

Teaching in the age of social media

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Engaging with students – both inside and outside the classroom – who are continually linked in to social media and online devices presents a range of opportunities, challenges and pitfalls.

To some of my students' displeasure, I have my office hours on Friday afternoons. I prepare for this ancient tradition of face-to-face, pen-and-paper pedagogy by tidying my office, purging unwanted scraps of paper, removing half-empty coffee cups, and sometimes even plugging in an air freshener. Then I sit in my swivel chair, arms crossed, and wait for the barrage of undergraduate students to arrive with their genetics questions.

Recently, I have been hearing an echo in the room. A detailed answer or explanation that I give to one student will be delivered back to me with further questions an hour later by another student who wasn't even in the room for the initial explanation. How have my seemingly private responses spread so quickly? My cursory investigations have revealed that second-year genetics pupils are not telepathic – they are just very savvy at social media.

Indeed, I have come to discover that my office hours are being tweeted, Facebooked and blogged about in real time. The self-effacing student sitting on the couch beside my desk is not typing notes – she is posting live updates to a Facebook group dedicated to my course. And the compelling question she asks, which appears to have been stimulated from our constructive discussions, was actually text-messaged to her by another student who is in Toronto for the weekend.

These online activities by my students can sometimes feel like espionage, but they can also be helpful. By posting my replies to Facebook or Twitter, the students are saving me from having to explain the same concepts over and over again. And by relaying questions from students who are away, they are helping me to connect with the entire class. But, if I give a less-than-eloquent reply or inadvertently provide one too many details about the exam, my answers can be broadcast to hundreds of pupils and can come back to haunt me.

Engaging with students – both inside and outside the classroom – who are continually linked in to social media and online devices presents a range of opportunities, challenges and pitfalls. Perhaps the biggest and most obvious challenge for university instructors is trying to gain and hold students' attention in an age of retina displays and captivating clickbait. But if you can't beat them, join them.

Although I'm just learning how to use [Twitter](#) and other social media platforms, such as Instagram and Medium, I'm open to and modestly optimistic about integrating these and other contemporary technologies into the classroom. I soon hope to start interacting with my students on social media before, during and after the lecture. While updating my PowerPoint presentations for next term, I have already begun inserting into my slides Twitter hashtags and sample tweets in the hopes of stimulating online class discussions.

However, online engagement can quickly turn into online enragement. Because I teach a large course (more than a thousand people), I'm terrified of taking a misstep on social media. I would never purposefully say or write something offensive or inappropriate, but we are all capable of making silly, stupid or inadvertently disrespectful comments, especially if our words are taken out of context. My fear of being publicly denigrated is amplified by the knowledge that when I'm teaching there are hundreds of smartphones ready to pounce on my every remark or slip-up.

By searching social media I can also get a sense – albeit a biased one – of how disgruntled some of my students are with my teaching and testing styles. If I look at my Rate My Professors [profile](#) following a mid-term or final exam, I can gauge how many students vehemently despised the questions (unfortunately, they rarely post comments if they liked the exam).

I don't enjoy reading negative comments like this, but when the feedback is constructive, it can help me to become a

better instructor. And, sometimes the comments are good for a laugh. “Professor Smith is like a little puppy: he’s eager to get your attention and spends most of his time yapping.”

More and more of our public, private and professional lives are migrating online. There is little doubt that social media will infiltrate every aspect of our day-to-day existence. If used effectively, online tools are revolutionary for communicating and stimulating important conversations. They can also be a distraction and the messages they broadcast are too often abusive and toxic. As a person and a teacher, I will try to embrace these changes, but I’m worried that an endless stream of online abuse and vitriol will overshadow any positive changes.

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