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Thinking SMALL about social media assisted language learning

Abstract

This paper makes a case for a more appropriate acronym than CALL to reflect the reduced significance of the microprocessor in language learning and emphasize instead the most salient affordances computers bring to the process. Early CALL theorists note that the term might not transition to an era of network based learning. This paper describes such learning, and its use with language learners from the time the terms social media and Web 2.0 were coined. Since social media is an enabler of the meaningful and authentic communication so critically necessary to effective language learning, the paper encourages language practitioners to "think SMALL" and model for one another the use of social media and Web 2.0 in language learning. The paper shows how engagement in communities of practice spills over into changes in teaching practices and reports results of a survey of teacher perceptions of how effectively students and teachers are able to transition use of social media in their personal lives to their professional ones, for the purposes of both teaching and learning.

Paper

An introduction to distributed learning

Anisoara is an English teacher in Romania. Recently she was trying to recall where she could find free images online, so she decided to write to a Yahoo group she was a member of called Webheads in Action (WiA) . Over the next six days she received 8 replies with 56 link suggestions. In gratitude she wrote the list, "What a wealth of suggestions to look through! Thank you so much! You are my memory and my crowdsource, Hugs, Anisoara."

This kind of thing happens all the time in our connected world, but there are several things noteworthy about this incident. Anisoara wrote her message in March 2019 to a list populated mostly by language teachers that started in 2002. This list is one way that this community (currently 1100 members) have been interacting with each other for almost two decades. The fact that this community of practice (CoP) continues to function and help one another after so many years is itself remarkable. Another interesting detail is the way Anisoara signs off with hugs. This is a community of teaching practitioners, but informality and caring for one another are two of its salient characteristics (Bostancioglu, 2018).

Another aspect of this is that Anisoara intuits what Downes (2005) and Siemens (2006) write about how knowledge is distributed in networks, and how networks redefine what knowledge is and how it is learned. They suggest that any node in the network (e.g. Anisoara) is potentially as knowledgeable as the most knowledgeable other-node in the network. In other words, what the network "knows" is equivalent to the sum of the knowledge at all its nodes, and the wealth of networks lies in how any given node, Anisoara for example, is able to extract that knowledge, make it hers, and learn from it. Another characteristic of networks is that they overlap, so that any given node in the network is connected to dozens of other networks. The trick for a given node in a given network is to access that wider knowledge ("the pipe is more important than the content within the pipe," Siemens, 2004, n.p.), but the knowledge is potentially there, and potentially accessible, wherever it lies in the wide web of interconnected networks

An example of a SMALL distributed learning network

Webheads in Action derived in 2002 from a precursor group called Writing for Webheads (WfW). This group emerged in 1998 as a small (number of participants) community of language learners who enjoyed meeting regularly online in avatar-based spaces for the purpose of improving their command of English. They wrote about their experiences, thoughts, and feelings and sent emails along with recordings and pictures to the present author to post on a website he maintained in Web 1.0 fashion (Stevens, 2018).

WfW roughly coincided in time with the emergence of the term 'social media.' Bercovici (2010) credits Ted Leonsis with inventing the term in 1997. By the following year WfW was posting participants' photos to a wall on our portal page (see Figure 1), and attaching the thumbnails to their writings as well. This was four years before Martin Dougiamas released Moodle in 2002, and associated each posting with an image of the person posting. It would be another two years before Mark Zuckerberg would put faces to names and profiles with his social network site Facebook. Later in that same year, 2004, Tim O'Reilly and Dale Dougherty held their Media Web 2.0 Conference which popularized the term Web 2.0, coined originally by Darcy DiNucci in 1999 (Toledano, 2013; DiNucci, 1999).

Figure 1: The Writing for Webheads students portrait gallery

WfW was premised on the assumption that language learners would improve their language not through a course of study ordained top down via a prescriptive curriculum but through motivation to interact with one another socially and set individual agendas for personal language development guided by their immediate communication needs within the social network. This is similar to what Cormier (2008) later termed 'community as curriculum', but this notion came to us intuitively and through experimentation, and in time we discovered that our approach worked and made learning fun.

WfW participants even went out of their way to meet us from a distance at online and face-to-face professional conferences and discuss with attendees how they were benefiting from their use of voice and other Web 2.0 tools in our socially connected network (albeit still

couched in a Web 1.0 portal). Accordingly we began attracting a following among language teachers who started joining the group in order to have an opportunity to interact online with language learners. Eventually the teachers predominated and displaced the students, but once the teachers were there we focused on modeling how they could use Web 2.0 with each other and thus learn to use these tools second-naturedly with students. In so doing we began to function as a social network, patterned on what had been learned with students pioneering SMALL, or social media assisted language learning.

Transition from pre-network CALL to network-based teaching and learning

In 2001 the Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages Computer-assisted Language Learning Interest Section (TESOL CALL-IS) launched an experiment in learning through Web 2.0 and social media. Electronic Village Online (EVO) has been an annual offering of 5-week long professional development courses given by teachers for free and for other teachers each January-February ever since.

In 2002 an EVO session was formed to help teachers understand how Web 2.0 tools had been used to create and nurture the community of learners online in WfW by enrolling them in a similar learning community. Called Webheads in Action, by its second year, participants had come to consider themselves to be a perfect example of a community of practice (Johnson, 2005; Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998).

Meanwhile, some practitioners of CALL at around this time were questioning the validity of their acronym. CALL is by definition computer assisted language learning, but computers are integrated into almost everything electronic. Bax (2003, 2011) argued that computers had become so normalized that the C in CALL is decreasingly descriptive, implying that a better acronym was in order. Levy and Hubbard's (2005) riposte was that we should continue to call CALL "CALL" largely as a matter of convention and practicality, but suggested that "perhaps … the label CALL cannot ultimately make the transition from pre-network to network-based teaching and learning," (pp. 143-144).

This paper concurs with that conclusion. The purpose of language is communication, and students internalize languages through meaningful, authentic communication. Communicative skills are best honed through practice during opportunities for authentic communication which form the most stable substrate for sustained language learning.

Social media is a ubiquitous enabler of natural communication. What computers do best for language learners is to facilitate communication among themselves and with native speakers of a language, largely through social media. In reality, SM assists LL more than does the old C so over the past decade I have been encouraging people to "think SMALL" in recognition of the diminished role of computers themselves in the process of language learning vis à vis how they actually help learners acquire a target language. And for teachers to be able to facilitate this, they have to use social media in their own professional development with one another.

