



## CHAPTER 1

# SOCIAL MEDIA AND EDUCATION

### Overview

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This chapter prepares the social, theoretical, and pedagogical ground for your social media explorations. It situates new technologies in the current media landscape before providing more specific detail on where social media are positioned in the contemporary educational context. In particular, we examine various constructivist-based approaches to learning because it is through these approaches that learning in digital environments proves most successful.

### The recent media landscape

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The internet has not always been ‘social’ – that is, it hasn’t always given us the ability to interact in real time with our friends, family, colleagues, and strangers as we do on Facebook or via Skype. In fact, the first ‘version’ of the web (‘Web 1.0’ as it is now retrospectively referred to) was a ‘read-only’ web for most of us: if we didn’t have access to special knowledge, such as how to write html code, or special technology, such as servers, then we could only read the content that other people had written and published on their websites. But around 2005 there was something of an evolution of the internet and the next generation of the web, ‘Web 2.0’, was born.

## Web 2.0

Today, we don't need access to special knowledge or special technology in order to have a website or a web presence. Instead, we can publish our own material on the internet by using services that make it easy for us to do so, and this is why 'Web 2.0' is also known as the 'read-write web': we can write it as well as read it.

### Key point. What is Web 2.0?

'Web 2.0' simply describes a 'second generation' of the internet; it is not a software package, even though it has a name that makes it sound like one.

Although 'Web 2.0' has been a useful phrase for 'tech-types' in describing this 'read-write web', the term can be a little confusing. Instead, this book prefers the term 'social media' to describe the tools, services and applications that this 'next gen internet' and other digital technologies provide us with.

### Key point. Is there a difference between the web and the internet?

Yes, there is. The internet is the underlying architecture that allows the digital transfer of information. The web, on the other hand, is simply a platform that sits on top of the net and uses it to deliver content. Thinking of it this way, you can see how the apps on your smartphone or tablet device aren't websites, but they nevertheless use the internet to transfer data.

Social media, then, include everything from blogs, wikis, and podcasts to Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Google. In fact, the digital tools and services that you probably already use in your everyday work, study, and social lives can be described as 'social media'. For example, Facebook is a service that helps you communicate with your friends and find out what they are up to; blogs are a way of expressing your opinion on a topic; and YouTube allows you to upload and comment on videos. All are social media. And, in recent years, social media have changed the way in which information circulates in our cultures.

## Traditional versus social media

Up until the advent of Web 2.0, the flow of information through our broadcast, ‘one-to-many’ media – newspapers, television, books, magazines, and the like – typically went only the one way: from producer to consumer. Some of these traditional media formats supported response mechanisms (such as the letters columns of newspapers) but the feedback was slow to turn around and often out of date by the time it was published. Social media, however, challenge this paradigm because they are formed around the idea of ‘networked’ media and allow for instantaneous and simultaneous commentary on, and reaction to, material posted on the internet in a process of many-to-many communication. If we were to identify the qualities that characterise social media we could say that they are all about:

- Participation
- Collaboration
- Interactivity
- Communication
- Community-building
- Sharing
- Networking
- Creativity
- Distribution
- Flexibility
- Customisation.

As you make your way through this text, you will notice these qualities underpin the ways in which social media can be used in education.

## Why social media in education?

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Because of its ‘read-only’ nature, the early web, Web 1.0, largely supported transmission-style educational practices: material was posted, usually via a learning management system (LMS) such as Moodle, WebCT, or MyClasses, and students were able to view it or download it, but that’s about as far as things went. These ‘industrial’ practices (characterised by mass production and economies of scale) tended to replicate old-fashioned educational routines based around the notion of the monolithic learner; that is, material was ‘pushed’ to a student who then absorbed it as a single individual, often without interacting with peers (Attwell, 2007). This, of course, is to simplify things for the sake of analysis, and it would be fair to say that most class-

rooms in contemporary schools do not operate in such an anachronistic manner – but early web technologies did. In other words, even though practices in schools moved on some time ago to embrace more social forms of learning, Web 1.0 technologies simply weren't capable of supporting anything other than already outmoded, largely didactic pedagogies.

