Social media as an Educational Tool in University Level Geography

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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

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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 weblogs and Twitter—in the university geography classroom. Lessons learned in the geography context can be extrapolated to many other disciplines.

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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 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 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.


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).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time (min)</th>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Details</th>
<th>Presentation Strategies</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1-10</td>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>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.</td>
<td>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.</td>
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<td>10-25</td>
<td>Pros/ Cons Large group brainstorm</td>
<td>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.</td>
<td>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).</td>
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<td>25-40</td>
<td>Social Media: Examples in Geography</td>
<td>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.</td>
<td>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</td>
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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. Wikipedia is viewed as a non-academic source, but students could be required to add information to existing Wikipedia articles or even create new ones 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 Polleverywhere.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.

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<th>40-60 Social media solutions</th>
<th>Small groups exercise</th>
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<td>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.</td>
<td>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 &quot;Social Media as an Educational Tool in Geography: Instructor Tools. &quot;</td>
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<tr>
<th>60-70 Social media solutions</th>
<th>Share results</th>
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<td>Each group shares their initial scenario from part 4 of the workshop and its solution with the rest of the group.</td>
<td>Other participants are invited to weigh in and comment.</td>
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<tr>
<td>70-85</td>
<td>Social Media: Your context</td>
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<td>Participants are encouraged to brainstorm ways that social media can be used in their particular teaching context.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>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.)</td>
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<th>85-90</th>
<th>Conclusion</th>
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<td>Session is concluded and resources for using social media in the classroom are provided.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Provide hand-out “Social Media as an Educational Tool in Geography” hand-out.</td>
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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?
### Social Media as an Educational Tool in Geography

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