

Social Learning with Social Media: Expanding and Extending the Communication Studies Classroom published in *[Teaching Arts and Science with the New Social Media](#)* edited by Charles Wankel (Emerald, 2011).

Extended Abstract: overview and highlights

Recent studies suggest that many of today's students are highly proficient in their use of digital media and are developing new learning styles heavily dependent on social media and the Web. Theories of social learning address these new learning styles, which are interest and friend driven, and occur in contexts that are outside of class and within the flow of students' everyday lives. Social learning emphasizes participation, group interaction, and utilizing collaborative environments. This paper explores how the affordances of social media, specifically class blogs (WordPress) and microblogs (e.g. Twitter) together, help achieve social learning. Internet-based learners have various levels of proficiencies, competencies, and adoption rates. Strategies and best practices are explored to address how social media can be utilized by educators to accommodate the heterogeneity of digital learners and engage new styles of learning.

The technological and social (techno-social) affordances and communication dynamics of social media (Web 2.0, or the read/write web), such as visible "always on" social presence, and the ability to comment and rework media, can enable people to create, interact, collaborate and learn in ways that are socially grounded and contribute to self-actualization through participation. Class blogs are useful tools for displaying and commenting on visual content, and for collective and individual engagement with texts. Blogs also provide a platform for both instructors and students to publish digital media,

including images, videos, and slideshows (e.g. PowerPoint slides), giving students and instructors opportunities to create, talk back, and share within a learning community. Three primary outcomes encouraged by blogs include: 1) technical literacy, 2) social interaction, and 3) critical reflection (transparency of posting in public and critically thinking about one's own work and the work of others). Microblogs additionally support these outcomes, as well as leverage the additional benefits of social presence and social influence, utilizing the network structure of strong and weak ties.

The very affordances that enable social learning present challenges and risks that need to be confronted and include: moments of online inertia, residual issues of unequal participation, resistance to social learning as an insufficient use of time, and instructors' discomfort in sharing power or authority in the classroom. Students may overreach, abuse opportunities to talk-back, and provide excessive distractions. Utilizing social media requires flexibility, the ability to adapt, relinquish some control, and work with the unexpected. Within an augmented class there are opportunities for instructors to restore a balance of power within face-to-face meetings, and raise issues of appropriate conduct, ethical communication, and mutual respect. Additional challenges involve connecting the different modalities or learning styles together. Strategies that connect offline and online participation can maximize the benefits of social media and persuade students to view familiar online spaces as integral to the educational goals of the class. Successful augmented learning formats require maintaining focus on the linkages and mutual contingencies between online and offline work.

Blogs and microblogs together can be used to provide a social foundation that encourages social learning and allows students to express strengths that may be otherwise

stifled in a traditional learning environment. The affordances of social media might enable but cannot determine student engagement and learning. Social media together with the design of diverse and meaningful group assignments and activities can bring students at various levels of talent, ability, and interest together to participate and learn from one another. In spite of the challenges and risks, instructors from many disciplines are encouraged to utilize the potential disruptions of social media to better accommodate the disparities and similarities among traditional, non traditional, and other unique learners in higher education.