One modeling of this insight occurred during three global online Webheads in Action Online Convergences (WiAOC) in 2005, 2007, and 2009. In mounting these, we utilized a panoply of Web 2.0 tools, including Elluminate, to which we had been granted free access by LearningTimes.org, along with our burgeoning social networks, to organize ourselves around a Moodle portal where presenters submitted proposals which we vetted, and then facilitated for presentation over three straight days in each of those years for free to a worldwide audience. These were conferences about language teaching, involving language teaching practitioners, who in effect were modeling for one another how they could use Web 2.0 and social media in such a way that it might carry over into their teaching practices (Hunter, 2006).

Indeed, during a keynote session at WiAOC 2007 (see Figure 2), Etienne Wenger was talking with Cristina Costa about her participation in the Webheads in Action CoP, when he asked her

how she knew she was in a community of practice. She immediately answered: when she realized that her practice had changed.

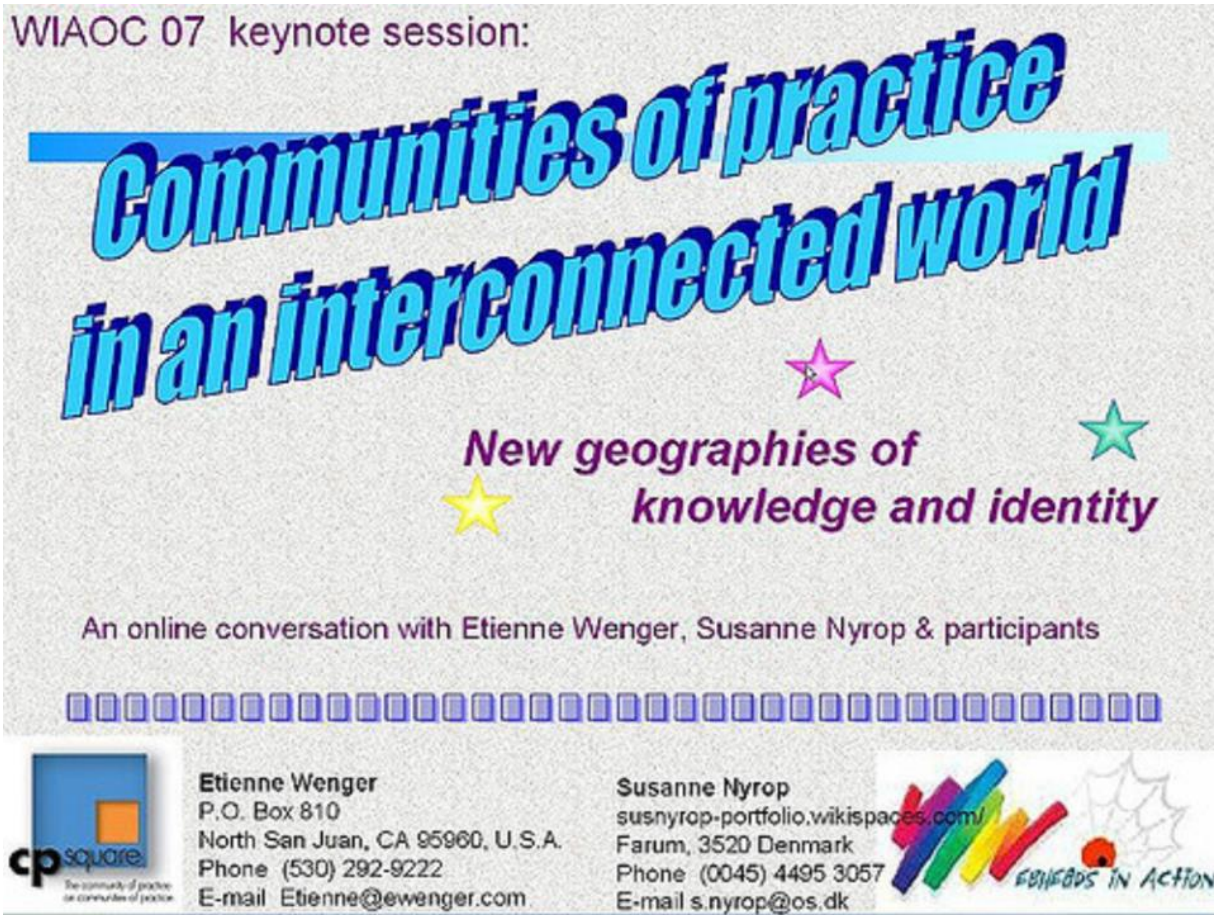

Figure 2: Susanne Nyrop's announcement of the keynote conversation with Etienne Wenger, retrieved from https://www.flickr.com/photos/netopnyrop/503628210

Stevens (2014) asserts that teachers learning through connectivist frameworks might apply similar strategies in their teaching, thus introducing their students to networked learning methods that will help them in future endeavours. Such a change in practice might materialize as a DIYLMS, or do-it-yourself learning management system. A DIYLMS is a collection of Web 2.0 tools that together function as a learning management system (LMS) in a way similar to Moodle or Blackboard, but with much greater flexibility and at minimal cost. Stevens (2012, pp.5-6) specifies what components might be included in a DIYLMS:

- A wiki portal for course information and organization, with links pertinent to course content and management, and other relevant resources, such as screencasts and tutorials
- Google Docs for student submission of assignments, and teacher feedback on student writing
- Blogging, to showcase student work
- Etherpad clones for group collaboration tasks
- Jing <http://www.techsmith.com/jing.html> and Screenr <http://www.screenr.com/> to create and annotate screen-capture and screencast tutorials
- A back-channel tool such as Twitter, Skype group chat, or Edmodo <http://www.edmodo.com/>
- … synchronous learning tools
  - Skype group chat as a synchronous AND asynchronous forum
  - Google Hangout for live webcam and voice-enabled interaction

- WizIQ

Suggested in 2012, these specific tools may be dated, but the basic principles still apply; for example in place of WizIQ, educators these days might substitute Zoom as a platform for synchronous voice, webcam and text chat-enabled spaces allowing for sharing screens and documents among participants. As such tools become widely used and accepted, teachers are able to become familiar with them through practice in the course of their own professional development, thus becoming empowered to use them with students. In this way participants in networked communities

> continually leverage each other's professional development, and what is modeled and practiced in transactions there is applied later in their teaching practices … This strongly suggests that teachers must be trained not only in the use of social media, but through its use (Stevens, 2009, p.1).

Why not call CALL "SMALL"?
Many acronyms have been proposed to replace the C in CALL; e.g. MALL, TALL, TELL, etc. but it was this heavy emphasis on social media in our work with teachers which led to the proposal, at the TESOL conference in Denver, that we consider rebranding CALL as SMALL (Stevens, 2009a, slide 8) (see Figure 3).

