Building the Field of Social Media and Education: Reflections From #Cloud2Class Conference Organizers

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The American Educational Research Association sponsored the 2018 #Cloud2Class conference. Through virtual or in-person participation, more than 100 individuals participated in a three-day conference focused on social media and education. Several presentations addressed aspects of social media. Structured discussions took place around both these projects and other areas of the field that need more attention. Collaborations/partnerships formed around similar ideas and resulted in the publication of projects, revision of teaching practices, presentations at conferences, and professional networking. Strategies for organization and challenges that arose are also included for those who wish to host a similar event.

Social media: The phenomenon that has made the world a much smaller place catalyzed a real-life network of scholars, influencers, managers, teachers, and students into a highly productive and valuable three-day conversation during the #Cloud2Class conference. Research presentations, thoughtful discussions, and high-quality interactions were the hallmarks of this event.

CONTEXT

The conference was conceived to address five identified gaps in the literature surrounding social media in education that required further research: (1) description of current virtual engagement through schools, teachers, students, and educational stakeholders; (2) need for more comprehensive and critical literature reviews in general, as well as within and across social media platforms; (3) increased theoretical connections and development of theory to ground and guide research; (4) expansion of methods used to both quantitatively and qualitatively assess the social media space; and (5) additional quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods research on the educational activities occurring within social media sites and their connection to classroom and school practices. The American Educational Research Association sponsored this event.
PARTICIPANTS
The conference included a wide variety of participants who attended in person (48), virtually via Zoom (19), virtually on Twitter (70), or a combination of these. Given the global nature of social media, inviting international scholars was essential. Diversity among the participants was a key component of the conference; the unique viewpoints generated new ideas and partnerships. Senior and junior faculty members, graduate students, preservice teachers, clinical practitioners, and representatives from the National Science Foundation and the Gates Foundation were all present at the conference, acting as experts in social network analysis, computer science, communication, social media, education technology, teacher education, and educational policy.

PRESENTATIONS
Three formal research presentations and a panel discussion sparked discussion and interaction with individuals. The first presentation was of a systematic literature review: “Teaching and Teacher Learning With and in Social Media: The State of the Field” (Greenhow, Galvin, Brandon, & Askari, 2018). This presentation included preliminary results from a first-of-its kind systematic review of more than a decade of research from around the globe on K–12 teaching and teacher learning with various types of social media. The second presentation, “Educational Discourse—Twitter, Facebook,” took a high-level view of Twitter (Daly, Supovitz, Frank, Rehm, & Cornelissen, 2018). In an effort to analyze, visualize, and make sense of the often hidden world of online interactions around educational policy, researchers looked deeply into the ways in which messages and meaning are crafted in social media space around the Common Core State Standards, with special attention to the role of bots and how influence is wielded. The third presentation, “Virtual Resource Pools—Pinterest, TeachersPayTeachers, YouTube, Open Educational Resources,” presented the notion of a Fifth Estate within the digital age (Torphy, Hu, & Tang, 2018). Within this space, researchers examined the emergence of a teacherpreneurial guild, in which teachers independently seek out supplemental resources and professional social networks within virtual spaces, circumventing traditional hierarchies of information diffusion and educational change. Finally, a panel of stakeholders responded to issues related to the emergence and increasing prevalence of social media in education (Torphy, Frank, Mapes, Peng, & Lockwood, 2018). They discussed the benefits and concerns for social media in 21st-century teaching and learning, and provided perspectives on how the education profession is changing as a result of social media.
ACTIVITIES

The presentations themselves were the starting of conversations, and those conversations took many forms. Networking was a key component of the conference, given that forming new partnerships was a primary goal. To facilitate this, the first activity was a scramble activity in which individuals both made and then facilitated introductions for those who have similar interests. Additionally, postpresentation discussions facilitated the exchange and synthesis of ideas. Informal conversations during meal and break times also allowed for the exchange of ideas and the building of new relationships.¹

INNOVATIONS

The conference itself was innovative for several reasons. Individuals could participate in person, via robot, or through video conference on the Zoom platform. This greatly increased the number of people able to attend; travel limitations or scheduling conflicts would have prevented many from participating. The variety of attendance also allowed for widespread, open invitations to anyone who had an interest. Invitations for participation were posted on social media, blasted through professional organizations like the American Educational Research Association, and forwarded by individuals, allowing for greater diversity in the participant population. The live stream of the discussions and the presentations was unique as well. Digital archives of the event were posted for individuals to share, with the addition of closed captions to make the content more accessible. The use of Beam Robots allowed some digital participants to have a unique virtual presence in the conference and navigate through the in-person population, sparking conversations on the affordances and constraints of digital presence devices and modalities.

