Study about Twitter and Facebook in varsities here

Three main universities offer modules on using networking tools and the impact on society

By Serene Luo

SOCIAL media tools such as blogs, Facebook and Twitter have spread from the playground of the tech-savvy to the university curriculum here.

And this is not just because they are the “in” thing, especially among the young. These tools are increasingly adopted by corporations, which expect their employees to use them in their work.

All the three main local universities – as well as the open university, UniSIM – now offer courses or classes on how to use these networking tools and their impact on society.

Universities overseas – from Harvard to the University of California, Berkeley, to Stanford – have similarly started classes in this area or set up centres to carry out cyberspace research.

Here, corporate communication students at the business school of the Singapore Management University (SMU) have been taking a class called Digital Media Across Asia for about two years now. It is always fully subscribed.

Over at Nanyang Technological University (NTU), journalism majors recently completed a feature-writing class using these networking tools. For instance, they write content to mesh with a map for websites, or tag pictures or articles according to where and when they were produced.

At the National University of Singapore (NUS), an honours-level class in social media for communication students will start next January.

Students submit their assignments in the form of blog posts, or set up and upkeep wiki pages. These are encyclopaedic pages on a given subject, complete with links to related topics, usually contributed by various people.

Communications and new media assistant professor Giorgos Cheliotis, who will teach next year’s class at NUS, said there is a place for such classes in an academic curriculum.

This is because, beyond using this new media, one should also understand the issues thrown up by the social phenomenon.

The shape and form of these classes are ever evolving as the technology shifts, so this creates “a great motivation for faculty to stay in touch and not rest on our laurels”, said journalism lecturer Daniel Reimold, who taught the NTU class.

The schools could well be feeding companies’ preference for employees who are savvy about social media, as more businesses start incorporating these tools into their operations.

For instance, computer manufacturer Dell and airline JetBlue have been using Twitter to publicise their promotions. United States Internet service provider Comcast monitors Twitter feeds to provide support to people complaining about its service.

Recruitment consultant Adrian Loh of headhunter firm Robert Walters said he recently placed a sales manager who was adept at using Facebook. Mr Loh said the manager’s ability to build relationships with customers and partners may not translate directly into revenue, but it can create payoffs “above and beyond what other people can offer”.

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Now you know

- Facebook: A social networking site with more than 200 million active users today. People can keep up-to-date with what their friends are doing online, as well as share photographs and play games.

- Twitter: A Web/cellphone service, where users beam out their thoughts in short bursts of up to 140 characters. These posts (called “tweets”) are like mini blogs, which their friends (called “followers”) can read using their computers or on their cellphones.

- Wiki: These are collaborative websites, usually databases of information, where groups of people can create, modify and organise the content from their Web browsers.