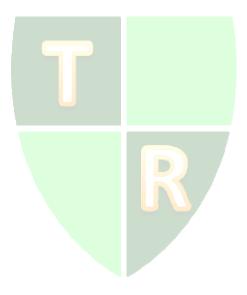# Social media in the online classroom.

Jillian R. Yarbrough
Texas Tech University

ABSTRACT:

Distance learning began nearly a century ago with a handful of universities broadcasting information via radio. Today, distance learning is part of almost every university's curriculum and is delivered through a robust assortment of technologies designed to reach and engage students. And yet, when we consider some popular social media tools, like Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, or Instagram, we must ask: are these tools supporting or hindering online learning? This session will provide an overview of contemporary technology and the research supporting or negating the effectiveness of social media in the online classroom.

Keywords: social media, distance learning, Facebook, online learning, engagement

INTRODUCTION

Technology has transformed learning, allowing connections between students and educators regardless of space and time. When students have access to quality educational resources and instructors, something amazing can occur, there is communication, there is sharing and there is learning. Learning, that without the technology, would not have occurred.

As educators, specifically distance learning educators, we must remain current and knowledgeable, not only about our content area of expertise, but also about technology. Technology is advancing rapidly. The technology we used last year, may not be applicable next year. Distance learning is evolving, are you evolving with it?

One change in distance learning is the application of social media in the distance learning classroom. The following paper will discuss this evolution. Specifically, a brief history and evolution of distance learning from early correspondence to current electronic applications, specifically social media. An overview of Social Media options for the distance learning classroom. Tips on when and how to use Social Media in the distance learning classroom.

BRIEF HISTORY OF DISTANCE LEARNING

Distance learning has a long history, dating back to the 1700s. And distance learning has been widely used and accepted. "Since 1890, more than 80 million Americans have studied by correspondence, including Franklin D. Roosevelt, Walter P. Chrysler, Walter Cronkite, Barry Goldwater, Charles Schulz and many other distinguished American," (Welch, 1992). The following is a timeline of a few key distance learning history highlights.

- 1728- Correspondence Courses Ran in the *Boston Gazette* where Caleb Phillips taught shorthand to students anywhere in the country through an exchange of letter (Miller, 2014).
- 1837- First correspondence schools were founded in the United States (Miller, 2014).
- 1873- Anna Ticknor created The Society to Encourage Studies at Home for the purposes of educational opportunities for all classes of women in society (Nasseh, 1997).
- 1883- Cornell University began a Correspondence University (Gerrity, 1976).
- 1883- Chautauqua College of Liberal Arts offers education by correspondence (Nasseh, 1997).
- 1882- University of Chicago established a home study division (Portway and Lane, 1992).
- 1920- Earliest of the military correspondence schools established (Welch, 1993).
- 1923- Over 10 percent of all broadcast radio stations were owned by educational institutions delivering educational programming (Portway and Lane, 1992).
- 1926- National Home Study Council was established (Welch 1993).
- 1950s – First educational television programs were created (Portway and Lane, 1992).
- 1950- WOI-TV at Iowa State University went on air as the world's first non-experimental, educationally owned television station (Portway and Lane, 1992).
- 1960s- University of Akron (Ohio) used Closed Caption Television to broadcast seven required courses (Portway and Lane, 1992).
- 1970- Maryland Center for Public Broadcasting and the Southern California Consortium for Community College Television produced and offered tele courses regionally and nationally (Portway and Lane, 1992).
- 1970s- primarily pre-recorded videos, cassette recording and some broadcast channels (Harper, Kuanchin and Yen, 2004).
- 1980s- cable and satellite television used as a delivery medium for distance education courses (Wright, 1991).
- 1980s- emergence of World Wide Web (Harper, Kuanchin and Yen, 2004).
- 1997- estimated 1.6 million students participating in distance education (Harper, Kuanchin and Yen, 2004).

- 1999- distance education earning annual revenues of 225 billion dollars (Harper, Kuanchin and Yen, 2004).
- 2000- less expensive computers, Internet in the classrooms, more educational institutions utilizing computer based training synchronous and asynchronous (Harper, Kuanchin and Yen, 2004).
- 1998- 2008- 150% increase in the number of students selecting distance-learning courses as part of their college curriculum (Akanegbu, 2016).

