

## '#@FBTweet' Using Social Media in Your Classroom: A Practical Guide for "Newbs"

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**Abstract:** *If the world of our students is dominated by social media applications such as Facebook and Twitter, as instructors we must then ask: What role may social media play for educational purposes? Recent research has demonstrated the practical and effective use of social media in higher education (e.g., Blessing, Blessing, & Fleck, 2012; Junco, 2012; Kassens-Noor, 2012). There are also thorough sources on the merits and pitfalls of using social media in higher education (see Keengwe, 2012). However, we strive to provide a condensed, simple primer that discusses why and how social media should be used in your classroom, and offer practical considerations for those instructors contemplating implementation.*

**Keywords:** *Social media, higher education, classroom instruction*

"Hashtags, mentions, Tweets, and Facebook statuses...oh my!" If you are unfamiliar with these terms illustrated in the title above, do not fret (see <http://www.urbandictionary.com/> for a complete technology lexicon). The goal of this primer is to provide *Newbs* a concise overview of the many functions of two social media sites (e.g., Facebook and Twitter) and most importantly—how you can use them to support instructional efforts. Friend us or follow us, for we are about to embark upon a technological voyage to enhance classroom instruction.

### WHY USE SOCIAL MEDIA IN YOUR CLASSROOM?

In 2012, Davis, Deil-Amen, Aguilar, and Canche reported that the social media giants Facebook and Twitter had over 1 billion users worldwide. Fleck, Richmond, and Hussey (2012) and Davis et al. suggest that because of this explosion in social media usage, college-age students, now mainly interact with one another via various electronic means (i.e., Twitter and Facebook). Furthermore, Davis and colleagues indicate that higher education is using social media for various educational purposes ranging from recruiting students to posting course content via Twitter (e.g., Kassens-Noor, 2012) and Facebook (e.g., Junco, 2012). Therefore, as practitioners of best practices in teaching future educators, the logical proceeding question is: How may we use social media to enhance the teaching of pre-service teachers?

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## HOW STATUSES, LIKES, HASHTAGS, TWEETS, AND RETWEETS CAN SUPPORT COURSE OBJECTIVES

Instructors can utilize Facebook and Twitter as channels to communicate with students and disseminate some types of course information. Moreover, we are more likely to catch our students checking their social networking profiles than their institutional e-mail account or class site on a course management system. We believe the benefits to social media, namely continued engagement with course content outside class and interactivity among students and instructors, can outweigh the inherent concerns. We provide several considerations that instructors should keep in mind before implementing social media.

First, decide whether student presence on social media is required or simply recommended. You can reinforce students' timely account creation and "friending" or "following" by assigning points to those who meet these goals by a set deadline. Assigning points conveys to students that social media is important and will be used for educational purposes. Those instructors who prefer a less formal approach could leave social media as an option, and attempt to create value organically, such that students will seek it out under their own volition. Dunlap and Lowenthal (2009) invited their students to add the instructor, all classmates, and commit to logging in to Twitter three times per day for a 2-week period. Students were told that if they did not see value in their Twitter usage for class that they could discontinue participation after that second week. Those who chose not to participate were not penalized. We recommend instructors take their instructional purposes, teaching style, and student profile into consideration when deciding whether social media is required, presented on a 2-week trial basis (Dunlap & Lowenthal), or simply recommended in the course.

Second, determine whether a one-way or a two-way information flow is best to meet your purposes. That is to say, will a social media platform be used to disseminate course content or reminders to students (i.e., a one-way information flow)? If so, a recent study by Blessing et al. (2012) demonstrated that daily Tweets on course concepts increased students' memory for course material. You may also want to gather and share links to columns, articles, YouTube videos, and other information relating to educational psychology, special education, educational assessment, etc. If this type of one-way information flow is a priority, then consider Twitter and/or a Facebook page. Either way, students will view your posts within a live feed.

If you are seeking interactivity and a two-way information flow, private groups on Facebook or direct mentions on Twitter could accomplish these goals. Students' postings are not accessible to anyone outside the class group on Facebook. A Facebook Group would be effective if your course contains controversial or provocative material, or if you encourage students to share their personal experiences. If you favor concise responses, students could reply to a prompt by directly mentioning you on Twitter (e.g., @JeremyHouska) and including a hashtag for the class (e.g., PSY1000) and topic (e.g., #Pavlov).



**Figure 1. Sample tweet to instructor (@JeremyHouska) from student including hashtag (#Pavlov) for class topic.**

Instructors can see all students' replies in the Interactions menu on Twitter. Students can search for the Tweets of their classmates by typing in the class hashtag. In sum, the type of course, course content, and degree of interaction desired should factor into one's decision to use Facebook Groups or class hashtags on Twitter.

Another issue that may arise on Facebook Groups or Twitter concerns privacy. Setting a Facebook group as private is critical. Students are most apt to interact with others genuinely if they know that their postings are not publicly accessible, and will not show up on their walls or friends' newsfeeds. Some students may also be wary of using a personal Facebook account for their classes. If students will be required to have a Facebook account for class, it may be best for them to create a strictly professional profile used just for academic purposes. This relieves students of the social pressure to add or follow classmates not part of their social circles. Encouraging separate profiles to delineate students' personal and professional lives also saves them from the possibility of their professor viewing status updates or posts that are unrelated to course matters. All Tweets on the Twittersphere are public, and so if you are concerned about privacy issues, Twitter may not be best. In defense of Twitter though, the medium does force students to ponder their public responses carefully. This is certainly a useful skill in today's culture.

