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Educational discourse and digital media.

Case study: Erasmus Intensive Programme: Government Affairs and Lobbying in a European Perspective.

“New worlds are invented with principles transcribed from old worlds”

Gunkel and Gunkel (1997)

Introduction

In order to provide a tailor-made course on government affairs and lobbying in the context of the European Institutions, seven European university partners¹ applied for, designed and organized an Erasmus Intensive Programme that was approved for three years (2011-2012/2012-2013/2013-2014).

In this paper, we want to analyse how the digital platforms were used by the students and academic team in the first two editions of this Intensive Programme (2012/13) and how this benefitted the educational discourse and pedagogy of the programme.

The Intensive Programme (IP) “Public Relations: Government Relations and Lobbying in a European Perspective” annually aims to offer 60 Master’s students in Communication Sciences of the IP partners an opportunity to experience lobbying in the EU dimension. Both as a crucial and strategic issue for business enterprises and public administration and to explore the way that the views of the citizens of Europe are properly represented and becoming an increasingly crucial part of the lobbying and government relations process. Over a period of 2.5 weeks each year, the Intensive Programme also explores civic and government

relationships in the public sphere from different cultural approaches, taking into account the growth of social media in this respect.

Moreover, ethics is the overall thread for the programme, highlighting the ethical dimensions of governmental and corporate relations in issues dealing with legitimacy and transparency. The Intensive Programme intends to help the students understand the EU mechanisms (from a historical, legal, social, and political perspective), and gain an insight in agenda setting activities of enterprises, citizens, NGOs, and the public sector and administrations in order for them to be able to judge whether the viewpoints of business enterprises, public opinion, and public administration are ethically and democratically presented and represented at the level of the EU. The IP constitutes a first step to enhance the employability of PR students in an important and influential area of practice predominantly occupied by other disciplines. Finally the IP, as the first ever awarded in the discipline of public relations, offers an important opportunity for academics and lobbying practitioners across Europe to meet and discuss theory and practice and provide a platform for further development of pedagogy, research, and practice.

1. Educational discourse and digital media

The term “educational discourse” in this paper refers to the specific formal and informal social-communicative practices which are activated when it comes to give an answer “in real time” to the educational question *par excellence*, i.e. what content is worthwhile to be transmitted and what is the best way to do so?

Indeed, by performing specific activities, teachers become “teaching” students, particularly with postgraduate programmes seeking to develop critically reflective students. This implies a high degree of responsibility which, when the educational discourse becomes dialogical, is shared by teacher and students, the latter becoming more and more aware of their own responsibility with regard to their learning. Educational dialogue *pur sang* resembles to a certain degree, a *colloque singulier* among partners who share knowledge about the rules of the game, the purpose, and the modalities (Spoelders et al., 1985).

In this context the question may be raised what the impact is of “outsourcing” educational activities to the digitalised surface.

Is not one of the characteristics of digital media “...*their ability to remove, or at least rearrange, the boundaries between public and private spaces, affecting our lives not so much through content, but rather by changing the ‘situational geography’ of social life?*” (Papacharissi, 2009: 206). Are educational policies and practices not fundamentally challenged by social media to encourage and sustain civil discourse related to critical social and personal issues? The study into the effects on educational discourse, on the learning results and teaching practices of New Information Technologies (NIT) has become an ever expanding field of investigation. The chorus of Pros has recently been challenged by some prominent Cons (e.g., Carr, 2011; Spitzer, 2012). Will they remain calling in a desert of digital diehards? Or will they stimulate the practitioners to find out for themselves, within their definition of what good teaching should be, what added value which NIT might offer, when, and how?

2. Conceptualising the pedagogical approach

The IP Staff articulated the pedagogical approach of the programme based on the experience realms developed by Pine with Gilmore (1999). In their book ‘The Experience Economy’ (1999), the authors have identified four types of experiences. The IP team positioned the IP as an “Educational” experience. The aim of the Intensive Programme is for students, who only have basic knowledge, to participate actively and absorb the content regarding government affairs and lobbying, contextualizing these activities in a European perspective (see figure 1).



