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Social media as an Educational Tool in University Level Geography

Elizabeth Hundey Western University, ehundey@uwo.ca

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Social media as an Educational Tool in University Level Geography

Summary

Social media is not a passing fad—it is a new, versatile way of both information gathering and production. It is broadly defined as "networked tools that emphasize the social aspect of the Internet for communication, collaboration and creative expression" (Dabbagh & Kitsantas, 2012). Although many courses have online components (e.g. WebCT or other learning management systems), it is arguable that we as educators are not taking advantage of mainstream (i.e. applications and sites that are not education specific) social media to its full potential in the classroom. This short paper offers an outline of a seminar discussing the uses of social media—such as web logs and Twitter—in the university geography classroom. Lessons learned in the geography context can be extrapolated to many other disciplines.

Keywords

Geography, social media, participation, teaching, learning, digital native

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SUMMARY

Social media is not a passing fad—it is a new, versatile way of both information gathering and production. It is broadly defined as "networked tools that emphasize the social aspect of the Internet for communication, collaboration and creative expression" (Dabbagh & Kitsantas, 2012). Although many courses have online components (e.g. WebCT or other learning management systems), it is arguable that we as educators are not taking advantage of mainstream (i.e. applications and sites that are not education specific) social media to its full potential in the classroom. This short paper offers an outline of a seminar discussing the uses of social media—such as web logs and Twitter—in the university geography classroom. Lessons learned in the geography context can be extrapolated to many other disciplines.

Keywords: Geography, social media, participation, teaching, learning, digital native

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

I use social media daily, and even fall under the definition of a "neomillennial student" (i.e. born after 1982) as defined by Baird and Fisher (2005). However, I have already noticed that the social media trend has surpassed me—students in my labs and classes multitask on their phones and laptops with Twitter, Facebook, FlickR, Pinboard, YouTube, wikis, blogs, and undoubtedly, more sites that I have not yet discovered. Social media plays a crucial role in communication for students. Avoiding social media may inhibit our ability to communicate with and engage students as effectively in the classroom. It may be possible to capitalize on this 'distraction' and use it as a means to engage students in a format that is familiar to them. In this seminar, participants will investigate the potential use (or, to date, underuse) of social media sites in conjunction with a traditional (live setting lectures, labs, and tutorials) university course in geography.

By the end of this session, participants will be able to:

- use Twitter;
- describe the pros and cons of using social media in an educational setting;
- explain multiple uses for social media in the educational setting (e.g. social interaction, collaboration, communication, assessment, etc.); and
- brainstorm creative, practical ways to use social media in their own personal teaching context as a means of enhancing student learning.

REFERENCE SUMMARIES

Cao, X., & Hong, P. (2011) Antecedents and consequences of social media utilization in college teaching. *On the Horizon*, 19, 297-306.

Cao and Hong (2011) discuss the use (or alternatively, the avoidance) of social media platforms from the instructor's perspective. This is a useful article as it is the instructor who ultimately makes the decision about whether students will be using social media for the purpose of his or her course. The factors affecting an instructor's choice to use social media in the classroom include: current use of social media platforms and personal readiness; pressure to use social media in the classroom by others (peers, employers, students); expected benefits; and perceived risks of use. The consequences of using social media in the classroom can be measured by looking at the perceived student satisfaction and student learning outcomes.

This study reports that already two thirds of teaching faculty have used social media in class and 30 percent have posted course content outside of class using social media. The authors argue that the use of social media encourages interaction, collaboration, and participation. The perceived risks that instructors report are the fear of losing control of the class, difficulty or uncertainty in using social media platforms, and invasion of privacy.

This article is useful background reading for the individual leading the workshop. In particular, this article is a starting point in order to lead an effective brainstorming session on the perceived risks and benefits of social media in the classroom (see Content part 2).

Baird, D., & Fisher, M. (2005) Neomillenial user experience design strategies: Utilizing social networking media to support "Always On" learning styles. *Journal of Educational Technology Systems*, 34, 5-32.