OUTCOMES

Outcomes for the conference were substantial. More than 100 individuals participated through face-to-face interactions, Twitter, Zoom, or Beam Robot. Online participants were able to converse with each other and interact with presenters through in-person representatives who responded and shared comments to the group. The Zoom Chat is represented in a word cloud in Figure 1.²
The online and in-person attendees interacted on Twitter, and the impact of that interaction was widespread. During the conference itself, participants were able to interact with the entire group (in-person and online) through the Twitter platform using the #Cloud2Class hashtag. Participants asked questions, invited interested parties, and offered feedback about their experience. One example of a tweet is in Figure 2 (Black, 2018).

Figure 1. Zoom Chat as word cloud

Figure 2. Sample tweet
The 227 original tweets from 70 contributors using #Cloud2Class had a reach of 529,037 individuals (number of individuals who saw content) and 847,704 impressions (number of times content appeared in Twitter timelines). This interaction was not only well suited to the topic of social media, demonstrating the power the platform had to unite individuals across a large-scale environment, but also created an archive of thoughts and activities of the conference itself. Two examples are provided in Figure 3 (dankrutka, 2018; MAET @ MSU, 2018).

Figure 3. Sample tweets

Further impacts of the conference were the creation of new collaborations between colleagues from different universities. The chapters within this yearbook are a primary example of a strong outcome of collaboration and innovation addressing the challenges within the field. In addition, other publications resulted from these collaborations.

Sixteen papers, including those in this yearbook, resulted from the conference, addressing the gaps in the research identified before the conference: nine commentary pieces, two theoretical papers, and five empirical projects to start. Additionally, 87% of participants met someone new during the event. As a result of the conference and the embedded activities/
discussions, participants submitted to future conferences, changed teaching strategies, planned future collaborations, and continued reflecting on the presented information.

HOW IT HAPPENED

Organizing the conference itself started with choosing a location and date. We chose the Michigan State University campus in East Lansing for several reasons. Other locations, like New York City, were eliminated from consideration because of the high cost of travel and accommodations. Once a location was identified, we chose a date that worked for all the conference organizers, taking care to avoid busy times during the academic year (the beginning and end of a semester, particularly). Because we were planning an event on a university campus with a large sports program, we also took care to avoid dates with major home sporting events that could limit hotel accommodations and travel opportunities. Once we had a target location and date, we worked with the event planning staff at the Kellogg Center, who provided expertise in the necessary decisions, including the food options and the rooms that will accommodate the participants in a conference of this size. The original estimate for conference attendance was 25–30 people.

The next major challenge was setting the invitation. One major feature within the conference proposal was diverse inclusion. Organizers wanted to highlight the broad views of the field, the voices that are involved in social media policy (see Daly, Supovitz, & Del Fresno, 2019, this yearbook), as well as those in other fields who could add expertise (see Rehm, Manca, Brandon, & Greenhow, 2019, this yearbook). Three teams of conference planners made a list of ideal candidates to maximize the expertise of the group while maintaining the desired diversity. The first round of invitations was issued from this list with a goal of inviting 25–30 individuals. After confirming travel budgets for those guests, we identified a surplus and expanded our guest list to 60 invitations. Travel and accommodations were confirmed. Tracking these details (e.g., flight times, room reservations) allowed the conference organizers to confirm individual arrivals. International participants needed extra time because of flight limitations, so they arrived earlier than the rest of the guests.

Communication with participants occurred through email and the construction of a conference website. This provided everyone with a shared schedule and presentation information, as well as room assignments, to make navigation of the Kellogg Center easier for everyone. This was supplemented by posts to Twitter with the conference hashtag. During the conference itself, one person acted as the point of contact for the facility staff and for the participants so that there were clear lines of
communication. This allowed for quicker decision making and less frustration because there was a single point of contact.

While there was a set schedule with presentations, the conference organizers also put themselves in a position to be responsive to the thoughts and ideas of participants. The third day of the conference was scheduled as structured work time for collaboration and a gallery walk through social media platforms. The actual event included a sharing of project ideas among the whole group, followed by breakouts where teams worked on their individual projects; this generated many of the chapters in this yearbook and represented the many facets of social media in education that were a part of the conference.