Figure 1: Positioning of the Intensive Programme in the Pine with Gilmore (1999) dimensions

The team of IP lecturers adopted the following didactic cornerstones:

1: Preparation at the home institution: courses and seminars

Theoretical presentations (courses):

2: Courses by own lecturers

3: Courses by IP lecturers from the partner Institutions

4: Case studies by invited speakers, professionals and lobbyists

5: Visit to the EU institutions

6: Discussions with peers and tutorials during classes, preparing the group assignments

7: Presentations by peers (own/other group presentations)

Informal discussions:

8: with lecturers

9: with speakers, professional and lobbyists

10: with peers from own university

11: with peers from other universities

12: Personal reflection during assignments

13: Readings

14: Digital platforms: blogposts, papers, articles and presentations posted on WordPress, Yammer and Facebook.

As they acknowledged the integration of digital platforms in the participants' daily life, how they connect with each other, how they form relationships, the IP staff defined a set of user generated led sites aiming to create a complementary educational space expanding the offline objectives to the online experience. The final outcome for the IP participants is to achieve *appropriation* as a skill to collect, synthesize and remix content from disparate sources to communicate ideas (Ahn, 2011).

3. Evaluation of the didactic cornerstones

In an online survey conducted in September 2013 (Carvalho with Cotton, 2013), 52 students (from a total of both cohorts equals 113) participated, thus representing 59% of the 2011-2012 cohort, and 41% of the 2012-2013 cohort.

The IP student-participants were first asked to evaluate their level of knowledge related to the Intensive Programme subject (lobbying), before and after following the programme. They were asked to estimate their knowledge level (=perceived knowledge) regarding the subject of the programme on a scale from 0 to 10.

The average score before starting the IP = 3,63 (n=52). The average score after the IP = 7,90 (n=52). Thus there was a significant increase in perceived current knowledge due to the Intensive Programme ($t=15,021$, $df=51$, $p<.001$). More specifically, before the IP, 27% gave themselves a 2 as the starting score, 25% a 3, and after the IP 23% gave themselves a 7 as a final score, 38% a 8, and 23% a 9.

Secondly, the students were also asked to evaluate the didactic cornerstones mentioned above on a scale from 0 to 10. Table 1 shows the average score of each didactic cornerstone. All except one cornerstone, i.e., preparation at home institution (5,02), were evaluated above the midpoint of the rating scale. The top three included the case studies (by the speakers/professionals) rated as first source for acquiring knowledge (8,90), followed by the visit to the EU institutions (8,41) and the theoretical presentations by the IP lecturers (8,14). The students' readings and their personal reflections during the assignments respectively have an average score of 7,85 and 7,74 (see table 1).

Items of the survey:	Average score of each tool	Corr ² x 100
1: The preparation @ home institution	5,02	10,50
2: The theoretical presentations by own lecturers	6,88	10,50
3: The theoretical presentations by other IP lecturers	8,14	7,06
4: The case studies (by the speakers/professionals)	8,90	12,74
5: The visits to EU institutions	8,41	7,36
6: The discussions with peers during classes, preparing the group assignments	7,35	14,90
7: The presentations by peers (other group presentations)	6,68	11,97
8: The informal discussions with lecturers	7,02	5,82
9: The informal discussions with speakers/professionals	7,02	7,62
10: The informal discussions with peers from own university	6,37	19,89
11: The informal discussions with peers from other universities	6,63	14,36
12: The personal reflections during assignments	7,74	12,11
13: The readings	7,85	19,71
14: The papers posted on Yammer	7,11	8,29
Average across the tools	7,22	11,63

Table 1: Survey results and basic data for the impact analysis

Table 1 also shows the squared correlation of each item with the perceived current knowledge ($\text{corr}^2 \times 100$).