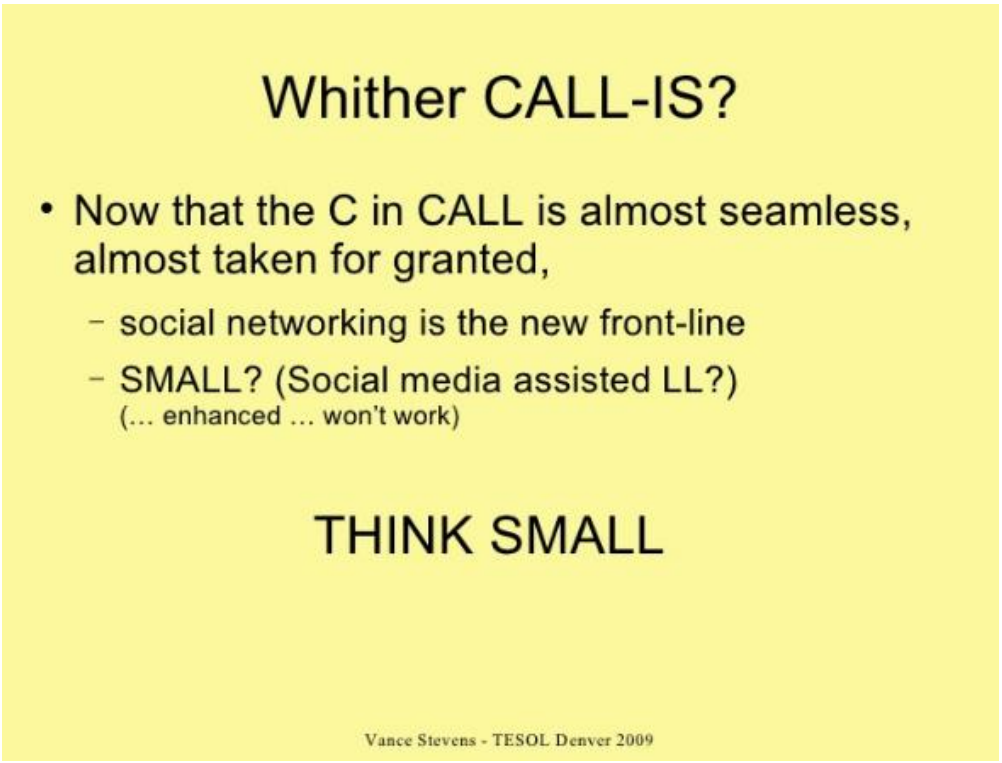

Figure 3: The first known proposal of the acronym SMALL in 2009

This appears to be the first use of SMALL to appear in the literature. A Google Scholar search on the string "social media assisted language learning" turns up no hits when filtered through 2009, and filtered through 2010 it produces one hit for Stevens (2010). Filtered through 2011 there is an additional hit on Mashinter, (2011), who cites Stevens, Cozens, and Buckingham (2010) as her source for the term.

The term SMALL was independently arrived at by Chua (2013) as a characterization of his research showing how students generally benefited in writing, speaking, grammar, and vocabulary from using wikis, YouTube, Facebook, and to a lesser extent, Twitter. But the acronym did not appear to gain much more traction until a panel was formed at the 2019

TESOL Conference in Atlanta to address the case for using social media in language learning and referred to that as SMALL.

In communications with other panelists, I felt that we were describing how social media was used in our contexts depending, as with the proverbial blind men, on which part of the elephant we happened to be touching. My own impressions of social media have been formed from decades of working with students in Arab countries where social media was sometimes restricted, sometimes banned altogether, and colleagues might not be amenable to its use. However, my impressions when I encountered colleagues from more developed parts of the world were that they and their students, especially in K-12 and to some extent higher education, were more sophisticated in their use of social media in both their teaching and their learning.

Selected survey results

I wanted to better understand how educators worldwide perceived their competence and effectiveness in using social media in language learning vis à vis that of their students. So I created a survey to establish a benchmark of educator perceptions of how SMALL is used worldwide, drawn from a range of contexts, not only from mine.

All 60 respondents to the survey reported themselves to be educators;, 93% had been in the field for over 10 years. They came from 31 countries. 85% were teachers, the rest specialists working in support of teachers (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Breakdown of educator roles of those surveyed

The survey sought to establish what percentage of respondents used social media with each other for personal learning and with their students for academic purposes. Most tended to use social media with their students and in their own learning, though many did not use social media for either.

When asked about their own use of social media for learning, 74% said they used social media in learning from their peers; 19% said they didn't (Figure 5).

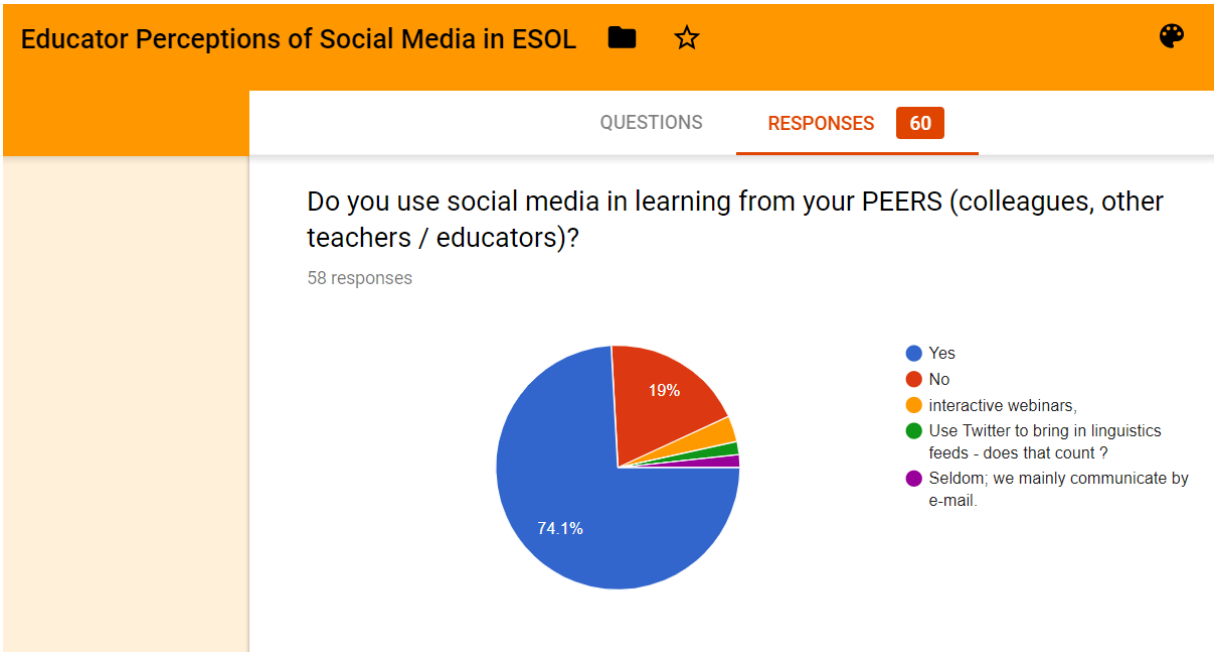

Figure 5: Extent to which respondents used social media in learning from their peers

Two thirds said they used social media with their students; almost a quarter (14 respondents) said they didn't (Figure 6).

