and to construct alternative media" (Ibid). In an era where the youth "receive nearly all their information through popular culture mass communication" (Worsnop, 2004, p. 1), critical media literacy is crucial in equipping young people with analytical skills to use media more critically.

Traditionally, critical media literacy has occupied itself with mass media such as Television, radio, the Press and music as they have been the most influential media in pop culture. Recently however, as access to the Internet grows, Internet and social media has been added to this list. Social media is particularly powerful due to its ubiquitous access through mobile devices like the mobile phone that people can carry anywhere and use anytime of the day, unlike other media platforms that are limited in place and time. Considering that students use social media widely, it could be argued that it is imperative that they should be equipped with the skills offered by critical media literacy to be able to use social media safely, critically and with more responsibility.

2.3   *Teacher Professional Ethics*

Teaching is considered a value-laden profession due to the pivotal role that teachers play in the society and the influence they have on generations of people. "Ethics deals, amongst other things, with right and wrong, ought and ought not, good and evil" (Mahony, as cited in Bullough, 2011, p. 21). Rauni Räsänen (2000, p. 169) argues that "teaching and education are inevitably value-laden activities, because they deal with issues like civilisation, growth, development – the idea is to make or support something becoming better".

Räsänen maintains that what makes teaching particularly morally sensitive due to "the fact that it is working with children, who are easy to influence and are not capable of

defending themselves and their rights like grown-ups" (Räsänen, 2000, p. 170). She further argues that the inherent ethical responsibility of a teacher is not optional since "whether the teacher wants it or not he/she is always a model of a grown-up person to the child" (Ibid). It is for this reason, she maintains, that teaching needs professional codes of ethics, not to "burden" or rule the teacher but rather to serve as "an important source of inspiration", while also directing "the relation between the teacher and other people and the teacher's attitude towards work and his/her duties" (Räsänen, 2000, p. 171). Through Räsänen's vintage point, it is easily recognisable that teaching is not a profession to be taken lightly. The conduct and behaviour of teachers both in their work and their personal lives has considerable implications for the image of the profession and for their credibility as role models in society.

When one looks at Namibia, the teaching profession is guided by a code of ethics called Code of Conduct for Teaching Services. One of the objectives of Code says that teachers should "act responsibly and in a clear and transparent manner, bearing in mind the responsibility they hold in their communities and in society" (MoE, 2004, p. 2). The same Code defines ethical conduct as "conduct or behavior based on or influenced by a system of principles and values and beliefs about right and wrong, good and bad" while moral standards are defined as "principles and values based on what the society believes are the right and acceptable ways of behaving" (Ibid, p. 4).

The literature and the policy cited above conceptualise the meaning of ethics within the teaching profession. The policy in particular clarifies what ethical and moral standards mean to Namibian teachers, and which levels of conduct are expected. As highlighted earlier, social media poses ethical challenges to teachers and future teachers due to the freedom it offers to them to share or post information and other content that may have ethical implications for themselves and their profession. Social media and the Internet in general are public platforms and behaviour on it is open to scrutiny from various quarters of the society. Hence the paper is concerned with the following three questions:
  (a)   What are student teachers' social media practices?
  (b)   How can these practices be interpreted through the critical media literacy lens?
  (c)   What are the implications for teacher professional ethics?

3.   METHODOLOGY

A qualitative research methodology was employed in this study because it offered an opportunity to "study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them" (Denzin and Lincoln as cited in Creswell, 2007, p. 36). Data was gathered through focus group interviews guided by a phenomenographic research approach. Phenomenography is a research approach concerned with the different understandings of reality by "mapping

the qualitatively different ways in which people experience, conceptualise, perceive, and understand various aspects of, and phenomena in, the world around them" (Marton, 1986, 31).

The study used focus group interviews that were considered suitable due to the richness of data that they produce based on the fact that the interaction is not only limited between the researcher and the participants but also amongst participants themselves, producing a collective rather than an individual view on the subject of research (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007, p. 376). Focus group was particularly relevant for this study because at the time of data collection, students' social media interest was considered to be high and issues related to it topical amongst students at the time. The research participants were 19 students, with one focus group consisting of 7 students, and the other two focus groups consisting of 6 students.

Participants were selected using purposeful quota sampling, representing the BETD final year, and the Bachelor of Education first and second year groups at one education campus of the University of Namibia. Purposeful sampling was applied due to the fact that it was important for all research participants to be social media users, and to ensure that that was the case, the sample had to be selected purposefully, with that criteria as a guide. The quota element of the sample was to maximise the diversity of participants, thereby enhancing the richness of data collected.