Baird and Fisher (2005) focus on the student as the user of social media. To properly develop uses for social media in the classroom, it is important to understand how the 'digital native' student uses social media. The Internet is described by Baird and Fisher (2005) as more than just a browsing medium but a collaborative space where users are able not only to take ideas but to share them as well. They also note that at the university level, instructors are dealing with adult learners who are more self-directed and have more experience than their elementary and secondary student counterparts. Adults have internal motivation to learn that makes them well suited to self-direct some of their learning under the encouragement of the instructor. This becomes important in social media, which requires self-directed goal setting and attainment.

The Internet provides an opportunity to transcend space. In the past, interacting and engaging classrooms required all of those associated with the class to be physically present; however, now students and teachers can also interact on the web. Fortunately, neomillenial students are already equipped to use multiple forms of social media.

How does one design courses with for these digitally-minded students? Baird and Fisher (2005) note the importance of the location of links, the form of text, and the importance of stimuli such as simulations, pictures, and animations. Rather than the traditional linear portrayal of information, the student's learning path can take multiple directions depending on their interests and train of thought, and they can draw their own connections between material and to the learning objectives of the course. The Internet has been criticized for being an emotion-free learning space, but Baird and Fisher (2005) argue that this is not the case with social networking, as connections to the material and to others are made in real time.

As the participants in the workshop will want to maximize student learning, it is especially important to ask the participants to distinguish between benefits for the instructor and benefits for the student. 'Digital native' students are already trained in the use of social media to communicate effectively and are able to follow their interests in course topics independently. Students can connect with the material, their classmates, and their instructors outside of class time and outside of the classroom.

Dabbagh, N. & Kitsantas, A. (2012) Personal Learning Environments, social media, and self-regulated learning: A natural formula for connecting formal and informal learning. *Internet and Higher Education*, 15, 3-8.

This article is useful as it indicates how students now 'learn on demand,' and this can be useful when thinking about how social media can fit into a course. A Personal Learning Environment is the student's 'place' of learning—an environment of self-directed and informal learning, involving both the production and use of material from the Internet. Using social media would allow learners to collaborate, share results, contribute to the collective knowledge of their class, and derive their own meaning from material. Faculty may use Twitter to stimulate student engagement in the classroom, Wiki software as collaborative projects, and blogs as assessments of understanding. Students benefit from using social media in the classroom by taking charge of their learning. However, the drawback (or requirement) is that students must be able to engage independently and self-motivate.

Dabbagh & Kitsantas also indicate a framework for using social media in class. In brief:

- 1. Encourage students to privately use social media (blogs, wikis) to enable goal creation and greater self-direction in learning (journals and social bookmarking)
- 2. Encourage students to interact and collaborate, (wikis, sharing, blog commenting), fostering informal learning and social behaviour
- 3. Encourage students to collect and synthesize information from above to reflect (and perhaps be assessed) on their overall learning experience.

Social media by its very nature is constantly changing and manifesting in new forms, and so it is necessary for the workshop instructor to be familiar with the ways in which social media sites can be used. In section 4 under Content and Organization of the workshop, participants are given classroom scenarios to tackle using social media as the primary solution. This article gives some varied examples of how social media can be used in the classroom or independently by students for assessment, planning, satisfying curiosity related to the course, communicating ideas, and organizing course content.

CONTENT, ORGANIZATION, AND PRESENTATION STRATEGIES

Before the seminar, participants will be asked to create (if they do not already have) a Twitter account, and bring a laptop or smart phone if possible to the seminar. While giving the presentation on using social media in the geography classroom, the instructor is also demonstrating how to use social media in the classroom. Therefore, the presentation strategies are paramount to the success of the presentation and are included in each section of the presentation (see next page).