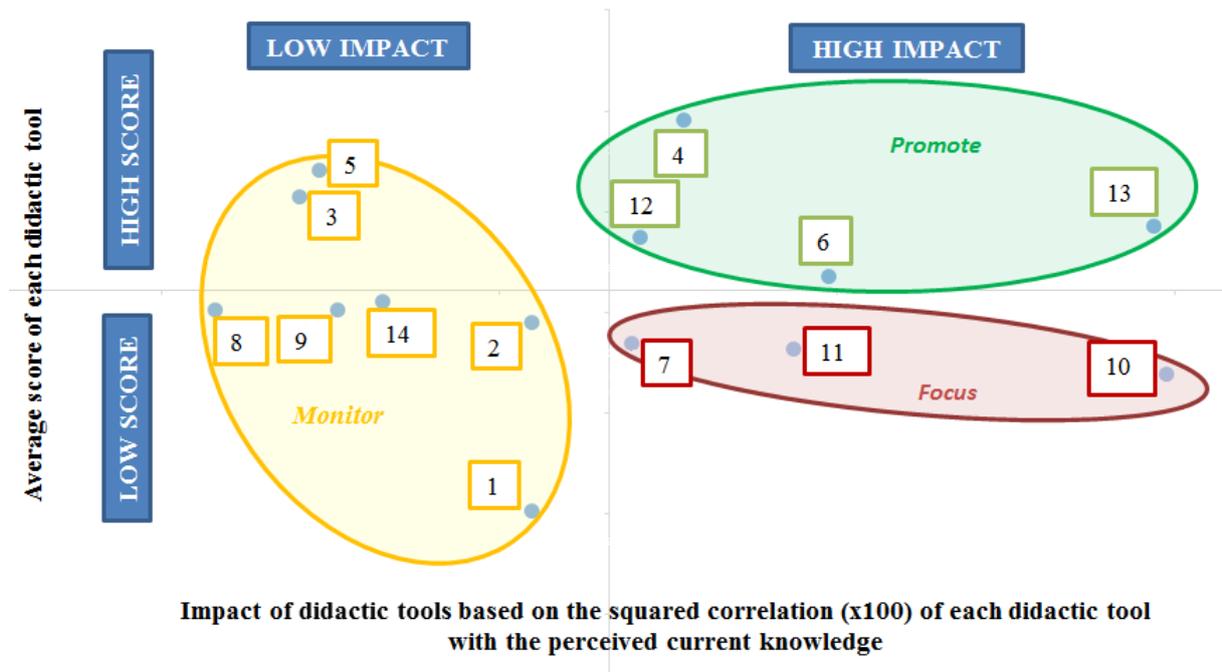
The impact analysis based on the squared correlation ($\times 100$) of each didactic tool with the perceived current knowledge of the participants, and the average score of each didactic tool showed three clusters (see figure 2).

The first cluster, “Promote”, groups didactic tools with high impact and with high score on the perceived current knowledge and not only incorporates the case studies which was highest rated (8,90), but also students’ readings (7,85), their personal reflections during assignments (7,74) as well as the discussions with their peers during classes preparing the group assignments (7,35). Future Intensive Programmes should certainly implement these strong didactic cornerstones for knowledge acquisition.

A second cluster, “Focus”, groups didactic tools showing a high impact on the perceived current knowledge but not strongly developed during the IP. It incorporates three participants’ activities: the informal discussions with peers from the own university (6,37) as well as the ones with peers from the other universities (6,63) and the presentations by peers (6,68). Future Intensive Programmes should reinforce these inter-peer didactic cornerstones for knowledge acquisition since they appear to have an impact on the perceived knowledge although student-participants did rate them below the average across the didactic cornerstones (7,22).

The third cluster, “Monitor”, incorporates all didactic tools with a low impact on the perceived current knowledge, although their average score varies from low (5,02) to high (8,41). The final cluster “Monitor” needs extensive attention in future Intensive Programmes because it holds quite a variety of didactic cornerstones but these tools have a low impact on the perceived current knowledge. The didactic cornerstones include the preparation at the home institutions (5,02), theoretical presentations by lecturers (6,88 and 8,14), visits to the EU institutions (8,41), informal discussions with non-peers (both 7,02), and the digital platform Yammer (7,11). Most of these didactic activities are time- and energy-consuming and some of them should therefore be re-evaluated for future Intensive Programmes in order to achieve their primary pedagogical objectives and to increase their learning impact. Indeed, the visits to the EU institutions (rated as second source for acquiring knowledge), the informal discussions with non-peers (lecturers, speakers and professionals) as well as the digital platform Yammer aim to support the learning process on the IP subject and should therefore obtain a higher impact on the perceived current knowledge. The preparation at the

home institutions and the theoretical presentations by lecturers aim to offer the contextual framework the student-participants need to acquire in order to understand the mechanisms of lobbying and government relations in a European perspective. Since the students were not asked to rate the didactic cornerstones related to their relevance towards the European context but related to their impact on their current perceived knowledge of the subject “lobbying”, these specific didactic cornerstones could not obtain a high impact.



