

LSIS Practitioner Enquiry: Supporting and enhancing the study of A-level history through the use of social media

LSIS Research



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Background

My investigation focussed on the use of social media to provide history students with extension work, enrichment opportunities and out of lesson support. After observing smartphones being used more and more by students and being a user of both Twitter and Facebook myself I believed that at least one, and possibly both offered an opportunity to engage students beyond the classroom and form an online community that students could be part of that would also add to the identity of the department. The study took place in a sixth form college of around 2200 students, 315 of whom studied history as one of their AS or A2 choices. The history department already had its own website, but this was mainly for conveying information and basic resources to students whereas

the Facebook and Twitter sites offered a more exciting and ever changing environment that could be fully interactive.

Starting point

I was aware of research (Hratinski and Aghaee, 2012) that highlighted a “digital dissonance” existed as students used social media to keep in touch with friend, but didn’t realise the opportunities it offered for sharing information regarding their studies. Hratinski and Aghaee (2012) argue that the opportunities exist, but have to be carefully co-ordinated by teachers and incorporated into their planning. I hoped to explore if Hratinski and Aghaee were correct by arranging some opportunities to do this.

I initially set out to find out which social networking medium would be most

popular with the students, using a simple survey. Most of the students who replied through an informal student voice survey (105 replies) said they preferred Facebook (78) to Twitter (27). This seemed to be because they were familiar with it as they used it themselves. However, I was initially put off using Facebook from the numerous horror stories in the press involving the abuse of Facebook sites. Twitter with its limited word count for entries (140 characters max) seemed to offer a more ideal medium as it limited how much could be written. Furthermore, we also wanted to offer students more enrichment opportunities and Twitter’s ability to follow relevant institutions and individuals, such as history departments at universities and historians, which then automatically updated the feed on the page seemed to offer an

an ideal time saving opportunity. Enough students in the survey had indicated that they had Twitter accounts to make the experiment worthwhile. At the same time, more of the department's staff had experience of Twitter than Facebook.

As a result of a staff INSET day, when departments were allowed to share ideas about teaching and learning, we were paired up with the music department who showed us their use of Facebook to engage their students. This enabled us to see that we could link our Twitter feed to Facebook as well. As a result we also opened up a Facebook page which whenever we update it, creates a tweet on Twitter. Similarly we linked the Twitter feed to Facebook too so any time we retweet something, it updates Facebook. Facebook allowed us to upload JPEG files of notes and other resources (see Fig.1.).

Sometimes these files were too big for Facebook, so we opened a Dropbox account that

we could upload large files to that we could link to from the Facebook and Twitter feed. These three platforms provided the social media infrastructure that we have used to this point and for the focus of the study

Teaching and learning process

Using a college based email address rather than a personal address to register the Twitter account further insulated staff using it from any potential abuse. Students were informed of the Twitter account's existence in class in May 2011, and the Facebook page when it became live in October 2012, via email and were encouraged to 'follow' them as there would be links to resources and updates about enrichment on it. These included word, PDF and PowerPoint documents we used in class and links to video clips on sites like YouTube. Sometimes some of the enrichment articles prompted discussions in class, but this

was on an adhoc basis and we are hoping to make this more integral in the next few years as both staff and students get used to using both feeds more. For example, the recent death of Margaret Thatcher resulted in a swathe of articles and obituaries about her that were useful resources for our A2 British History students therefore the Facebook site allowed us to react quickly to the situation and post these up for further reading, see Fig. 2.

The main use of the feed was providing out of lesson hours resources and support for students especially in the lead up to their exams. The feeds also allowed us to create albums of trips we had been on which allowed more students to feel involved with the trip than just those who went on it. For example, we organised a two day trip to London and posted pictures and comments as we went to different sites, such as Westminster Abbey, allowing the whole department to feel like they were involved.

