

## Concerns regarding the use of public social media sites for student assessment

In this short paper we want to share, on behalf of the RMIT Vietnam academic leadership team, the concerns around the use of social media, which sit outside of the suite of RMIT tools, for student assessment. This paper also offers some guidance on these matters based on the RMIT policy on student assessment and outlines a rationale for how we might apply the policy that takes into consideration the pedagogical, ethical, privacy and political issues important to our context. There is an abundance of articles written on the use of blogs and other social media tools in teaching and learning. Some studies have shown that the use of social media has the potential to empower and enhance student learning, and that student response to using tools like blogs is very positive (Chawinga 2017, Shana 2015, Churchill, 2009, Farmer 2008). However, as one review of this literature has stated “*Quite a few of these papers and articles seem rather uncritically to rejoice in the possibilities of wikis and/or blogs*” (Dohn 2010 p142). Hence, it is worth considering: what are the concerns with using social media tools for student assessment?

## Concerns and Issues with the use of non-RMIT-supported platforms or tools

The first point to acknowledge from the research is there is clear benefit to using social media tools in assessment tasks in order to make them more authentic (Duke 2007). One study found that when doing a crisis simulation, it was more authentic to immerse students in the task of using social media as the tool with which they could respond to and assess the crisis. This approach mirrors what they will be expected to do in the real world (Anderson et al. 2014). However, when students post work to be assessed through a social media site (i.e. Word Press, Youtube), this work sits outside of RMIT. This raises serious questions about whether this can constitute a University record of student assessment. This is because when student work resides solely in a digital sphere that is not in our control, it can lead to complications around access, verification and consideration for assessment flexibility and appeals. The public facing default of many social media sites also present some major privacy and ethical concerns; these are exacerbated when you layer on top policies and sensitivities associated with student assessments. These concerns include:

- Can we legitimately *require* students to post on a public blog, especially if they are concerned about their privacy and public image?
- Is it appropriate for a student to use an alias or pseudonym (common when posting on blogs to protect their identity) when it is an assignment?
- How do we verify the author? Sites’ terms of use may also prohibit multiple accounts or require that real names/identities be used.
- Is it appropriate that we require students to post information or views that they (or others) believe should be private to the context of the classroom and learning?
- What would be an equivalent assessment task to posting in a public blog, that would still meet the course requirements? Could the same outcomes be met in another form of assessment?

Without a comprehensive, program-level view of the learning technologies adopted across courses, the students’ learning experience can quickly become fragmented (Ellis 2005). We all tend to remember Project Rewire as ‘the Canvas project.’ The real benefit of the enormous effort that teaching and project staff invested wasn’t just a new LMS. It has been that students have a toolset that they are familiar with. Teaching staff can leverage on these learning technologies to achieve their course outcomes. Balanced with our concern for students, and what is appropriate to ask them to do by way of assessment, we must remember the fact that students own the rights (copyright) of their own work and therefore have the right to publicly display it. But, their right to

do so, does not give us the right to compel the student to make this work publicly available on a digital platform that we may have very little control over.

## Solutions

How can we use social media tools, particularly for authentic assessment, but appropriately address these concerns?

The RMIT University Assessment Policy and Processes documents provide some valuable direction. In regard to submission of assessments, it states:

*Electronic submission (eSubmission) is the preferred method for students to submit assessment work. Physical submission should only be used for assessment work that cannot easily be submitted electronically, such as creative works or physical artefacts.*

*1.22.1. The electronic authorisation of assessment website describes how staff must set up eSubmission for students.*

*1.22.2. Students eSubmitting work must do so from their RMIT student account.*

It also states *Students retain a copy of all work submitted for assessment until a final result for a course is formally released by the university.*

The principle underlying these policies and processes is that if student work resides solely in a digital sphere, that is not in the control of the University, this complicates access, verification and considerations for assessment flexibility and appeals.

Using this direction, various courses have addressed the concerns about social media by developing a “secure technological infrastructure” (Broussard 2015). The University has sought to support teachers to use social media tools, like blogs, but under controlled conditions. At RMIT Vietnam some secure (i.e. allowing for control around access and what information can be posted and when) tools that allow the lecturer to run a blog for student assessment, are the Discussion features in Canvas. Google Docs (which remain available to all staff and students), are also an excellent tool for collaborative writing and sharing. In the future, the University will also be supporting SharePoint. It has been pointed out that these tools may not replicate or offer the full functionalities associated with external social media sites. However, all of these tools do allow for the work to be published to an audience that is of the lecturer and students’ choosing. The Learning Technologies team is keen to help you learn more about how you can apply these tools (ed.tech@rmit.edu.vn).

It is good practice to ensure all assessed online student work is secure and the use of learning technologies for assessment meets privacy and student records requirements. The simplest way to do this is to start with the intent that all assessed student work, which requires the use of learning technologies, is conducted using the RMIT-supported online learning environment (OLE) and that all parts of the assessment cycle (submission, marking, feedback) make use of RMIT-sponsored technologies. Of course, there may be some good reasons for exceptions but the expectation of the policy is to start with what the RMIT tools have to offer before considering any exception.

When incorporating social media into programs, teaching staff need to also educate our students around the use of this media in a discipline and professional setting. Ask students to consider what sort of digital footprint they are creating as they journey to become a professional. It would

be unfortunate for an alum to miss out on a job opportunity because their forgotten naïve first-year efforts were still available online. More importantly, student involvement in social media platforms in the region do not go unnoticed and we would not want our students to inadvertently get into trouble by saying something that is not well considered, or meant only for the confines of a safe learning environment.

Students benefit from a coherent online learning experience (Elloumi 2004). Student learning is enhanced when teaching staff try to minimise the amount of cognitive load students experience when learning new technologies (Bradford 2011). On this basis RMIT has sought to facilitate that all learning resources, administrative communications, and out-of-class activities that students need to succeed in the course can be made available in or through the LMS, that over time they will become very familiar with.

This article is not intended to discourage those using social media in our teaching and assessment. We do however want you to be aware of the concerns about using social media tools, especially for submission of work that will be assessed. These concerns can be mitigated by following the appropriate University policies and using tools that the University provides. These tools may not offer the full functionalities of public social media tools, but these limitations should be balanced against our responsibility to manage the concerns expressed in this paper.

*This explainer document was drafted by the RMIT Vietnam Learning & Teaching team in consultation with academic leaders. If you have further questions, please email [tlu@rmit.edu.vn](mailto:tlu@rmit.edu.vn)*

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