Integrating Social Media into Online Education

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Online education has a reputation for being insular and isolating, with low levels of participation, disconnected from the creative, discursive, and tumultuous world of social media.[1] Bringing social media into an online course might liven it up and burst the bubble, so to speak, of the learning management system and the online discussion forum, bringing the greater online world of social media into the classroom; inspiring richer, more authentic conversations; and giving learners greater access to outside resources. Today, every app, tool, and website has a social media component—from sharing videos on YouTube to sharing sandwich orders on the Subway app. It is only natural to want to bring that kind of functionality and technological cross talk to the online classroom. However, as both a researcher of social media in education and an educator who has implemented social media—successfully and . . . not-so-successfully—in blended and online classroom environments, I have found social media and online education to be compatible, but not an automatic fit. The integration of social media into online education, like all instructional design, is a challenge that requires planning, research, practice, and goal setting. This chapter will explore some of the challenges faced by librarians who attempt to integrate social media in online learning or are collaborating with educators who would like to add these tools to instruction.

Knowing Your Learners and Their Social Media Preferences

In 2014, I researched the use of Twitter as a means of discussion for five sections of an introductory undergraduate educational technology course at a large public university. The instructors and I hoped to replace typical online discussion forums, often seen as bereft of free-flowing and motivated conversation, with a social media environment.[2] After all, the world of social media is one of rampant discussion, while the online discussion forums typical of online courses are notoriously perceived as dull and lifeless.

The rise of hashtag culture helped us choose Twitter. By placing the pound sign before a word or phrase, a social media user can create an ad hoc group of other postings that use that same hashtag. This alleviated the rigmarole of students having to follow each other. By clicking on #techclass (the hashtag has since been changed), the students would see all posts using that hashtag.

The activity flopped. Over the semester, more than 100 students tweeted a little over 1,000 times, averaging around ten tweets per student for the entire semester. These were mostly short tweets about in-class activities, with a significant portion being pictures. This is the key statistic: not once did students hit the Reply button and respond to another's tweet. At the time, tweets were only 140 characters, hardly an insurmountable barrier to activity; yet, no one had the energy to respond to another.

This particular social media integration was chosen because it aligned with the notion of personal learning environments (PLEs), which support this kind of social media and Web 2.0 usage in education. In a PLE, the instructor—perhaps with the students—creates a learning environment built out of Web 2.0 and social media tools that resembles the manner in which students conduct their online life.[3] Students might even have autonomy to choose some of their

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tools and how they interact with these tools. For the instructors and me, the use of a Twitter hashtag to unite discussions seemed au courant, something that undergraduates would understand, as it matched our perception of their online behavior.

We should have known better. A poll on student social media usage conducted at the beginning of the class raised a serious flaw in our plan: only half of the class used Twitter on a regular basis, and later interviews with students confirmed this lack of interest in—if not outright antipathy to—Twitter.[4] Instagram, Pinterest, and the nascent Snapchat all featured higher student engagement and activity, and many students resented being forced to use a social media platform in which they had little interest.

An important factor in quality instructional design is learning the characteristics of your learner group, and this principle holds true when integrating social media into online education.[5] We failed our students by making assumptions about their social media use based on their age and undergraduate status, guided more by media portrayals and our biases than the actual data we had showing that Twitter was unpopular. Instagram was the most popular, so we should have pivoted to that as our source of discussion, especially given our students' propensity for posting pictures. In fact, we should have asked about that, too. Knowing learner characteristics is more than knowing what their favorite social media tool is. It means investigating how students interact online, what they choose to post, what technological affordances they prefer in a social network, and much more. It would be impossible, of course, to design a social media–integrated lesson that appealed to every student. Still, the research suggests that if they do not like a social media tool in real life, then they will most likely not like it in the classroom.

Building Relatedness

Self-determination theory (SDT) is a motivational theory that cites three human needs as being powerful intrinsic motivators: autonomy, competency, and relatedness.[6] Learners feel more internally motivated if they have more autonomy and control over their learning, if they feel competent while engaging in learning, and if they feel a sense of relatedness, of being understood. Perhaps so many gravitate to social media tools because the tools satisfy these three needs. Social media users can post what they want (autonomy) in a generally easy-to-use space (competency) and feel heard, while receiving feedback from others (relatedness).

Although learning managements systems (LMSs) often struggle to meet these three needs, the ability to generate relatedness most distinguishes social media from online education. In an online class environment, a student shares impersonal course materials with a small number of peers; on a social network, a student might reach thousands or even more. This relatedness deficit, combined with the perceived lack of autonomy on what can be shared in an online educational space, demotivates users; these may be factors in the oft-reported feelings of isolation in online learning.

A problem I have encountered is something I call—for lack of a catchy name!—the Personal-Educational Barrier, a reluctance on the part of students to mix their personal social media lives with their online educational lives. It is not difficult to see why students might want to keep their personal, autonomous profile separate, as their feed might contain information too intimate, or possibly too embarrassing, to share with the relative strangers in their online class. Even with social media integrated into a course, students might create new "professional" or "fake" accounts to interact with the course materials and each other. In the aforementioned failed Twitter activity, more than half the students created these blank accounts, which featured nothing but posts about the course, rather than the fully fleshed-out, human, relatable profiles of those who used Twitter in their personal lives. It would be difficult to relate to—or feel related to by—others when the social media profiles on the other end are relative blanks, thin on personal data. Students never checked the course hashtag because there was rarely anything new to read.