From the timeline, it is apparent that as technology advances, distance learning expands or we could say as technology speeds in transfer of communication, distance learning grows. With decreasing costs for lap tops, wide spread availability of the Internet and prevalence of cell phones, technology has evolved to the point that students can truly have access to their online classes anywhere, anytime. Consider that 99.8% of College Students Have Cell Phone (Huffington Post, 2010) and 30% of student's report taking a class or obtaining their educational content from their cell phone (Huffington Post, 2010).

In 2015, nearly two thirds of Americans relied in on smartphones to access online services (Smith, 2015). The Pew Research Center found one of the primary reasons Americans are using their smartphones is to access Social Media sites like Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. Further, The Pew Research Center identified that 91% of individuals 18-29, 77% of individuals 30-49 and 55% of individuals 50+ are using Smartphones to access social networking sites.

Social Media can be defined as a websites and application that enable users to create content, share content or participate in social networking.   If nearly 100% of students have a cell phone and nearly 100% of the students are using their cell phones to access social media, doesn't it make sense for college educators to find a way to communicate to their students via social media? It does make sense and in fact social media in the online classroom is not only supported by availability of technology, positive outcomes from social media application are supported by research. Internet use for communicative purposes is related to positive psychosocial outcomes (Junco, 2011) (Cotton, 2008) and engaging in social information seeking behaviors on Facebook (as an example) is related to increased social capital (Junco, 2011)(Ellison et al. 2011 and 2007).

OVERVIEW OF SOCIAL MEDIA OPTIONS FOR THE ONLINE CLASSROOM

The following will list six forms of social media, websites or applications that can be used to support instructor and student communication.

Facebook

The Pew Research Center found as of September 24, 2016, 71% of online adults use Facebook. Not only is Facebook a prevalent communication tool, distance learning educators are finding, if given a choice of social media, students are choosing to use Facebook in an educational setting.   "One thing has been clear from our observations in those studies: When given the choice of a number of social technologies to use as part of a course, students will overwhelmingly choose Facebook," (Carter, 2012).

Facebook can fit into almost any academic course when used as an information source. Students can "like" National Geographic, CNN, FOXNews, CBS or Humans of New York. Once a student "likes" a page, their new feed will populate throughout the day with information from this source. Having students "like" course relevant sources, will support ongoing reflection on course topics and understanding of immediate application. Other options for course application of Facebook include student usage to build online communities for pre-service teacher education programs (Shaltry, Hanriksen, Wu and Dickson, 2013), discussion tools for women's studies or philosophy courses (Camus, Hurt, Larson and Prevost, 2016) or as instructional tools in management courses (Buzzetto-More, 2012).

Online Newspapers

"One of the most innovative ways to teach may be to slow down, and tell a story" (Juliani, 2014). Research supports story telling as an effective method for teaching and sharing information with students. Social Media is an excellent platform for storytelling. Consider having students follow online newspapers or websites where they can see and hear recorded real "lived" experiences from other people. Students might follow outside virtual life stories or create their own video newspapers to share their life. The use of internet based newspapers as instructional tools can work effectively in social studies or history courses (Hicks and Ewing, 2003).

Virtual Case Study

Case Studies allow students to apply course content in a "real world" setting. In the case study process, students are asked to read a course relevant case, consider academic research, answer case study questions and possible create unique case solutions. Through this learning process students experiment with course content application in a contained professional setting with instructor support. Research supports the benefits of learning through case studies as many students learn best from examples and problem solving (Dunne and Brooks, 2004). Further, case Studies improve student performance and perceptions of learning (Bonney, 2015). As case studies are prevalent in business courses, virtual case studies can be particularly effective in online business courses (Pariseau and Kezin, 2007). There are numerous virtual case study offerings and competitions, like, StudentAffairs.com, AMA Collegiate Case Competition and Collegiate DECA

Virtual Conference

Students benefit from attending conferences. A conference can build excitement about a career path, support networking, allow for the development of new ideas and simply be fun. Virtual conferences are particularly aligned with college students as a virtual conference is cost effective and easily accessible. "Through the use of video conferencing software, virtual conferences are able to provide an accessible and cost-effective alternative to real time conferences while retaining the key benefits presented by an on-site conference, such as learning opportunities, sharing of ideas, and networking" (Gichora et al, 2010). There are increasing numbers of virtual conferences across a broad range of topics. Students in all disciplines benefit from active participation in relevant, professional conferences.