Indeed, there is much criticism in the literature of this industrial model of education, and much confidence in the potential of social media to free us from the constraints of transmission teaching (Attwell, 2007; Conole, 2008; Fitzgerald and Steele, 2008). As Conole points out, '[t]here has never been a closer alignment between the current practices of Web 2.0 technologies and what is put forward as good pedagogy' (2008, online). And, as Fitzgerald and Steele assert:

Social software and Web 2.0 services open a channel for exploring the value of social and collaborative production, including peer learning, and a variety of practices that support formative assessment models. (Fitzgerald and Steele, 2008, p. 30)

Social media are ideal for educators because they are nimble, flexible, easy to use, and often very powerful: they focus on doing one thing only (for example, photosharing or animation) and on doing that thing well. Social media are also continually in development: they are said to be in 'perpetual beta' mode, meaning that improvements to the software are always being made and that students are always working with the latest version of the product. Moreover, with social media, students can participate easily in the creation of content, websites, and their own learning spaces, meaning that these tools can be student and class focused rather than teacher driven. John Dewey recognised the importance of such approaches almost a century ago when he stated that there should be 'more opportunity for conjoint activities in which those instructed take part, so that they may acquire a social sense of their own powers and of the materials and appliances used' (2004 [1916], p. 39, emphasis removed). We can now readily create such opportunities for students because social media platforms put education – not the teacher – at the centre and thus allow students to take part more actively and creatively in their own learning.

### **Benefits of using social media in education**

If used correctly, social media can have many benefits in the educational setting, depending on the task and the type of media employed. For example, they provide excellent tools for socialising students into the online world and for teaching them about appropriate online communication practices. They can also be highly motivational for students. Having said this, however, it should be emphasised that social media are not a panacea for

all educational dilemmas. There is growing evidence that, because of their hyperlinked architecture, social media can prove more distracting than focusing (Carr, 2010). The trick is to design teaching and learning tasks that demand deep, considered engagement with a topic, as opposed to surface occupation with a technology or tool. To this end, tasks that require not just comprehension but higher-order cognitive activity (such as creativity, synthesis, and evaluation) should be developed if you want to intelligently integrate social media into your classroom.

### Intellectual benefits

The intellectual benefits of social media are in no way automatic. Simply establishing a class blog and then letting the students loose on it will not guarantee higher-order thinking. Rather, a considered design for your use of social media that demands deep processing on the part of the student and – perhaps most importantly – synthesis of various materials or viewpoints is essential if students are to benefit intellectually.

- *Analysis, interpretation, synthesis, critique.* Breaking material up, identifying patterns, and then putting it all back together again to create a new or different meaning are key features of higher cognition. Social media provide a variety and range of tools and services to support these activities.
- *Validation, assessment, evaluation.* Social media can be used to teach students about issues of authority, legitimacy, and authenticity on the web, and can encourage the development of skills of judgement.
- *Traditional literacies.* If tasks and activities are properly designed, social media can readily support the development of traditional literacy (reading and writing) and numeracy through the generation of text- and arithmetic-based teaching and learning episodes.
- *Visual literacy.* Visual material is becoming more and more prevalent in rich-media environments. Using social media can teach children and young people how to decode and interpret such material.
- *Media literacy.* Social media can be used to teach a critical appreciation of the role that media of all sort play in shaping our society and culture.
- *Functional literacy.* Using social media to teach functional social media skills is a recursive process that gives students an operational basis for using social media platforms. Put more simply, using social media teaches students how to create usernames, upload images, manage a profile, and perform other basic functions on the internet.

### **Benefits for communication, collaboration, participation, and socialisation**

One of the most exciting features of social media for education is precisely their socialness. They allow us to break out of the paradigm of the monolithic learner into the more intricate and complex world of constructivist, active, and situated pedagogies.