MONITOR: 1: The preparation @ home institution 2: The theoretical presentations by own lecturers 3: The theoretical presentations by other IP lecturers 5: The visits to EU institutions 8: The informal discussions with lecturers 9: The informal discussions with speakers/professionals 14: The papers posted on Yammer	PROMOTE: 4: The case studies (by the speakers/professionals) 6: The discussions with peers during classes, preparing the group assignments 12: The personal reflections during assignments 13: The readings FOCUS: 7: The presentations by peers (other group presentations) 10: The informal discussions with peers from own university 11: The informal discussions with peers from other universities
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Figure 2: Results of the impact analysis: the crossings of the axes are based on the average score of the didactic cornerstones (y axis crossing = 7,22) and the average impact score (x axis crossing = 11,63)

4. Pros and cons of the digital platforms

In this paper we now take a critical look, from the inside, at the pros and cons of the digital platforms Yammer, Wordpress, Facebook and Engagor as they were implemented in the Intensive Programme described above.

4.1. Yammer (<http://www.yammer.com>):

Yammer is a user-generated led site, a members-only platform, which means that to become a member, one must be invited by existing members. On Yammer, documents are shared in a closed online setting. Yammer was used in the IP to share lecturers' and speakers' presentations and content related articles. Students were invited to post their presentations and assignments; lecturers may post feedback on the assignments. Yammer was used to send and collect the evaluation forms and to inform students about marks allowing them to see their progression.

Students "liked" the posts, they also downloaded the presentations in real time. However, few left comments. Students did not manifest themselves as active contributors content wise although there was a higher participative activity the second year, the second cohort overall being more assertive online. Next to posting their assignments the students selected content related articles or used this closed platform to facilitate interaction and communication through the network, questioning IP lecturers online on practical issues, not on content. Thus Yammer was mainly used as a one-way communication instrument, focusing on 'information' and 'knowledge transmission' rather than a two-way communication instrument allowing and/or enhancing dialogue.

4.2. Wordpress (blog: <http://blogmarpe.wordpress.com/>):

Wordpress is an open-to-all platform. The blog is used for experiencing the values of open sharing, as well as for enhancing the network generation. It is linked to the MARPE² website (www.mastermarpe.eu).

The IP lecturers' team decided to make use of Wordpress in order to offer the students a window to the public sphere. Therefore their first assignment was a group blogpost reflecting on the perception of lobbying from their cultural perspective. Although the lecturers' team was supportive towards the first productions and looked forward to read more students' reflections, they could not but ascertain that students' input was rather poor. Though students

offered interesting insights during their presentations (in the private sphere), they did not feel confident enough to share reflective content on lobbying openly (in the public sphere). Students willingly shared their identities on Yammer and Facebook, yet they did care what happened to this information when it came to the blog. They reported having some concerns about how PR agencies would use their information as “*a source for data mining and surveillance*” (Kietzmann with Angell, 2010), especially once they monitored themselves the EU institutions and some companies via monitor tool Engagor. This finding was confirmed by CareerBuilder.com, stating that 45% of employers check social media profiles during the hiring process (Junco with Chickering, 2010). Because of its links to the MARPE website, the blog provided the IP participants with a *professional sense of place*, which implies professional modes of interaction as: referrals, introduction, networking, professionally related questions, answers, and conversation. (Papacharissi, 2009). The non-native English participants showed too little confidence to apply during the IP because they had the feeling it could have harmed their self-presentation (see figure 4). They still needed the private sphere offered by the ‘lecturers/students’ setting or the closed Yammer platform.

4.3. Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/MasterMarpe>):

Facebook is an open-to-all platform. All IP lecturers are administrators, which means that they all are able to directly post on the wall while its 343 fans only can comment or post in a specific window. The Facebook page aims to share visual documents related to the day-to-day IP (mainly pictures), to support the “we” feeling and to generate spontaneous interactions. In between the IP editions, information is regularly posted, related to the institutional partners, the MARPE programme, the Public Relations discipline and academic events in which the partners are involved.

The Facebook page clearly endorsed the “we” feeling and the group cohesion. Students shared their experience within the IP group, becoming “friends” with the lecturers present on this social platform, as well as with all the other IP participants. They also shared their daily life with their personal Facebook network (see figure 3), generating reactions, engaging their contacts, enhancing the network dimension as well as the reputation both of themselves and of the programme.



Figure 3: Facebook metrics Master MARPE page 13-15 April 2013

Referring to Pine with Gilmore (1999), the Erasmus Intensive Programme can be positioned as an *educational experience*, requesting an active participation from the students, showing engagement, catching their attention to absorb and internalise the experience, and aiming at self-development and intellectual enrichment via active learning.

