How Can Social Media Be Used In Education

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By Robyn Treyvaud

30 May 2018

Many educators and parents have recognised an urgent need to support digital forms of learning that will empower younger generations to tackle complex future challenges in our increasingly online world [2]. There's no doubt that social media plays a significant role in the education of modern students [3]. Research shows 59% of students already use social networking platforms to discuss educational topics online [2]. In light of this, more schools and families are championing the inclusion of social media in the classroom to drive collaborative learning and help young people develop a strong moral compass for the digital age [1].

This article will discuss social media's benefits and drawbacks as a learning tool, and provide examples of how it can be applied in educational contexts to enhance learning outcomes. To maximise its potential benefits, social media must strengthen educational experiences in a meaningful way and support clear learning goals, including safe and responsible digital citizenship [9, 11]. Furthermore, it is critical that the use of social media in schools is mediated and moderated by teachers [2]. Through the carefully-considered inclusion of technology in the learning environment, students can acquire key skills that prepare them for life and foster critical thinking about what it means to be a good digital citizen [10].

How Is Social Media Changing Education?

At first glance, social media may seem contradictory to education. Sceptical parents might imagine classrooms filled with students on iPads using Instagram without supervision. However, with strategic implementation into the learning curriculum, social media can be an enriching addition to a student's learning experience.

A recent study demonstrates that social media's communication and collaboration benefits can positively impact learning outcomes and help students become academically and socially integrated [11]. Educators and schools are attempting to leverage the engaging qualities of social media to make classes more interesting and relevant [1]. For example, they may use Facebook and Twitter to stimulate thoughtful discussions on specific classroom topics, and Pinterest to share learning resources. They may draw upon a variety of digital learning resources, such as Youtube videos, virtual reality, podcasts and

infographics to deepen content knowledge, nurture an appreciation for a diversity of viewpoints, and stimulate critical thinking [5].

Using the right strategy, social media can make learning more engaging and enriching [4]. According to social learning theory, people learn most effectively by interacting with other learners and actively solve learning problems together [12]. Social media can develop students' breadth and depth of understanding, build stronger interpersonal and teamwork skills, and enhance the feeling of community in a classroom [1]. Collaborative social media study networks can promote knowledge sharing and increase study efficiency [3]. For example, a school may participate in a cross-institutional social network where students and teachers from multiple schools access and contribute to a deep reservoir of information on a specific topic [7].

Studies show that social media can also encourage more transparent communication between students, teachers and parents, allowing parents to play a more active role in their child's education [5]. For example, social networks can provide a convenient way for busy parents to keep up to date with a child's learning and progress [2].

What Are The Benefits Of Using Social Media For Education?

Social media offers many benefits for classroom learning. These include:

Increased student participation: By stimulating engagement, discussion and understanding, social media can encourage students to find connections between the content explored and their own experiences, making it more relevant and meaningful [1].

Increased student collaboration: Social media can help students contribute ideas more easily [1], assist educators to monitor and record student participation, and increase teamwork and interpersonal skills by facilitating group projects [3, 12].

Development of 21st century skills: Social media can encourage the development of important skills that will help students succeed in the modern world [2], including creative or technical skills, an understanding of proper online etiquette [8], how to safely and responsibly use information and technology, and how to cultivate a positive online reputation [6].

Low cost: Social networking tools are low cost or free for educators to implement in the classroom [1].

What Are The Drawbacks Of Using Social Media For Education?

However, there are some drawbacks of social media for classroom learning. These are:

Distraction: Students may take advantage of the availability of social media in the classroom to engage in personal interactions not relevant to school activities [5]. To minimise distractions, educators must monitor social media use in class [2].

Privacy: To protect students' privacy, schools must develop robust policies around social media use in schools. Schools must also invest in methods to protect and keep social media accounts secure [8].

Possible exposure to inappropriate content: If not carefully controlled, social media in schools may expose students to inappropriate content [3]. Schools must monitor and manage educational social media accounts daily to avoid negative comments and trolling [4].

Cyberbullying risks: Unfortunately, the interactive nature of social media can raise issues of cyberbullying. Educators must actively monitor social media conversations, set up safeguards to protect students' safety and well-being, and ensure accountability in cases of cyberbullying [5].

Not recommended as the sole learning tool: Face-to-face learning is deeply beneficial for learners of all ages. Experts advise that social media should play a supplemental role, rather than a replacement for in-person learning [3].

How Should Schools Design Guidelines For Social Media?

