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Recommended Citation

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Abstract

Walk into almost any secondary school today and you'll see students seemingly glued to their phones. A study from 2018 revealed that almost 50% of youth are online "almost constantly" and they're often engaging with social media, whether watching videos on YouTube, participating in the latest dance craze on TikTok, checking Facebook, or making videos on Snapchat. Through these sites, young people are creating sophisticated digital stories, finding and sharing relevant information, contributing to current discussions and, in short, developing digital literacy, digital citizenship, language, and other valuable 21st-century skills.

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LEARNING WITH SOCIAL MEDIA

Bringing popular platforms into the classroom to develop literacy, identity, and citizenship

By **Ben Gleason**

Walk into almost any secondary school today and you'll see students seemingly glued to their phones. A study from 2018 revealed that almost 50% of youth are online "almost constantly" and they're often engaging with social media, whether watching videos on YouTube, participating in the latest dance craze on TikTok, checking Facebook, or making videos on Snapchat.

Through these sites, young people are creating sophisticated digital stories, finding and sharing relevant information, contributing to current discussions and, in short, developing digital literacy, digital citizenship, language, and other valuable 21st-century skills.

Teachers, museums, and other educational innovators are beginning to introduce social media into their learning environments, finding that social media can support the development of a number of valuable literacy skills.

Educational benefits

Teachers interested in integrating social media are finding many benefits. First, as young people are using sites such as Facebook, they are developing valuable traditional literacy skills (e.g., attention to audience, grammar, and voice), as well as digital/new literacy skills (e.g., constructing a story with other people through text and images/video).

Second, social media facilitates learning new perspectives from diverse voices, and young people have noted that on social media they interact with those who are different from them—in gender, background, political affiliation, and so forth. These perspectives often complement formal education and serve to introduce marginalized voices into the curriculum.

Third, as young people are collaborating with others to tell multimedia stories and curate and share information from diverse perspectives, they are developing digital citizenship through strategic participation in civic activities.

Young people need to develop traditional and new literacy skills for full political, economic, social, and cultural participation in a global, mediatized world.

Digital literacy, social media, and classroom learning

Innovative teachers know the power that can be unleashed when social media is incorporated into the classroom. In Washington State, high school Spanish teacher Regina uses a wide range of social learning tools to help her students develop digital literacy skills. In one Twitter post, students develop language competency through the use of FlipGrid to record videos. Many students have reported that FlipGrid allows them to learn language naturally and in a fun way.

Another exemplar comes from high school English teacher Jenna, who uses Instagram to share images and videos of her student work. What sets Jenna apart is her use of the *affordances,* or possibilities, of the social media platform. In addition to posting images and videos, Jenna shares videos of her stories in the platform's Story Highlights, which makes them permanently accessible. These stories are a way to make explicit connections between the classroom and the real world through sharing links to learning resources.

Both teachers are making student learning explicit, a high-value learning practice that encourages students to demonstrate what they have learned. They are also pairing digital literacy

activities, such as creating digital content with FlipGrid, with traditional literacy activities, such as close reading and small-group discussion. By inviting families, teachers, administrators, and others into the classroom, these teachers are working to create inclusive learning spaces that are open and accessible to all.

Teachers can also incorporate high-quality content from real-world learning spaces, such as museums and historical organizations. One creative example is from the Tower of London, which has created a multimedia "choose your own adventure" narrative in which Twitter users play by trying to escape the Tower. You move through the story by answering questions such as "You're kept in a small cell in the Salt Tower, with a guard who spends hours every day right outside. Do you attempt to make conversation?" The correct choices will eventually lead you to victory, but all players will experience history through historical simulation.

Teachers should remember that there are many ways to integrate social media, depending on local educational context (i.e., school policies and current learning practices), the motivation and competence on the part of the teacher, and expectations on the part of families, teachers, students, administrators, and others. Teachers can begin where they feel comfortable and, keeping in mind their educational goals, they can always "do more" later.

Mobilizing social networks for engaged learning

One major reason to incorporate social media into the classroom is that social media leverages the power of our social networks—not only the technical resources, but also the human ability to express opinions and build knowledge—to help us learn with, and from, other people.

In a study I conducted on adolescent literacy and learning with social media, I was astounded to see the range and depth of learning that occurred. Over three years, Lori, a young woman who initially voiced her opposition to anything related to feminism, developed into a self-identified feminist. Key resources that played a part in her development were literacy artifacts such as memes referencing the hit TV show

Parks and Recreation. In one episode, an elderly character argued against hiring women because they are "frail" and "breakable." The character Leslie Knope cleverly retorts, "Is it possible you're thinking about lightbulbs? Or your hip?"

The use of humorous pop culture references provided a way into the conversation about feminism, allowing Lori to challenge the nonsensical polemics of male chauvinism. Lori developed an identity as a feminist through her actions on social media. She tweeted information on the wage gap, shared her observations and opinions and, critically, received recognition for statements like, "I don't understand why all women aren't feminist. Feminism is about equal rights, not about making men inferior." A key indicator of learning with social media is the development of a social identity that is recognized by others. Over three years, Lori demonstrated her knowledge of feminism by being known as a feminist.

Examples of powerful learning abound. In the same study, a young man named Ryan demonstrated how he developed digital citizenship by integrating traditional civics knowledge (e.g., understanding the political process) and digital citizenship (e.g., taking part in a protest at his state capital). Ryan showed how social media could support his learning by offering a way to connect his online support for increased services for town residents with his offline political advocacy—in this case traveling to the state legislature to protest the cuts and ask for his town's "fair share."

Lori and Ryan's experiences suggest that social media can support powerful learning and development by lowering barriers to participation and providing a space for young people to develop digital citizenship by sharing knowledge, connecting offline and online activities, and leveraging student interests in service of expansive academic learning.

Recommendations for teachers

Social media provides a powerful way to create engaging spaces of learning and literacy development. By meeting students where they are—literally and figuratively—teachers can support learning by lowering barriers to participation, offering opportunities for students to develop powerful social identities, and recognizing that meaningful education includes both offline and online activity.

Teachers might find success integrating social media when they center young people's experiences, language, and youth culture as not just valuable but also as necessary to the functioning of the class. Currently, much social media use in education seems to demonstrate teacher practices—what teachers are doing to support student learning. The next step is to emphasize student learning—how young people develop critical literacy skills, express identities, and demonstrate digital citizenship.

At the same time, teachers can honor youth practices that embrace multiple, diverse perspectives by incorporating social media accounts from nondominant communities. This practice not only is pedagogically sound but also provides a way to link real-life experience with individual and societal development.

Finally, social media can provide a way to engage in a pedagogical strategy of concerted "listening," which can provide a way to develop teacher–student relationships while offering a way to better understand young people's capacities, competencies, and learning and development. ◼

Ben Gleason (bgleason@iastate.edu) has worked in education for the past 17 years, first in youth development and then as a high school and college teacher in California, Guatemala, and Michigan. He now teaches and researches educational technology in the School of Education at Iowa State University.