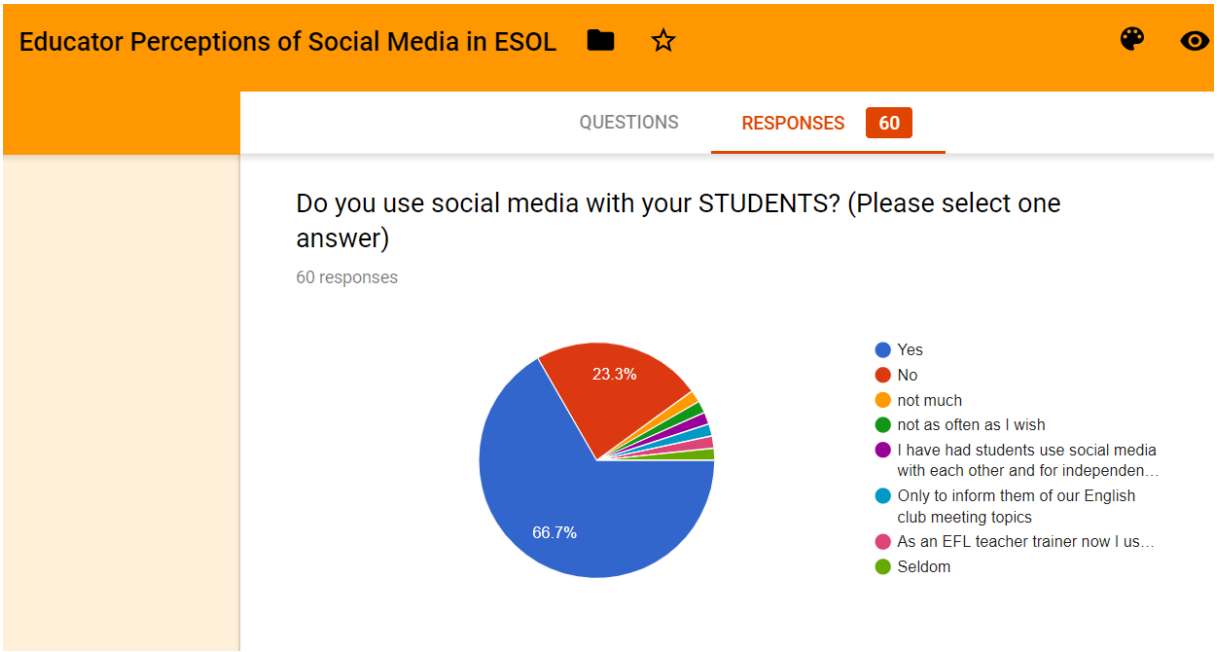

Figure 6: Extent to which respondents used social media with their students

How educators learn about social media

When asked how they had acquired their knowledge of social media, half said through reading, through trial and error, and from websites. A quarter said they had learned from YouTube videos. Almost half said they learned from peers, and a quarter said they learned from mentors / teachers (see Figure 7). Therefore, 75% of the respondents cited peers and mentors as being a prime factor in their knowledge base on social media.

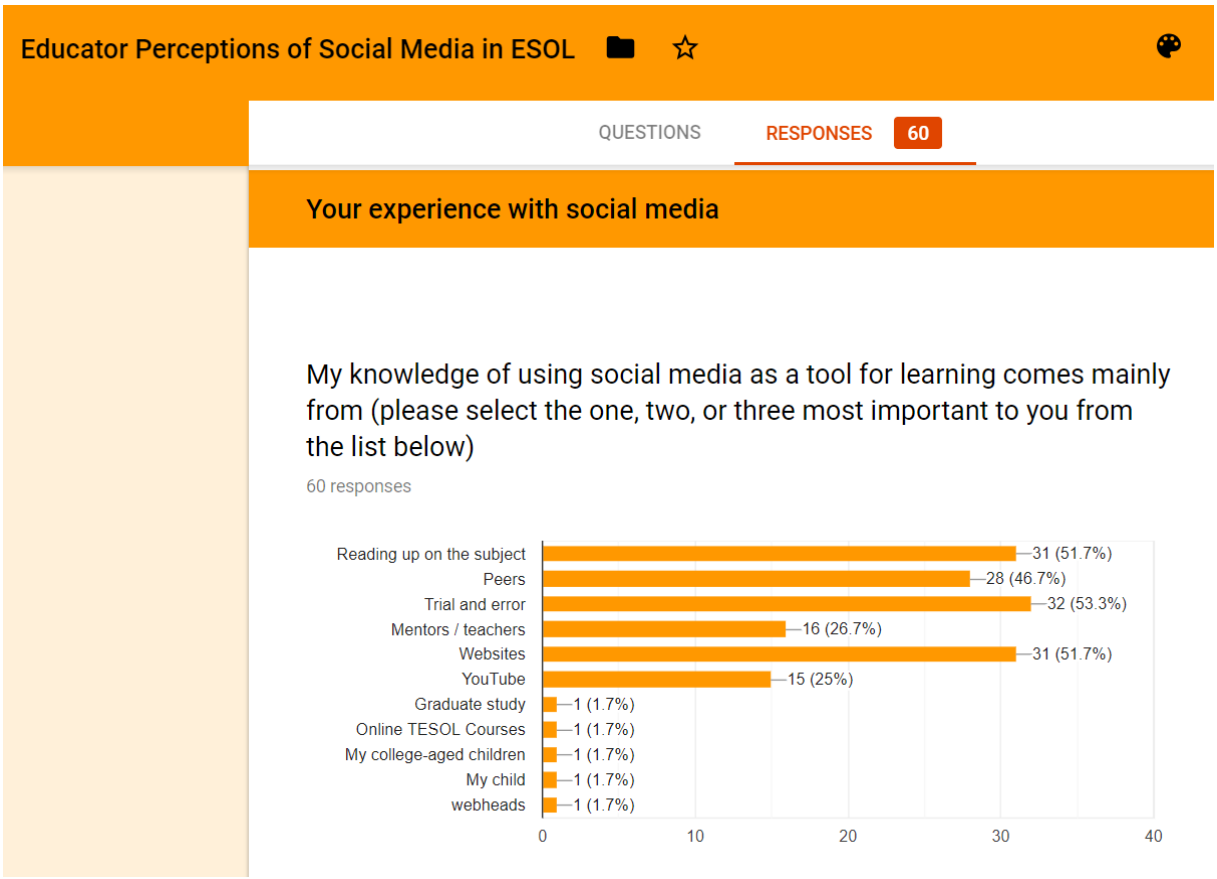

Figure 7: How respondents acquired their knowledge of social media

On the presupposition that peer scaffolding would be important to teachers in improving their skills with social media, one item in the survey asked if teachers were good models for one another on using social media effectively in their teaching and personal learning. As seen in Figure 8, teachers overwhelmingly agreed (95%) that they could be effective models for one another in this regard. The other 5% were neutral; no one disagreed.

