Vocational IT students' social media skills

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Abstract

The present study provides descriptive data on social media skills of $N = 124$ vocational students from the IT sector. Specifically, we explored social media skills belonging to the four skill facets select and manage information, comprehend and evaluate information, communicate and comment on information, and create and edit information. The results of the study indicate that some of the participants already possess quite well-developed skills, but for others there is room for improvement. Based on the findings of the present study we aim at developing concrete training units to foster students' social media skills.

Introduction

Social media, such as blogs, online forums, wikis, and social networking sites, increasingly become an integral part of young adults' personal as well as school or working life. Particularly in the IT sector the use of social media has become popular for both knowledge consumption and production. A competent and reflective use of social media, however, not only requires technical skills (e.g., how to set up a wiki page) but also a set of cognitive and social skills. On the basis of existing models about general ICT literacy (e.g., Katz, 2007) as well as models from educational psychology about information problem solving on the internet (e.g., Brand-Gruwel et al., 2009) and collaborative problem solving (Hesse et al., 2011) we derived four skill facets that seem important for an adequate receptive or productive use of social media in educational or business contexts (see Table 1). The goal of the present research, which has been co-funded by the European Social Fund and the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research within the project KOMMIT, was to test the proficiency of vocational students from the IT sector regarding these skill facets.

Method

In a classroom setting 124 vocational students from the IT sector ($M=20.4$ years, 93.5% male) were given a set of 10 social media tasks that addressed the four skill facets (2 for select and manage, 3 for comprehend and evaluate, 3 communicate and comment, 2 for create and edit). In the following, we will illustrate and report on four of these tasks (one for each skill facet). The tasks were presented on laptops and required free text entry. The first task (facet select and manage) was an open question that asked students about potential strategies to keep up-to-date about topics in the IT sector by using social media. In the second task (facet comprehend and evaluate) students were asked to read a blog article about health risks of laser printers and to argue whether or not

they would use this website for a school assignment. The blog article did not include any references and was written in a one-sided, somewhat subjective style. When clicking on a hyperlink with the author's name or on the website's imprint, one was informed that the author was a PR consultant of a well-known printer company. After participants had send off their argumentation, they were directly confronted with this author information and were explicitly asked to rate the author's credibility. In the third task (facet communicate and comment) students were presented an extraction of a facebook newsfeed where several people had contributed a post (of which some were inappropriate, see results for details).They were asked to indicate which of the posts they wouldn't post and why, assuming that the individuals were also friends with their colleagues on facebook. In the fourth task (facet create and edit) students were shown an example of four students that had collaboratively written and edited a wiki article about laser printers. The task was to anticipate potential problems that could occur when several people work together on a wiki article.

Table 1. Social media skill facets (subskills in italics addressed in the four tasks).

Select and manage information	Comprehend and evaluate information	Communicate and comment on information	Create and edit information
▪ Select relevant information from a large amount of information ▪ *Keep oneself up-to-date* (know useful resources and ignore irrelevant information) ▪ Collect and categorize information ▪ Manage contacts and build networks	▪ *Critically evaluate the quality and credibility of information* ▪ Compare information from multiple sources ▪ Find experts or appropriate networks	▪ Share information (with selected target groups) ▪ *Have an awareness of the (long-term) visibility of own contributions and profile information* ▪ Respond adequately to contributions or comments of others	▪ *Collaboratively create, augment, or modify contents* ▪ Prepare content appropriate to target audience ▪ Synthesize information from multiple (potentially contradicting) information sources ▪ Cite references

Results

The open-ended responses of 34% of the participants were coded by two independent raters by means of a coding scheme that included only suitable answers (Cohen's k = .77-.94). In the following, descriptive data about students' performance in the four tasks are reported. With regard to task 1, 46% stated that in order to keep oneself up-to-date about IT topics one can regularly read blogs, online forums, wikis, and social networking sites or twitter, or watch videos or postcasts. 26% mentioned that one could follow individuals or institutions on twitter or facebook; also 26% mentioned that one could subscribe to websites using RSS feeds. 6% suggested to create an own facebook page or

group, where then also other people will post information. With regard to task 2, 27% criticized that the article did not contain any source references. 10% stated that the author was a PR-consultant or that the article seemed commercially biased (another 30% at least stated this when explicitly asked about the author's credibility in the second part of the task). It should be noted that only 10% of the students had clicked on the website's imprint and/or the author name – a finding that has also been reported in other recent studies (e.g., Stadtler et al., 2013). Moreover, 26% stated that they would search for additional sources to check the veracity of the information. 20% indicated as negative that user ratings about the article were only moderate and only few people had liked or shared this article. With regard to task 3, 82% stated that they would not post their cell phone number. 66% mentioned that one shouldn't talk negatively about his or her own work or workplace, because of potential negative consequences. Likewise, 63% stated that one shouldn't post anything negative about a client and 42% correctly indicated that one shouldn't post pics from the company's Christmas party or embarrassing party pics in general. With regard to task 4, 24% addressed that destructive behaviors might occur, e.g. when simply deleting things, 18% mentioned coordination problems, and 24% disagreement between co-authors. Furthermore, 26% stated that as a result the text might lack coherence, 16% that it might contain inconsistencies, and 14% that it might contain duplications.

Discussion

The results of the study indicate that some of the vocational students already possess quite well-developed skills, but for others there is room for improvement – particularly, with regard to spontaneous quality or credibility assessments (cf. e.g. Stadtler et al., 2013). Based on the findings of the present study we aim at developing training units to foster students' social media skills.

References

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