Blog

Students benefit from an opportunity to reflect on learning. Jack Mezirow, said, *"A defining condition of being human is that we have to understand the meaning of our experience."* Educators promoting reflective classrooms ensure that students are engaged in the process of making meaning (Costa and Kallic, 1980).

Social Media offers innovative ways to support student reflection and blogging. With Social Media, students have options to participate in Live Blogs. A Live Blog is an ongoing blog where students update information in real time and often share statements or brief excerpts about their experiences. Students can follow Live Blogs like the BBC Live Blog page or create Live Blogs by posting short bursts of information through a blogging platforms like 24LiveBlog. A Live Blog can combine innovation and technology to increase student creativity and student-to-student interaction.

Reflective blogging has potential for application in many disciplines like education and psychology (Cisero, 2006), nursing (Kennison, 2006) and course for student teacher preparation (Polder, Van Der SChaaf, Simons, Van Tartwijk, and Wijngaards, 2014).

Additional Options

Facebook, online newspapers, virtual case studies, virtual conferences and blogs are just a few of the numerous options available for social media integration into the online classroom. There are many other options like Polling, BackChannel, Twitter, Instagram and Snapchat.

Knowing about the social media options is important, but equally important is recognizing when and how to apply the social media tools in the classroom in a way that enhances learning.

STRATEGIES FOR SOCIAL MEDIA USE IN THE ONLINE CLASSROOM

The next wave of distance learning will include the use of Smartphones (Skjodt, 2013) and Social Media (Nicholson, 2010). So, it is not a question of if a distance educator should use social media in their distance learning classroom, but rather the questions are when and how. The following tips and strategies have the purpose of helping distance learning educators to prepare now to be effective at communicating and transferring course information to students with the use of Social Media?

When to Use Social Media

Social Media is a tool for transferring information, communication and course content between students and their instructors. But, there have been many communications tools in the past and there will be more in the future. The presence of a tool does not mean the tool will be effectively applied or used in the distance learning classroom. The following will offer four guidelines to help determine when to use Social Media in the online classroom. Use Social Media when:
1. The technology supports a connection between the student and the instructor.
2. Students have access to the technology.
3. Students are comfortable with the technology.
4. Alignment between the tool and learning outcomes is present.

Connecting the Student and Their Instructor

Social Media should be used in the classroom when application supports connect between students and their instructor. Questions to ask to support understanding of connectivity are as follows:
- Is there a need for increased communication or instructor/student connection?
- How will the selected social media tool support connection between the instructor/student?

Students Need Access to the Technology

In order for the Social Media tool to be effective in supporting learning, students must have access to the technology or application. Questions to ask to support understanding of access are as follows:
- Do the students already have the necessary technology?
- Is it reasonable to request purchase of necessary technology if all student's do not currently have access?

Students are Comfortable with the Technology

Students must have a level of comfort in using the technology or application. If the technology or application is unfamiliar or difficult, the usage can detract from desired learning. Questions to ask to support understanding of student comfort with technology are as follows:
- Are the students already comfortable with the technology or application?
- If the technology or application is new to a student, will learning to use the technology or application detract from learning the course content?

Aligned with Learning Outcomes

When applied in the distance learning classroom, Social Media should be aligned with course learning outcomes. A question to ask to support understanding of alignment is as follows:
- Does the use of social media support the assignment or course learning objectives?

Example- Applying the Four Guidelines

The following is an example determining the effectiveness and ease of use for including 24LiveBlog in a college level Human Relations Course. A response of Yes to the assessment question will score one point and a response of No will score 0 points. A higher score indicates a greater alignment between the course assignment and Social Media. The highest possible score and a score indicating full alignment between Social Media and the course assignment would be 7.

For this example, the alignment between live blogging and learning objectives in a Human Relations course will be evaluated. One of the main purposes of a course in Human Relations is to help students reflect on their own communication styles and learning needs. A course reflection assignment should foster critical thinking and reflection regarding personal communication and learning style.