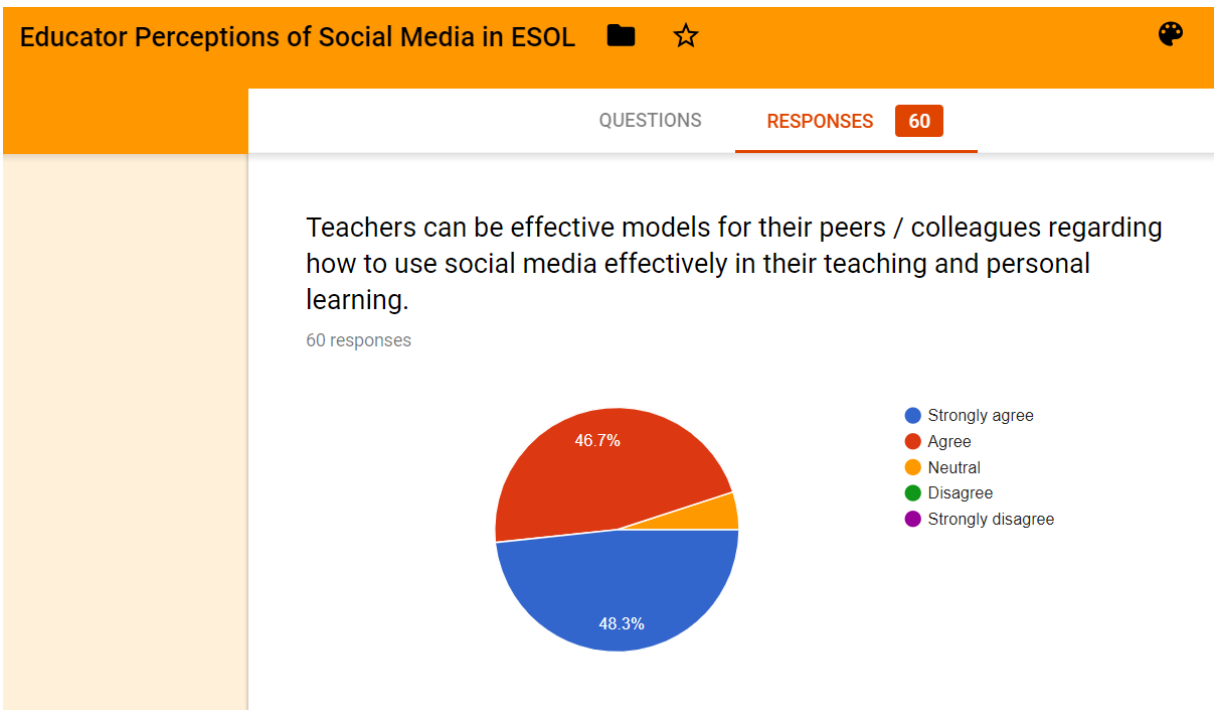

Figure 8: Appreciation of teachers modeling use of social media with one another

Respondents were slightly less sanguine when asked if students appear to be good models for one another. Over 88% agreed with the statement that students can be highly effective models for other students regarding how to use social media effectively for learning. 10% were neutral, and one respondent noted that social media can be unsafe for students from non-western countries (Figure 11).

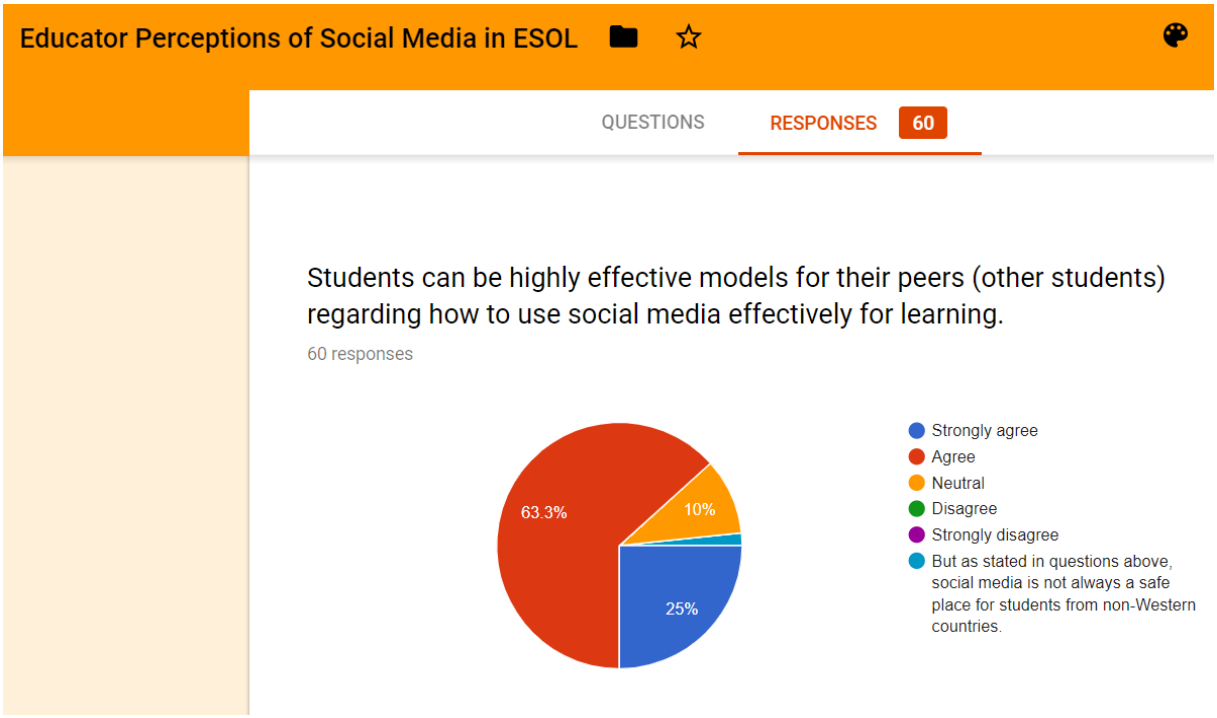

Figure 11: Extent to which students can effectively model use of social media for each other

Another item asked if the educators polled thought that teachers might also learn from observing how students used social media. 80% surveyed felt they could learn about social media from their students, with 12% appearing neutral, and only 3 respondents disagreeing. One said s/he was more net-aware than his or her students, and another expressed reservations about students from a particular country (Figure 9).