Time (min)	Topic	Details	Presentation Strategies
1-10	Introduction	Participants will be asked to open Twitter and make sure they are following my account. Participants will be instructed on how to use the Twitter site in preparation for the rest of the session.	Various social networking logos are presented on a single slide to give the participants an impression of the scope of tools social media offers (e.g. Tumblr, Flickr, Imgur, Pinterest, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Wikipedia, Poll Everywhere, etc.). The instructor will demonstrate Twitter use with the web browser open and encourage participants to do the same on their laptop, phone, or tablet.
10-25	Pros/ Cons Large group brainstorm	As a large group, the participants will brainstorm the perceived pros and cons of using social media in the classroom for both students and instructors.	This segment serves not only as a chance for participants to think about their views of social media as educational tools, but as a demonstration of one possible use of Twitter in the classroom. The instructor can fill in a chart in their slideshow under the headings pros and cons for different users (e.g., student or instructor). The instructor will also encourage and receive tweets (on a personal device rather than on the big screen) of ideas from quieter members of the group and share those with the class. The instructor will ask follow-up questions and provide (or ask for) suggestions for overcoming some of the risks associated with using social media in the classroom. For example, what happens if you put your Twitter page up and someone has tweeted something inappropriate for the entire class to see? One solution is to have Twitter only viewable to you on a tablet or personal laptop. That way, the instructor maintains control of both the content and the timing of the tweet-sharing. Another good practice is to moderate discussion boards, make posting rules, and require students to reveal their usernames (or make them obvious).
25-40	Social Media: Examples in Geography	This section is a web-surfing demonstration of interactive and engaging social media sites. Participants will follow along as the instructor navigates well-known sites such as YouTube, Facebook,	Where possible, the instructor will give examples of the sites as used for teaching purposes in the field of geography, rather than simply stating how each site is used. For example, tumblr is used as a blog or journal for many users, but it can be

Wikipedia, and blog sites (e.g. Tumblr), but with a new perspective: How can these sites be used by geography instructors and students to enhance the learning experience? Participants will also be shown newer sites such as polleverywhere.com, Pinboard, to examine their potential.



adapted for use in the classroom, as has been done for this Photo Reflection Portfolio project: http://geo1300b.tumblr.com/ password: geography. Instructors can even create YouTube or Screencast videos so that students can review more complex processes after lecture. e.g. http://www.screencast.com/t/0k1JcZFF 2V5. Wikipedia is viewed as a nonacademic source, but students could be required to add information to existing Wikipedia articles or even create new with appropriate references. Because geography is such a visual field, social-media and web-based assessments are particularly appropriate, as students can upload maps, photographs, and Google Earth imagery.

For some sites, workshop attendees will be asked to participate as they would in a classroom setting. For example, using an account on Polleverwhere.com, participants will be asked their opinion and the results will be displayed in graphic form, and in real time. Participants will have the option of replying via their smart phone, texting, from their laptop, or via Twitter. This is fundamentally different than receiving opinions via Twitter, in which you can share the opinions of only a few.

The instructor should have bookmarks of interesting ways of using social media but also follow the interests and curiosity of the group.

40-60 Social media solutions Small groups exercise

Participants are divided into groups of 4-5 individuals. Each group is given a specific scenario or problem that could occur in the geography classroom. They must design a plan to solve the problem using social media.

For example, one group will design an individual assessment in which the students use social media, another will try to overcome a disconnect between instructor and student. For more examples please see the "Social Media as an Educational Tool in Geography: Instructor Tools."

60-70 Social media solutions
Share results

Each group shares their initial scenario from part 4 of the workshop and its solution with the rest of the group.

Other participants are invited to weigh in and comment.

70-85	Social Media: Your context	Participants are encouraged to brainstorm ways that social media can be used in their particular teaching context.	Participants are divided into small groups based on expertise (e.g. human geography, physical geography, health geography, etc.). Each group will pick one idea for using social media in the classroom and make it more concrete by sketching or outlining their idea (e.g. possible blog topics, questions that can be asked on Twitter or polleverywhere.com to a class, etc.)
85-90	Conclusion	Session is concluded and resources for using social media in the classroom are provided.	Provide hand-out "Social Media as an Educational Tool in Geography" hand-out.

