



# The role of social media in higher education classes (real and virtual) – A literature review

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## ABSTRACT

The ubiquity of social media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter) is no more apparent than at the university. Social media are increasingly visible in higher education settings as instructors look to technology to mediate and enhance their instruction as well as promote active learning for students. Many scholars argue for the purposeful integration of social media as an educational tool. Empirical evidence, however, has lagged in supporting the claim. Most of the existing research on the utility and effectiveness of social media in the higher education class is limited to self-reported data (e.g., surveys, questionnaires) and content analyses. This paper summarizes the scholarly writings as well as reviews the findings of empirical investigations. Some limitations are discussed, and future areas of research are proposed.

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## 1. Introduction

The growth of social media and other Web 2.0 technologies is unprecedented (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickuhr, 2010). Social media technology has become an essential part of personal life as users generate content, share photos, choose to “like”, or interact in a game. The ubiquity of social media is no more apparent than at the university where the technology is transforming the ways students communicate, collaborate, and learn.

Even as today's college student experiences a variety of classroom forms (i.e., “brick and mortar”, virtual, hybrid), social media's use and influence are evolving depending on context. Widely embraced as a tool for personal or business purposes, the notion that social media could be an effective tool for educational purposes has received recent attention. At the same time, this developing arena is receiving an increased research interest. The potential role for social media as a facilitator and enhancer of learning is worth investigating. As a result, this literature review will explore the question, “What is the role of social media in the higher education classroom (real and virtual)?” as described in current scholarship and studied in empirical investigations.

The review begins with a brief description of the literature review methodology employed in the identification of relevant works. An operational definition for social media is offered followed by a look at usage trends of the most popular social networking sites. The next section of the review focuses on what researchers have argued should be the antecedents of the educational use of social media. The affordances and drawbacks of social media use in class are explored next. Scholarship surrounding each

of the most popular social media applications follows. The review concludes with suggestions for future research as gleaned from the literature or proposed by the author.

## 2. Methodology

A review of the literature was undertaken in September and October of 2012. I systematically searched the following specialized database sources: Web of Science, EBSCOhost, and ERIC. Additionally Google Scholar searches were performed. Search words and phrases included Facebook, Higher Education, Social Media, Social Media in Education, MySpace, LinkedIn, Web 2.0, Social Networking, Social Networking Sites, and Blogs. The “snowball” method of using the most recent works to find relevant articles cited in them provided additional articles. Since keywords in research articles are not based on common lists, it is highly likely that some of the literature was missed. An interesting strategy from a literature review on the same theme could be noted here. Conole & Alevizou, 2010, besides the traditional review approach, used social media (i.e., Cloudworks) to outsource to other researchers inviting their collective input.

## 3. Definition and pervasiveness

### 3.1. Social media defined

*Social media* is a term that is broadly used to describe any number of technological systems related to collaboration and community (Joosten, 2012). While it appears that a specific definition may be elusive (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010), social media is often described by example. Social networking sites, blogs, wikis, multimedia platforms, virtual game worlds, and virtual social worlds

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are among the applications typically included in recent illustrations (Barnes & Lescault, 2011; McEwan, 2012). To narrow the range for this review, social networking sites (SNSs) were chosen to be the focus in recognition of the prevalence of SNSs such as Facebook and MySpace, and LinkedIn. Used interchangeably with terms such as social networking or online social networks, SNSs are web-based services that allow users to make personal profiles, create content, and share messages by connecting with other users in the system (boyd & Ellison, 2007). Some researchers use the more inclusive term *Web 2.0* when referring to SNSs and other social media (Gruzd, Staves, & Wilk, 2011; Hemmi, Bayne, & Land, 2009; Kaplan & Haenline, 2010).

The task of defining social media is made more challenging by the fact that it is constantly in a state of change. SNSs evolve as developers create new or enhanced features that will meet the demands of users. Some social networks are tailored to niche markets so features may be differentiated for particular users. For example, Match.com and eHarmony.com are SNSs that cater to dating (and were not included in this review). Ning allows users to create their own social networks. A brief description of Facebook's functionality portrays most current capabilities of SNSs. Inside Facebook, users can send messages, add friends, update personal profiles, join groups, develop applications, host content, and learn about other users through their online profiles (Haase, 2010).