Figure 9: Appreciation of students modeling use of social media for teachers

Attitudes of educators toward using social media with students and in their own learning

The survey had items designed to shed light on the value teachers placed on using social media with students. Replies were mostly positive on the statement "Social media holds compelling potential for language learning." 85% were in agreement, 13% neutral, and one respondent said it could be, but was not worth the privacy risk (Figure 12).

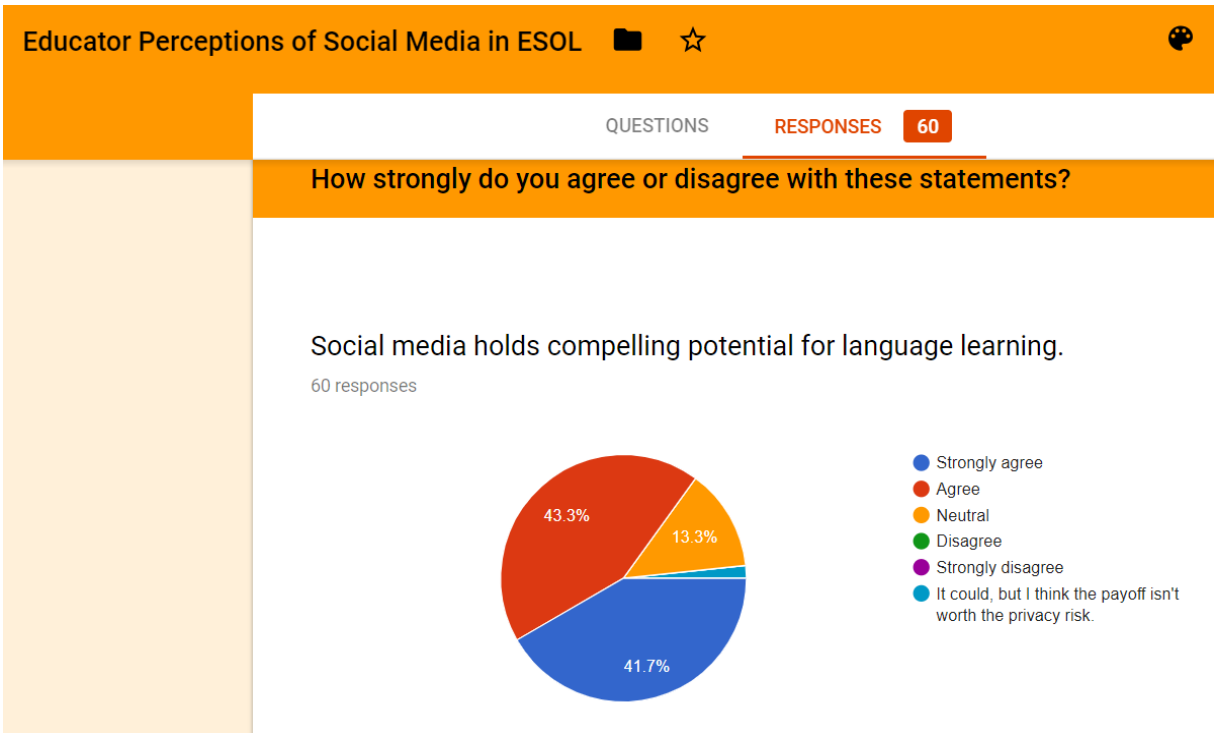

Figure 12: Perception of potential of social media for language learning

One acknowledged problem of students having access to social media in the classroom is the temptation for distraction it provides. This has been an issue in my own context, and appeared to be a concern shared by survey respondents. To the statement, social media generally distracts from learning in the classroom, 22% agreed, 25% were neutral, and 47% disagreed (8% strongly), with other answers pointing out that it depends on how social media is used in class (Figure 13).

Figure 13: Extent to which social media distracts from learning in the classroom

Most of the respondents reported mostly positive experiences with social media, both in their personal learning and in working with students.

Almost 60% reported mostly positive experiences using social media with their students in their teaching, whereas on this question 20% (11 of 60, plus one who wrote 'not applicable') said they had never used social media with students in their teaching (Figure 14; c.f. Figure 6 above).

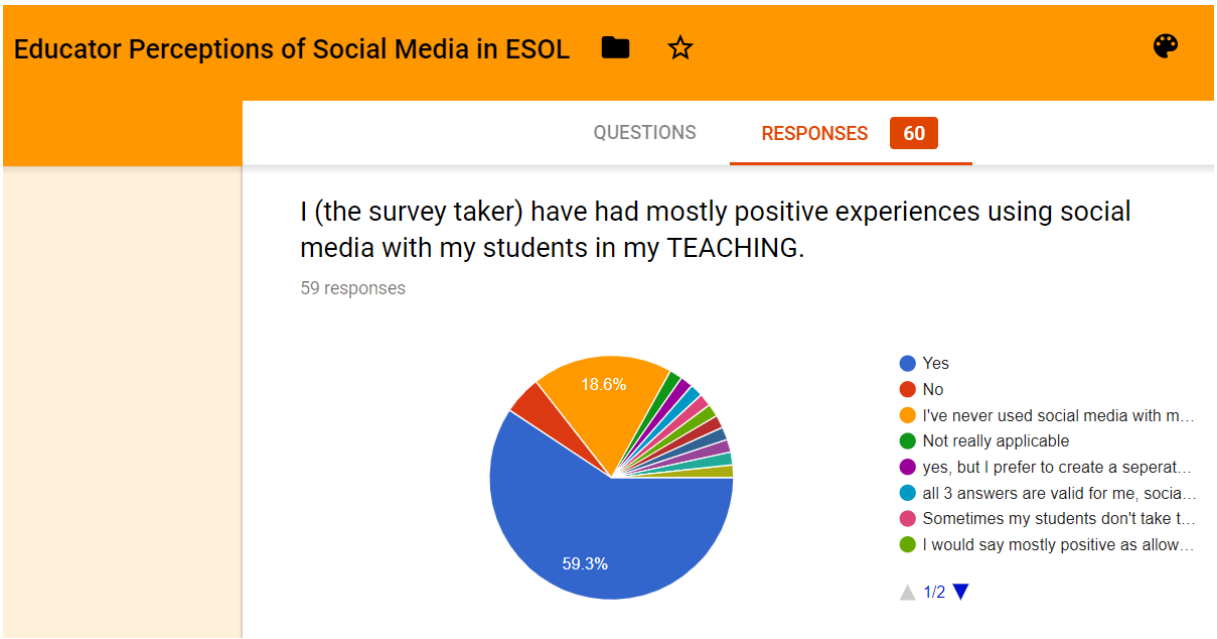

Figure 14: Respondents reporting positive experiences using social media in teaching

Of all respondents, 82% reported mostly positive experiences using social media in their own personal learning. Only three of 60 (5%) answered not having had positive experiences with social media in their own learning, and five (8.3%) said they had never used social media in their personal learning (Figure 14).