4.   RESULTS

The results address the first research question, namely: what are student teachers' social media practices? The analysis of the data through the critical media literacy lens and its implications for teacher professional ethics will be done in the discussion. Data was analysed using phenomenographic approach that involved the coding and grouping of data into categories of description based on meanings, as illustrated in figure 1. The main results are displayed through three descriptive categories as presented below.
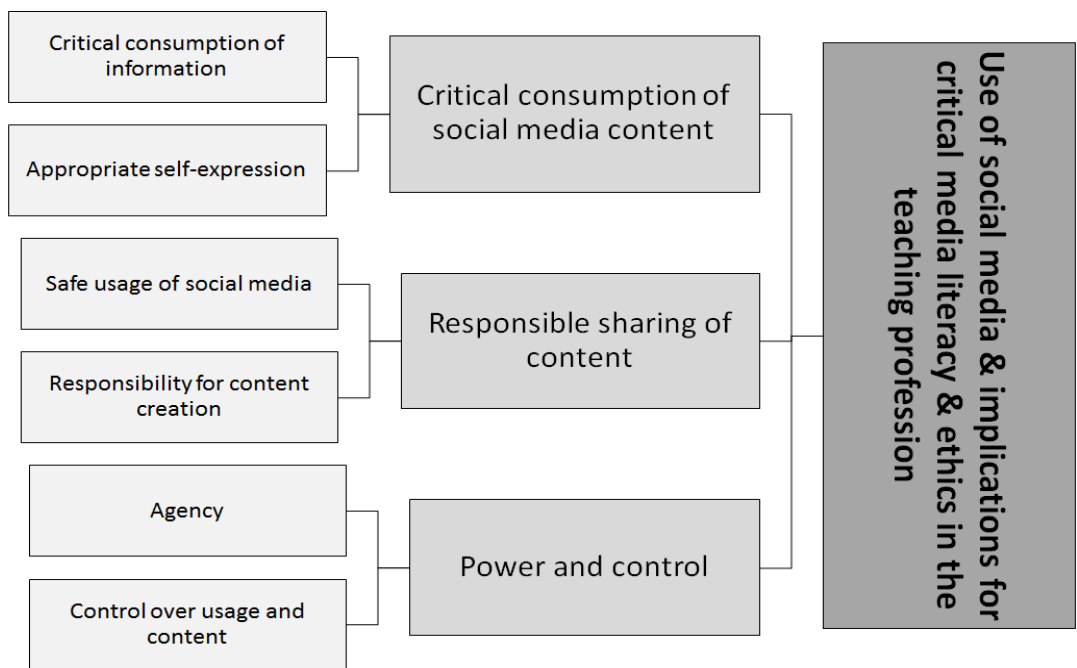
Critical consumption of information

Appropriate self-expression

Critical consumption of social media content

Safe usage of social media

Responsibility for content creation

Responsible sharing of content

Agency

Control over usage and content

Power and control

Use of social media & implications for critical media literacy & ethics in the teaching profession

Figure 1: Levels 1, 2 and 3 categories of description

4.1 Critical Consumption of Social Media Content

Critical consumption is linked to the notion of appropriate expression on social media. Data showed that students tended to express themselves through the sharing of thoughts, feelings of the self, as well as expression of opinions on social media content that they consumed. Some students relied on social media as their daily source of information which they found empowering, like the one who said,
I get most of my information on Facebook. I just simply got the information there and now I'm acting smart with it. Actually I get a lot from there.

With regard to disclosure, the way students perceived it on social media varied. Some were comfortable sharing genuine and sensitive information about themselves such as their feelings and moods, almost turning social media into a personal but publicly published diary. Other students have however found this aspect inappropriate and ought to be discouraged.

4.2 Responsible Sharing of Social Media Content

Responsible sharing in this context refers to ways of sharing information that is considerate and thoughtful, while also considering safety for self and others. Some students showed awareness of the importance of contemplation before sharing, as well

as issues of privacy and safety on social media. Showing concern about privacy, one participant said,

My concern is the posting of the reality, posting everything about yourself. A stalker can easily find you by reading your status updates. This person can easily track you down."

Students also indicated consideration beyond themselves, extending it to the protection of children online, such as the participant who claimed that,
Honestly, if you gonna allow a child to go on a social network, you should look at the child not being emotionally and mentally ready for what they are gonna see.

However, data also showed evidence of lack of consideration for others' privacy. One participant admitted to violating another social media user's privacy by using their Facebook account that they found open on a public computer to post negative information online by impersonating the account holder. The perception around this issue appeared to be that it is the responsibility of the "victim" to ensure that his/her Facebook account was closed to other users, and therefore the violator did not feel remorseful about the action. Other participants claimed to have used pseudo names behind which they hid while sharing content that they knew was negative or hurtful. They therefore felt immune to ethical responsibility because their true identities were hidden.

4.3 Power and Control

Students demonstrated a positive conception of their agency and control over content that they share on social media whereby they believed that they were in charge of their information, and not the social media sites. Illustrative of this was the participant who claimed that,
[Privacy] depends on you. Facebook is very private. You can set your privacy settings like I didn't even know that I shared my phone number so people started texting me, I got your number on Facebook. So the privacy really depends on the person themselves, not on the network.