The four step guidelines for assessing Social Media application as outlined in this paper will be applied to consider if a reflective live blog via 24LiveBlog would be effective for students in a college level Human Relations course.
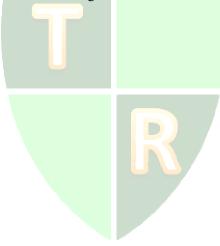
1. Connecting the student and the instructor.
   - Assessment Question: Is there a need for increased communication or instructor/student connection?
     - Instructor Response: Instructor perceives greater communication between the students and instructor could foster creative reflective learning.
   - Assessment Question: How will the selected social media tool support connection between the instructor/student?
     - Instructor Response: The selected social media tool 24LiveBlog encourages student interest and creates opportunities for the students to participate in numerous short blogs. The increase in blog frequency could increase opportunities for ongoing communication exchange between instructor and student.
2. Students have access to the technology.
   - Assessment Question: Do the students already have the necessary technology?
     - Instructor Response: 100% of the students in the class have access to the necessary technology, Internet and Computers.
   - Assessment Question: Is it reasonable to request if all student's do not currently have access?
     - Instructor Response: Yes
3. Students are comfortable with the technology.
   - Assessment Question: Are the students already comfortable with the technology or application?
     - Instructor Response: No- About 40% of the class has completed online blogs.
     - Instructor Response: No- About 10% of the class has completed a live online blog.
   - Assessment Question: If the technology or application is new to a student, will using the technology or application support learning the course content?
     - Instructor Response: Yes. The technology is new but familiar based on other student frequented technologies like Twitter and Facebook.
4. Aligned with learning outcomes.

- Assessment Question: Does the use of social media support the assignment or course learning objectives?
  - Instructor Response: Yes. The use of Social Media for an online live blog supports student reflection and understanding of their personal communication style.

Upon completion of the assessment. The application of 24LiveBlog for a virtual live blog in a Human Relations course scores 5/7. This score would warrant exploration of the Social media usage. The instructor might proceed with the live blog assignment but schedule some student training and support regarding procedures for using 24LiveBlog.

CONCLUSION

Distance learning is a part of nearly every academic institution of higher learning.   Technology is advancing and so must distance learning applications and procedures. Students are seeking more freedom, increased access and less boundaries in their learning environment. As reported by the Pew Research Center in 2014, over 91% of individuals 18-29 are engaged in Social Media. This data alone supports an exploration of learning opportunities with students through one of their preferred communication channels.   There are numerous Social Media tools that can be relevant in the online classroom.   But, it is important to consider the need, relevance, accessibility and alignment of any Social Media tool before applying in the distance learning classroom.

REFERENCES

Akanegbu, A. (2016). 50 Striking Statistics About Distance Learning in Higher Education. *EdTech Focus On Higher Education.* Retrieved September 26, 2016 from:
http://www.edtechmagazine.com/higher/article/2012/07/50-striking-statistics-about-distance-learning-higher-education

Bonney, K.M. (May, 2015). Case Study Teaching MethodsImprove Student Performance and Perceptions of Learning Gains. *Journal of Microbiology and Biology Education 16*(1).

Buzzetto-More, N.A. (2012). Social Networking in Undergraduate Education. *Interdisciplinary Journal of Information, Knowledge & Management,* 763-90.

Camus, M., Hurt, N.E., Larson, L.R., & Prevost, L. (2016). Facebook as an Online Teaching Tool: Effects on Student Participation, Learning and Overall Course Performance. (Cover Story). *College Teaching, 64*(2), 84-94.

Carter, D. (Feb. 2012). Facebook Pages for College Classes? Students Say Yes, Please. *eCampus News.* Retrieved on Sept 12, 2016 from http://www.ecampusnews.com/technologies/facebook-pages-for-college-classes-students-say-yes-please/

Cisero, C.A. (2006). Does Reflection Journal Writing Improve Course Performance?. *College Teaching, 54*(2), 231-236.

Cotton, S.R. (2008). Students' Technology Use and The Impacts on Well-Being. *InterScience.* Retrieved on Sept 12, 2016 from http://blog.reyjunco.com/pdf/Chapter4.pdf

Dunne, D. & Brooks, K. (2004) *Teaching with Cases* (Halifax, NS: Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education), ISBN 0-7703-8924-4

Ellison, N.B., Steinfield, C. & Lampe, C. (2011). Connection Strategies: Social Capital Implications of Facebook-enabled Communication Practices. Retrieved on Sept 12, 2016 from https://msu.edu/~nellison/EllisonSteinfieldLampe2011ConnectionStrategies.pdf

Gerrity, T.W. (1976). *College-sponsored correspondence instruction in the United States: A comparative history of its origins (1873-1915) and its recent developments (1960-1975)* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Columbia University, New York: NY.

