Interested in incorporating social media into your teaching but wary of the effort it might take? According to the research reviewed by Paige Abe and Nickolas A. Jordan, the challenge may be well worth it in terms of increased student engagement.

By Paige Abe and Nickolas A. Jordan

Integrating Social Media Into the Classroom Curriculum

OVER THE PAST DECADE, SOCIAL MEDIA AND TECHNOLOGY have become prevalent in the day-to-day life of many college and university students. In 2007, the Higher Education Research Institute found that 94 percent of first-year college students spent time on social networking sites in a typical week. From Skype to Twitter to Facebook, these modes of social media are often used as tools to keep in touch with friends and family, socialize, and share personal opinions. Considering that such a high percentage of students are spending time on social networking sites, college faculty and administrators may benefit from integrating social media into their curriculum to serve as a useful tool to enhance student learning.

Is the use of social media in the classroom worth the hassle? Andreas Shroeder, Shailey Minocha, and Christoph Schneider share in the *Journal of Computer Assisted Learning* that "integrating these applications [social media software] into learning and teaching practices has the potential to trigger significant educational innovations as they enable new forms of interactive and collaborative learning" (p. 169). Social media provides educators with the exciting new opportunity to connect with students in a manner that continues to provoke thought and discussion outside of the classroom setting. The use of social media encourages students to interact with one another and may increase engagement and interest in the course content. Though several studies outlined in this article call for further research to bolster their findings, in many cases the benefits of using social media appear to outweigh the limitations.

As Ronald Berk shares in *Transformative Dialogues: Teaching & Learning Journal*, the role of social media has expanded from recreational use to supplementing learning in the classroom environment. More and more research is being conducted to evaluate the impact of social media in the classroom. In 2011, Mike Moran, Jeff Seaman, and Hester Tinti-Kane reported on a social media survey that revealed "nearly two-thirds of all teaching faculty have used social media in their class sessions … and 30% have posted content for students to view outside class" (p. 11). Not only are faculty use and awareness of social media being assessed, but researchers are also examining student perceptions

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of social media. In the *Journal of Instructional Pedagogies*, Leigh Browning, R. Nicholas Gerlich, and Lori Westermann developed a Social Media Affinity Scale to gauge male and female perceptions of social media. Both sexes perceived social media favorably, with no significant difference in perception between the two. According to Browning, Gerlich, and Westermann, this openness to social media provides an "opportunity for educators to speak to students in a way they are likely to be reached" (p. 7).

According to C. Michael Elavsky, Cristina Mislan, and Steriani Elavsky, educators are paying attention to trends in social media, as demonstrated by incorporating blogs, wikis, podcasts, and social networking websites in the classroom curriculum. Many of these social media resources are used not only to facilitate discussion in the classroom, but also to serve as a reflection tool through instructing students to submit blog entries or hold discourse via Twitter to continue critical discussion of classroom topics.

Why is it important to integrate social media into the curriculum? Berk asserts that the students of today were "born with a chip" (p. 3). Essentially, today's traditionally aged college students (i.e., millennials, characterized by birth between the years of 1982 and 2004) "have grown up with Sesame Street, MTV, reality TV, the Internet, PCs/Macs, video games, Facebook,

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MySpace, Twitter, Flickr, Skype, iPods, iPhones, PDAs, and TV/DVD remotes as appendages to their bodies" (pp. 3–4). Berk states that millennial students are technology-savvy, rely on search engines to find information, are interested in multimedia, have a short attention span, and multitask on everything. Needless to say, having access to so many different modes of social connection and communication may serve to overstimulate students. For example, usage of smartphones and laptops often serves to distract students from paying attention during class. It is not hard to extrapolate that student disengagement in the classroom may occur on an even greater scale in large lecture-style courses, where students are less likely to be "called out" by their professor. Elavsky, Mislan, and Elavsky state that larger classes make it relatively simple to hide a smartphone while texting or pretend to type notes on a laptop while really checking Facebook or email. Social media, in other words, has the potential to draw students' attention away from the lecture content. While one may argue that students have historically found ways to become distracted in the classroom, students' fixation on social media proves to be a more powerful distraction than most. This reality makes it critical for university instructors and administrators to figure out what can be done to combat these distractions in the classroom.

