

Social Media Usage in Higher Education

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## Introduction

Social media tools such as YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter are being used with increasing frequency in higher education. Appropriate usage of these tools in an educational environment offers the opportunity for a variety of benefits. Current incoming freshman, who are of the Millennial Generation, are already familiar with and enjoy using social media, creating one very common rationale for using these tools in the classroom. However, just because students are comfortable using social media for socializing does not automatically mean that they are comfortable or know how to use social media for education or business related collaboration. Mullen and Wedwick (2008) argue that being able to use such tools to collaborate effectively will be a necessary component of being considered literate in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Therefore, simply teaching students how to use these social tools for productive collaborative purposes is important in and of itself. On another level, teachers should consider social media as a pedagogical tool within their arsenal for helping students understand instructional content. In this literature review, I will explore both beneficial reasons for incorporating social media in the classroom, while also considering possible objections and areas of concerns in implementation. Finally, I will offer several suggestions for successfully implementing social media in the classroom.

Why use social media in the classroom? Much has been written about the ways that Millennials learn and interact with the world, often casting those in the cohort as lazy, entitled narcissists. (Stein, 2013). Rather than characterizing Millennials negatively, it may be more productive to simply characterize them as different, and then consider how to best teach to these differences. Dede (2005) studied the ways that Millennials learn best and concluded that these learning styles can be applied across multiple generations with positive learning outcomes. Dede offers the following learning styles for Millennials:

1. Fluency based in multiple media, valuing each for the types of communication, activities, experiences, and expressions it empowers.
2. Learning based on collectively seeking, sieving, and synthesizing experiences rather than individually locating and absorbing information from a single best source.
3. Active learning based on both real and simulated experiences that include frequent opportunity for reflection.
4. Expression through non-linear, associated webs of representations rather than linear 'stories' (*e.g.*, authoring a simulation and a webpage to express understanding, rather than a paper).
5. Co-design of learning experiences personalized to individual needs and preferences (p. 15.15)

## Concerns and Opposition to Implementation

Glancing through the learning styles, one can already begin to imagine how these might match well with the implementation of social media in the classroom,

making it an important tool because it may be highly adaptable to the learning style of Millennials. Despite this potential, many instructors are still hesitant to use social media. The age of the instructor appears to make a difference. Moran, Seaman, and Tinti-Kane (2012) found that faculty members, especially those who were born before about 1970, have greater concerns about privacy, plagiarism, and the time required to properly use social media. Abe and Jordan (2013) echo the concern that using sites like Facebook and Twitter will take too much time, asking “will the time spent explaining how to effectively use social media take away from the subject matter educators currently concentrate on in their courses?” (p. 20).

Further concerns raised by Abe and Jordan include the worry that the textual nature of social media will eliminate access to important nonverbal cues that are part of the instructor-student relationship. Additionally, assignments posted via social media are publically accessible and typically archived indefinitely. Discussions that are appropriate in an educational context may not appear that way to employers who are googling students as potential employees in the future: “An educational conversation now may not look ‘educational’ to an employer long term, particularly if the content of the assignment or conversation is perceived as a sensitive topic (*e.g.*, politics, religion, gender equality)” (p. 19). Jovanovic, Chiong, and Wiese (2012) also argue that the use of social media may lead to students wasting time browsing Facebook socially when they should be using it educationally. Finally, some students have raised objections to being required to use social media as part of an assignment, noting that they worried instructors would use social media to get information about them (Abe and Jordan), or simply would prefer that their social space not be used for educational purposes (VanDoorn and Eklund, 2013, p. 6).

Despite these concerns from both faculty members and students, many are still using social media in the classroom. Cao, Ajjan, and Hong (2013) researched factors that would influence instructor likelihood to adopt social media in the classroom and determined that task-technology compatibility was the most significant positive predictor of the use of social media in college teaching. Perceived usefulness and external pressures also motivated use (p. 588).

