Teaching Twitter and Beyond: 
Tips for Incorporating Social Media in Traditional Courses

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Abstract

Social media can be powerful tools for engaging, teaching, and learning in the college classroom. They enable students to retrieve information and interact with others in real time. This article discusses the benefits of integrating social media in classrooms and provides examples of projects that may be useful in courses such as magazine writing, reporting, public relations, and minorities in the media. The goal is to pique and hold students’ interest while arming them with skills that will help them get jobs in the future.

Introduction

Although social media have rapidly changed the way people live, do business, and connect, many teachers have not been as quick to modify their courses to reflect these sweeping changes. However, instructors of media courses, especially those teaching classes about the industry, must evolve their coursework to remain relevant to today’s students.

This article offers tips for integrating social media in magazine writing, reporting, public relations, and minorities in the media courses without changing the overall content. The goal is to pique and hold students’ interest while preparing them for a rapidly changing media climate.

Felder and Brent (2005) assert that the key to successful integration is to “mix things up” (p. 29). For example, instructors can break up long lectures with activities of varying lengths, such as role-playing exercises, PowerPoint presentations, and short video clips. “If the students never know what’s coming next, it will probably be an effective course” (Felder & Brent, 2005, p. 29).

In addition, instructors need to consider students’ learning styles and preferences. For example, Tang and Zhang (2010) found that younger students prefer videos, whereas older students favor lectures. Findings also indicated that instructors should use a mix of technologies in the classroom and apply them creatively to promote learning.

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Becoming a social butterfly

Social media technologies, such as social networking, wikis, and blogs, allow collaboration on a grander scale than traditional media (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Sites such as Twitter and Facebook can help instructors communicate with students. Users create, swap, and manipulate information on many levels and in real time.

Instructors can create a Facebook group for their courses and invite students to post articles and information about various topics. This encourages an open dialogue via a medium that students often use for many hours throughout the day. Instructors can chat with students who have questions about a project and need a few minutes of their time, versus stopping by for an in-depth office visit. This works particularly well with students who have a disability or those who have internships or jobs.

In addition, students who are too shy to talk in front of their peers may open up on the Web. Similarly, students might feel freer to participate in a class dialogue if they have time to collect their thoughts and put them in writing beforehand. A Facebook group allows them to post information in a public setting and get feedback in a nonthreatening manner.

Fostering rich dialogue

Magazine and feature writers can look to Facebook and Twitter for story ideas, trends, and sources to interview. Instructors can also use social media to encourage critical discussions on topics such as media stereotypes. One exercise, for example, might encourage students to discuss the prevalence of hate groups in social media or to compare and contrast the goals and objectives of race-related groups on Facebook.

Online discussions can tackle subjects such as Facebook hate groups.
Instructors can foster a rich discussion by encouraging online feedback from individuals who aren’t enrolled in the class. Discussions with a diverse group of people could offer insight into the ideas and objectives of hate groups. It would also encourage students to question media portrayals and become aware of their own biases. As a result, they might become savvier journalists and media consumers.

Blogging and beyond

Almost any course can benefit from having students practice critical thinking and writing skills by blogging. Magazine students who blog about current trends, for example, might receive reader comments and suggestions that they can incorporate in feature stories with both local and national angles. Instructors in media culture studies courses could assign subject matter that explores issues of race, gender, religion, and politics. These topics provide ample controversy and rich content for blogging.

Current events make excellent blog topics. For example, combine blog discussions on how media frame race-related issues with an exercise that directs students to compare and contrast two different media outlets’ coverage of a racially charged issue. Such a forum allows participants to analyze a situation through primary research and disseminate their findings in a digital format.

Instructors can also relate blogging to real-world experiences. News organizations have launched blogs to discuss everything from parenting to sports. By one estimate, 80,000 new blog sites are launched daily; 29 million blogs are tracked by the blog search engine Technorati (Biagi, 2009). In recent years, corporations have hired students to create a social networking presence and blog about products and services on sites such as Facebook and MySpace. No surprise, then, that students who know how to blog and create Facebook groups will have a better chance of landing these jobs.

 Tweaking Twitter

Although Twitter might not be as popular with students as Facebook and MySpace, it can be useful in the classroom. Twitter is a social networking and micro-blogging service that enables users to send and read short messages (a maximum of 140 characters) known as tweets. These text-based posts are displayed on the author’s profile page and delivered to the author’s followers.

Twitter allows users to update their status and simultaneously send the information to everyone who is following them via a text message. Followers can retrieve the information without having to check e-mail. Such a service could be useful for teachers or students who want to send a text message to the whole class.

Instructors can encourage students to follow current events on Twitter. News outlets such as National Public Radio usually provide at least 30 updates throughout the day, ranging from music to politics. Each tweet contains a link to the full story. Students could follow two different news outlets, such as FOX and MSNBC, and then analyze the types of
tweets they post. This allows students to discuss critically how different media outlets cover news and issues.

**Empowering PowerPoint and video presentations**

Another way to use social media in the classroom is by having students create a PowerPoint video displaying key points from feature stories and other course projects. Students can easily convert PowerPoint slides to video using applications such as authorSTREAM.com or Slides.com, and then upload their projects to YouTube.

![A student PowerPoint presentation converted to a video clip illustrates stereotypes of Asian women.](image)

Students can also use this technique to create a slideshow to accompany a magazine article by including text, photos, video clips, and/or background music. Upload finished projects to authorSTREAM.com, or convert them to video and upload them to YouTube to share with others.

