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Information literacy meets employability

Social media training and the library

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During the last year the library has run social media training sessions aimed primarily at job-hunting undergraduates. The focus on employability has been encouraged and enriched by collaboration with our careers department.

In spring 2012 our university was in the headlines when a student was found guilty of an offence involving comments on Twitter – an unpleasant and extreme example of the consequences of social media use. Subsequent stories in the press have also focused on students' lack of awareness of how social media may affect their future career prospects.¹

A recent debate on the Guardian's Higher Education Network included this definition of digital literacy:

'digital literacy = digital tool knowledge + critical thinking + social engagement'.²

Most students come to university with knowledge of the digital tools and a readiness for social engagement – critical thinking can be the weakest link! Universities – necessarily – focus on the regulations and disciplinary issues around social media. We felt there was scope for the library, with its expertise in information literacy, to take a lead in encouraging safe, positive use of social media.

We were originally inspired to develop social media training materials after reading a blog post on sessions being run by learning technologist David Hopkins at Bournemouth University.³ Soon after the press coverage of student misuse of social media appeared we were therefore able to advertise our first workshop – 'What's your e-reputation? Managing your online presence.'

Since then we have run tailored sessions for several departments and have been re-running the generic session as part of the university's employability weeks.

Delivering social media training brings several advantages to the library.

- We are addressing key strategic issues: employability, the student experience, digital literacy. Although there were a few activities taking place at departmental level, we could offer central support for students on social media issues.
- It promotes information literacy:⁴ used critically, social media is a valuable information source for current awareness and learning materials.
- It gets us out of the library 'echo chamber' as we start new conversations with careers, academics and the students' union.
- For the social media enthusiasts in the library, the session is fun to teach and useful for us too, both in terms of our own professional development and running the departmental social media channels. There is also an overlap with the content of social media sessions we run for researchers which focus on boosting your research impact and profile.

There is no shortage of material for a one-hour session! Employability issues include:

- Job-seeking: using social media to research jobs and network
- Job applications: ensuring your social media use does not jeopardise your chances. Lack of a social media profile can be a disadvantage too – as well as the social aspect, demonstrating an understanding of social media is becoming a key communication skill.
- In employment: avoiding social media pitfalls at your own or the employer's expense. This links in with legal issues such as copyright.
- Using social media for professional development and commercial awareness.

Our sessions focus on positive use of social media and are run as hands-on workshops. We use a classroom response system (clickers) to find out the level of social media use in the audience and also their intended career paths by broad sector. Key topics covered are:

- researching your current social media profile and setting up tools to monitor it in future

- considering what positive social media presence would be appropriate for your skills and chosen career
- raising awareness of the issues of using social media in the workplace and general legal concerns.

In a general session we refer to the various professional social media guidelines, but in subject-specific sessions (e.g. social work, nursing) we are able to focus on the particular issues they face as well as positive examples of how social media is being used in that profession. For example, social workers need particular vigilance in their use of social media but some social work services use social media both with service users and to promote what they do.⁵

One of the main challenges of social media training is keeping abreast of a fast-changing environment. As well as Facebook's complex privacy controls, the law is also in a state of evolution regarding social media. We cannot be experts but we can encourage the students to be aware of the issues too. The expertise of the careers team also enriches the session content, for example, with a new focus on personal branding.

As with information literacy, a subject-specific approach can be most relevant for the students. Some departments have now embedded social media awareness into the curriculum, but this remains piecemeal and can have a negative focus. As with information literacy, the need for social media training is often not recognised by the students who need it the most. Reaching those students in danger of jeopardising their careers and reputation is the main challenge ahead, and we look forward to working on this in partnership with the careers team and the students' union.

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