## Benefits of Implementation

As with all tools, social media has potential drawbacks. The question, then, is whether or not there are also significant benefits to using this particular tool. Research has shown that the use of social media positively influences both student satisfaction and learning outcomes, and these increase the more than instructors used social media (Cao, Ajjan, and Hong, p. 591; Cao & Hong, 2011). Jovanovic et al. reported additional benefits to using Facebook groups as part of a course: “More than half of them [the students in the study] reported that it enhances the sense of community within the learning environment, the learning process, and class discussions, makes the classes more interesting, and – as a learning tool – engages students” (p. 41).

VanDoorn and Eklund, in a study of social media tools, determined that rapid responses by instructors facilitated by social media is important to students and heightened the sense of immediacy (p. 7). In contrast with faculty members' concerns that important nonverbal information would obstruct communication, many students appreciate the comparatively low pressure and "faceless" communication opportunities afforded by text-based opportunities, even making up for some of the nonverbal communication through the use of emoticons (p. 9). Although learning management systems such as Blackboard or Moodle also offer this type of textual interaction, Tess (2013) reports that engagement, as measured by the number of posts, can be as much as four times higher on social networks than a traditional learning management system.

Social media tools also allow access to information in a more immediate manner than something like a textbook, allowing for greater flexibility (VanDoorn and Eklund; Jovanovic et al.). Thomas and Thomas (2012) argue that "alongside traditional teaching techniques, social media can be continually developed around any topic and incorporate current business events in the learning process as the events themselves unfold" (p. 365). Presenting up to date information and helping students understand material in the context of current events is one aspect of the classroom that can benefit greatly from the additional of social media.

## Suggestions for Use

In thinking through the potential benefits and drawbacks, one thing that stands out to me is that many of the drawbacks to using social media may be mitigated through an appropriate instructional process. Several of my suggestions for implementing social media will be based on ways that one can avoid these problems.

### 1. Discuss Privacy Explicitly

Many popular social networking sites, and specifically Facebook, offer extensive privacy settings that would allow students to keep their social media profiles hidden from faculty members even while engaging in a class-related group. Further, these postings can be excluded from search engines that would allow employers to find them. Making students aware of these settings and discussing how to set them appropriately would help overcome many concerns. Educational conversations would not be publically available to future employers, and instructors would not have access to students' personal profiles. Even students who frequently use these social media tools may not be aware of these settings, so explicitly discussing them is an important step in successfully using social media. Even if using a particular tool where these privacy settings are not available, it is important to make students aware of the fact that their postings will be public and what the possible implications of this may be.

## 2. Model Best-Use Practices

It's important for us as instructors to remember that students primarily use these tools socially. For many, an academic use will not come naturally. Therefore, we ought to use the social media tools in a way that demonstrates its best uses. For example, in online courses I've taught, I have commented and been much more active in the discussion board during the beginning of the course as a way to model the type of interaction I expect on such a forum. A similar strategy can be used with any social media tool, and doing so is much easier if it's a tool we are already comfortable using. Along those lines, I recommend only assigning social media tools to students if you are comfortable using them. For example, if you've never used Twitter before, don't assign it your students! Instead, learn about it and begin to use it professionally before attempting to implement it in the classroom. This commitment can make a big difference and will be apparent to students.

I use Twitter as a way to network with others in my field and to share the work I'm doing as well. Because I follow people who work in the same field, my Twitter feed serves almost as a customized newspaper. Unlike Facebook where I've met most of my friends in person, I use Twitter to connect to professionals I've never met personally. I see links to the latest work and news in my field, often directly from the authors themselves, and I can retweet these and reply to the original posters to discuss them. Allowing students to see the way I use this social media tool can serve as an example of a way to use it in a more professional manner for those who may not have experienced that particular way of using the site.

## 3. Make Assessment Strategies Clear

Bennett, Bishop, Dalgarno, Waycott, and Kennedy (2012) make the important observation about the use of social media in the classroom that while there are surface similarities to educational objectives, there are also deep incongruities: "Web 2.0 values participation, however minor or major, above recognition of an individual's contribution, thereby de-emphasizing authorship. This clashes with the remit of education to accredit individuals through progress towards a qualification." At the institutional level, teachers ultimately have to assign grades, and so we need a way to evaluate the assignments. Being clear up front about how these assignments will be assessed will not only make grading easier for us, but make the assignment clear for students as well. Many social media projects will be multi-modal, and thus need to take into account more elements of the work required for the project.