However, when it comes to the impact of Facebook on the IP, a shift from “Educational” to “Escapist” could be observed, particularly in the second year. The “escape” of the IP participants to Facebook happened when the programme was felt to be too demanding, e.g. a minimum of six hours of activity on complex and often new content for a majority of non-native English students (Anton et al., 2013). Escaping from the Intensive Programme limited the transmission and educational effects. It also created a gap between “real life” participation and “online life” participation especially because the “escapers” -although they were not looking to meet new people or to network during classes- were to sustain contact with their existing group of friends and acquaintances outside the IP. This behaviour points out the inclusion/exclusion dimension of the social media (boyd with Ellison, 2007).

The never-ending need of connectivity, the ubiquitous aspects of social network sites also had implications on the research abilities of the IP participants. Briefed on an assignment they reacted negatively discovering they would not have internet connection during their assignment preparation, although they had already received all information, data and documents. This Net.Generation did not seem to realise how heavily they were relying on the internet as primary source and they also were not that aware whether the sources were accurate or reliable (Junco with Mastrodicasa, 2007).

4.4.Engagor (<http://www.engagor.com>):

Engagor is a monitoring tool which has been used to monitor the European Institutions and those companies presenting case studies during the IP. Since this online tool does not have “social” properties, it will not be enclosed in the further analysis. However it is relevant when the critical need for reliable sources as well as the implications of traceable online behaviour is emphasized.

We conclude this paragraph by positioning Yammer, WordPress, and Facebook in the two-dimensional framework of Kaplan with Haenlein (2010). All three digital platforms imply a high self-presentation and/or self-disclosure level as the participants’ activities are clearly identified. The Yammer platform has by its intrinsic characteristics a low social presence: the content can only be shared among members. The IP blog has a medium social presence because the student-participants were not willing to produce content on regularly basis as blogs usually do. Although it was not its initial aim, Facebook became the main social networking site used by all IP participants, expanding the IP to the participants’ networks.

		Social presence / Media richness		
		<i>Low</i>	<i>Medium</i>	<i>High</i>
Self-presentation / Self-disclosure	<i>High</i>	User-generated led site Yammer: for IP participants only	<u>MasterMARPE</u> <u>Wordpress Blog</u> integrated in the IP content wise	<u>MasterMARPE</u> Facebook page, IP social networking site
	<i>Low</i>	Collaborative projects e.g. common courses (curriculum development)	Content communities e.g. e-learning modules	Virtual game platforms
		Not yet implemented in the IP		

Figure 4: Positioning of the digital platforms in the IP in Kaplan with Haenlein (2010)

5. The IP digital platforms and the honeycomb

By means of the honeycomb of social media developed by Kietzmann et al. (2011) the way how the IP students used the main social media platforms was examined. The authors construct their framework with seven functional building blocks: identity, conversations, sharing, presence, relationships, reputation, and groups. We will take a closer look to each block, identifying a specific facet of social media user experience, and its implications for the IP, acknowledging that there is no obligation to have all seven present in the social media dimension of the IP. As the authors say: “*they are constructs that allow us to make sense of how different levels of social media functionality can be configured*”.

Looking at the *Identity* block, we can observe that students’ online social identity was identical to their real identity on Yammer and Wordpress since they were invited to join on the closed platform and they were evaluated on their blogposts on the open platform. They all used their current Facebook identity on the IP Facebook page, linking their online presence to their IP experience and sharing their educational activities.

The *Conversations* block of the framework which represents the extent to which users communicate with other users in a social media setting, did not play an important role during the IP. Although several social media sites primarily are designed to facilitate conversations, the latter did not occur online. The shared messages were of an ephemeral nature, without real obligation to respond. If we analyse the content posted based on the ‘conversation velocity’ as developed by McCarthy et al. (2010), we can conclude that there is a high rate of change (the number of new conversations over a specified period of time) and a uniformity in the direction of change (the continuity-discontinuity of the conversation i.e., changes in how favourable or unfavourable a conversation is toward an object or subject). Students generated a continuous flow of new topics to address, in reaction to the lectures, presentations, and case studies. When an issue aroused, when content challenged the students, it was discussed offline. Conversations and dialogues happened offline in real life.

