

Thriving *in* Academe

REFLECTIONS ON HELPING STUDENTS LEARN

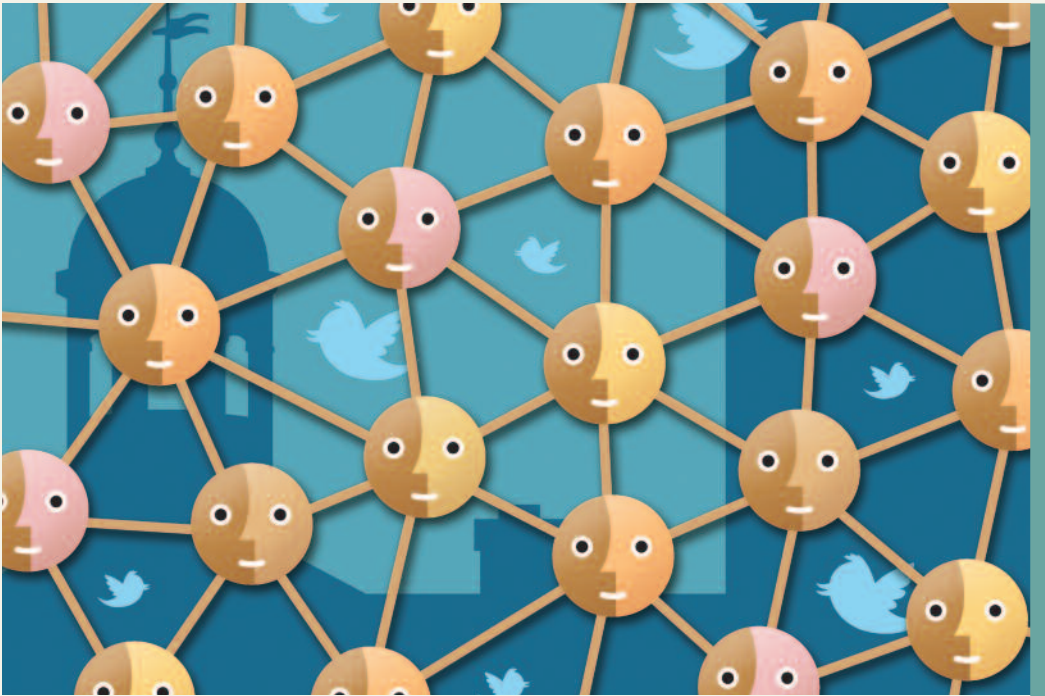
Meet Your Students Where They Are: Social Media

Effective educational practices suggest that we engage our students in order to improve educational outcomes. We're used to engaging students in the real world, now it's time to engage them in social online spaces like Facebook and Twitter.

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Online social networking has become an integral space for many of our students to live out their daily personal interactions. A large percentage of our students are using social media from the moment they wake up (Mashable, 2010). Data recently collected by Rey shows that college students spend an average of one hour and 40 minutes per day on Facebook. With often-misguided fears and feeling the need to keep personal and professional relationships separate, many faculty and administrators tend to steer clear of online social space. But this is as important a space to engage students as is the classroom, lab, or student union.

Research indicates that outside of stopping by the student's residence hall or running into them at coffee shops and discussing course content, there is not another method that is as ubiquitous, cost-effective, or engaging as co-opting emerging social media like Twitter to enhance student-student, student-faculty, and student-content engagement outside of class. In a time of drastic budget cuts, campuses should not be spending money on expensive and unwieldy learning management systems. Our fiscal constraints combined with a changing workforce that continues to enjoy the flexibility of the faculty role, this student-faculty engagement can happen as effectively from home as it can from your drab, entropic campus closet/office.



Meet Greg and Rey



Greg Heiberger is an instructor, academic advisor, and coordinator of the Pre-Health Professional program at South Dakota

State University. He has provided more than 60 presentations to students, faculty, and administrators through consultations and workshops. He can be reached at greg.heiberger@sdsu.edu or on Twitter @greg_heiberger.



Reynol Junco is an associate professor in the department of Academic Development and Counseling and Director of Disability Services

at Lock Haven University. He is the author of two books, "Connecting to the Net: Generation: What Higher Education Professionals Need to Know About Today's Students," and "Using Emerging Technologies." For the latter, he analyzed social media's role in student engagement, technology's potential to improve retention, and blogs' potential to improve writing skills. He has given more than 50 talks and workshops on topics such as: how technology impacts colleges students; using social media in educationally relevant ways; teaching students about privacy; marketing university programs and services through social media; and developing effective first-year seminars.