At the same time there were students who saw power differently, stating that it is the social media sites that retain control over content shared online in the way that once content is shared, it can never be deleted but is retained by the websites. Another conception of power involved the manner in which most students joined social media, mainly through peer pressure rather than by their own accord.

5. DISCUSSION

The results presented describe students' use social media seen through three meaning categories. The first category of critical consumption of social media content lends itself

to the analytical lens of critical media literacy. If critical media literacy is the ability to use media "intelligently, to discriminate and evaluate media content" by critically dissecting it (Kellner & Share, 2005, p. 372), the results show that there is both a presence and an absence of this literacy in students. An overreliance on social media by some as their main source of information raises questions of critical evaluation of the social media content. Personal experience has shown how regular use of a particular media as a main source of information could lead to trust and complicity, which in turn could make one vulnerable to media manipulation. On the other hand, the disapproval shown towards the indiscriminate sharing of personal views and feelings in the public sphere represents a question of appropriate self-expression. This represents as moral question of right or wrong which is related to the codes of ethics of the teaching profession.

Responsible sharing of social media content presents itself as an ethical and moral matter rather than a critical media literacy one. The concern and disapproval shown regarding the potential exposure of children to social media for fear of possible harm demonstrates ethical and moral responsibility. This concern resonates with Räsänen's conception of the ethical nature of the teaching profession which concerns itself with "working with children, who are easy to influence and are not capable of defending themselves and their rights like grown-ups" (Räsänen, 2000, p. 170). Thus, showing concern about children's exposure to potential harmful content on social media is recognition of children's vulnerability and the need for them to be protected. On the other hand, students' infringement of others' privacy or their use of pseudo names on social media that makes it easier for them to post content that they deem morally questionable are both ethical and moral infringements based on the Namibian Code of Conduct for Teaching Services, the code that the student teachers in question would be expected to abide to when they enter the teaching profession in the near future.

In terms of power and control, the results show just how limited students' knowledge of how the Internet in general and social media in particular work. Their conception of agency, which suggest that the control of their information and content they share is up to them is exaggerated. Qi and Edgar-Neville (2011, p. 76) highlight the potential danger that social media poses on users' privacy, regardless of whether the user has control over privacy settings:
"Social networking sites as Facebook and Myspace hold an incredible amount of information about their users. A fully completed Facebook profile contains a wealth of personal information: name, gender, sexual preference, birthday, political and religious views, relationship status, educational and employment history, and more. When a single entity collects and controls so much personal data, it raises a host of privacy concerns because of the potential that such data could be misused".

Considering how much information a typical social media profile holds and since information is power, it is reasonable to be concerned about how much power users of

social media surrender to the networks they use, and the potential risks that they may subject themselves to. When social media users have belief that they have control over information, as indicated in the results above, it may lead to complacency and sloppiness. Although there is evidence of lack of critical media literacy in this case, there is also a lack of technical knowledge about how the Internet and social media operates regarding user content.

The other concern that can be deduced from the findings on power and control is the fact that some students join social media through peer pressure. This means that they start using these tools before they are ready, or before they have learned more about how these media platforms work. This implies that they could make a lot of mistakes, such as sharing inappropriate content or keeping their profiles public for all to see. Even if they learn later and rectify their mistakes, the potential damage would have been done and may be irreversible, such as an appropriate picture being downloaded by strangers who would forever keep it without the owner's knowledge. This raises the question: if our future teachers show lack of critical media literacy and a limited awareness of the using social media safely, how will they guide their learners in this regard? At the same time, as Räsänen (2000, p. 170) puts it, "whether the teacher wants it or not he/she is always a model of a grown-up person to the child", what kind of modelling will the future teachers provide to their learners in the context of using social media carefully and critically?

6. CONCLUSION

This has analysed students' use of social media through the critical media literacy and teaching profession ethics lenses. The results show that students' levels of critical thinking and critical media literacy vary, with some showing awareness of critical issues to consider when using social media, while others showing naivety. It well established that students start to use social media on their own and learn about it informally on their own or from friends. It is perhaps therefore expected that they would not consider ethical and moral issues while they use social media. They may think it is all harmless fun that does not need to be taken seriously. However the opposite is true, particularly for student teachers.

Therefore teacher education needs to identify these potential potholes and seal them before they pose danger to both student teachers and learners in the future. Formalising the learning about social media and Internet in the curriculum could one option, while integrating critical media literacy in related courses could be another. The concept of teaching as an ethical profession may also need to be emphasised in the same manner, that is, through curriculum consideration. Student teachers need to know that they are not just ordinary students but that they are a special group of future professionals with huge ethical and moral responsibilities, as well as modelling roles for

their prospective learners. The sooner they start assuming that role and appreciating the responsibilities awaiting them, the better their general behaviour, including their online behaviour would be.

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