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Social Media Go to College

By Ana M. Martínez-Alemán

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Abstract

Social media are the hallmark of 21st century technology, but their integration as into the college classroom is slow. Faculty are hesitant to adopt them for instruction, despite students’ generational appetite for these technologies. Who uses social media? What are faculty’s and students’ apprehension about social media when used as instructional tools? How do postsecondary students and faculty use them as teaching and learning tools? What are some promising aspects of their use? This essay sheds light on these questions and raises additional ones about the future use of social media in higher education.

Technology’s march into the college classroom continues. Generations of college and university faculty have both embraced and resisted instructional technologies such as the book, the mimeograph, the overhead projector, and hand-held calculators. Now college and university faculty are greeting the 21st century’s signature technology—social media—with varying combinations of apprehension and excited curiosity.

Since pioneering social-networking sites Friendster (2002), MySpace (2003) and Facebook (2004) leveraged the power of the Internet and Web 2.0 technologies, blogs, micro-
blogs, wikis, mashups, videosharing, videoconferencing, Webconferencing, and telepresence technologies have followed close on their heels. Together, these constitute a rapidly developing suite of instructional tools for the brick-and-mortar college classroom.

**What are Social Media?**

Social media are online, Web-based, mobile technologies with content (information, ideas, data, and other knowledge resources, either in their original or mashed-up forms) distributed across virtual geographies through Web-based and mobile applications. Through social media, users both consume information shared by other users and produce new content. Audio, video, images, and text are used separately or simultaneously to compose and deliver content, which is consumed and dispersed by other users through dedicated networks or open-source platforms.

*Social-networking sites* such as Facebook are gated-access or permission-based niche communities in which direct and indirect real-life social ties provide access to communications across the network. In these “trust-based” or “friendship-based” social webs, users know each other to one degree or another (boyd & Ellison, 2007). They are designed to enhance and leverage communication among users’ “friends,” whether these relationships were initiated and developed first in real-world interactions or are established virtually. Social-networking sites are fundamentally *interactive* and rely on the socio-cultural ecology of users (Martinez-Aleman & Wartman, 2009).

Unlike open-source social media, online social networks empower users to exercise varying degrees of control over who can and cannot gain access and generate communications. Information circulated through niche or “walled-garden” social networks is managed by individual users and the site’s design specifications.

“Egocentric” by design (boyd & Ellison, 2007), online social networking is built on the idea that users’ real-world identities and cultural positions, as well as socio-cultural norms and practices, give authority to communications (Martinez-Aleman & Wartman, 2009). Understandably, gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, and socio-economic class influence the standing of users, underscoring the site’s real-world footing (Birnbaum, 2013; Junco, Merson & Salter, 2010; Martinez Aleman & Wartman, 2009; Byrne, 2008; Hargitaii, 2007).
Online social networks are only one form of social media. That term covers an ever-increasing range of interactive, user-driven Internet platforms that may or may not be predicated on a user’s real-world social graph. Through these platforms, users easily produce and consume content. Wikis, blogs, micro-blogs (e.g. Twitter, Tumblr), videosharing (e.g. YouTube) videoconferencing (multiple users in multiple locations) and other telepresence applications (e.g. Skype, FaceTime) allow users to share content through text, image, or video.

But more importantly, social media enable non-linear, asynchronous collaboration between users. Content “posted” on blogs and micro-blogs (and micro-blog features on social-networking sites such as Facebook) are regarded as organic, dynamic, and spontaneous and are normally archived by a posting date or narrative theme.

**Who Uses Social Media?**

**The General Population**

Across all age groups and demographic categories, the use of social media has grown significantly. In the early years, users were primarily aged 18-29; today, well over two-thirds of all US adults in that age range use social media. The proportion of adult users ages 35 to 64 is 50 percent or more, and over 30 percent of adults ages 65 and older are users (Duggan & Brenner, 2013). Since 2005, user cohorts ages 30 to 65+ have experienced significant growth in participation; in 2009-2010 alone, use by adults 50 and older doubled (Brenner & Smith, 2013). Indeed, almost three-quarters of all US adults using Internet technologies are social-network users.

Men (and users over 55 years of age) represent the fastest-growing segment in social networking worldwide (Shaw, 2012), although more women than men use online social media. But what gender disparity persists is narrowing among users 25 and younger (Bennett, 2013; Brenner & Smith, 2012; Shaw, 2012). Differences in use by gender are primarily about the tools preferred: Women still remain more likely than men to use Facebook, Instagram, and Pinterest.

