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Reflective case study. My ‘Pinteresting’ project: Using Pinterest to increase student engagement, promote inclusivity and develop employability skills

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Introduction

This article will give an overview of my Pinterest project, outlining a rationale for using social bookmarking sites and specifically Pinterest. It will then outline the aims of my practice, linking to research and implementation by other educators, before describing the boards I have set up with visuals and finally evaluating its impact and looking forward to future possibilities for research.

Rationale for using social bookmarking sites

1. Computer or internet devices can be used anywhere, which in turn makes social bookmarking sites accessible, especially as mobile phones have instant access with apps to enable this. Hafemann (2012) views technology as a common language, advocating: ‘Technology is the great unifier. Instead of having to master nearly 7000 languages, you can easily communicate through universal icons, terms, functionality and community.’

2. Social bookmarking sites are convenient. Being able to search links saves time, whilst creating boards provides useful resources for students to use both inside and outside the classroom.

3. Social bookmarking sites enable you to develop professionally, as you can share and network with colleagues, gaining ideas for your area of expertise.

Background to choosing Pinterest

There are many other social bookmarking sites which I could have used. For example:

- Delicious, which uses a ‘tagging’ system to store websites and Diigo, which stores more than just links: for example - podcasts, screenshots and bibliographies.
- Scoopit and Flipboard which allow you to create and publish your own glossy magazine.
Symbaloo which uses multiple tabs to organise links on a custom ‘dashboard.’

I originally started using Delicious but found it to be too text-focused, especially for more creative students, those with dyslexia and generally for those with a preference for a visual style of learning, so I investigated Pinterest as an option since I found it to be visually appealing and user-friendly. In The Top 100 Tools for Learning 2012, Pinterest came in as a newcomer in 36th place; by 2013, it had moved up to 22nd place, and in 2014, it is reached 14th place, which shows its increasing usefulness in educational settings across the globe.

Pinterest is a social bookmarking site which looks like an online pin board. Each ‘pin’ allows you to save links to useful websites, providing direct hyperlinks, and has the capability of storing short information about them. It is also possible to curate pictures and other images such as infographics, though obviously copyright issues need to be taken into consideration when doing this. You can categorise your links using ‘boards.’ As well as being able to share links and boards with others, it is possible to search your own links and find links from other ‘pinners.’

![Figure 1: An overview of some of my Pinterest boards](image-url)
Aims of my Pinterest practice

The aims of my practice are threefold: to try to increase student engagement, promote inclusivity and develop employability skills.

1: Increasing student engagement
Rockinson-Szapkiw and Szapkiw (2011), based at Liberty University in the United States, argue from a theoretical position for educators to use social media to initiate quizzing and polling, discussion and creative group work, all of which can be carried out both inside and outside the classroom. Rockinson-Szapkiw and Szapkiw (2011) believe that ‘involving students in active cognitive processing’ is key for learning, drawing on Kearsley and Schneiderman’s (1999) theory of engagement (in Rockinson-Szapkiw and Szapkiw (2011) pp. 361). Further, they claim that captivating students’ interest enables the retention of information (as supported by Barkley (2005) and Shulman (2002)) and in addition, it maintains motivation (as shown by Wishart and Blease (1999) found in Rockinson-Szapkiw and Szapkiw (2011) pp. 361).

Now turning to practical applications of this, Allan (2011), based in the UK, used Twitter with BTEC and A-Level ICT students ‘to explore their thinking in and outside the classroom.’ He found that it was a useful way to remind students of deadlines and give feedback, as well as encouraging them to share information about projects with each other. Rutherford (2010) used social media to engage pre-arrival students at Brock University in the United States, and surveyed students on their experience of the institution, correlating this with their social media use. She found that those who had engaged with this technology prior to beginning their courses were more likely to perceive a better relationship with their peers and teachers, which added to the overall quality of their educational experience. This was reflected positively in the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) (Rutherford, 2010, p.706).

