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3 Questions for an Online Learning Leader

Featuring Tanya Joosten, Ph.D.

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Dr. Tanya Joosten is the director of eLearning Research and Development at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (UWM) where she leads strategic eLearning efforts at the campus, state, and national levels. She develops innovative programming for the University of Wisconsin - Milwaukee campus and leads a team of researchers to advance the field of eLearning. She is also the co-director of the National Research Center for Distance Education and Technological Advancements, supported by the U.S Department of Education. Tanya has been recognized by the Sloan Consortium, now Online Learning Consortium (OLC), and has been featured in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* and *Ed Tech Magazine*, to name a few.

1 **What are your recommendations for educators across contexts (i.e. virtual, face-to-face, and hybrid classrooms) for using social media for communication, instruction, and other related activities?**

I have several recommendations from professional development to instructional practices. In my book, *Social Media for Educators*, I immediately discuss the benefits of social media for building a professional network and professional development. Social media allows you access to people and dialog on key issues - in particular, innovative ideas, pedagogies, and technologies, that you may not have access to in your department, on your campuses, or even at your disciplinary conferences. Twitter not only helped me build my professional network, it led to meaningful collaborations with colleagues across the globe and a social support system that I did not have locally. Many of my closest colleagues, I met on Twitter. Importantly, every educator should immerse themselves in a technology, understand the characteristics of the technology, and identify how the technology aligns with their pedagogical need.

An educator needs to determine how the technology, social media in this instance, is going to help overcome a challenge, problem, or barrier in the classroom. Social media has the capacity to increase student-content, student-student, and student-

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instructor interactivity by encouraging the frequency of content, increasing social presence and engagement, and providing frequent feedback. Too often educators are implementing technologies into their instruction without an honest understanding of how they can facilitate student learning. Understandably, we all know the investment in time in exploring new pedagogies and technologies to increase our instructional effectiveness is immense. However, if we do not take the time, it may have an inverse impact on student outcomes, including satisfaction and learning.

2 How do you feel universities are doing with attending to developing students' information literacy skill sets?

I feel that university libraries, historically, are doing good work in attending to developing students' information literacies, yet it is crucial in this century to consider the importance of other literacies. Information literacies need to be taught hand in hand with digital literacies. In the last couple decades, we have seen a surge in literacies that educators and employers have identified as important. Many times these are referred to as 21st century literacies. They include digital, technology, visual, and information literacies. Social media can help build many of these literacies. However, we need to not only teach students how-to's, but we need to provide them with a greater

understanding of how their behaviors impact societal structures and vice versa. In leading the digital futures planning at my institution several years ago, faculty expressed there was a gap in developing students' digital literacy skills. In our work, we discovered two different aspects of digital literacy. One aspect focuses on the idea that students needed to know how to use technology and associated digital tools to find, evaluate, share, and create information, and the other aspect focuses on the need for our students to be critical consumers of these same tools.

With the quick-moving development of new technologies every day that are open and free to individuals, it is important for students to understand the implications of their use in their own lives and on society as a whole. Students chose to use certain hardware and software or apps. They now have to consider the security, digital identity, behavioral data and analytics, information sharing and creation, consumerism, political activism, and many more aspects. These issues are beyond the traditional thought of teaching students how to use technology to perform tasks, such as locating reliable information or communicating with the instructor. I would argue that it is important that these skill sets are implemented across the curriculum, including the incorporation of critical and postmodern theoretical approaches around information and technology. In my courses, I work to ensure that learning objectives, assessments, and activities consider the development of these literacies among undergraduate students.

Most recently, I have been exploring social media for visual, digital, and technological literacies. By using backwards design, we can start thinking about how students can provide visual evidence of their learning or visual documentation that they have achieve the desired results as a form of assessment (i.e. image, video, and visual data sharing tools) rather than using traditional forms, such as research papers or exams. Moreover, I have thought differently about how I present information to my students incorporating more visual components to better affect their cognitive and affective learning, including the incorporation of more open education resources found through social media and other online repositories.

Finally, I would urge educators to consider ways to incorporate cultural and global literacies into their course designs and learning outcomes as well. It is important that students have cultural competence, can think critically about their own culture and others, and can understand how we are all interconnected across the globe. With the advancements in technology, these literacies and competencies are crucial to the advancement of our future as a global society.