- *Communication.* Social media are communicative media, pure and simple. They are entirely designed to facilitate connectivity and dialogue.
- *Collaboration and teamwork.* If you design, scaffold, and support educational tasks correctly, social media can be used to encourage students to work together and negotiate their way out of problems.
- *Community and participation.* Engagement in a community of practice has arguably never been easier. Social media provide excellent platforms for people to come together to discuss, share, discover, and network.
- *Audience and participation.* Students are forced to consider issues of audience whenever they publish their work online. In this, they learn about different genres for the presentation of their work.
- *Appropriate online behaviour.* Incidents of unsuitable conduct will doubtlessly arise in any social media environment. Embrace these incidents as excellent ‘teaching moments’ for the whole class.
- *Peer learning.* By their very nature, social media provide active, socially constructivist learning environments that present students with the chance to formulate questions, express opinions, discuss problems, and share solutions.
- *Diverse perspectives.* Students can use social media to integrate a range of perspectives on a topic – but still make an evaluation of their own at the end.

### **Motivational benefits**

Take a look at what many children and young people do in their ‘off time’ and you will see that a lot of time is spent using social media (ACMA, 2010; Ofcom, 2011; Rideout et al. 2010). The attractiveness of social media for young people can be harnessed in the classroom.

- *Control and ownership.* Students can create their own social and intellectual presence with social media. In developing their own blog or animation, they are creating something that exists within themselves, not something that is external or in some way ‘false’.
- *Increased effort.* Students try harder when they know their work is being published to the world. Having someone other than the teacher accessing and judging their work can provide a high incentive.
- *Audience.* Getting feedback from an audience in the wider world can be very exciting and affirming for students.

- *Self-publication.* Easy self-publication and/or sharing of information makes students want to share their work and to do well at it.
- *Creativity.* Social media provide multiple modes and outlets for creativity, from text to audio to video to animation.

### Management and administration benefits

Aside from the educational benefits, social media can also prove useful from a classroom management perspective. Oradini and Saunders (2007) discuss the administrative advantages of using eportfolios in a study at the University of Westminster, but corresponding benefits can also be applied to the use of blogs in the school environment:

- *Ease of feedback.* The majority of social media support some kind of comment or 'wall' function. Teachers can provide specific feedback to a student using these functions and students can learn from reading the feedback on others' sites or pages.
- *Tracking student learning.* Many forms of social media permit for the archiving and searching of student work and you can easily track student learning and progress through time, allowing you to intervene once you've spotted a problem.
- *Accessibility off-campus.* This is useful for both you and the student: you don't have to be in class in order to access school work.
- *Communication with parents.* Parents can view their child's work via the internet and they can get in touch with you (and you with them) to discuss any problems with progress.
- *Easy submission of student work.* By engaging in an online social media task, students will have completed their assignment – no more printing out and handing in paper-based work.
- *Organisation.* An early study by Armstrong et al. (2004) established that students who lack routine and order in their study find blogs useful for organising notes, thoughts, information, and the like. The same can be said for many types of social media: social networks, wikis, bookmarks, and so on.

These many benefits do not just happen on their own: they can only be achieved through solid educational design and a commitment to informed pedagogy on your part. This is why an understanding of theory is important to your everyday classroom practice, and it is to theory that we turn next.

### Constructivist approaches to social media use in education

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Theories attempt to describe real-world phenomena in abstract terms. In education, they help us explain the complexity of social and cognitive life



in ways that allow us to analyse how something works or why something happens as it does. In education there are three broadly accepted theories of learning:

- **Behaviourism:** learning occurs through changes in behaviour, and in particular is a function of the operations of stimulus-response.
- **Cognitivism:** learning occurs within the individual mind as learners ‘process’ and store knowledge internally.
- **Constructivism:** learning occurs within the mind but is also a collaborative, interactive process in which individuals create knowledge and meaning through experience and incorporate it into their existing frameworks for understanding (or schema).

Although social media can support all three theories of learning, our focus here is primarily on constructivist approaches, not least because contemporary digital media readily support collaboration and interactivity, which are key features of constructivism. At the heart of constructivist approaches to teaching and learning is the learner’s active participation in knowledge construction and in the learning process. Learners draw on their own prior knowledge and experience to create new or different understandings of the world – in other words, they build on what they already know. Constructivism encompasses a variety of forms and approaches, all of which are relevant to the informed use of social media in the classroom.