Social Media, Teaching, and Learning

Research based strategies to increase engagement, grades, and persistence through social media

"Students spend more time on Facebook than in class or studying," "Student suspended for threats made on Twitter," "Faculty fired for Facebook." ... Headlines like these skew our thinking about social media and its effect on college students, and frequent comments about our students wasting time on social media just adds fuel to the fire. Even if we hypothesize that this is true for many students, do we not owe it to them and their future workforce colleagues to help them change? Most would argue that stopping students' use of Facebook is

SO WHAT IS AN ETHICAL EDUCATOR TO DO? LEVERAGE THIS NEW MEDIA TO MEET YOUR NEEDS AND THOSE OF YOUR STUDENTS.

impossible. It also should be argued that these sites help establish and maintain very positive interactions and social connections. Research even shows that their use can be linked to better grades, engagement, satisfaction with the university experience, and persistence from first to second year.

So what is an ethical educator to do? Leverage this new media to meet your needs and those of your students. We often say

TALES FROM THE FIELD > GREG'S INTRODUCTION TO SOCIAL MEDIA

As a new professional in higher education in the early days of Facebook, I saw its instant pull on students and figured (as I'm sure many of us did) that it was not a good thing. But I soon

learned, I was wrong. The social network kept my student orientation leaders in touch with incoming freshmen long after their "work" was done, and I saw the value in these interactions. Consequently,

we began creating and maintaining Facebook groups for incoming students. Future research led me to see positive links between students' social media use and engagement in campus activities, and

also their feelings of connectedness to friends. In 2009, Rey and I began testing the potential of Twitter to increase engagement and grades. At first, we reasoned Twitter would be too truncated, too

unstable, and too simplistic to continue course discussions outside of official class-time. Wow, were we wrong! For details of the study see: Junco, Heiberger, & Loken (2010).

we should “meet students where they are” — but it doesn’t make sense to go to the student union to teach chemistry lab skills.

So how should you use social media? Content matters should always drive your pedagogical and curricular decisions. For example, students in Physics could be asked to watch a TED talk on string theory (http://www.ted.com/talks/brian_greene_on_string_theory.html) and then discuss it with renowned physicists and educators on the site. Future healthcare professionals could create and maintain a Facebook page or Twitter account that shares risks and precautions to take for diabetics. Political science students could use Twitter to keep abreast of breaking news and have real-time, outside-of-class discussions about U.S. budget cuts or the overthrow of a Middle East dictator. Students can share links, answer questions from the instructor, and even pose questions to fellow students.

In the first and only published controlled study of social media as an educational intervention, it was shown to be an effective teaching medium. Students in the study used Twitter to discuss a common reading, answer questions relating to other courses, and formulate study groups for Biology and Chemistry courses.

Become an expert—or at least find confidence in what you know.

Like any new venture in teaching and learning this will require an initial and sustained

investment. Find and develop relationships with colleagues near and far (you can stay connected via social media) who will learn alongside you.

Businesses that are creating social-media products to sell on college campuses can be great resources for how to implement social media in your classroom. One company, RedRover, helps students orient to your campus by connecting them to clubs, majors, and other students with similar interests. Inigral engages and connect students pre-admission, and Sophia is a social media-based learning environment relying on peer-to-peer learning.

Even if your campus isn’t ready to jump head-first and spend money, these companies regularly offer free webinars and other training opportunities. Don’t get discouraged—you may need to wait for a critical mass to develop on your campus before these pedagogies are widely accepted. But as soon as your colleagues see the success you are having, they will get on board.

Innovate, Pilot, and Assess

As with any new teaching method, pilot your ideas and strategies with students and then rigorously assess them. Use both quantitative and qualitative feedback to assure accuracy in your assessment. Don’t let any one assessment be the sole driving force for your decisions.

Social media can span your students’ college experience as well as your campus’

administrative structure. Just as student engagement is not a pedagogy for student affairs alone, social media should not be used merely by auxiliary units. Whether you work in Admissions, serve as Dean of the Medical School, or teach, social media is a proven effective means of distributing information, making connections to students and between them, and most importantly helping them learn.

Realize that new teaching methods and technologies will take time for you and your students to adapt to, try it again next semester with a few tweaks and don’t give up too soon.

Get excited; find ways that you can benefit from social media and it will help you motivate your students!