More African-Americans and Latinos use online social networking than other racial and ethnic groups, and these communities have a heavy presence on Instagram. On other social media such as the micro-blogging network Twitter, young adults 18-29 years old, men, and African-Americans comprise a significant share of users (Bennett, 2013).
Social media are increasingly mobile. Users are accessing them on smartphones and tablets with greater regularity, giving them instant and around-the-clock access to social media and other Web functions. Forty-six percent of all social-media users access sites on smartphones; they spend about one-third of their social-media time on supported apps. In 2012, the increasing time adults spent on mobile apps and accessing the Web through mobile devices accounted for the significant growth (63 percent) in the time users dedicated to mobile social-media use (Bannon, 2012).

The speed and graphic interfaces of smartphones and tablet are attractive to users, especially youth and young adults. Mobile technology appeals to the tendency of younger adults, especially those who comprise the net generations or who are digital natives (i.e., young adults born after 1981) to be on-demand learners, to multitask, to process information quickly, and to favor graphic/visual information over text (Palfrey & Gasser, 2008; Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005; Prensky, 2001a, 2001b; Tapscott, 1998).

College and University Users

College and university student and faculty comprise a substantial segment of online social-networking users. The widespread cross-generational use of social media in the larger population suggests that undergraduate and graduate students are a demographic familiar with and experienced in social-media use and that among faculty, the use of social media is a growing trend.

That said, students are generally of the “native” digital generations, while the majority of the faculty have discovered social media only recently. Today’s postsecondary students were born into a world in which social interactions and information seeking are commonly done online (Palfrey & Gasser, 2008).

The first generation to grow up with computers in the home, “Gen Y” or “Millennials” (the net generations) are undergraduates and younger graduate students for whom technology is fundamentally a social experience. These students see social media as an opportunity to personalize and customize their information production and consumption and as a means to interact virtually.

The net generations are responsible for a 34 percent increase in social-media use in 2011, and they spend an average of 483 minutes per visit to a social-media site (Shaw, 2013). For these
students, engaging with social media, especially social networking, is a cultural and behavioral norm.

According to recent data from the Pew Internet and American Life Project, by all accounts and measures, the Internet is ever present in the lives of digital-native students. These students embrace new media quickly: Gen Y students have abandoned desktops for laptops and smartphones, preferring wireless access for all undertakings. This is a generation of undergraduates (and some graduate students) who expect information production, consumption, and circulation to be mobile, fast, and 24/7.

On mobile devices or laptops, they use the Internet as an information kiosk for political and entertainment news, for health and recreational advice, and for experiencing a sense of community (Pempek, Yermolayeva & Calvert, 2009; Valkenberg, Peter & Schouten, 2006). Facebook is their preferred social-networking site, and they have moved away from traditional blogging to micro-blogging, especially on Twitter.

Older adults, on the other hand, continue to buy desktop computers and in recent years have increased their use of traditional blogs (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickuhr, 2010). They have adapted to the demands of Web 2.0 communication and adopted most of its platforms. But although older adult use of social media has doubled in recent years, adults 50 years and older primarily use email to contact friends, family and co-workers.

In contrast, youth’s and young adults’ use of email has fallen sharply with the rise of social media (comScore, 2010). In 2010, rates of email use by youth 12 to 17 years of age dropped 59 percent, which is significant for the communication strategies employed by college and university faculty, administrators, and staff.

Clearly, most faculty do not have their students’ social-media experience and fluency. However, the general-population data reported here would suggest that though faculty and students are differently positioned on a digital divide, as “immigrants” to social media, faculty are narrowing the divide.

Within the general population, generational cohorts that most faculty represent are rapidly acquiring some measure of social-media cultural competence, as well as honing their cross-generational computer-mediated communication skills. Attitudes about social media, knowledge of the technology, and computer-mediated communication skills have improved within the age cohorts populated by postsecondary faculty.
But exactly how do college and university faculty use social media personally and, more important, professionally?

Faculty Social-Media Use

Colleges and universities have universally harnessed the communicative power of social media for institutional operations and services in order to extend and expand their reach (Barnes & Lescault, 2012). For most postsecondary institutions in the US, Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, blogging, and podcasts are the preferred social-media tools, but colleges and universities are now also looking to Pinterest (31 percent adoption), Google+ (25 percent adoption) and Instagram (16 percent adoption) to advance their communications’ delivery and impact.