Elavsky and his coauthors took note of student disengagement in their large lecture class and decided to integrate the use of Twitter into the course to aid in facilitating student participation and engagement. In order to combat the temptation of checking one's email or Facebook during class, using social media (such as Twitter) in the classroom creates a new pattern of social encounter. Through the entire course of the semester, Twitter was used to allow students to answer questions and share opinions by "Tweeting" during class and to fulfill assignments outside of class. Such assignments consisted of providing a prompt for students to respond to. Through the use of a "hashtag" keyword (e.g., #assignment) students could also view their classmates' responses to the prompt.

At the end of the semester, they distributed a survey to students from the large lecture class and found that their perception of Twitter usage for the class was generally positive. Using Twitter improved enthusiasm and participation for the course. However, the findings were limited in scope considering some students did not actively or regularly engage in the Twitter assignments. This leads one to consider how students who are disengaged in the classroom may be encouraged to participate using social media.

Currently, social media use in the classroom has a lot of potential and room to grow. Elavsky, Mislan, and Elavsky shared that Twitter has the distinct ability to blur the lines between online and offline communication. By blending face-to-face and online modes of communication into one, students are free to participate and engage in the course in whichever manner they choose. For example, if a student does not feel comfortable speaking in a classroom of more than 100 students, they may post a "Tweet" to contribute to class discussion.

Another practical way in which social media may be used in the classroom is when individuals are physically, financially, or geographically unable to travel to the classroom. One professor was invited to guest lecture at a university but was unable to procure the funding for travel. This issue was resolved through the use of Skype, which proved to be a satisfactory experience for the professor. As Mark Blankenship shares in *Education Digest*, "Except for the fact that I never shared a physical space with them, my experience with the students was remarkably similar to the experience I've had with students in the actual world" (p. 39). The professor was able to see and hear the students and vice versa, which simulated a familiar classroom environment. The use of Skype and similar media may prove useful for students who are long-distance learners or have physical disabilities that render them unable to navigate campus on their own.

Howard Rheingold is a popular figure in the realm of using social media in higher education. Though students know *how* to use social media to communicate with others, Rheingold states that students must be *taught* to use social media in an educational context. Rheingold posits that "there is nothing innate about

knowing how to apply those acquired skills to the processes of civil society, scientific or scholarly innovation, or economic production" (p. 2). This brings to light an important point for educators to consider. In order to effectively integrate social media into the course curriculum, it is necessary to instruct students in using social media critically and intentionally to optimize learning outcomes. In other words, as Schroeder, Minocha, and Schneider state, "it is not enough to set up the activities and leave it to the students to collaborate and share" (p. 165).

Teaching students to use social media in an educational context could be as simple as a modeling of its use as an instructor. For example, an instructor could openly share with students what scholars they "follow" via Twitter or a professional Facebook page built to attract individuals to a specific cause. Further, assignments can be built around the use of social media. This could take the form of creating real-time discussion groups between classes around the world over Skype or even having students develop educational-specific Twitter handles that provide links to class-related materials that they share in the moment. One of the authors of this work uses Skype regularly to bring in experts on specific issues that would otherwise be out of reach financially. Just as educators facilitate discussion and share content in the classroom, it is up to them to ensure that students are gaining the same benefits through their usage of social media.

A study conducted by Rey Junco, Greg Heiberger, and Eric Loken supports student learning through use of Twitter as a medium to facilitate book discussion, give students a low-stress way to ask questions, share class and campus event reminders, provide academic support, and help students connect with one another. Junco, Heiberger, and Loken found that "using Twitter in educationally relevant ways had a positive effect on student engagement" based on the results of a pre- and post-test (p. 128). Integrating the use of Twitter in many different aspects of the course allowed students to participate in whichever way would best supplement their learning and needs. Essentially, Junco, Heiberger, and Loken were able to integrate Twitter into the course in such a way as to support students' academic and psychosocial devel-

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opment. This study demonstrates that social media can enhance student learning. However, one limitation of this study was that although student engagement appeared to increase, it may have been due to the fact that "Twitter lent itself more to a conversation between students and faculty" than the control group experienced (p. 129).

In addition to teaching students how to use social media in an educational context, Joseph P. Mazer, Richard E. Murphy, and Cheri J. Simonds state that educators may enhance student learning and engagement by meeting students in their own territory. Facebook serves as a popular medium for students to connect with one another. Educators may make themselves appear to be easier to relate to when connecting to students through Facebook. A study conducted by Mazer, Murphy, and Simonds found that "high teacher self-disclosure … may lead students to higher levels of anticipated motivation and affective learning and lend to a more comfortable classroom climate" (p. 12). In this study, Facebook provided educators with the opportunity to engage students using a medium that they are familiar and comfortable with. Additionally, the study by Moran, Seaman, and Tinti-Kane revealed that of faculty who use social media for professional purposes and in the classroom, 45 percent used Facebook.

