Social distancing meet social media: digital tools for connecting students, teachers, and citizens in an emergency

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Abstract

Purpose – In a public health crisis where social distancing, or physical distancing while in public spaces, is the new normal, social media offer respite from being alone. Recent statistics show spikes in social media usage worldwide during the Covid-19 pandemic. More than just easing loneliness, such freely available digital tools offer affordances for education in an emergency.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper summarizes insights from literature reviews of over a decade of research and recent case studies on the benefits of teaching with social media in K-12 education.

Findings – The authors highlight three affordances of social media for fostering active learning, community building and civic participation and describe how social media can be used in conjunction with conventional learning management systems. Furthermore, the authors argue that the unprecedented health crisis that is faced today requires the participation of responsible citizens of all ages; K-12 public education is on the front lines of preparing informed and active citizens and the integration of social media as part of remote education plans can help.

Practical implications – The paper includes instructional guidelines for K-12 teachers and instructional designers in various settings who seek to integrate social media as part of their strategy for teaching students at a distance and facilitating their civic participation.

Originality/value – This paper fulfills an identified need for evidence-based and pragmatic approaches to K-12 online teaching and learning using technologies already widely in use (i.e. social media).

Keywords Social media, Active learning, Community building, Distance education, K-12 education, COVID-19 pandemic, Civic participation

Paper type General review

Introduction

A worldwide pandemic in the spring of 2020 has resulted in economic and social disruption of unprecedented scale. In this public health crisis where social distancing, or physical distancing while in public spaces, is the new normal, social media offer respite from being alone. Recent statistics show spikes in social media usage worldwide during the COVID-19...
More than just easing loneliness, such digital tools offer affordances for education in an emergency. As many K-12 schools rapidly transition to remote online forms of teaching and learning, further distancing students from classmates, friends, teachers and public life, social media offer benefits.

This article summarizes insights from a review of over a decade of research (Greenhow et al., 2020; Greenhow and Askari, 2017; Rehm et al., 2019) and recent case studies (Chapman, 2019) on the benefits of teaching with social media in K-12 education. It highlights three affordances of social media for fostering active learning, community building and civic participation. To orient the reader, we provide an overview of social media generally, including its key features, common uses and the platforms or services most widely adopted in education. Next, we describe how social media can be used in conjunction with conventional remote learning platforms. We draw from educational research to provide evidence-based instructional guidelines for teachers and instructional designers in various settings.

Furthermore, we argue that the unprecedented health crisis facing us today requires the participation of responsible citizens of all ages; K-12 public education is on the front lines of preparing informed and active citizens (Heath, 2018; Krutka, 2014), and the integration of social media as part of remote education plans can help. For instance, teachers’ integration of Twitter can facilitate and encourage students to engage with elected leaders, subject-matter and health experts and members of their community in ways not possible without social media (Chapman, 2019).

Social media overview
Definitions of social media have been debated in the research literature, as these technologies with their range of uses, user experiences and social implications continue to evolve (Boyd and Ellison, 2007; Ellison and boyd, 2013; Fox and McEwan, 2017). In this paper, we define social media as Web 2.0 internet-based applications that feature user-generated content, profiles for the site or app created by users, and the development of online social networks by connecting a user’s profile with those of other individuals or groups within the system (Obar and Wildman, 2015). This last hallmark feature: the facilitation and development of online social networks is prominent in social media like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest and others which spotlight people's list of connections and feature the ability to view and traverse the connections of others.

Social media use has become so ubiquitous that it has impacted how, when and with whom people learn (Greenhow et al., 2009). A recent meta-analysis of 610 journal articles on social media found that the greatest percentage of articles were related to education (Van Osch and Coursaris, 2015). Educational research has examined the use of social media in formal education and out-of-school contexts, including K-12 education (Greenhow and Askari, 2017; Greenhow et al., 2020); higher education (Greenhow et al., 2017; Selwyn, 2009); professional learning (Li and Greenhow, 2015); and informal learning (Gleason, 2013; Greenhow and Lewin, 2016). Popular social media platforms, including Twitter (Gao et al., 2012) and Facebook (Greenhow, Menzer and Gibbins, 2015; Manca and Ranieri, 2013, 2016), are widely adopted and the most studied in education (Greenhow et al., 2020). Such research has sought to reimagine the ways in which teachers and students conceive of and construct the learning environment (Greenhow et al., 2016).