Ball (2012) highlights several strategies for grading multimedia assignments, including suggestions from the Institute for Multimedia Literacy. These suggestions include assessing the conceptual core of the project, the research component, the form and content, and the creative realizations. Although there are many alternative ways of assessing such assignment, I believe these guidelines offer a good general outline of what we need to consider in addition to the traditional research component of assignments. Additionally, Ball suggests we should remember when implementing multimedia – or social media - that the project should achieve something not possible on paper. This leads us straight into my next suggestion.

#### 4. Ensure Task-Technology Compatibility

One of the major obstacles to implementing social media successfully in the classroom is a problem of abundance – in other words, the large variety of tools that are included under the umbrella of the term social media, as well as how often these tools evolve and update. Because of this, my recommendation is that instructors stop thinking in terms of “social media” as a whole, and instead start thinking about individual tools, such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, *etc.* Task-technology compatibility is one of the greatest predictors of social media success in the classroom setting, but this compatibility is best determined on the level of the individual tool. In other words, we should incorporate a discrete tool like Facebook into an assignment, not a vague tool like “social media.”

In order to do this, we can think about how a particular tool can help us achieve a particular course objective or learning outcome. Looking at our objectives, some tools might make more sense than others. If our objective includes better communication and interaction with peers inside the class, a Facebook group presents itself as a more compatible match. However, if our objective includes students communicating with other professionals in the field and seeing how the topic is relevant in contemporary terms, an assignment utilizing Twitter would be a more compatible match.

Finally, although the novelty of technology itself has long been enough to engage students in an assignment, this is no longer always the case: “the Internet is no longer inherently cool, and is even a little boring” (Perry, 2013). Bennett et al. found this attitude in students who participated in a study on using Web 2.0 tools in the classroom: “While students indicated they enjoyed identifying chemistry concepts in everyday phenomenon [through image sharing on Flickr], they also complained that this did not help them do better in their assessment tasks. So, although there was a high level of engagement in the activity, students felt it did not fit clearly into the dominant educational practices in their course” (p. 533). When creating assignments using social media, it is extremely important to make sure we are not simply integrating technology for the sake of technology; instead let us ask what objective or outcome will it support.

#### 5. Incorporate Bloom’s Taxonomy

One of the best strategies for beginning to make the connection in task-technology compatibility is suggested by Bosman and Zagenczyk (2011). They propose that “each of Bloom’s [Taxonomy] components can be highlighted using different social media tools” (p. 3). Through this lens, they suggest the following task-technology example matches:

- Remembering and social bookmarking (Delicious, Pinterest)
- Understanding and social blogging (Wordpress, Tumblr)
- Applying and social file sharing (Google Docs, Wikis)
- Analyzing and social collaboration (Skype, Oovoo)
- Evaluating and social decision making (Kluster, Doodle)
- Creating and social creativity sharing (Scribed, YouTube)

Using Bloom's Taxonomy in this way can help us ensure our task-technology compatibility. The tools matched with each level are merely suggestions; it's certainly possible that various Web 2.0 and social media tools can be used for multiple levels. However, beginning to think of social media tools in this manner has been very effective for me in brainstorming ways to incorporate these tools in my own assignments.

## Conclusion

Social media is an exciting and constantly changing tool that is available for use in the classroom and is beneficial because it engages students through a medium in which they are already interested and present, as well as offering a greater variety of assignments that can help achieve objectives at various levels of Bloom's Taxonomy in a way that is vibrant and current. Early adoption of social media in the classroom has seen mixed results, but we can learn from these early uses and improve the ways that we use social media in higher education. A major part of these improvements is simply being more explicit and clear in the way that we use social media and in the ways that we explain our use of social media to students. As with all assignments, it is important to connect the assignments to course objectives.

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