Gichora, N.N., Fatumo, S.A., Ngara, M.V., Chelbat, N., Ramdayal, K., Opap, K.B., Siwo, G., Adebiyi, M., Gonnouni, A., Zofou, D., Maurady, A., Adebiyi, E., Villiers, E, Masiga, D.K., Bizzaro, J.W., Suravajhala, P., Ommeh, S.C., & Hide, W. (2010). Ten Simple Ruls for Organization a Virtual Conference—Anywhere. *Plos Computational Biology, 6*(2), 1-4.

Harper, K.C., Chen, K. & Yen,D.C. (2004). Distance learning, virtual classrooms, and teaching pedagogy in the Internet environment. *Technology in Society, 26*: 585-598.

Hicks, D., & Ewing, E.T. (2003). Bringing the World into the Classroom with Online Global Newspapers. *Social Education, 67*(3), 134.

Huffington Post. (May 25, 2010). 99.8% of College Students Have Cell Phones: Ball State Study. *The Huffington Post.* Retrieved on September 26, 2016 from:
http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/06/28/998-of-college-students-h_n_628161.html

Juliana, AJ (2014). The Hidden Importance of Teaching With Stories. *A.J. Juliani Intentional Innovation.* Retrieved on Sept 12, 2016 from: http://ajjuliani.com/hidden-importance-teaching-stories/

Junco, R. (May 3, 2011). Thoughts on the "Is Social Media Ruining Students?" *Social Media in Higher Education.* Retrieved on Sept 12, 2016 from http://blog.reyjunco.com/thoughts-on-the-is-social-media-ruining-students-infographic

Kennison, M.M. (2006). The Evaluation of Students' Reflective Writing for Evidence of Critical Thinking. *Nursing Education Perspective (National League for Nursing), 27*(5), 269-273.

Miller, G. (November 20, 2014). History of Distance Learning. *WorldWideLearn.* Retrieved on September 26, 2016 from: http://www.worldwidelearn.com/education-articles/history-of-distance-learning.html

Nasseh, B. (1997). A Brief History of Distance Education. *Adult Education in the News.* Retrieved on September 26, 2016 from: http://www.seniornet.org/edu/art/history.html

Nicholson, S. (2010). Inviting the World Into the Online Classroom: Teaching a Gaming in Libraries Course via YouTube. *Journal of Education for Library & Inofmration Science, 51*(4), 233-240.

Pariseau, S.E. & Kezim, B. (2007). The Effect of Using Case Studies in Business Statistics. *Journal of Education for Business, 83*(1), 27-31.

Poldner, E., Van der SChaaf, M., Simons, P.R., Van Tartwijk, J., & Wijngaards, G. (2014). Assessing student teachers' reflective writings through quantitative content analysis. *European Journal of Teacher Education, 37*(3), 348-373.

Portway, P. & Lane C. (1992). *Technical Guide to Teleconference and Distance Learning*. San Ramon, CA.

Shaltry, C., Henriksen, D., Wu, M., & Disckson, W. (2013). Situated Learning with Online Portfolios, Classroom Websites and Facebook. *Techtrends: Linking Research & Practice To Improve Learning 57*(3), 20-25.

Smith, A. (April 1, 2015). U.S. Smartphone Use in 2015. *Pew Research Center.* Retrieved on September 26, 2016 from: http://www.pewinternet.org/2015/04/01/us-smartphone-use-in-2015/

Welch, S.R. (December, 1993). The Effectiveness of the Home Study Method. *NHSC Occasional Papers.* Retrieved on September 26, 2016 from: http://www.deac.org/UploadedDocuments/Occasional-Papers/9%20-%20EffectivenessofHomeStudy.pdf

Williamson, J. (February 11, 2009). The History of Distance Education. *Distance Education.* Retrieved on September 26, 2016 from: http://www.distance-education.org/Articles/The-History-of-Distance-Education-113.html

Worm, B.S. (2013). Learning from Simple Ebooks, Online Cases or Classroom Teaching When Acquiring Complex Knowledge. A Randomized Controlled Trial in Respiratory Physiology and Pulmonology. *Plos ONE, 8*(9), 1-5.