### 3.2. Prevalence of social media

#### 3.2.1. Facebook

Facebook may be the face of online social networks. Developed in 2004 by then Harvard undergraduate Mark Zuckerberg, it is the "dominant" social networking site (Lenhart et al., 2010). Among the many studies reporting statistics related to Facebook adoption and usage (e.g., Hargittai, 2007; Jones & Fox, 2009; Lenhart & Madden, 2007; Salaway & Caruso, 2008), Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe (2007), found that 94% of their college students were users of Facebook spending an average of 10–30 min on the site and having 150–200 friends. More recently and in a larger study, 90% of undergraduate college students were reported to have Facebook accounts (Harvard, 2011). Reaching the one billion user mark during the first days of October, 2012 (Facebook.com), an interesting usage trend has recently emerged. College-age users (Facebook's most mature market) reportedly spent 25% less time on the site in August of 2012, a declining trend predicted to continue (Blodgett, 2012).

#### 3.2.2. MySpace

MySpace, co-founded by Chris DeWolfe and Tom Anderson in 2003, was an early addition to the SNS field. With enormous growth in its first few years, by 2009 it was considered the leading social media site (Lenhart, 2009). Fifty percent of adult social networking users reported that they owned a MySpace account. Users were found to be more likely women, Hispanic or black, and high-school educated with some college experience. The median age was 27 years old. Like Facebook it offers an interactive, user-submitted network of friends, personal profiles, blogs, groups, photos, music and videos (boyd et al., 2007).

#### 3.2.3. LinkedIn

Used primarily for professional networking, LinkedIn is a networking site that launched in May, 2003. LinkedIn users usually affiliate with others in their work maintaining a list of contacts for people they know and trust. The trust factor is an important concept in this SNS as connecting with others requires either a pre-existing relationship or some mutual contact (Papacharissi, 2009). Last December, comScore reported that LinkedIn had reached the 35,000,000 user mark making it the third most visited

SNS in the United States social networking market (comScore December 23, 2011).

#### 3.2.4. Blog

A weblog or blog is essentially an online journal where a number of contributors participate by dialoging about a particular topic or focus. Like other social media, blogs allow users to post personal content, to comment on and connect to other media sites, and to make observations about other users' posts (Du & Wagner, 2006). The word *weblog* was used as early as 1997 (Blood, 2000). Indicative of its growth, by 2004 the word *blog* was announced by Merriam-Webster as its Word of the Year (<http://www.merriam-webster.com/info/04words.htm>). One of the main tracking and ranking services for blogs, Technorati.com (2012) (<http://technorati.com>), lists over 1,315,000 active sites in its directory. As a basic tool, blogs today are most often provided by hosting services such as Blogger, ModBlog, and Xanga. Sophisticated and larger users may need to host their own blogs (Du & Wagner, 2006).

#### 3.2.5. Twitter

Twitter is a social networking site that is often termed a microblogging service. In contrast to Facebook or MySpace, Twitter limits posts or updates to 160 characters. Some have suggested that Twitter makes for a faster mode of communication because of the relatively short post lengths (Java, Song, Finin, & Tseng, 2007). The average blogger may update every few days whereas the average microblogger will update several times a day (Java et al., 2007).

### 3.3. Social Impact

The Pew Internet Project, an initiative of the Pew Research Center, has gleaned extensive data on the social impact of the internet ([www.pewinternet.org](http://www.pewinternet.org)). Since 2007, the research organization has studied the use of social networking sites. In their 2010 report of social media use among young adults, Lenhart et al. found 72 % of online 18–29 year olds used SNSs which was significantly higher than the 39% of users older than 29. Sixty-six percent of young adults maintained a profile on My Space but only 7% on LinkedIn. Among all age groups, young adults led the way in using Twitter as 33% of the group reported posting or reading status updates. More recently, Madden and Zickuhr (2011) reported that 83% of internet users within the ages 18–29 group used social networking sites (61% of those on a daily basis). Young adults were more likely to use SNSs than older adults, but the percentage gap was reduced significantly from the previous 2 years. Fifty to sixty-four year old users had more than doubled from 25% in 2009 to 51% in 2011. Of all web-based applications, only email and search engines were used more frequently than SNSs among all ages.

While social networks have similar functionality, they exhibit different social norms and organization. In a comparative analysis of Facebook, LinkedIn, and another SNS called ASmallWorld, Papacharissi (2009) concluded that Facebook was much more publicly open (a "glasshouse") where behavioral norms were looser. Users could leave cues for one another, essentially constructing their own norms. As was expected, LinkedIn was more tightly organized offering less room for spontaneity or norm generation. The researcher posited that users did not have to wonder what was considered right or wrong on this website.

## 4. Antecedents of classroom use

### 4.1. Conceptual and theoretical antecedents

Given the prevalence of social media in general and the saturation of SNSs in particular, many higher education instructors have

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