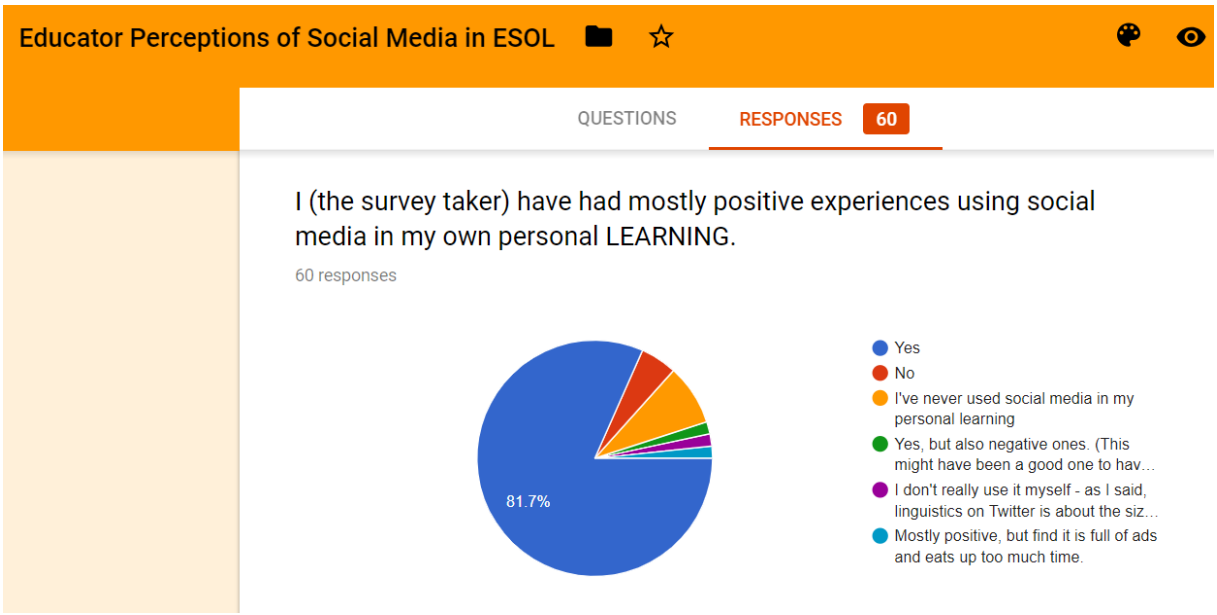

Figure 14: Respondents reporting positive experiences using social media their personal learning

Do educators think their colleagues and their students are able to use social media effectively

Regarding educators' perceptions of other teachers' use of social media, the survey asked if teachers in general might use social media themselves but not know how to use it effectively in their teaching. Surprisingly, 85% agreed (20% agreed strongly). Only 8% disagreed, and 5% (3 respondents) were neutral. So it appears that educators responding to this survey felt that many of their colleagues were familiar with social media for their own purposes, but not up to speed on its use with students (Figure 15).

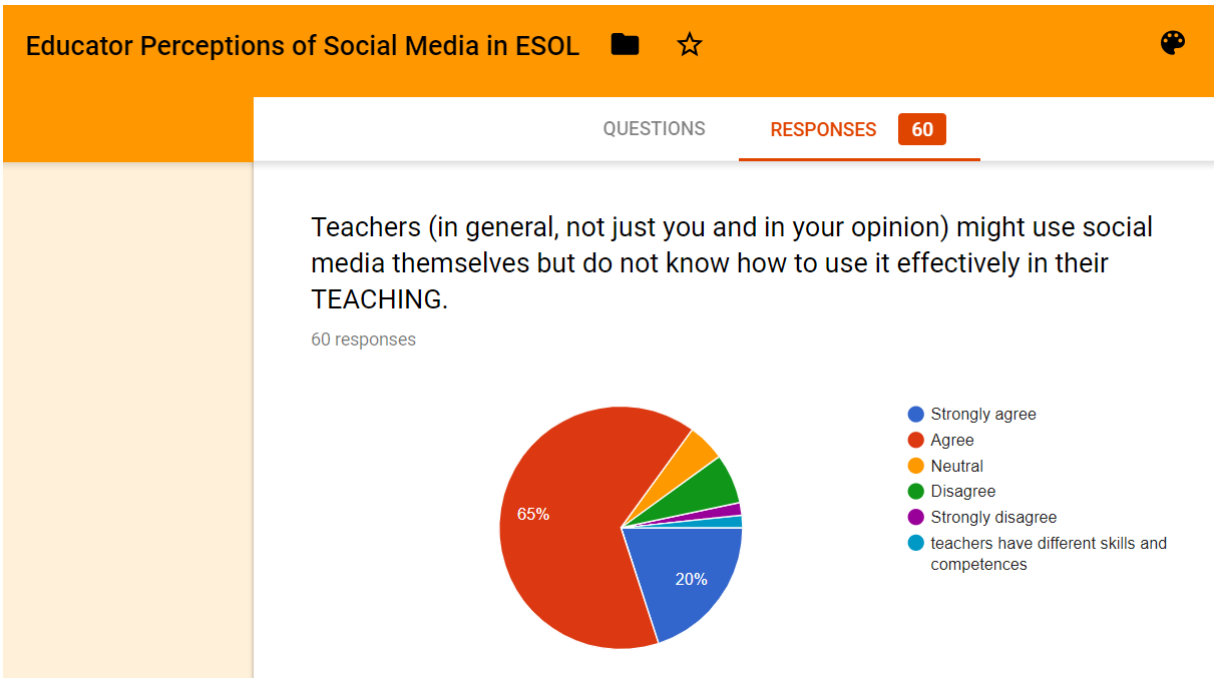

Figure 15: Perceptions of other teachers' ability to use social media effectively in their teaching

A similar question asked educators to rate the statement that students might use social media themselves but not know how to use it effectively in their learning. According to Figure 16, there was strong agreement with this (78%), 12% were neutral, and 8.3% disagreed (but none strongly).