Some of this research has shown positive effects of the use of social media in education, including new opportunities for connection, collaboration and content sharing (Mazman and Usluel, 2010; Li and Greenhow, 2015), new literacy practices (Greenhow and Robelia, 2009a) and increased critical thinking and participation in classes (Ajjan and Hartshorne, 2008;
Mason and Rennie, 2007). Research has also shown negative effects, such as a decline in students’ grades as their use of Facebook increased (Kirschner and Karpinski, 2010); using Facebook while doing schoolwork was correlated to a drop in college GPA (Junco and Cotton, 2013); or using social media during extracurricular activities distracted participants (Andersson et al., 2014). Although critical evaluation of social media in education is warranted, it is important to note that these studies evaluated social media use for social, rather than educational purposes. That said, we acknowledge that there is still a need for more empirical work that can improve not only our understanding of how to use these technologies for learning but also how that understanding may inform learning theory. While further exploration is necessary, the research examining the ways social media can facilitate learning has shown potential benefits.

Social media benefits for distance education
Barriers to technology adoption in education, such as lack of teacher training, replication of traditional teacher-centered and transmission-oriented methods and a fear of change, have been well-documented (Gikas and Grant, 2013; Ertmer and Ottenbreit-Leftwich, 2010). In considering online education:

[...] teachers must often “re-imagine” traditional images and norms of learning and assessment and help students understand how successful learning includes participating in and supporting the exchange of feedback within classrooms and beyond them (Greenhow and Askari, 2017, p. 625).

The COVID-19 pandemic prompted a rapid shift to distance education. Using social media as a means for supporting active learning provides one pathway for overcoming these barriers, especially when we do not have the luxury of only re-imagining.

Social media, with its user-generated content and online social networking, can help reduce some of the distance, or feelings of disconnection, that students experience in distance education (Smith and Taveras, 2005); helping students establish a social presence, or their ability to project their personal characteristics into the learning environment, is critical to their successful learning and satisfaction in courses (Richardson and Swan, 2003). Reviews of the educational research literature (2004–2018) suggest that social media could help improve students’ experiences of remote education by facilitating active learning, community building and civic participation. In the sections that follow, we draw from the research base to provide instructional guidelines for using social media to better engage students, teachers and citizens in online education in an emergency.

Social media for active learning
Social media can help foster active learning. Defined as learning that immerses students in their own learning processes, requiring them to critically evaluate their work, make connections to their prior knowledge and reflect on metacognitive strategies, active learning is essential to education and the design of quality instruction (Bransford et al., 2000). Schwarz and Caduri (2016), for instance, found that secondary school teachers used social network site features to increase students’ active learning in science, history, literature and geography. To foster inquiry-based science learning or historical reasoning or literary analysis, teachers leveraged social media’s groups and page features, multimedia elements and its multiple channels for communication (i.e. posts, likes, chat, share, comments). In one course example, students explored their own object of inquiry (e.g. butterflies, aquatic plants) as scientists do; they created a shared digital notebook through a group Facebook page in which to formulate a researchable question; record qualitative and quantitative data in photo, video, text and other forms; and collaborate on the research process. Through the
digital notebook, tagged with each group member’s profile, students interacted with other groups’ research and with their teacher to reflect on their own research questions and learning strategies. Integration of social media in the curriculum facilitated students’ active learning.