Sharing represents the extent to which the IP participants exchanged, distributed, and received content. The term ‘social’ often implies that exchanges between people are crucial and that social networks are mapping the relationships between individuals. In many cases, however, sociality is about the objects that mediate these ties between people, the reasons why they meet online and associate with each other (Engeström, 2005). Students shared their assignments (Yammer and Wordpress), articles (Yammer and Facebook), and pictures and

videos (Facebook). Lecturers shared their presentations (Yammer), articles (Yammer and Facebook), and pictures and video (Facebook).

Presence represents the extent to which users can know if other users are accessible. It includes knowing where others are, in the virtual world and/or in the real world, and whether they are available. This block should have been less relevant since the students spent the entire period of the IP together. Although they used presence-focused platforms as Foursquare to let their friends at home know they were abroad, participating in the IP, going to the EU Institutions, or sightseeing in the weekend. A direct implication of *Presence* is that it is linked to the traits of other functional blocks in the honeycomb framework, including *Conversations* and *Relationships*. This link sometimes had negative interferences during “classes” when students were paying more attention to the activities happening in their virtual world.

The *Relationships* block represents the extent to which participants can be related to one another (the kind of association that leads them to converse, share objects of sociality, meet up, or simply just list each other as a friend). Consequently, the type of connection often determines the what-and-how of information exchange. We experienced a difference between the two cohorts: the first being more “open”, participative between lecturers and students, while the second closed some conversations to the students only.

Reputation is the extent to which users can identify the standing of others, including themselves, in a social media setting. The aim of the IP social platforms is not to collect as much followers as possible to build its reputation. They rather serve to construct in the long run a community sharing similar educational experiences (MARPE and IP). Therefore the IP social media would score low on a number of metrics including: strength (the number of times you are mentioned); sentiment (the ratio of mentions that are positive to those that are negative); passion (how often certain users talk about you); and reach (the number of different users talking about you divided by the total number of times you are mentioned).

The *Groups* functional block represents the extent to which users can form communities and sub-communities. This dimension also is, understandably, underrepresented in the present case since the aim was to keep the IP participants as one group.

Applied to the digital platforms, the following preliminary results emerge (see figures 5a, 5b and 5c). The usage density of each dimension is reflected by the different shades.

On the members-only platform Yammer, the IP lecturers communicated in real time which goals and behaviours were valued through their messages and posts. Students and lecturers easily acknowledged each other's *Presence* which enhanced the immediacy and availability of information. Lecturers and students shared documents, presentations and content related articles. Lecturers gave feedback on the posted assignments and the marks were also posted on this closed platform which created a moderate *Conversation* velocity. All participants used their own identity, following specific rules communicated at the beginning of the Intensive Programme.

