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# USING GOOGLE PLUS AS A LEARNING MANAGEMENT SYSTEM/SOCIAL LEARNING TOOL IN K-12 AND HIGHER EDUCATION

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## **Introduction**

A learning management system (LMS) is a server-based information system designed to manage users, courses, and communication tools for e-learning activities (Barchino, Gutiérrez, & Otón, 2005). Faculty can use an LMS to digitally share syllabi, course readings, and collaboration tools with students without having to know how to code web pages. Examples of popular LMS programs include Blackboard, Moodle, and Desire2Learn. A recent survey reported that 93% of higher education institutions have a campus-wide LMS license, with 58% of all classes using an LMS (Green, 2012). Faculty and students report liking a common interface when accessing course content and communication tools. Even with the current popularity of a centralized campus LMS, some technology leaders have called for its “death” (Clay, Wheeler, & Attwell, 2009). They argue that the same top-down structure that makes an LMS easy to use also stifle student and faculty creativity. In addition, while some like the privacy of an LMS “walled garden”, where only those enrolled in a course have access, this typically means that when a course ends the learning ends, as the contents are made unavailable to students. Instead of an LMS, Clay, et al. (2009) advocate for the use of a Personal Learning Environment (PLE), where students manage their own digital learning tools. Examples of PLE tools include blogs, wikis, and other social media tools such as Facebook, Twitter, and Google+, that allow students to have control over the appearance of their content and provide opportunities to continue interacting with professors and peers even after a course ends.

Social media tools provide environments in which users can share information, provide feedback, post pictures, participate in synchronous and asynchronous discussions, post a calendar of events, and more, with either privately invited users or the world wide web. Social media tools allow instructors and students to continue to interact when more formal learning

management systems become unavailable at the end of a term. Orlando (2011) stated that the social media tools promote people-centered discussions rather than the topic-centered discussions used in an LMS. Facebook is a popular social media tool that may be used for social learning. Facebook allows users to develop profile pages and interact through discussion forums, polls, and announcements. Twitter is another tool that allows users to create short messages or posts that may be used educationally to share announcements and post class resources. However, while Facebook allows users to regulate who can see their posts, Twitter allows any user to follow an individual's updates (Manning & Johnson, 2011).

Other PLE tools for facilitating online communication and collaboration include platforms such as wikis, Google Docs, and blogs. A wiki is a web-based tool that allows users to collaboratively create a website (Cunningham, 2005). A wiki allows a group of authors to collaborate, edit, and discuss web pages. "Google Docs is a product that behaves like a wiki and allows for synchronous, simultaneous editing. Google Docs goes beyond being a wiki in that you can also create spreadsheets, presentations, and forms, not just traditional text documents" (Manning & Johnson, 2011, p. 214). A blog is website that functions like a digital journal and allows readers to add comments. Instructors can use blogs to post content and announcements. Students can use blogs to publish work and receive feedback (Manning & Johnson, 2011).

Before social media tools can function as social learning tools, changes must be made in how they are presented to students. First, policies to block social media sites like Facebook, Twitter, and Google+ should be evaluated. Many students access these sites during the school day using their smart phones, regardless of any policy that prohibits the use of cellphones at school. Would we be better off acknowledging this use and engaging students in how to practice good digital citizenship with social media tools? Second, much of what is being shared about

social media sites is presented with a negative bias. The focus is on how Facebook is used for cyberbullying and how Twitter shares useless information rather than how these tools might be used to interact with PLNs. Finally, a “no cell phone” policy sends a message that mobile technology and learning are not compatible. Policies that encouraged cell phone use when it accompanies the use of social learning tools may help students think about how and when it is appropriate to use these devices. Having students use social media tools for learning can provide opportunities for teachers to discuss digital identity and how to establish a positive digital reputation.

Popular social media tools like Facebook, Twitter and Google+ include collaborative features that allow students to participate in online communities of practice (CoP) around topics of interest. Regular interaction in a CoP can be a valuable educational process because it may lead to beneficial activities such as problem solving, requests for information, and knowledge mapping (Wenger, 2006). CoPs may be created as part of course design or students could be encouraged to participate in an existing real-world CoP such as a Community in Google+.

Social learning tools can also be used to promote community interaction with student learning reflections. We regularly ask students to reflect on their learning through the use of blog posts (Denton & Wicks, 2013; Wicks, et al., 2011). Students can use social media tools to encourage their PLNs or CoPs to interact with their reflections and provide feedback.

### **Google Plus**

Google Plus is a social media platform that allows users to create a profile, chat with others, and post content, feedback, events, announcements, photos, videos, and web-based resources. Google Plus Hangouts allow up to ten users (fifteen users for education accounts) to video conference, share Google Docs, share desktops, and watch YouTube together. Hangout

recordings can be shared and viewed by other, non-participating users (Kawasaki, 2012).

Google Plus has distinct advantages over tools such as Facebook, Twitter, Wordpress, and Blackboard, as shown below.

	<b>Google+</b>	<b>Facebook</b>	<b>Twitter</b>	<b>Wordpress</b>	<b>Blackboard</b>
<b>Post size limit</b>	100,000 characters	63,206 characters	140 characters	unlimited	unlimited
<b>Profile</b>	One large profile photo, one smaller inset profile photo, one to five photos are displayed at once, multiple text fields	One large profile photo, one smaller inset profile photo, and multiple text fields	One small profile photo and 160 characters	Unlimited photos and text may be established by the user as a distinct profile page	Course administrators may limit profile information
<b>Synchronous discussions/messaging</b>	Yes	Yes	No (near real-time)	No	No
<b>Video conferencing</b>	Yes, ten (15 for edu) people total, unlimited watch-and-listen only guests	One-to-one only	No	No	No
<b>After-the-fact editing of posts</b>	Yes	Sometimes, if you edit within seconds of posting	No	Yes	Yes, if allowed by the course administrator
<b>Grouping posts with comments and responses</b>	Yes	Yes	Not really, unless you are willing to search through every	Yes	Yes, through threaded discussions

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(Adapted from Kawasaki, 2012)

Workshop participants will be guided through a tutorial on the features of Google Plus. These features include the stream, circles, hangouts, messenger, events, communities, YouTube channel, hashtags, +1, and +mention. Participants will then be invited to sign up for an account, create a profile, find other users, create a “circle” for workshop participants, and join a “community” for conference participants.

Workshop participants will then engage in an introductory task using Google Plus that includes posting an educational technology resource, commenting on another user’s post, sharing another user’s post, using the +1 and +mention features, and participating in a hangout. Presenters will make recommendations as to how to use Google Plus features optimally for educational purposes and a live example of the use of Google Plus as a learning management system/social learning tool in higher education will be provided. A presentation with step-by-step instructions can be found at: <http://bit.ly/13NII0a>

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