In other work, researchers documented how digital story telling through social media such as Instagram, Flicker or VoiceThread fostered active learning. Digital story telling allows the user/author to practice critical thinking in selecting the story topic, elaborating ideas in text, image and sound and consolidate new knowledge, which can boost students’ motivation and engagement. Batsila and Tsichouridis (2016), for instance, found that using a social media tool for digital storytelling in an English class helped students enhance their reading and writing skills, their interest in writing and struggling students' self-confidence. Similarly, Vazquez-Cano (2012) explored how middle school students’ use of Twitter in Spanish language, social sciences and natural sciences classes sparked their creativity and self-directed learning. In another study, students’ use of the social network site, Edmodo, in their elementary classroom increased their critical evaluation of writing, their awareness of audience and authorship, and prompted more collaborative and less teacher-centered work (Thibaut, 2015). Marich (2019) similarly found that when social media was integrated into their elementary school classroom students were motivated to write for an audience beyond the classroom and engage critically in the writing process. Social media was found to empower students to take ownership of their learning. These findings align with Moje’s (2016) review of digital youth cultural studies and literacies research which found that social media “offer opportunities for people to act as agents in their own learning” (p. 72).

*Instructional guidelines.* Common themes across these studies suggest two guidelines for educators seeking to integrate social media into distance education for more active learning. First, embrace the technology’s multimedia and co-constructive elements. On social media individuals are free to express their ideas in multiple media, claim ownership over their work through their associated social media profiles and connect their work to that of others in the system. By empowering students to control and manage their own learning experiences, social media can draw students into the learning environment where they can bring preferences, interests and prior knowledge to the task at hand.

Second, embrace the technology’s capabilities for documenting ongoing processes (Gao, Luo and Zhang, 2012). Social media features like status updates and short-form writing (e.g. tweets) encourage students to post regular updates and just-in-time thoughts which are then, liked or shared or commented on by others in the system. Because social media spaces exist apart from educational institutions, unlike learning management systems, such informal sharing is common. In these ways, social media can foster impromptu and reflective thinking for more active learning.

*Social media for community building*

Social media can also enhance students’ connections to communities, within and beyond the classroom. The International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE) (2018) established standards that emphasize students’ community connection and citizenship: students are encouraged to work in teams, expand their perspectives, express themselves and understand their responsibilities as contributors to a global, digital society. Although it can be difficult for students to feel a sense of camaraderie and community in formal learning management systems which emphasize content delivery and are controlled by their teacher, on social media, students can build community with classmates as well as experts and organizations brought into the learning space through their networking features (Manca and Ranieri, 2016).
Research has shown that social connections students established through social media use in classrooms created safe spaces where they could share, explore identities and risk making mistakes. Sun et al. (2017), for example, used a quasi-experimental design to compare Chinese elementary students’ English language learning either with a mobile social networking app or without, and found that the group using social media improved significantly more in their English fluency than the control group. The researchers determined that the mobile app’s ability to connect students with each other (i.e. create an authentic audience) and allow students to redo and practice their oral assignments before submitting a final recording created a low-stress environment where students enjoyed practicing English and interacting with peers (e.g. sharing pictures with each other). Similarly, in Eamer et al.’s (2014) study, students’ use of the social network site Ning allowed for “low-stakes sharing” (p. 65); they felt free to express and explore pieces of their cultural identities, thus facilitating interactions with classmates that built an inclusive online community. By allowing students to incorporate and share personal artifacts through their profiles and tag, share or otherwise interact with others’ content, social media promote connectedness and belonging that tie students’ academic and social experiences into the same learning environment. Moreover, because social media emphasize networking features (e.g. Facebook Groups; Twitter Follower and tagging structure), it can foster low stakes, informal sharing that help create connections within the class and extend participation beyond it to other learners, interest groups and subject matter experts.

**Instructional guidelines.** To leverage social media for community-building as part of one’s distance education plans, educators should:

- encourage students to “Friend,” “Follow,” or otherwise connect with their peers and instructor within the small group and/or class and/or school;
- model low-stakes sharing and interacting with others posts, status updates and shared content; and
- encourage student-to-student and instructor–student interaction and communication on social media (e.g. “like” students’ posts; reply to students’ posts or comment on their updates; retweet students’ tweets or share their posted content with commentary; “favorite” students’ tweets; tag other students in passing along student-initiated content).

Using social media’s networking features in these and other ways will help build trust, reciprocity and community over time. Research has shown that teachers who actively participate in social media with their students are more successful at building community through these tools (Gao et al., 2012). In the next section, we talk about how teachers can use social media to build community beyond their course to encourage greater civic participation.