In each stage of our course design from developing the learning outcomes or the desired results, determining documentation or evidence students will present to the instructor as assessment of student learning, and the actual learning activities including content and student interactivity can incorporate these literacies.

3 What are your two favorite technology tools for instruction and why?

That is a hard one. It really depends on what you are trying to accomplish in your class.

My pedagogical approach includes providing my students with experiential learning opportunities that ensures them with real-life, generalizable skills in order to be successful in their future profession or endeavors. In working to accomplishing this effort, I examine what trends are taking place in our society and organizations throughout the country, including what digital technologies are being used to communicate with each other, what applications are being used to improve productivity, and how are people consuming and creating digital materials. Two of my favorite resources include the EDUCAUSE Center for Analysis and Research (ECAR) reports and the Pew Research Center Internet reports. It is just as important for me to understand how children and teens are using technology as it is to understand how organizations and businesses are using technology. Also, I am a social scientist and my teaching and research are in the areas of human communication, communication technology, and organizational communication, so how I teach and what I teach inform each other. I often run pilots of technology use (i.e. clickers, virtual worlds, social media, Open Educational Resources, and more), and consistently survey my students. I provide them with real-life

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problems regarding technology in human communication and organizations to better understand their perspective on how technology can be used to enhance social processes.

In determining technologies to explore, there are several considerations. I identify what technologies are on the fringe and what it is about those technologies, the media characteristics, etc. that can help facilitate instructional and learning effectiveness. Usually, the technology tools enhance the social process through increasing student connectedness, engagement, social presence, and/or community. There is an array of things I consider such as use, accessibility, cost, and more before I decide to pilot them in my course or amongst several courses with my colleagues. Importantly, I develop a pedagogical model or how these technologies will be used in my instruction to best influence student learning. We all know that the technology in of itself cannot influence student outcomes necessarily, but how we incorporate the technology into our course design and situate the technology within the student learning experience [is important]. It is very critical to develop a model of how it will be most effectively used.

With that, I could identify two areas of interest. First, I believe the use of Open Educational Resources (OER) is extremely important, especially in the move to make undergraduate education more affordable. I do not encourage the use of e-Texts, per se, but what I do encourage is OER that is interactive. One of the areas through the years where we

have lacked is increasing student interactivity with content. Instructors can increase this interactivity by annotating the text that they share with their students and allowing students through the use of certain tools to collaboratively annotate text. Students believe it better unpacks the instructor's expectations in comprehending the content and can lead to deeper thought and critical thinking about the reading. Also, I believe there are a significant amount of course materials available through online encyclopedias, image and video sharing sites, blogs and microblogs, and more that can provide students rich and current content in a digital form that they are used to viewing. For instance, videos of actual subjects or scholars bring more authenticity to the material than reading about it. Sometimes there can even be an affective component to the stories. These digital archives, such as microblogs, can also provide multiple and global perspectives on a phenomenon that would be difficult to capture at any one time. Furthermore, instructors can start putting learning in the hands of the students by encouraging and guiding their aggregation of OER materials from digital spaces increasing their digital and information literacies.

And, this ties into my second area. I like using social tools, such as Facebook, Twitter, and Google Hangouts in my class. My courses are usually completely online and need to use tools to allow students to communicate amongst each other, with myself, and with the outside world. These are great tools that allow individuals to develop networks, learn in informal spaces,

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participate in conversations beyond the walls of the class, and share and gather information. Using these tools gives them real-life skills they can use in their personal or professional lives within or beyond the institution.

Now, although you requested two, I want to mention one other future technology on which to keep an eye. I spent a good amount of time researching virtual worlds, social media, augmented reality, and mobile devices in separate pilots for about a decade. For years I have felt that there would be an integration of the characteristics of these technologies that would lead to a new technology that would tremendously impact education. Although we are not there yet, the latest arrival of PokemonGo is a good indicator that the technology developers are getting closer. One day we may have a technology that allows us to blend our real and digital worlds in a 2- and 3-dimensional space where we can be connected to each other.

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