

Social Media Engagement and Domestic Intercultural Immersion Trips: An Examination of Social Media Platforms as Avenues for Assessment of Student Learning in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzed the extent to which social media engagement enhances domestic intercultural immersion trip experiences. Dumford and Miller (2018) examined students' use of social media as an assessment of student learning outcomes and found that it is an efficient and convenient method for assessing such. While there is research in the literature related to the advantages of using social media as an assessment of student learning outcomes, there is a paucity of studies pertaining to social media as an assessment tool for immersion programs. The purpose of this study is to contribute to existing literature with a focus on social media usage to assess students who participated in the *Something New Alternative Spring Break (SNASB)* immersion experience at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire. Data was collected via a closed (by invitation only) Facebook group of students registered for the SNASB trip. Students were instructed to create posts in response to eight prompts related to the university's liberal education responsibility outcome. Data was analyzed via content analysis with thematic analysis as a secondary form of examining data. Results reveal that students engaged across a variety of social media platforms, utilizing multiple communication tools in sharing their immersion experiences.

INTRODUCTION

- Students on previous SNASB trips were expected to write a reflection paper to earn liberal education credit that counts toward graduation.
- Being a UWEC immersion experience supported by Domestic Intercultural Immersion (DII) funding, the "Responsibility Outcome 1" (R1) Liberal Education learning outcome (Use critical and analytical skills to evaluate assumptions and challenge existing structures in ways that respect diversity and foster equity and inclusivity) was assessed.
- Historically, there was a perception of lack of motivation among students to engage in a meaningful and transformative reflection component of the immersion experience through writing a paper.
- This study investigated the use of social media as a medium for students to demonstrate benchmark competencies in the sixth rendition of the SNASB trip in the Spring semester of 2019.



LITERATURE & CONCEPTS

ASSESSING THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA

Dumford and Miller (2018) studied advantages and disadvantages of social media to assess student learning, finding that such "offer[s] efficient and convenient ways to achieve learning goals" (p. 453). The study also revealed that "more recent research indicates trends for the importance of incorporating social media into the classroom" (Dumford & Miller, p. 453). Social media platforms, such as Facebook, serve as mainstream communication tools that resonate with the Millennial generation (born late 1981-2000, which applied to all of the students on the SNASB trip based on student demographic data of the trip). Chen and Behm-Morawitz (2017) found that members of the Millennial generational cohort have "a proclivity for the creation and consumption of digital content" (p. 1493) and are often defined by their experiences with digital cultural activities.

FACEBOOK AS A PLATFORM FOR ASSESSMENT

The choice to use Facebook stems from research conducted by Shane-Simpson, Manago, Gaggi, and Gillespie-Lynch (2018), which has provided evidence that "Facebook has remained the most popular social media site in the United States" (p. 276) since 2005. The authors also stated that "Facebook provides the largest array of functions, including text-based posts, photo sharing, and sophisticated privacy settings that allow one to curate specifically who can view each post" (Shane-Simpson, Manago, Gaggi, & Gillespie-Lynch, p. 277). The variety of functions that students can use to create their posts and the enhanced privacy setting options that can be implemented are characteristics of Facebook that were important for this study. The diverse array of functions in Facebook provided students with a plethora of options for demonstrating liberal education competencies and reflecting on their experiences throughout the trip.

DIFFUSION OF INNOVATIONS THEORY

Creating a new idea and exploring the ways in which the new idea is accepted is attributed to the Diffusion of Innovations theory. Srivastava and Moreland (2012) explored Everett Rogers' Diffusion of Innovations framework and found it is used "to study the acceptance and spread of all sorts of ideas and practices throughout the world" (p. 296). With this study examining Facebook as a platform of assessment throughout the SNASB trip, a new approach to evaluating the R1 liberal education learning outcome was implemented. Writing a paper served as the previous form of assessment for SNASB trip participants, so utilizing Facebook instead allowed this study to explore a new approach to assessment throughout immersion experiences and evaluate the acceptance of this approach as based on student perceptions.

METHOD & PARTICIPANTS

- Among the group of 29 students who participated in the 2019 SNASB trip, 28 students consented to having their Facebook posts analyzed for the purpose of this study.
- All of them created posts in response to eight prompts that correlated with the UWEC R1 rubric, which is centered around perspectives, identities, and privilege (PIP).
- The prompts spanned the course of the eight-day SNASB trip, requiring students to create a post in response to one prompt, and reply to two peers' posts, each day within a closed (private) Facebook group.
- The students were provided with a list of social media tools they could utilize in their posts.
- Students were required to incorporate one social media tool, in addition to having text in their main post each day.
- On two days throughout the trip students were able to post their main response to the day's prompt individually or with a group.

DATA COLLECTION

- The eight prompts that correlated with the UWEC R1 rubric, and centered around PIP, were typed, printed, and distributed to SNASB trip participants.
- Each day the prompt was also posted in the Facebook group and marked as an announcement so it was one of the first posts available to students.