**Social media for civic participation**

While health-care providers are on the front lines of managing the COVID-19 health crisis, teachers are on the front lines of educating informed, engaged and responsible citizens. This work is often measured through research on civic education. Conventional civic education emphasizes teacher-centered pedagogies, such as lectures, and traditional methods of civic participation, such as joining a political party, which have proven to be ineffective in encouraging young people to engage in civic life (Torney-Purta et al., 2001; Torney-Purta and Wilkenfeld, 2009).
Yet, young people’s engagement with civic life is made even more important in a national emergency with its uncertainty, rapid information flows and changes. This importance is even greater now, when the crisis of the pandemic is taking place during the collection of decennial US Census, primary elections for federal, state and local political office, and national protests for social justice and reform. Each of these separately calls for participation in civic life; together, they require new technology-enabled approaches which encourage all members of society to engage in public life while remaining physically distant from each other. This moment coincides with younger voters having enough power to influence civic issues, including elections, but many are disillusioned, disregarded or do not know how to participate in civic life effectively (Astor, 2020).

Social media, as part of distance education plans, can facilitate young people’s civic participation; it can encourage students to engage with elected leaders, subject-matter and health experts, and members of their community in ways not possible without social media (Chapman, 2019). The affordances of social media are that they are inherently participatory, align with established best practices in civic education and with the ways in which young people engage with civic life (Chapman, 2019; Gleason and von Gillern, 2018). These affordances of social media also lower barriers to civic engagement and disrupt traditional power structures, which together nurture student agency (Chapman, 2019; Chapman and Greenhow, 2019; Gleason and von Gillern, 2018).

For instance, Chapman (2019), in a phenomenological case study of the use of Twitter for civic education among high school social studies teachers, found that using social media amplified student voice and fostered student agency. Teachers’ use of Twitter allowed and encouraged students to engage with elected leaders, subject-matter experts and members of their community in ways that were not possible without it. Students used Twitter to find, share and engage with news stories, and teachers used the platform to teach about source evaluation. Importantly, several of the participants in this study taught students who were isolated, whether emotionally, socially or geographically. In these cases of isolation, teachers used Twitter to connect students to others, such as connecting emotionally isolated students with members of their local communities; connecting socially isolated students in a school’s Gay-Straight Alliance with other GSAs around the state; and connecting geographically isolated students to their county and state elected officials. Each of these uses of Twitter developed civic skills and promoted participation in public life; regardless of the source of physical isolation, the use of social media encouraged students to engage with others for civic purposes.

Civic education is intended to prepare students for lifelong civic participation. Using social media to teach civic participation during this public health crisis will teach civic knowledge, develop civic skills and promote civic action in ways that will move fluidly between online and offline spaces when the crisis has passed.

Instructional guidelines. For educators seeking to implement social media for civic education we offer three practical guidelines based on insights from the research. First, choose a social media platform which aligns with your objectives for civic education. In the study mentioned above, teachers had specific goals in mind for their students’ civic education; they chose to use an open system like Twitter because it aligned with those objectives (Chapman, 2019), whereas most social media integrated into K-12 education, as documented in the research, are set up to be closed, available only to the students and teachers in the class, grade or other bounded system (e.g. school). If the objective is for students to interact with governmental officials, a private Facebook group or less popular niche social media platform would be inappropriate.
Second, teach students how to use social media to practice responsible and informed citizenship. We know from the educational research literature that characterizing all students as digital natives belies the truth (Bennett et al., 2008). Neither all students know how to use social media platforms nor do they know how to effectively use them for civic participation (Chapman, 2019; Chapman and Marich, 2020). Additionally, the spread of misinformation on social media, while always a concern, is a particularly critical issue during the COVID-19 pandemic (Priebe, 2020). Research has shown that teachers need additional resources to combat the spread of misinformation (Chang et al., 2020). Teach students how to use social media to identify and prevent the spread of misinformation. For instance, have students conduct a Google search on the source or content of posts that they find to fact-check information before interacting or sharing with the post (Guynn, 2020).