On the other hand, not all educators may feel comfortable increasing their level of self-disclosure with students. According to Lori Lockyer and John Patterson, faculty concerns may arise from the manner in which social media imposes "blurring of the lines between the personal and professional roles of the lecturer and students" (p. 533). Greg Heiberger and Ruth Harper state that educators have reported feeling as if they are invading the so-called territory of the younger generation and replacing real relationships with electronic relationships. Some students may agree, wishing to keep their Facebook and other social media pages separate from their academics and coursework. Students reported being concerned that

faculty would use their Facebook to "get gossip or spy" on them.

Though social media sites such as Facebook may enable educators to connect with their students, Mazer, Murphy, and Simonds share that educators also "run the risk of harming their credibility if they utilize Facebook" (p. 3). This "risk" depends on what the educator chooses to disclose about themselves on their Facebook, which may either positively or negatively alter students' perceptions of them. While it is unreasonable to expect educators to increase their level of self-disclosure through social media such as Facebook, it is important to recognize the benefits of connecting with students as well as to consider alternative ways in which students may be motivated to participate in the classroom. The millennial generation of today is a generation that constantly self-discloses via Facebook status updates, Tweets (via Twitter), and blogging. From an educator standpoint, self-disclosure to students has the potential to create a "buy-in" and rapport with students that may not have been previously established.

Despite perceived benefits of using social media in the classroom environment, several barriers still exist in using social media to communicate. For example, Rey Junco and Arthur W. Chickering state that social media may cause students and educators to miss out on the nonverbal aspect of communication such as facial expressions, body language, vocal tone, and volume, which may lead to misunderstandings or misinterpretation of content. When posting personal content online, students do not necessarily recognize the implications their decisions may have ten years down the road. Employers are increasingly checking the Facebook pages of potential employees. 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).

Another challenge posed by social media includes the amount of time it may take to use sites like Twitter

and Facebook to supplement course content. Though most millennial students are tech-savvy, not all students may be familiar with social media (i.e., non-traditionally aged students). Lockyer and Patterson state that "lecturers may have to play a considerable technical support role in helping students who are new to such technologies" (p. 533). Do educators have the time it takes to teach students how to use social media? Will the time spent explaining how to effectively use social media take away from the subject matter educators currently concentrate on in their courses? Additionally, students and educators alike may experience technical difficulties, making it necessary to establish a back-up plan in the event of a technological failure.

Despite the time commitment and difficulties social media may present to faculty, the survey conducted by Moran, Seaman, and Tinti-Kane revealed that "faculty see considerable value in many social media sites for use in class" (p. 16), particularly online video found on YouTube or other sites. Seventy percent of faculty who took the survey agreed with the statement "Video, podcasts, blogs, and wikis are valuable tools for teaching" (p. 16). Social media can be integrated into the curriculum in a manner that is intuitive and informative, such as showing a video that serves to illustrate a point relevant to the lecture content.

Schroeder, Monicha, and Schneider warn that "micro-blogging applications (e.g., Twitter) are still in the early phases of acceptance by mainstream internet users" (p. 161). This is an important factor to consider both now and in the future as social media continues to evolve—how do students feel about particular social media applications? The difficulty posed by the rapid development of social media is that once educators have figured out how to integrate sites such as Twitter or YouTube videos into their curriculum, one or more new social media sites or trends may have sprung into existence, thus starting the entire learning process over again and rendering the use of older forms of social media obsolete.

The majority of student perceptions regarding the use of social media in the classroom are positive. Likewise, many faculty members seem to be aware of the different types of social media and how it may be used in the classroom. From YouTube to Twitter to Skype, social media offers many benefits to both educators and students alike, such as encouraging real-time student engagement in courses to enhancing the connection between educator and student. Additionally, Rheingold shares that social networks and media "enable broader, faster, and lower cost coordination of activi-

ties" (p. 25). Social media can serve as a cost-efficient tool for educators to use, as well as an effective tool to supplement and augment the delivery of course material and development of important intellectual skills.

NOTES

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