This lack of relatedness is a discussion dampener. Avoiding it means embracing the personal and encouraging sharing of student interests, goals, and feelings (within reason!), beyond the typical introductory posts that start most online classes. Make sure all discussions have a personal component. Find ways to intermingle personal content with the professional and instructional so that student social media profiles, even the fake ones, look vibrant and active. Encourage curatorial content usage—your retweets, shares, and repins, if you will—so that students can quickly and easily fill up their profiles with approved content. Even if it seems wholly extraneous or unnecessary, encouraging relatedness might have motivational effects in the long run. You might not break down the Personal-Educational Barrier, but you might increase the feeling of relatedness among your learners, letting them know that living, breathing human beings are on the other end of the screen.

Harassment and Privacy

One major problem with social media, however, is that there are living, breathing human beings on the other end of the screen. With that fact comes the dark side

of human behavior, in this case, cyberbullying and harassment. A recent Pew Research survey showed that 41 percent of Americans experienced harassment online.[7] Women and marginalized populations remain particular targets of ire.[8]

Educators are not immune to harassment. I interviewed an art education professor who attracted online trolls when she pinned an article about art and Trayvon Martin to the relatively drama-free Pinterest. The article was intended to spark in-class discussion, but because the board was public, outside actors were able to disrupt the dialogue, scaring students away. The Trayvon Martin case was controversial, to be sure, but these cyberbullies were explicitly seeking out people to harass and threatened the professor's job in the process.

To open up your online home to social media is to potentially expose students—and instructors—to these issues. This perception of harassment certainly had deleterious effects on student perceptions of Twitter. Over time, I have made my own social media–based lessons increasingly locked down, but there is an opportunity cost in this, as these lessons lose the reason for breaking out of the LMS bubble in the first place—that connection to the outside world, however volatile it might be.

Using social media also opens students up to privacy issues and the fact that their information is being sold and shared, often with little recourse, by social networks. The revelations about data selling via social media like Facebook are enough to give anyone pause.[9] Some students might object to using social media on these grounds, and alternative assignments might be needed in that case. Your institution might even be uncomfortable with exposing a class to public, data-mined social media environments. For both privacy and harassment issues, the key again is research. Find your students' comfort levels and preferences and where your institution stands. Then strike the appropriate balance between the benefits and openness of social media use and the greater protection of the controlled space within an LMS.

Data Gathering and Assessment: The Big Headache of Big Data

Even if you have social media firmly embedded into your online course plans, and you feel relatively good about it, you are faced with another hurdle: How exactly are you going to gather the data from the social media? After all, these sites were created to share cat videos, start fights with high school friends, and sell ads for things you would never buy. You need to gather data or find some way to assess student progress.

Unfortunately, there is no easy answer for the layperson. Social media sites *do* make their data available through their application programming interfaces (APIs), which is how apps and sites talk to one another, as when an Amazon advertisement is embedded in a website you frequent. These APIs can be used to gather data, but they change frequently, meaning the programs needed to gather the data also need maintenance. For Twitter and Facebook, I had to employ the talents of a computer science whiz to scrape the data from the sites, and the APIs changed so much that our algorithms needed constant maintenance. When I researched and assessed Pinterest, I applied brute-force methods, meaning I copied and pasted student responses into a spreadsheet, which was time-consuming and inefficient. Assessing social media or any online PLE is a bit like playing the proverbial whack-a-mole, as sites go through regular redesigns. As with all good instructional design, it is best to have your assessment plans lined up and tested before integrating social media.

More Than Just the Cool Tool

If integrating social media into online education seems daunting, along with the privacy and harassment issues, the need for relatedness, and the need to use social media that students will enjoy, then let me add one final challenge: not everyone uses social media for the same reason, so students' usage might vary, even within the same social network. This fact might make social media integration seem impossibly complicated, but it actually opens up a world of creative, interesting lessons connected to the vast wealth of knowledge outside the online education bubble.

One student I interviewed used Facebook for political discussions. Another used it to keep up with friends and family. Still another used Facebook as a storehouse for photos. Similarly, when I interviewed three other instructors who used the curatorial social media Pinterest in their classrooms, I found that all four of us used Pinterest in our courses in different ways. The art education professor used Pinterest boards to post supplementary and current materials for in-class discussions. The professor of gifted and creative education used pinboards in lieu of online discussion forums. The high school art teacher used Pinterest as the repository for class readings and resources, namely examples of art and artists. I used Pinterest as a place to share students' in-progress graphic design to garner peer feedback.

All of us deemed our Pinterest experiments successful and continued to use them. I have also seen virtual field trips and botany scavenger hunts conducted in Instagram and project management conducted in Facebook. The sheer variety of educational social media use cases on display appeared overwhelming at first, but after further reflection, I find

it liberating. Consider this: four different instructors were able to successfully use a social network—one not specifically built for educational purposes—to meet their instructional goals with high levels of student engagement. Social media platforms have more features and customizability than most instructional tools, offering the instructor opportunities to create engaging and creative instruction different from the offerings in an LMS or traditional classroom.

Treating social media as merely a "cool tool" might result in the Twitter failure described earlier. The most important thing to consider is that social media, while it has its own unique challenges and peculiarities, must still be approached like any educational technology tool: choose the best tool for the task. Find the affordances of the social media platform that make it distinct, determine what your goals are and how to assess them, investigate your learners, consider their privacy and safety, and then open up your online course environments to the weird, wild world of social media.

Notes

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