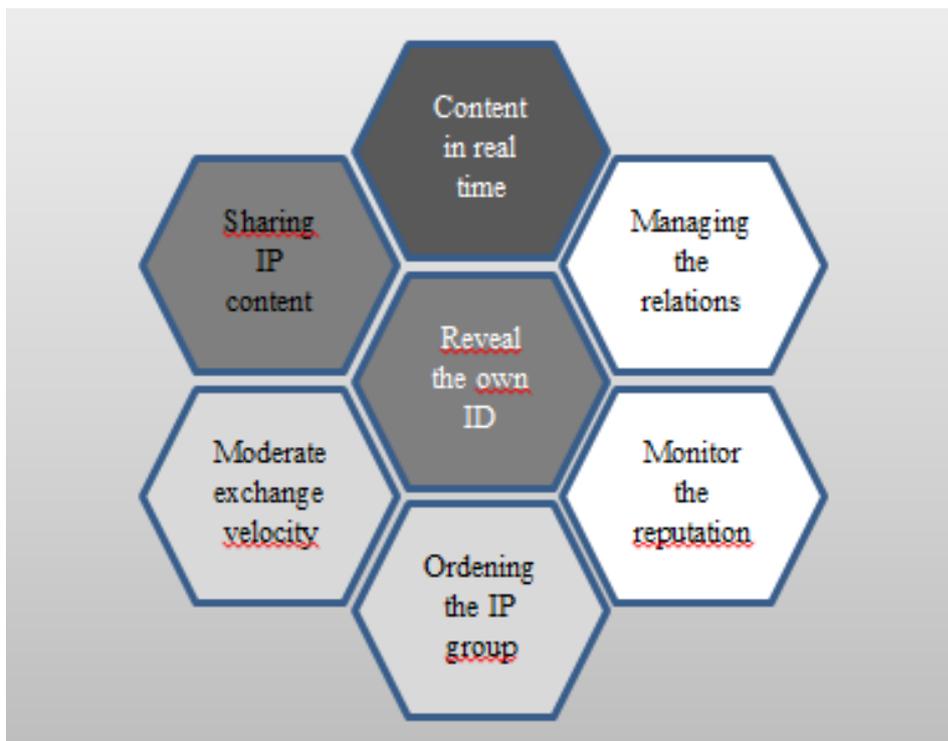


Figure 5a: Yammer in the honeycomb of social media

On Wordpress, the MasterMARPE blog, only students posted during the Intensive Programme, clearly mentioning their names and institutions. They only did once, sharing their perceptions on lobbying from their different cultural perspectives at the beginning of the programme. By revealing their own identity in a professional context, they faced the issue of data privacy and did not pursue this online activity they perceived as a threat because they felt too exposed to the public sphere and potential employers while they did not feel confident content wise. They feared posting would harm their reputation while they were not able to monitor the possible effects of their posts. Therefore all exchanges stopped because of the risks of joining the *Conversation*.

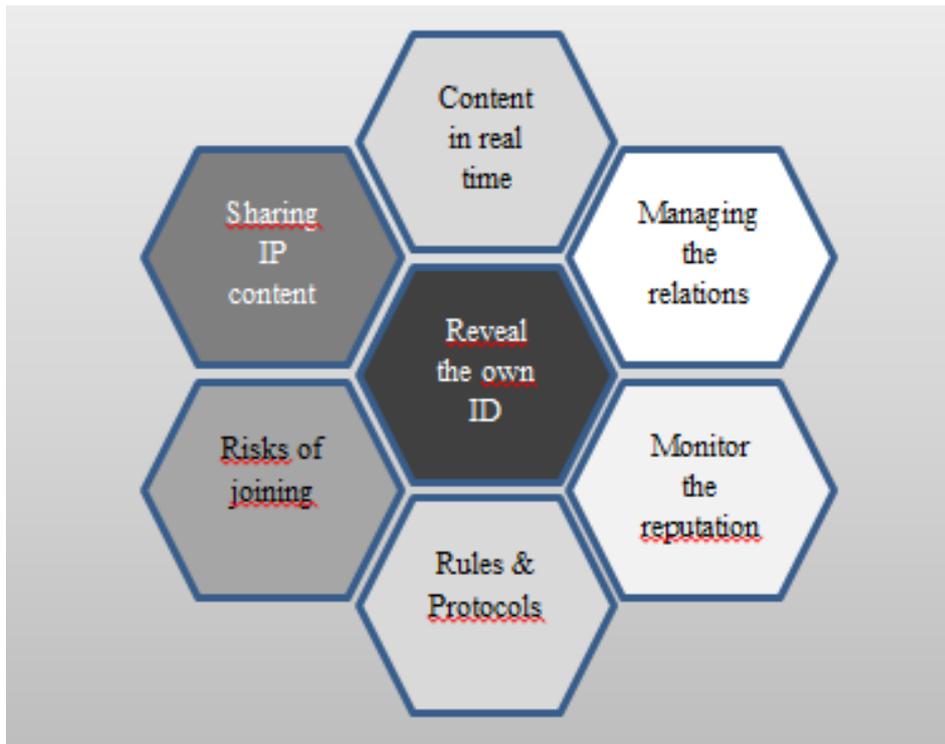


Figure 5b: Wordpress in the honeycomb of social media

The platform welcoming the highest level of activities and even developing a dimension of intimacy in real time was Facebook. Lecturers and students used it to daily share pictures and insights emanating from the “Educational” experience. These posts engaged the IP participants in *Conversations* with high velocity levels. Students used it to manage and promote their *Presence* online, exhibiting their network of friends, relating with their virtual network, reinforcing their online *Relationships*, capturing the “everydayness” and sometimes dissociating from the “educational” setting.

The “Escapist” dimension, although somehow present during the first IP, was not perceived as a disturbing factor that first year, while its wider use the second year sometimes caused negative reactions from student-participants who disapproved of this behaviour creating a physical barrier between real and virtual participation, between absorption (IP content) and immersion (managing the online *Relations*, external from the IP) (Anton et al., 2013). The absence of clearly described and shared rules and protocols influenced the *Group* cohesion the second year.