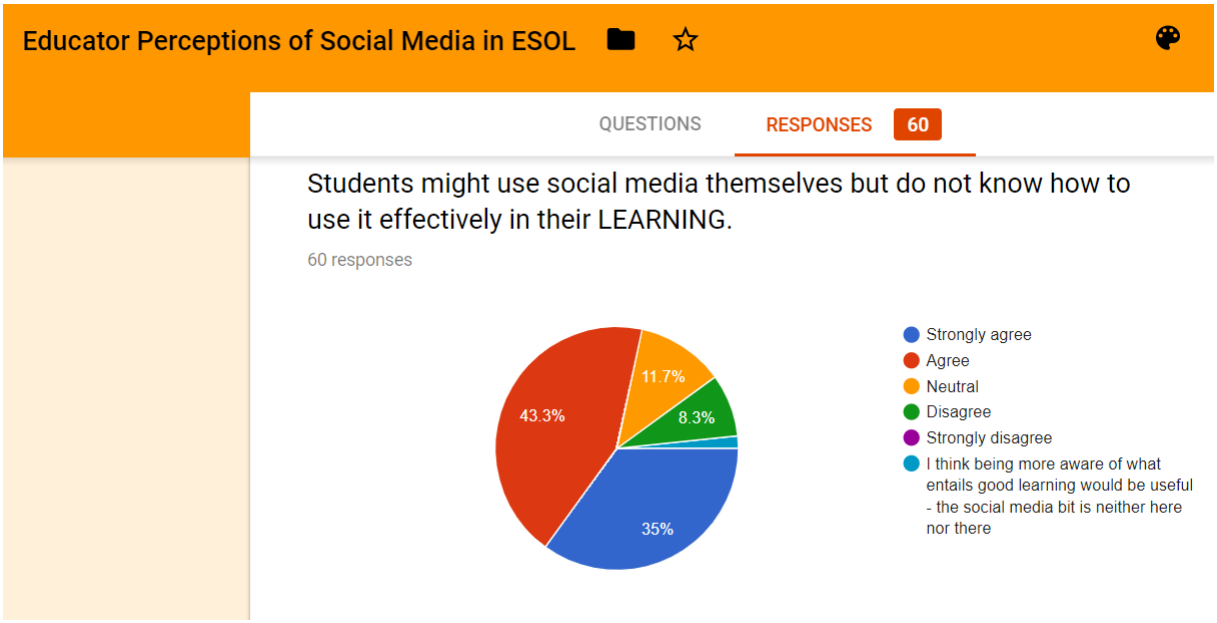

Figure 16: Perceptions of students' ability to use social media effectively in their learning

Social media found most useful in teaching and in personal learning

Respondents were asked in two places on the survey if they used social media with their peers/colleagues and if they used social media in teaching their students; and if they did, to list their favorite use(s) of social media, and if not, why not? These items elicited some of the more useful data to emerge from the survey. Respondents interpreted the question differently, some listing *ways* they used social media, others listing specific *tools*. Both response types were useful, and the reasons given for not using social media were particularly revealing.

Ways that the educators gave of using social media in their personal learning with colleagues included building relationships, class collaboration and collaboration in general, exchange of ideas, networking, online learning, professional development, reading articles, school events, sharing ideas, and tagged, categorized, and annotated resource sharing.

Some of the tools mentioned were

#ELTChat BBC Blogs bookmarking Engvid eTwinning Facebook groups feed aggregator forums	Google Docs Google+ Groups Headway Linked In MOOCs Moodle Pinterest Say again?	TED Talks threaded discussions Twitter webinars WhatsApp WhatsApp groups Wikis Zoom; online meetings

YouTube was particularly salient in the responses; in particular for

- Lectures
- Tech channel subscriptions
- YouTube to create my own videos
- Youtube videos of ESL lessons by other teachers

When the educators did not use social media with their peers and colleagues, these were the reasons given:

1. My colleagues lack technical skill.
2. They are not very fond of using social media.
3. I avoid Facebook.
4. Facebook online book club, limited success.
5. I think most see social as social and work as work.
6. I use email with peers.

Ways that the educators gave of using social media in teaching with their students included announcements, collaboration, communications, discussion, events, group chats, peer homework, platform, projects, publishing, sharing, and songs.

Some of the social media teaching tools mentioned were

blogs	Google+	Telegram
Duolingo	Instagram	Twitter
Edmodo	Kahoot!	Viber
EdPuzzle	Memrise	Whatsapp
Facebook	Messenger	Wikis
Google Docs,	PBWorks	YouTube
Google translate	TED talks	

For teaching, YouTube was again salient (mentioned in 10 of 60 responses). One respondent noted that Facebook was used decreasingly these days.

Again, the reasons not to use social media with students were interesting and varied:

1. Privacy laws in Italy prevent teachers using social media with students.
2. College does not allow. Used to use in past college.
3. Mostly, I'd like students to talk with each other face-to-face.
4. No need, we have other ICT like Moodle, Google+, emails.
5. I have not found a sufficiently strong pedagogical purpose for which to use it. Moodle provides enough opportunities for interaction.
6. Does not seem relevant.
7. I have enough trouble getting them into the main system where they can access the things I need to do ... have occasionally considered whether nipping round sheep dog like and trying to herd them into spaces / tasks they intend to (but don't always find time to) complete would be effective, but haven't resorted to it yet.
8. I use social media for personal, social reasons and for professional development.
    - Students tend to use it for social, personal reasons and teachers engaging them there may intrude into their personal space.
    - It can also blur personal/professional boundaries and appear inappropriate.

Answers 4 and 5 point out a limitation in survey data such as this. Inclusion of tools such as Moodle and Google+ in answers explaining why they don't use social media suggests that respondents don't have a common idea of what constitutes social media. Today's Wikipedia definition is "interactive computer-mediated technologies that facilitate the creation and sharing of information, ideas, career interests and other forms of expression via virtual communities and networks." By this definition, Moodle and Google+ are in fact social media.

Conclusion

Social media-facilitated collaboration in CoPs shows teachers how utilizing social media creatively with one another not only helps them model social media techniques most effective in learning from one another, but this informs the teaching practices of everyone in the participatory culture. When practices change, then novel techniques for using social media with students can develop, such as those reported in the research conducted here. As use of social media becomes normalized for language teaching, and as the computers themselves are seen as no more integral to the process of language learning than are overhead projectors, we might consider the acronym describing our field to be SMALL, or social media assisted language learning.

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