2: Promoting inclusivity
Gundara (2000) encourages cultural sharing as, by respecting cultural diversity, this can help to build a shared value system and therefore promote inclusivity. This has become particularly pertinent in recent years with The 2010 Equality Act. Cultural sharing is really important to me in the classroom as I mainly teach international students from a wide range of backgrounds.

In a similar vein Thornton (2012) analysed the use of Pinterest by 57 academic libraries in the United States, and found that it can ‘draw visitors to collections, resources, and digitised archival materials,
and share information and knowledge’ (p.165), thereby increasing accessibility. Hansen et al (2012) use Pinterest to promote the University of Regina’s library and suggest that its pictorial aspect is particularly helpful for visual learners (p.7) and they have received positive feedback from their users (p.9).

3: Developing employability skills
Dudenhoffer (2012) studied the use of Pinterest at the Central Methodist University (CMU) in the United States and found that it improved information and digital literacies (p.330) which is really important for employability. An article published in The Guardian (2012) reported that the University of Central Lancashire is using platforms such as Twitter to enable students to develop networking and job-seeking skills. By cultivating the application of information technology, students are working towards one of the key graduate employability skills identified by the Confederation of British Industry (2009, p.8).

Having a positive online presence can help secure work, as I discovered myself when the Deputy Director of the Centre for English Language Learning at De Montfort University Leicester contacted me via Twitter. He had seen my Pinterest project and wanted to know if I could deliver some training to his team on using social media in language teaching. Through this contact, I was able to deliver the training as requested in May 2014.

Method
I have created various different boards for the units I teach on; for example, there is one called English for Academic Purposes (see Figure 2) which concentrates on such skills as academic writing, Harvard referencing and presentations, and which can be used with a variety of levels of students. I also promote succeed@solent by linking to it from this board, plus links from a range of sources. In addition, I have several English for Specific Purposes boards, such as Event Management, English for Arts and Media, Journalism, Advertising, PR and Comms and so on, which directly relate to units that I teach on. There are also lifestyle boards, aimed at signposting students to advice, such as Living in the UK and managing Money.
Pinterest boards can be directly linked from myCourse to increase engagement and monitor what students are clicking on most by generating an activity report on myCourse. As well as using Pinterest independently, you can collaborate on pin boards with colleagues to avoid duplication, which is worth considering both within your teams and across faculties and services.

I have also created boards to raise awareness, such as one on Islam in the UK (see Figure 3), since I teach a number of Muslim students. There is also a board about Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender issues (see Figure 4), since the student age group often explore their identity, especially if it is their first time away from home. When something comes up in class that is sensitive and of a personal nature, it is not always appropriate to discuss in front of everyone, so these boards are a great way to signpost students to, and for them to pursue privately in their own time.
Figure 3: A screenshot of my Islam in the UK board

Figure 4: A screenshot of my LGBT+ board
In addition, I have set up some special boards focusing on employability - there is a general Career Advice board, and one linking to great examples of Creative CVs. These boards also link to the Employability and Enterprise service at Southampton Solent University by signposting students to their blog.

Impact of Pinterest

I have received positive verbal feedback internally from students and colleagues at Southampton Solent University about my use of Pinterest as well as from external institutions. However, data collection is needed to evaluate the impact more accurately. As a starting point, I could further analyse myCourse page interaction with the links to my Pinterest pages. I could then carry out a survey of my students to see how much they have engaged with my Pinterest pages and how useful they found them and for which specific purposes. This could then be followed up by a focus group to add more qualitative data.
Conclusion

I have aimed to use Pinterest to engage with my students more and to promote inclusivity and digital literacy skills for employability, following theoretical recommendations and practical advice from other academics. I have received positive verbal feedback so far from both students and colleagues inside and outside my workplace; however, more rigorous research needs to be carried out to evaluate the real impact of my project.

References


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