Why are you apprehensive about using social media in education? Maybe you say you didn’t learn this way when you were an

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■ BEST PRACTICES > INCORPORATING SOCIAL MEDIA

There are great examples of professionals using social media to meet their students where they are. For instance, T.J. Logan, associate director of housing at the University of Florida, uses Facebook to allow incoming students to self-match with roommates. Art Esposito, director of Discovery Advising at Virginia Commonwealth University, uses his Face-

book profile to post tips, videos about common suggestions he makes to student advisees, and answers to their questions. At UW-Waukesha, director of university marketing and communications, Liz Gross uses Facebook ads to entice fans to the school’s Facebook page, where they receive updates, ask questions about campus, and connect with current students and

faculty. Since they are a two-year school serving mainly one county, she uses Twitter to “listen” to chatter from the local area and “follow” community members who may be potential students or campus partners. Many faculty are using blogs to enhance student writing skills and to help them develop their prose for an online audience. This semester, Rey is having students



in his graduate-level Social Media in Higher Education course blog about weekly readings and discussions—a model based on what Associate Dean in Liberal Arts at Penn State University Chris Long is doing with his philosophy courses.

undergrad, back in the good ol' days.... but actually, you did. You studied in the student union, at the library, or at the coffee shop and had meaningful conversations and debates with your peers and advisors. Unless you are currently able to do that with all (yes I said "all") of your students, you are doing yourself and your profession a disservice by not finding ways to engage students outside of the formal classroom. Many faculty were not "taught to teach" but became students of our disciplines as we accumulated our advanced degrees. If we did learn teaching pedagogy along the way, it certainly can be translated to social media.

Teaching with social media will not be successful if you are not personally and professionally invested. It takes time to find its value and invest in its success, but you must value it as highly as teaching face-to-face. You wouldn't assign a book to your students if you didn't value it. In the same way, it will be difficult to encourage your students to find value in social media if you do not do so yourself.

In times of fiscal belt-tightening, the use of social media for professional development is a great way for faculty to start finding that value. Involve yourself in one of many weekly discussions on Twitter about higher ed, like #SACHAT, #SADOC, #EDCHAT, #PHDCHAT, #EDTECH, and #MUSEDCHAT. Similarly, multiple Facebook pages created for professional organizations or by faculty colleagues have wonderful teaching, learning, and pedagogical resources.

Use social media outside of your formal learning environment to post and converse about interesting ideas and topics, creating a personal learning network (PLN). Many professional conferences now use Twitter hashtags before, during, and after conferences for participants to discuss and share content, analysis, and reactions. Even if you can't attend in person, participate in the backchannel.

For those of us who are introverts, we may realize the value of networking for professional development but we sometimes don't fully realize its benefits because we can't put ourselves out there at conferences, meetings and the like. Social media allows us to share our ideas and connect with others who will challenge and support us throughout our career as faculty.

ISSUES TO CONSIDER

CAN SOCIAL MEDIA BE USED EFFECTIVELY WITH ANY COURSE?

Generally, yes—but as with any new curricular intervention, the use of social media should be tied to the learning outcomes for that course or course activity.

HOW CAN I INTEGRATE SOCIAL MEDIA IN RELEVANT WAYS ON A COMMUNITY COLLEGE CAMPUS?

The dynamics of the community college student body (i.e., mostly commuter, part-time, returning students), make this an excellent population to engage with using social media. You can help students build and strengthen their ties to the institution, connect with industry/business partners and/or students at four-year campuses, and build a personal learning network.

HOW MUCH TIME WILL IT TAKE FOR ME TO INTEGRATE SOCIAL MEDIA IN WHAT I DO?

Because social media is so diverse and each faculty has his or her own learning curve, this is highly dependent on the level of integration into the coursework. Programs like SocialOomph.com or

TweetDeck can help you manage multiple accounts and even pre-schedule planned updates to your social media accounts.

WHAT ABOUT SECURITY AND PRIVACY?

Social media websites, services, and applications are generally open or public and therefore, it is important to educate students regarding information they share online. If integrating social media into a course, it is important to explain to students the limits of the services they'll be using.

WILL ALL OF MY STUDENTS KNOW HOW TO USE SOCIAL MEDIA?

Although most of today's traditional-aged college students are tech-savvy, a digital divide remains—there are persistent differences in student access and use based on age, gender, socioeconomic status, race/ethnicity, and even gender. The more diverse your student body, the more important it will be to make sure that all of your students are "on the same page" when it comes to social media sites. You can do this by making sure that you teach all of your students how to access and use the sites



you will use with them.

WILL STUDENTS USE SOCIAL MEDIA FOR EDUCATIONAL PURPOSES?

Our research shows that students will use social media in educationally-relevant ways. Be prepared to explain how social media will be integrated into your course and how it will benefit their learning.

I'VE READ ABOUT USING TWITTER IN MY COURSES, BUT CAN YOU REALLY COMMUNICATE MEANINGFULLY IN <140 CHARACTERS?

Twitter is not meant to be a replacement for standard prose, instead, it is a useful microblogging and communication tool. Our research shows that students who were encouraged to use Twitter in educationally-relevant ways as part of a course were more engaged in the real world and had higher grades than a control group.

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