### Social constructivism

Social constructivism holds that social relations and social interaction are a key component of learning. This is not a new idea. John Dewey, in *Democracy and Education*, published a century ago, had this to say on the topic:

... any social arrangement that remains vitally social, or vitally shared, is educative to those who participate in it. Only when it becomes cast in a mold and runs in a routine way does it lose its educative power. (Dewey, 2004 [1916], p. 6)

Due to their inherently digital nature, social media allow us to ‘break the mold and the routine’ that Dewey describes to devise social tasks for our students. Wikis, for example, have an architecture that coerces the social construction of knowledge, and social networking explicitly encourages the sharing of information.

### Active learning

Active learning states that it is what a student does during a teaching and



learning episode that has the most value for learning. The important point here is that ‘activity’ should not be confused with simple ‘busyness’ in which no real intellectual furtherance prevails. On this last point, Alfred North Whitehead sounded a warning:

In training a child to activity of thought, above all things we must beware of what I will call ‘inert ideas’ – that is to say, ideas that are merely received into the mind without being utilised, or tested, or thrown into fresh combinations. (Whitehead, 1967 [1929], p. 1)

It is exactly these ‘fresh combinations’ that are essential if learning is to occur. Social media can sustain active learning situations that favour creative and artistic expression. In podcasting, for example, students are heavily engaged in ‘learning by doing’: not only must they familiarise themselves with the technical intricacies of producing and publishing online audio, they must also learn how to plan a ‘radio’ show, research a topic, structure an interview, and connect with an audience. None of these things can be achieved by mere repetition or mindless exertion – they require the active, thoughtful engagement of the learner in the creation of something new.

### **Discovery learning**

Social media enable problem solving and encourage independence, two of the key features of discovery learning. Discovery learning is constructivist in nature because it champions the idea that it is the meaning that learners create for themselves that is important to the learning process. As students formulate questions, manipulate their environment, and observe the effects, as they perform experiments, make adjustments, and unearth facts and information, they are engaged in learner-centred, inquiry-based projects that help them construct new knowledge and consolidate the old. To a certain extent, simply using a social media tool or technology will encourage many of these activities as students try to figure out how to make the technology work. But, more explicitly, social media applications such as blogs or bookmarks can be used to foster exploration, innovation, and the communication of newly unearthed ideas and materials.

### **Peer learning**

Like all constructivist approaches to education, peer learning places the student clearly at the centre of the learning venture. With peer learning, students work together to construct and share understanding, something that social media support very well indeed because of their innate interactivity. Whether it’s via photosharing, social bookmarking, or gaming, students are

involved in activities that promote joint-learning environments and participation. However, certain pre-conditions of positive collaboration and co-operation are necessary if peer learning is to be successful: students must already have had favourable experiences of working with others if they are to learn well (Christudason, 2003, online).

### Situated learning

Situated learning is a constructivist theory based on anthropological understandings of culture and society and the ‘inherently socially negotiated character of meaning’ (Lave and Wenger, 2009 [1991], p. 50). On this model, learners initially participate only at the periphery of an activity in which they are not experts (this is called ‘legitimate peripheral participation’). Through ongoing participation in authentic social contexts they build an understanding of the activity. Although the originators of situated learning state that it is not meant to be an educational technique or pedagogical strategy (Lave and Wenger, 2009 [1991], p. 40), it nonetheless can be taken to explain what is going on when social media are used to support student learning. When first entering a ‘community of practice’ such as a social network, discussion forum, or chat group, newcomers start out on the periphery of the community and, eventually, as they become more skilful and expert, they move towards the centre of the culture. This does not have to apply only to social networks, however: it can also explain how novices become experts in any social media environment.

### Special considerations in constructivist environments

John Dewey states that education is ‘a fostering, a nurturing, a cultivating process. All of these words mean that it implies attention to the conditions of growth’ (2004 [1916], p. 10). As a teacher, it is your responsibility to provide those conditions of growth. In adopting constructivist approaches to the use of social media in your classroom, you need to pay particular attention to three main considerations in supporting growth:

- 1 *Supporting constructivist approaches takes time.* You must be prepared to carefully plan, implement, and evaluate your chosen teaching and learning strategies without taking shortcuts.
- 2 *Learners will need a degree of scaffolding.* How much, of course, will depend on the task and individuals’ current states of knowledge and understanding – but in order for students to build their own concepts and constructs, you must supply them with materials and supports that