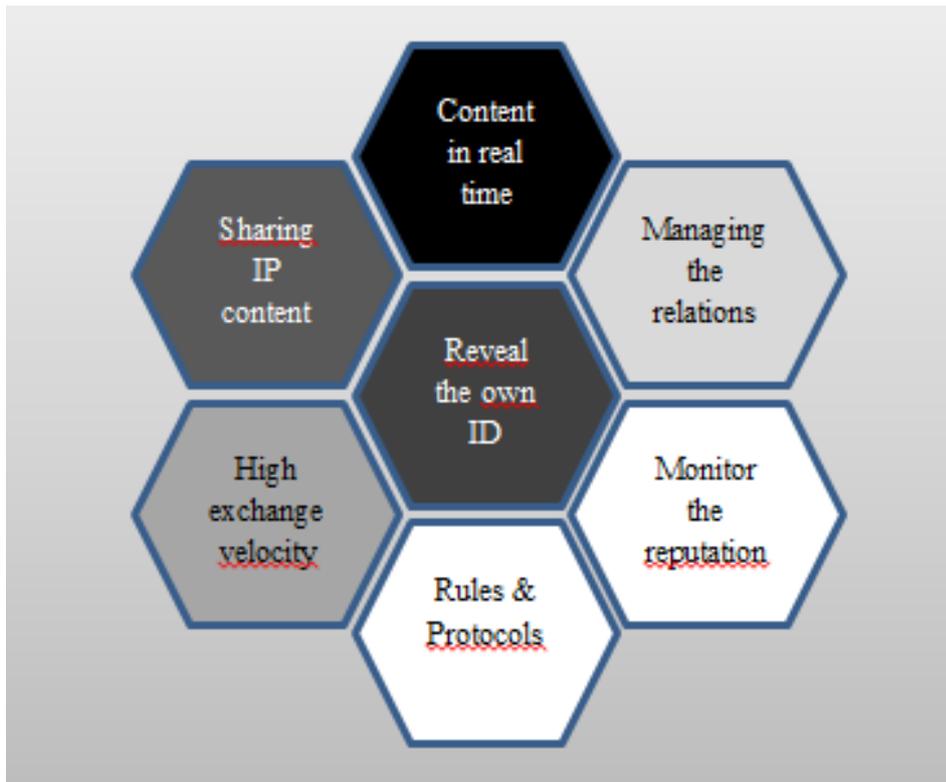


Figure 5c: Facebook in the honeycomb of social media

Conclusion

For genuine educational discourse, it is hard to survive in the social media arena. It is clear that the social media environment is more challenging than might initially be perceived. It is evident that educational discourse to fulfil what it is expected to do - i.e., make for effective teaching and deep learning- needs a firm basis of real life basis educational contexts, settings, and people willing to assume their responsibilities. We did not identify significant results showing that the social network sites helped the IP students to acquire a better understanding and knowledge related to Government relations and Lobbying.

However, their online –active- participation during and after the programme refers to a reflective process (Pine with Gilmore, 1999) and highlights their academic engagement as described by Frederickx et al.(2004): they all actively participated in the academic, social and extracurricular activities, and half of them contributed to the survey 1.5 years or six months after they finished the programme (behavioural engagement); they regularly posted about their personal experience, expressing their feelings, and some still do, referring to the

activities they experienced (emotional engagement); they spent lots of energy to comprehend the complex concepts of government relations and lobbying in an European perspective, willing to learn (cognitive engagement).

These insights open new research perspectives related to the type of interactions which might affect active participation or student engagement, how relationships influence academic engagement which also implies an active participation, but also grades and student achievement taking into account the constraints related to the short period of time as well as the complexity of the content of this Erasmus Intensive Programme.

Notes

1. Université catholique de Louvain (Belgium), i.e. IP co-ordinator, Arteveldehogeschool University College (Belgium), i.e. IP organiser, Instituto Superior de Novas Profissoes (Portugal), Universidad Cardenal Herrera CEU Valencia (Spain), Université de Lorraine (France), University of Bucharest (Romania), University of Greenwich (United Kingdom)
2. MARPE stands for Master in European Public Relations. The master programme was launched in 1992-1993 and can be followed in 3 different languages: English (University of Stirling, University of Lund), French (Université de Lorraine, Université de Bucharest), Iberian languages (Universidad Cardenal Herrera CEU, Instituto Superior de Novas Profissoes).

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