Each school must consult with their community, students and parents to develop a robust social media policy and guidelines that consider stakeholders' needs, and comply with relevant national and state guidelines. Traditionally, a school's IT policy was enough to guide the use of technology in schools. However, many schools are now developing social media policies.

Social media policies help schools manage social media by clarifying the scope and defining boundaries for social media use in the classroom. These guidelines may include appropriate and inappropriate use case studies, consequences for misuse, considerations for setting up school social media profiles, and step-by-step guides for dealing with and minimising risks.

For students, the risks presented by social media include cyberbullying, harassment and defamation. Without strong guidelines, teachers may also potentially misuse social media. Misuse may include unprofessional or offensive public postings from teachers' personal accounts or 'friending' students on social media. This makes it important to invest in staff professional learning to ensure boundaries are understood and that they know how to use social media and privacy settings responsibly. It is essential that teachers understand their actions on a social network may be visible to students, parents, schools and the media.

By implementing a robust social media policy, schools can minimise these risks and ensure teachers, students and the wider school community reap the benefits of social media platforms.

Social Media Platforms And Ideas To Enhance Classroom Learning

Social media is a dynamic, constantly evolving space with a variety of platforms available to enhance student learning. This is by no means an exhaustive list of social media channels suitable for use as learning tools. However, these are some of the most widely used.

Facebook

A Facebook classroom page or closed group can be used by teachers in a myriad of creative ways to streamline communication with students and parents [2]. Teachers may use closed Facebook groups or pages to distribute course content, advance thought-provoking discussions on specific curriculum topics, provide additional materials to enrich student learning, efficiently answer student queries [9], deliver announcements, and remind students and parents about important deadlines [8].

For students, a Facebook classroom group or page offers benefits such as the opportunity to foster personal responsibility through keeping up with updates and uploading homework or assignments online on time [2]. It can also enrich student learning through exposure to diverse media content or help them keep up to date with extracurricular activities and excursions [3].

It is important to note that using Facebook in classrooms should exclusively revolve around learning with closed group and pages, and not require students to connect with their personal Facebook profile.

Pinterest

A classroom Pinterest page allows educators and students to access, save, curate and share resources for learning [4]. These channels may be used to upload work and class projects [2], or post photographs and data obtained on out of school excursions. [7].

Social Wikis

Social wikis such as EditMe, Moodle or Weebly for Education can help students hone their digital literacy and language skills [11]. Students may be asked to develop a series of informative wikis that

demonstrate their knowledge on a certain topic. Encouraging students to build collaborative wikis or write a blog post for an assignment is an ideal way to cultivate students' language and research skills, creativity, and help them learn how to evaluate, analyse and synthesise information [2].

Creating a classroom blog or wiki offers educators the opportunity to invite discussions around the value of evaluating the credibility of sources, how to think critically about issues such as copyright and plagiarism, and how an online identity may not reflect someone's real-life identity [8]. Designing a blog or wiki may also support the development of coding or graphic design skills and encourage strategic thinking about how to present ideas [8]. Finally, a collaborative classroom blog or wiki may deepen a sense of community and provide a useful record of learning for the year, helping students reflect on how their skills and knowledge have evolved over time [2].

Twitter

Twitter can be an ideal platform for stimulating class discussion [2]. Educators may choose to adopt specific course and topic hashtags to organise course content, and use Twitter to remind students about assignment due dates, field trips and upcoming events, provide lesson recaps, and answer homework questions [2]. Setting up a GroupTweet account allows teachers to moderate who joins and what gets posted.

YouTube

YouTube is both a video sharing platform and one of the most popular social media networks in the world. Although often regarded as a distracting medium, YouTube can be a useful tool to deepen and extend learning in the classroom [4]. For example, teachers may share YouTube videos in class and on social media channels after school to enhance student understanding of curriculum topics and provide deeper insights [3]. Assignments that require students to create an informative or creative video will challenge learners to connect more deeply with the learning materials and think strategically about how to create media content [8]. Alternatively, classrooms can use TedEd to share and discuss educational videos.

Final Thoughts

With the rise of social media, educators and parents are presented with an opportunity to leverage social media to meaningfully enhance student learning [11, 7]. Appropriate use of social networks in the classroom can support the development of critical skills such as creativity, teamwork and critical thinking, preparing students for life in the modern world [10]. For best learning results, social media

must be supported by a strong social media policy and guidelines. It must have specific relevance to the school curriculum [7] and complement, rather than supplant face-to-face learning [12]. Furthermore, in order for social media to support effective learning, educators must set up safeguards to help students feel safe within the social media classroom community [11]. The use of social media for education can reinforce the development of critical digital skills and a strong moral compass in the online world [6].

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