Finally, encourage students to engage with accounts or topics which interest them (Chapman, 2019; Gleason and von Gillern, 2018). Students who had some freedom in choosing how to participate on social media found more creative and meaningful ways of doing so (Chapman, 2019). Set parameters for civic participation via social media but also provide students with multiple ways of engaging on social media within those parameters. For example, if one of your objectives is for students to find, evaluate and engage with news, allow them to choose news stories that interest them.

Final considerations
Despite extensive literature supporting the positive potential of social media in education, educators must also consider challenges to implementing these technologies: commercialization, privacy and norms. First, Friesen and Lowe questioned the suitability of social media for education, noting, “commercialism ultimately render television beyond the reach of education, we conclude that commercial pressures threaten to limit the potential of the social Web for education and learning” (p. 184). They argued that just as in television, social media are driven by advertising influences that seek to draw users’ attention to sell products, not to educate. Media scholars too have written about how social media are designed to compete for our attention and benefit from doing so (Shirky, 2014). To counter these commercial forces, what should educators do? Shirky (2014) suggests orienting towards protecting students’ attention and being intentional about which social media are used and how much:

Regarding teaching as a shared struggle changes the nature of the classroom. It’s not me demanding that they focus – it’s me and them working together to help defend their precious focus against outside distractions (n.p.).

Many school districts have specific policies about which social media applications can be used, such that teachers must weigh their options and goals before making pedagogical decisions.

A second challenge to implementing social media in education is navigating the privacy issues. Teachers have a responsibility to protect students’ privacy and this obligation complicates teachers’ use of social media as learning tools (Greenhow and Askari, 2017). Tensions between social media’s promotion of connectedness and the privacy concerns faced by teachers wanting to interact with students online are reported in the literature (Krutka et al., 2019). While some studies argue that teacher-student contact via social media is an under-used affordance (Carpenter and Krutka, 2014; Krutka and Carpenter, 2016), other studies suggest teachers should be cautious in attempting to digitally connect with students (Krutka et al., in press; Kuo et al., 2017; Sumuer et al., 2014; Vivitsou and Kynäslahti, 2014). Checking the school or district’s social media or technology use policies will help teachers...
navigate these issues. Krutka and colleagues argue that best practices for teaching with social media include teaching against it, confronting problems of profit and privacy in the curriculum (Krutka et al., 2019). They offer concrete ways to educate students on how the technology is designed to manipulate users’ attention and data, and strategies teachers and students can take to be informed and savvy users.

Third, combining learning, socializing and leisure-time spaces may also generate conflicts between learners’ and teachers’ goals (Greenhow and Lewin, 2016; Greenhow and Robelia, 2009a). A challenge frequently cited by educators implementing social media is integrating the media’s informality within the classroom where formal practices are the norm (Galvin and Greenhow, 2020). For example, students’ attempts to reconcile using social media for classroom writing while still adhering to a platform’s informal language customs can be confusing. Teachers can take several steps to mitigate these challenges, including facilitating open dialogue with students, being transparent in their purposes for using social media in distance education, and collectively setting expectations for use (Lantz-Andersson, 2013, 2018; Lindstrom and Niederhauser, 2016).

As K-12 schools move to online forms of teaching and learning in times of crisis, distancing students from classmates, teachers and public life, social media offer benefits for active learning, community-building and civic participation that can help reduce some of the distance students feel. Although these benefits pose new challenges that must be navigated, they also offer a pathway to overcoming aforementioned technology integration barriers. Integrating social media as we have suggested may help educators purposefully disrupt teacher-centered, transmission-oriented pedagogy in favor of student-centered, co-constructive practices. Where content or “what gets taught,” with the introduction of social media, is partially negotiated between teachers and students, students can experience more ownership and connection to remote schooling and teachers, more occasion to facilitate. Where lack of training can leave teachers feeling stuck, informal, in-the-moment resource-sharing and networking already present among educators on social media (e.g. #Edchat) can provide support and community, perhaps helping teachers, too, feel less distant.

References


Further reading


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