Through social media, colleges and universities recruit students, engage alumni, develop and sustain institutional academic and athletic brand, connect with students and faculty on and off campus, and manage crises. Student affairs professionals use social media to improve student engagement with academic and extracurricular activities (Heiberger & Junco, 2011).

Across institutional type, many institutional leaders are keen on social media’s ability to circulate information efficiently (Barnes & Lescault, 2013; 2012). At community colleges, for example, leaders who frequently use them are more likely to have confidence in the communicative power of social media to promote campus events and activities, to help build campus community, and to solicit and receive student feedback (Rios-Aguilar, González Canché, Deil-Amen, & Davis III, 2012).

But faculty employ social media far more often for personal than for professional and instructional use. Regardless of tenure status, career stage, or gender, almost all of the faculty surveyed by the Babson Survey Research Group had heard of social media, eight out of ten actually had accounts on a social-media site, but only about 30 percent reported that they use social media to communicate with colleagues and students. Their online instructional colleagues reported only a slightly higher rate of social-media use with colleagues and students. Faculty in the humanities and in the social sciences reported the highest use of social media among the traditional disciplines (Moran, Seaman & Tinti-Kane, 2012).

And faculty’s main use of social media appears to be consumptive rather than productive. They primarily watch videos and read blogs and wikis, although visiting social-networking sites
is also a principle activity. Slightly over 20 percent of the faculty who use social media to communicate with students report that they use YouTube; 12 percent use Facebook.

Faculty most often use online videos in their courses, both for in-class instruction and as required content. They do appear to value podcasts and wikis as well as videos, but they rarely use Skype or Twitter to talk with students. Faculty are equally reluctant to use these and other social media (e.g., LinkedIn) to communicate with their professional colleagues (Moran, Seaman & Tinti-Kane, 2012).

While they may use social media for instruction, faculty still have reservations about their pedagogical value. As with any instructional technology, faculty weigh the costs and benefits of employing social media as an instructional tool. Their enthusiasm for doing so is curbed by their awareness that learning how to use these media effectively will take time.

Undoubtedly, faculty’s reluctance to dedicate that time to learning how to use social media as an instructional tool is a function of the professional-productivity stresses they face, but it is also true that they have seen little evidence that social media are positively associated with learning outcomes (Cao, 2103; Moran, Seaman & Tinti-Kane, 2012). Despite this, faculty do acknowledge that some social media (wikis, podcasts, and videos) can be effective tools for student collaboration (Seaman & Tinti-Kane, 2012).

Chief among faculty’s concerns about social media as instructional technology are their own privacy and the integrity of student work. These concerns are primarily about social-networking sites, in particular Facebook.

Faculty have historically valued a relationship with students that could be characterized as “professional” or formal, and the very essence and objective of social media (especially social networking) is quite the opposite. Social media are designed to connect individuals through a informal, relaxed, and colloquial sharing of information.

There have undoubtedly been changes in faculty’s professional attitudes due to epistemologies and pedagogies that have challenged their historic position as the authority and the student’s as the passive learner and apprentice. But many faculty still do not want to share with students many aspects of their private lives or know about their students’—they see such sharing as a threat to the traditional conditions of the faculty-student relationship. Having access to faculty’s personal online profiles ostensibly makes students “friends” with faculty, which
many faculty feel disrupts their real-world authority (friends do not grade friends) and weakens their professional legitimacy.

Faculty recognize that social media, especially online social networking, are about revealing aspects of the self, whether authentic or counterfeit. Self-disclosure on Facebook, for example, can be communicated with irony, contain playful misrepresentations, or be characterized by earnestness. All of these tonalities need to be interpreted by their “friends” in the network (Lampe, Ellison & Steinfeld, 2007). The possibilities for misinterpretation certainly dissuade some faculty from using those networks,

Postsecondary faculty are wrong, however, when they believe that these platforms provide no privacy safeguards. Facebook groups, for example, allow only Facebook “friends” to see each other’s personal profile pages. But even so, faculty remain skeptical.