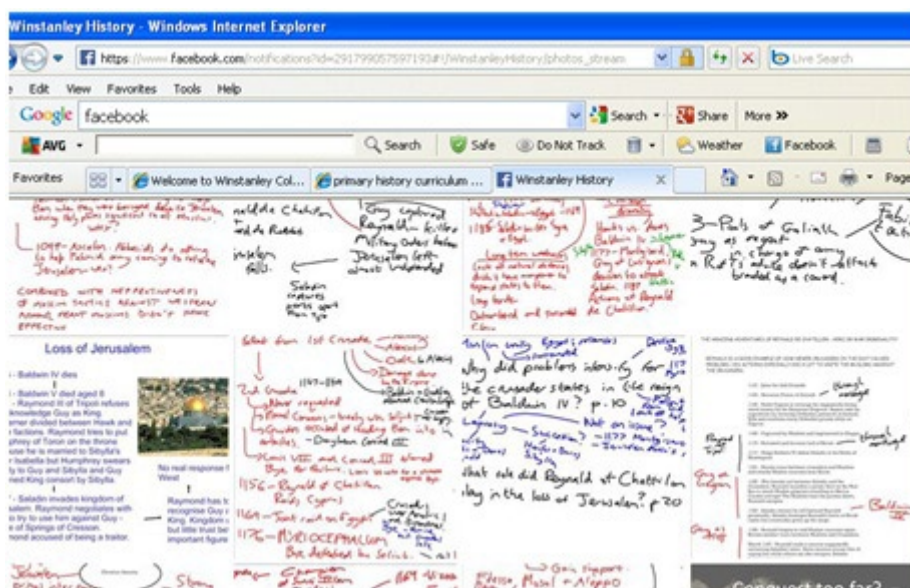


Fig.1. A montage of JPEG's of SMARTnotebook board notes uploaded on to Facebook as a photo album.

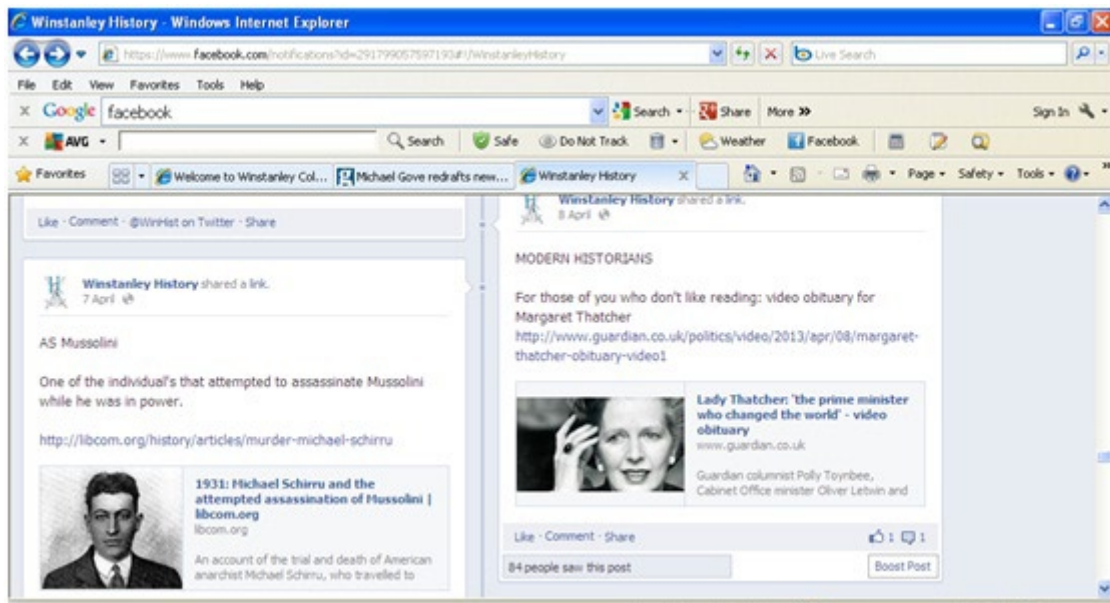


Fig. 2. Facebook site showing link to obituary of Margaret Thatcher which was then discussed in class. Some students used examples from it to support their ideas.

Impact

Initial uptake of the account was steady and we currently have 126 followers for our Twitter feed and 170 followers for our Facebook feed. Some of these include university departments and history enthusiasts from outside college as well, for example the Twitter feed is followed by the Historical Association and the University of Liverpool's History department. This has been very encouraging and has provided students with a rolling

stream of enrichment articles and events on the Twitter feed some of which, if we think they are particularly relevant to the courses we offer, we retweet and highlight on the Facebook site.

The Facebook site allows usage data to be exported and showed spikes of people talking about the resources that we had posted on the page just before the winter and summer exam periods. For example from 26/12/2012 to 31/12/2012

around 20 students a day were using the resources on the Facebook site. This increased to around 40 students per day between 23/3/2013 to the 28/3/2013 just before the Spring exam period. We believe that this was as a result of us mentioning it more in class and the profile of both feeds being raised among the students. We also use both feeds as a way to advertise what is going on in the department by encouraging prospective students to follow them on Open days/evenings.



Fig. 3 Screen shot of data available from Facebook. The purple blobs are the number of posts done by the department on a particular day, the blue line the amount of people the posts reached, and the green line the amount of people talking about those posts. As this screen shot was taken at the start of the summer holidays the data shown is obviously lower than usual.

The biggest change is that the practice we have had integrating the feeds into our teaching is setting us in good stead for more deeply integrating our new Moodle VLE site into the students work. The Facebook and Twitter feeds will still be used for enrichment and as an electronic noticeboard, but the main electronic teaching activities will be based on Moodle and integrated into work booklets.

Further reading

Hratinski and Aghaee (2012)
How are campus students using social media to support their studies? An explorative interview study. *Education and Information Technologies* 17 (4) pp. 451-464 Available from: <http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10639-011-9169-5#page-1>

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