One consideration worth addressing with students is the other applications they frequently use. Facebook and Twitter both have some form of integration with other social networking platforms. This may factor into your decision-making. Consider the Trending ticker on Facebook, as well as the Instagram, Tumblr and Vine sites, and Bitstrips apps. The former is useful if you like to cover current events and popular culture in your courses. The latter apps can make information sharing for students even more exciting. One of Twitter's strengths is real-time updating of the sheer number of hashtags being posted; this is referred to as Trending. Trending topics can be set to worldwide or for a country or city. In most cases, though, leaving the settings to global trends provides users an idea of the day's hot topics. Facebook has recently allowed hashtags on status updates and is currently testing a Trending section based on those hashtags. If this effort takes hold on Facebook, this may be another reason to choose Facebook over Twitter. That said, one limitation of Facebook's Trending Topics lies in the private nature of status updates, which contain the hashtags. Tweets are entirely public, and this allows for a better sense of what topics are actually trending worldwide.

If you ask that students apply concepts and theories to their own lives, Twitter and Facebook's integration with Instagram, Tumblr, Vine, and Bitstrips are worth exploring. Instagram and Tumblr are photo-sharing sites that some students may already frequent. If students already use these sites, they can integrate these applications into the class Twitter or Facebook plans. Instead of just a Tweet or post to the Facebook group, students can add a photo to their response by linking to their pre-existing Instagram or Tumblr accounts. If students would like to demonstrate a phenomenon or reply to your prompt with a video response, they could utilize Vine and post it to Twitter or Facebook. Vine is one of the most recent crazes; the site is known for its six-second loops of user-taken iPhone videos. For more on Vine see Sippey (2013). Students could be asked to illustrate a phenomenon by a one-frame comic in which they are the star by using Bitstrips. Bitstrips is a mobile comic-strip creation app that recently launched on Facebook (DeNinno, 2013), and could catch more steam in the months to come. If anything, your familiarity with some of these apps and sites may earn some "cool points" with students. But it is worth being aware of trends. Some recent reports (see Bilton, 2013) suggest that students may be turning away from Facebook for a number of reasons. Thus, exploring some of the other popular sites that can integrate with Facebook or Twitter can engage students further.

These are just a few ways that you can increase the likelihood that your social media efforts support educational objectives. See Fleck et al. (2012) for a more comprehensive review.

### OTHER CONSIDERATIONS FOR IMPLEMENTATION

**NEWB NOT N00B INSTRUCTORS!** First and foremost, instructors looking to implement social media into their classrooms cannot be “n00bs” (i.e., those with no will to learn). That said, you should keep in mind that there is a learning curve to the process of social media implementation, as well as the time commitment. As with all teaching strategies, there is a point of diminishing returns with updating Twitter and Facebook. We recommend instructors set and stick to a posting schedule (e.g., posting in the morning and checking for comments before leaving the office). Otherwise, social media easily consume one’s schedule and not offer additional benefits to student learning.

Beyond these suggestions, recently Fleck and colleagues (2012) described several key factors for successful implementation of social media. They include (1) becoming familiar with social media; (2) being clear on student expectations for social media; (3) using social media to self-disclose appropriately -- as it has been demonstrated to increase student motivation (e.g., Mazer et al., 2007); (4) investigating and understanding the use of privacy settings; (5) not solely communicating through social media; and most of all -- (6) being a student of the game by reviewing current research on the use of social media in the classroom. These suggestions increase the probability of successful implementation of social media as a pedagogical method. Having conversations with colleagues on their use of social media can also help instructors avoid the proverbial ‘Epic Fail.’

**YMMV: CULTURE, STUDENT ACCESSIBILITY, AND ABILITY.** We would be remiss not to provide a caveat: “Your mileage may vary (YMMV).” Students and faculty can share divergent views on the use of social media in an educational setting (Roblyer, McDaniel, Webb, Herman, & Witty, 2010) and so it is worth having conversations to ascertain the climate on one’s campus. For instance, some students may view professors on social media as a “creepy treehouse,” an infringement on their social space (Young, 2008). Some faculty may perceive their colleagues’ interactions with students on social media as crossing professional boundaries (Towner & Munoz, 2011). Thus, it may be worth surveying your students about (1) whether they own smartphones, (2) if they have Facebook and Twitter accounts, (3) if they have ever used social media for educational purposes, (4) their overall comfort with technology, and (5) general reactions to the social media possibilities you would like to entertain. Piloting how social media will be used can also offer an idea of student perceptions, and those can be helpful in tailoring social media assignments to meet your students’ needs.

### PARTING ADVICE

Twitter and Facebook are two social media platforms through which you can communicate with students and disseminate information. Unlike course management systems (e.g., Blackboard or Moodle), social media is a familiar and free space that students frequent. Moreover, each site features integration with a new and popular comic strip application, and photo- and video-sharing sites. As a result, more instructors utilize social media and apps for educational outcomes, but implementation is not without potential pitfalls. We have outlined some necessary considerations and a caveat. However, by no means are our recommendations exhaustive. The growing interdisciplinary knowledge base on social media in education can offer additional perspectives. If you are still finding your way between the hashtags and mentions on Facebook and Twitter (i.e., #@FBTweet) do know that you are clearly not a “n00b” (i.e., an ignorant or unskilled computer user) but a “*newb*” (i.e., a novice who wants to improve).

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