Faculty’s uneasiness about their inability to verify the authenticity of student work submitted online may be the most influential reason for their apprehension. A core professional value in academia, academic integrity has been challenged by online technologies and by what some have characterized as the habits of information access and circulation peculiar to digital-native populations (McCabe & Pavela, 2004).

Transgressions of faculty norms about plagiarism are not new to postsecondary education. Students have copied others’ work and have fraudulently submitted it as their own throughout history. But 89 percent of college presidents believe that “cyber-plagiarism” has risen in the last ten years, largely due to students’ online behaviors and technology’s incorporation into education (Parker, Lenhart & Moore, 2011). The digital generations’ experience with accessing vast amounts of information through the “concierge-style delivery system” of online media (Sternbergh, 2013) and with producing unscrutinized content seems to have increased both plagiarism and faculty’s anxiety about it.

More troubling in some ways is the practice of “mixing” or “mashing” information that is so common online and so natural to our digital-native students. The traditional academic position on what constitutes “original” work may be outside of the ken of a generation accustomed to valuing information on wikis and blogs that are collaborative and “mashed” by design (Jiang, Emmerton & McKauge, 2013; Ulrich, 2013). Referred to as the “Hegemann” phenomenon (Kulish, 2010), incorporating and combining other-generated original content into one’s own text is considered a new version of “original” work.
Focused on sharing content online and collaboration, many students place little value on the individual author or primary source of information. It appears that digital-native college students now understand the concept of authorship and originality very differently than faculty. Studies on cyber-plagiarism suggest that college students view online plagiarism as less dishonest than copying from text sources. Among the college students surveyed from 2006-2010 by McCabe, Butterfield, & Treviño (2012), only 29 percent believed that copying content from online sources constituted serious cheating.

**Social Media in the Classroom**

Interestingly and not unexpected, students also have concerns about their privacy, worrying that faculty will view their profile pages and personal communications (Cao, 2013; Martinez-Aleman & Wartman, 2009). While they admit that Facebook can be another means to communicate with faculty, students too prefer the student-faculty relationship to be a “professional” connection (Martinez-Aleman, 2009; Hewitt & Forte, 2006).

Students believe that social media are first and foremost “social” applications and are not meant for presenting an academic identity but for providing information about themselves that is peer-culture relevant. Online profiles on Facebook are social; professional relationship or employment-oriented profiles are more appropriate for gated-access online social networks such as LinkedIn.

Students are comfortable communicating with faculty through online course-management systems and email because these tools are bounded by their academic meanings and purposes and not by social motives (Martinez-Aleman & Wartman, 2009). Although many students report that they are comfortable with other authority figures (parents, employers) seeing their Facebook profiles, faculty access to their profile pages on sites like Facebook is still not something an overwhelming proportion of students desire (Levine & Dean, 2012; Martinez-Aleman & Wartman, 2009).

**Social Media as Instructional Technology**
Like faculty, students are skeptical about social-media use in the classroom, but they say that their postsecondary learning would be enriched if faculty’s technological literacy were improved (Levine & Dean, 2012). Surveys of current college students suggest that students clearly want more technology-enabled interactive learning opportunities. Students report that they want to learn through a mix of instructional models that include social media, and they express high rates of dissatisfaction when faculty simply lecture. About a third of students want faculty to use telepresence tools in class (CDW-G, 2012).

Because of the recent advent of social media and their slow adoption by faculty as instructional tools, research on their effects on teaching and undergraduate learning is in its early stages. But faculty recognize their promise as an instructional tool in providing students with opportunities for self-directed, collaborative learning.

These media appear to increase students’ engagement with course content and to take advantage of peer learning (Baird & Fisher, 2005). Dabbagh and Kitsantas (2012; 2011) argue for social media as an instructional tool through which students can have greater learner control and personalization despite the media’s collaborative nature.

Faculty who have incorporated Twitter into courses report an upturn in participation in class activities, their students’ engagement in the course, and grades (Junco, Heigberger & Loken, 2010). More specifically, students’ language proficiency has been shown to have improved by using Twitter. The micro-blog appears to increase peer interactions and faculty-student communication, and its informal, “relaxed” writing style can encourage creativity (Greenhow & Gleason, 2012). Medical students using social media report a variety of benefits, including immediate feedback, collaborative learning, and networking with experts (George & Dellasaga, 2011).