Students can also create short video clips using Skype, video cameras, or Flip cameras. All provide easy, inexpensive ways to record interviews for stories. In addition, Skype offers a range of free services, including voice or video calls and instant messaging to other Skype users whom students can videotape from remote locations.

Computer webcams offer another way to add video interviews to slideshows. Many computers now come equipped with cameras. With little prodding, instructors can encourage students to use the cameras for more than Web chatting with friends.
Creating a Shameless Plug Multimedia Autobiography

The Shameless Plug Multimedia Autobiography can replace or supplement the customary memoir or autobiography that many students complete in magazine, reporting, and writing classes. Students describe and illustrate their biographical information, such as hometown, extracurricular activities, and family, in a multimedia package that includes text, photos, audio, and/or video clips. Graduating seniors can highlight job skills, strengths, aspirations, goals, and internships for recruiters and potential employers. Students can display these items with a PowerPoint slideshow converted to video or a website such as Prezi.com or Slides.com. Instructors should first show students several examples to indicate how the finished product might look. (See samples listed on page 9.)

Instructors can adapt this assignment for different courses. For media culture classes, students might incorporate information about their ethnic background or media stereotypes. In women and gender courses, students can explore media representations of women and discuss how such images affect their lives. Editing students might benefit from editing and repackaging the content of Shameless Plug videos. For example, they might suggest modifications of a video that doesn’t fit the instructor’s guidelines. Editing media projects is something they may have to do professionally one day.

This project cultivates creativity, builds on previous assignments, and prepares students for future jobs. These days, most online magazines and newspapers feature slideshows and videos.
Lim, Pellet, and Pellet (2009) observed that shooting and editing digital video is a powerful way to help students develop various skills, such as research, communication, and decision-making. The scholars asserted that digital video enriches university classroom curricula and enhances authentic, meaningful pedagogical experiences.

Using Blackboard

Instructors can use Blackboard for more than recording grades and attendance. They can also post assignments on the discussion board, where students can write comments and provide feedback. Blackboard is also a handy place to post examples of feature stories from magazines, newspapers, and online publications such as Salon and Slate. It’s also a good place to put links. To accompany a lecture on writing movie or music reviews, for example, a teacher can provide links to selected online reviews.

Instructors can schedule conferences on Blackboard during which students meet at the same time to chat or ask questions about a topic. Instructors might prefer this type of interaction to individual e-mails and phone calls. For students accustomed to virtual, real-time interaction on MySpace, Facebook, and Yahoo!, Blackboard provides yet another way to bring real-world interaction into the classroom.

Blackboard is useful for fostering discussions on a variety of topics.

Speaking volumes

To reinforce class lessons, teachers have long known the value of guest speakers. Former students and local journalists who discuss jobs may spark interest and help students realize that the information learned in class actually applies to the real world. Undergraduates learn best when they perceive the relevance of course content to their career goals. The “trust
“me” approach to education seldom inspires a burning desire to learn, and students who do learn tend to be motivated only by grades (Felder & Brent, 2003).

The total package

Students in any class can market themselves professionally by creating online portfolios to display their work from courses, jobs, and internships. Storing everything in one place can come in handy when they begin searching for a job.

An online portfolio can include a résumé, contact information, a photo essay, work samples, a blog, and/or a digital bio (which can be a Shameless Plug). Students can use a software package or a free online site such as Wix.com or Webs.com to create a portfolio.

Students can create online portfolios to showcase projects from classes, jobs, and internships.
Piquing interest in social media

Instructors can expect to encounter obstacles and setbacks, so be prepared to do some encouraging. While students might at first be resentful or hesitant to participate in public forums, their interest usually increases once they become familiar with a new teaching approach and the other students in the course. Each class has sociable students and quiet ones, so adjustment rates will vary.

Be prepared to work a little harder at the beginning of the semester to create Facebook and Twitter pages for each course, but trust that the payoff is worth the trouble. Professors will connect with students and encourage discussions in many formats. After all, the ultimate goal is to foster a classroom with a high level of energy, sharing and, above all, greater understanding.

A combination of these exercises will help students become more media literate so that when they graduate, they can apply lessons from social media on the job. Instructors who pique students’ interest by incorporating social media in the class have accomplished volumes.

Pitfalls to avoid

Here are a few things to avoid when adding social media to traditional courses:

**Do not overlook traditional content.** Students must still learn the basics of solid writing and editing in magazine and other courses. Don’t sacrifice the old for the new.

**Do not include too many YouTube video clips.** Showing a bunch of video clips is just as ineffective as lectures with no visuals, photos, or video.

**Do not rely too heavily on a social media textbook.** Instead, supplement regular textbooks with inexpensive course packets containing social media exercises.

**Do not teach in a top-down format.** Instructors who foster a friendly give-and-take atmosphere will enjoy a free-flow exchange in which everybody talks and shares. Successful courses are collaborative rather than top-down.

**Do not be afraid to ask for suggestions and ideas about social media.** Students often know more about social media than faculty. Allow students to suggest helpful websites, and be prepared to take notes.
Student Samples

Shameless Plug Videos
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PrDqpgFJOYU
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hiMhTUEVSIU
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fC71Gtl03LE&feature=player_embedded

Student Web Portfolios
http://www.wix.com/annpayne/mirabellebyannpayne

Feature Story PowerPoint Converted to Video
http://tinyurl.com/2ekg3tk

References