Finally, before everyone left, we sent out a survey to everyone who attended either remotely or in person. This short survey asked only a few questions:

1. How did the individual attend?
2. What about the conference was done well?
3. What about the conference could be improved?
4. Did you meet anyone new?
5. What are your next steps?

This allowed all attendees to provide feedback that would be useful in evaluating the outcomes of the conference and planning a second event for the future.

WHAT NEXT?

The connections that emerged from the conference generated projects that address the research gaps. Conference follow-up, both virtual and face-to-face, will continue the conversations that began in East Lansing. This yearbook includes a number of pieces that address the future of this conversation, like identifying how to collect information on this field (Karimi, Derr, Torphy, Frank, & Tang, 2019, this yearbook) and what future research directions still need attention (Greenhow, Cho, Dennen, & Fishman, 2019, this yearbook).

Conversations about when and where to have a second event are already under way, using survey feedback to offer improvements. Most important, key stakeholders in the realm of social media in education were missing. More variety in the practicing teachers who attended (grade level, experience, etc.) is key to understanding deployment, use, or absence of social media. These are the people who are applying the research and theory in the classroom, and the practical side of social media use was underrepresented. Users within the schools, like educational leaders (see Daly, Liou,
Del Fresno, Rehm, & Bjorklund, 2019, this yearbook), classroom teachers (see Hashim & Carpenter, 2019, this yearbook), preservice teachers (see Torphy & Drake, 2019, this yearbook), and students themselves (see Rutledge, Dennen, & Bagdy, 2019, this yearbook) are stakeholders in the conversation who need a seat at the table for this conversation. Further, the conversations about how stakeholders are employing social media in the classrooms through the construction, distribution, and use of virtual educational resource pools (see Lane, Boggs, Chen, & Torphy, 2019, this yearbook, and Hu, Torphy, & Opperman, 2019, this yearbook) is a topic that we cannot discuss without the teachers.

Further, representatives from the social media platforms are key members of the conversation whose voices were noticeably absent. Personal data of users, negative effects of screen time, algorithms that run the platforms, and more were all key conversational threads that hit a dead end because those with the real-time information were not present. The conversations that occurred were necessary and sometimes uncomfortable. One thought was captured in a Tweet from Dr. Torrey Trust: “Does it seem strange that we look at the impact of social media by focusing on student test scores? Shouldn’t we be examining more powerful uses of social media in ed (e.g., increasing access to learning, breaking down classroom walls, improving digital literacy) #cloud2class” (Trust, 2018; https://twitter.com/hashtag/cloud2class?src=hash). The critical lenses used during the conference were furthered in critical perspective pieces by Krutka et al. (2019, this yearbook) and Frank and Torphy (2019, this yearbook).

FINAL THOUGHTS

The real-life network of scholars, influencers, managers, teachers, and students had a highly productive and valuable three-day conversation during the #Cloud2Class conference. The research presentations, thoughtful discussions, and high-quality interactions moved theory, practice, and scholarship during that time. However, in reviewing all that occurred during and after the event, the thought that resonates in the conference surveys, email conversations, and social media threads is this: It wasn’t enough, and we need to do it again.

NOTES

1. Direction slides for scramble and discussion exercises are in the Appendix.
2. Word cloud created using Wordle.
3. See Nadeau (2015) for explanation of the difference between impressions and reach.
4. Twitter analytics generated using TweetReach.
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APPENDIX

Direction Slides for Scramble and Discussion Exercises

Scramble Exercise: Be Part of a Social Engine

- Think:
  - What are the greatest challenges you see in education?
  - How are social media related to those challenges?
- Form: Meet and share in groups of 3-4
  - Discuss each challenge and how social media relate.
- Scramble: Form new groups of 3-4 people
  - Discuss each challenge and how social media relate.
- Share: One small takeaway (#cloudtoclass)
- Social Engine Matchmaker: Make introductions between members of first and second group (at lunch or on-line #cloudtoclass)

Direction Slide for Scramble Exercise

Knowledge Nugget

Using the “Final Word” Protocol

1. Attend to the session and make notes on what stands out to you, resonates, brings up questions, etc. (throughout session).
2. Each individual shares one aspect of the session that stood out, resonated, and/or brought up questions (5 minutes).
3. The group then comes to consensus around 1 of the ideas that an individual shared.
4. After 1-3 others share, the original person whose idea was selected comments on why they selected that idea etc (15 Minutes).
5. Continue the process for 2 or 3 more rounds (20 mins)

Direction Slide for Final Word Discussion
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