DATA ANALYSIS

Quantitative

- A number coding system was created associating a number one through 11 to a different social media tool that a participant used.
- In a spreadsheet, the prompt number (e.g. Prompt #1) was indicated at the top and the name of the students were on the side.
- The number associated with the specific social media tool the student used was put in the designated cell.
- The total number of times that social media tool was used throughout the trip was then quantified.

Qualitative

- Content and thematic analysis were used to find common themes and patterns throughout students' textual elements of their Facebook posts and their short answer responses in the Google survey taken after the SNASB trip.

RESULTS

Day One Prompt: Possible topics we will explore throughout this trip include race relations, civil rights issues, refugee issues, and class/socioeconomic experiences. With these topics in mind, and information about the trip on D2L (<https://uwec.courses.wisconsin.edu/d2l/home/3438352>), and orientation information provided at pre-trip informational meetings, what do you expect to learn from this trip? Consider using text, photographs, audio, and/or videos to aid you in your response.

Themes: Refugees in Clarkston, Georgia and Looking to the Future

- In terms of learning about different perspectives and cultures, many students expressed interest in becoming more knowledgeable about refugee resettlement in Clarkston, Georgia while meeting and building relationships with the people who live there.

"I'm ready to have an open mind and see how different people live and I think I will leave with a different perspective."

- Students also hoped what they were going to learn on the trip would challenge their future selves to become more accepting, understanding, and empathetic of others. Many indicated they planned to apply what they learned to future career paths, such as being education, criminal justice, and social work professionals, and future interactions with family and friends.

"During this trip, I would like to keep my future goals of being a teacher in mind. I'd like to use education as my mindset whenever I can."

Day Eight Prompt: Considering the knowledge you have gathered throughout this trip, what roles do you think the words **perspectives, identities, and privilege** have played throughout this Domestic Intercultural Immersion Trip? Have your answers changed after having these experiences or remained the same? Consider using text, photographs, audio, and/or videos to aid you in your response.

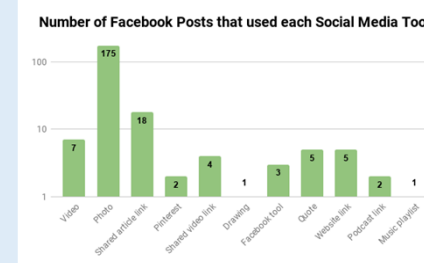
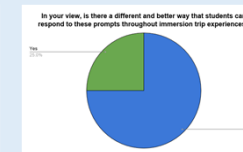
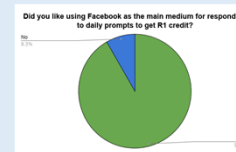
Themes: Perspectives, Identities, and Privilege and Gratitude for the SNASB Trip

- Many students shared that their perspectives of others and their own personal identities positively shifted throughout the course of the immersion experience. Students reported becoming more aware of their privileges and more conscientious of avoiding judging others before they experienced engaging encounters with them.

"My views towards perspective, identity, and privilege have positively shifted due to the new experiences we had, the people we met, and the new friendships we formed."

- Additionally, students expressed gratitude for going on the SNASB trip, which prompted them to appreciate their lives, circumstances, and the people they met.

"I didn't really know what to expect before the trip started, but I'm glad I took the chance because I learned so many things that a textbook couldn't give me."



DISCUSSION & CONCLUSIONS

- Incorporating a photo into Facebook posts was the most popular tool to utilize.
- Future research could explore the possibility of only offering a photo as the additional tool, keeping in mind that students could incorporate their own pictures, or pictures of words, quotations, and other experiences they encountered.
- Students' responses to the questions "Did you like using Facebook as the main medium for responding to daily prompts to get R1 credit?" and "In your view, is there a different and better way that students can respond to these prompts throughout immersion trip experiences?" from a Google survey that was distributed to students after the SNASB trip indicated that most students enjoyed using Facebook as a form of assessment.
- Students commented that Facebook was a feasible, efficient, interactive, and uniting platform that allowed them to incorporate other elements into their posts and view and comment on the experiences of others.
- Two trip participants did not have Facebook accounts, so each day, they would use a fellow participant's phone to create and submit their post and responses.
- Future research can explore how to best address social media-based assessment with students who do not have social media accounts.
- There was free Wi-Fi on the immersion trip bus that served as the main form of transportation for students throughout the trip, but there was not always a stable connection. Other free Wi-Fi opportunities could only be accessed at certain points throughout the trip, such as the City of Atlanta Wi-Fi. Thus, students who could not use their own personal cellular data had to actively pursue other outlets to obtain Wi-Fi, such as in some instances, other students or faculty members offered their phones as hot-spots.
- Several additional students indicated they did not like Facebook as a social media platform or they preferred to have in-person conversations.
- Future research can explore the effectiveness of other social media platforms as avenues for assessment during immersion experiences, such as Instagram.

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