The Promise of Social Media

Social media’s evolution as a pedagogical tool will depend greatly on faculty’s readiness to leverage their ability to enrich student learning, as long as they can authenticate student identity in assessing it. Faculty who are currently teaching with social media see their value for increased collaboration among students and with external experts and for improving learning personalization and participation. Additionally, they recognize the media’s value in evaluating
student products and in enabling timely feedback on them. Finally, faculty can create mechanisms for instructional accountability using social media (Taylor, 2010). Let’s consider each of these instructional benefits in turn.

**Personalization**

Ironically, social media can provide students with a greater degree of instructional personalization and enable them to develop self-regulatory skills. Because social media require individuals to create content that will be made public, they broadcast ownership of their products. Public exposure of their contributions to the intellectual community can motivate students to manage information and monitor and assess their contributions better.

Faculty can use social media to provide students with more opportunities to engage in self-directed learning and with differentiated paths to knowledge acquisition and processing. Students can use social media to catch up with course material and to explore topics of interest more deeply.

**Collaboration and Student Participation**

The interactive nature of social media fosters student collaboration within and outside of class. Through social media, faculty can extend the class beyond the limits of the physical classroom and the traditional in-class group format. Students can contribute and share resources through micro-blogs and wikis that require them to reflect and build on content, as well as engage in peer learning by considering the contributions of other users and determining the worth of ideas presented. These course collaborations help build a sense of community among classmates and provide another means for the circulation of students “academic capital” (Valenzuela, Park & Kee, 2009).

Social media also facilitate the participation of shy students and those cautious and reluctant ones for whom speaking in class is difficult. In large classes, faculty can promote student engagement and participation through blogs and micro-blogs, and online study groups can more actively involve all students. Additionally, faculty can check the class reactions to readings and discussions by checking backchannels on Twitter or other micro-blogs, helping them to read and improve class climate.
Collaborations through social media are not limited to classmates. Cross-institutional collaborations with peers, partnerships with international academic professionals, and multi-institutional conferencing are all possible through social media.

**Assessment and Accountability**

Social media also allow faculty to rely less on traditional measures of student performance (West, 2012), thus enabling better assessment of individual student performance. Students can submit materials electronically, and feedback to them can be timelier (Taylor, 2010). For example, screencasting software (e.g. Jing) can quickly give students the instructor’s virtual commentary.

Both students and faculty must act responsibly and conscientiously as users of the media. Given its non-academic origins and customary use by students, social media will serve instructional and academic purposes only if faculty both model best academic practices and set class standards and expectations for student use.

A course policy on social media should be presented to students as part of the course syllabus and requirements. Social media embedded in course requirements should be accessible to students with disabilities and enable an amplification of their learning (Schachmut, 2013). [Editor’s note: See Barbara Hill’s article in this issue on these and other legal issues raised by the challenges of students with disabilities.] Participation should not be compulsory, given that not all students use social media.

Faculty must keep in mind certain regulatory and legal issues: not only ADA requirements but FERPA guidelines and copyright laws. Good practices on social media should also include a ban on spam; only posts that are topic specific should be permitted. Faculty should remind students that faculty’s and student’s privacy will be paramount and that mechanisms are in place to prevent the sharing of personal profiles on online social-networking sites, but all posts must be signed by students’ real names.

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In many ways, social media today are consistent with the seven principles of effective pedagogy set out by Chickering and Gamson (1987) in the late 20\textsuperscript{th} century, but they certainly add fresh and tricky dimensions to teaching and learning. They have proven their potential for
encouraging contact between students and faculty and for developing teamwork and partnerships among students, but their promise for making postsecondary pedagogy more interactive, learner-centered, and multi-dimensional has yet to be realized.

Social media broaden the scope and increase the ways of learning course content; they may also draw out students’ many different talents in ways that traditional pedagogy does not. But faculty who use them should communicate clear and rigorous expectations for student use.

The challenges and responsibilities ahead lay at the feet of postsecondary faculty and administrators. Faculty need to explore the promise of using social media as supplementary or primary instructional tools. At the same time, more research needs to be conducted on the effects of social media on cognition.

Postsecondary institutions also have to do a better job of faculty development in using instructional technology in general and social media in particular (Moran, Seaman & Tinti-Kane, 2012). As new generations of faculty enter the profession, resistance to these media will likely decrease. But for the foreseeable future, faculty need not only training but incentives and time to reconfigure their 20th-century classrooms to meet the needs of 21st-century learning.