Social Media as an Educational Tool in Geography Instructor Tools

Here are some examples of possible scenarios that small groups can discuss for part 4 of the seminar.

- 1. Professor Y has noticed that her students seem to be bored and creatively unchallenged with her standard (and slightly repetitive) laboratory assignments in physical geography. Design an assessment surrounding his next week's topic, Climate Change, using social media.
- 2. Professor X has a class of 100 first-year students, and despite his best efforts to encourage participation, he can only seem to get the same handful of students to respond to his questions. Give Professor X some concrete tips on using social media in his class to encourage student engagement in his next class on plate tectonics. Make sure to be specific—what questions can he ask and on what social media platforms?
- 3. Professor Q teaches a class on the Philosophy of Geography. It is an upper year class in which he requires students to write a short reflection each week. He was hoping that the students would show progress and build on the knowledge they have gained from week to week. Suggest ways in which Professor Q could redesign this assignment for next year, while still achieving his goal for students to reflect on their learning.
- 4. John is a teaching assistant for an upper year physical geomorphology class. His instructor has asked him to design a project in which the students synthesize all of the data, photos, videos, etc. they have collected in the field component of their course into a well-organized report. Help John outline his project using social media instead of a hard-copy.
- 5. Professor L has a greater enrollment than he is used to in his Cultural Geography class. Usually, he is able to have each student give a presentation about a topic of their choice in front of the class, but it seems impossible to schedule so many students without taking up too much lecture time. Without giving up his assignment altogether (he likes the creativity that students bring to presentations), help Professor L design an alternative format that is more fitting for a larger enrollment.
- 6. Professor M is beyond frustrated that her students do not communicate with her promptly when they have a problem, need accommodation, or do not understand expectations (even though she has given them her phone number). Give her an idea on how to encourage better communication between her and her students for the next time she teaches this course.
- 7. Professor B's first year Physical Geography class did worse than she expected on the midterm—especially on the short answers. The final exam will be a similar format, and Professor B is desperate to find some way to help her students learn how to study big concepts and connections between material rather than memorizing trivial facts. There is no room in her short lecture time to teach this to her students, and many of them do not come to lecture anyway. How can she encourage her students to do better on the final exam outside of class time?

Hand-out Social Media as an Educational Tool in Geography

Social Media Site	Possible uses	Notes
Twitter	- Encourage participation	
www.twitter.com	- Foster a sense of	
	openness and encourage	
	communication	
	- Filter questions	
tumblr	- Create assessments that	
www.tumblr.com	allow for inclusion of	
or other blog sites	multimedia (videos, maps,	
3	photos, links, etc.)	
	- Encourage students to	
	build upon knowledge	
	throughout the course,	
	e.g. weekly feedback,	
D-11 F	journal entries, etc.	
Poll Everywhere	- Represent student opinions in real time and	
www.polleverywhere.com	in graphical form, in class.	
	- Would be especially	
	useful in human	
	geography classes which	
	require critical thinking	
	or examining different	
	viewpoints.	
Wikipedia	- Teach about when using	
www.wikipedia.org	Wikis is appropriate	
or other wikis	- Possible assessment tool	
0.0000000000000000000000000000000000000	 have students create or 	
	edit Wikis about topic	
	related to the course	
Discussion boards	- Encourage and evaluate	
e.g. on WebCT or blog form	participation	
	- Moderate student	
	comments, facilitate	
	discussion outside of class	
	time	
	- Encourage sharing of ideas, critical thinking,	
	and open-mindedness.	
Facebook	- Encourage students to	
	start study groups, to	
www.facebook.com	work together, and to	
	share useful links	
YouTube	- Share and upload videos	
www.YouTube.com	to enhance student	
or Screencast	learning	
	- Assess student learning	
<u>www.screencast.com</u>	through creative video	
	projects	