SHARE OPTIONS

The educational value of social media lies entirely in what you and your students bring to it, argues Jennifer Begg...

The reason I started using a private Facebook Group with my students last term was a pretty selfish one. I teach part time and don't always check my college email when I'm out and about. At the time I was enjoying using a Facebook Group for an editorial team I'm part of. It made it so easy to quickly check picture guidelines, share ideas, arrange meetings and just generally touch base with each other (we're based across the country) that I started to think 'why don't I do this with my students?'

I have one rule to prevent abuse of the group. Any inappropriate posts will be deleted and a mark taken from that student. As they are awarded a maximum of 10 across the term for my course that's 10% of their grade that they could never get back. Not really worth it for the sake of a quick laugh.

And so, we started what became a vibrant, helpful and creative community on Facebook. On a number of occasions, students answered each other's questions without me having to get involved. They shared online questionnaires relating to their end of term project and even the occasionally amusing internet meme to keep each other going towards exam time. What I loved most about it was that it felt like them taking responsibility for their own success. Instead of waiting a week to talk to me or sending an email and forgetting about it, they took action.

An argument I often hear against social media is "why do I want to know what people are having for breakfast?" My answer is always "I don't know; why are you following people who only post boring stuff?"

A network is just a database with some funky tools thrown in. It's only as interesting as the content you share. One of my biggest bugbears is when teachers are forced into using technology just for the sake of it. As a self-confessed technology nerd, I really object to being told by someone who usually doesn't teach and definitely doesn't use as many platforms and devices as I do, that I must use an interactive whiteboard when actually a pen will do. If I use technology, it has to be for the right reasons. I have to be able to answer YES to these:

- Is using this technology more engaging for the students?
- Does this make delivering the curriculum more effective?

And NO to these:

- Will this take up more time but ultimately have no positive impact?
- Will this make my job harder without increasing engagement and understanding?

I don't care how old you are or what subject your learning about – it should be fun! I know that sounds flippant and naive but it is true. Can I make this exercise more fun by using social media? Yes. Excellent; then I shall.

So, what are the possibilities?

Facebook

Facebook is a great start because the chances are most of your students already have an account. You probably already use it yourself in some capacity or another so you'll also be familiar with the possibilities.

If you think of a Facebook Group or Page as a mini intranet or learning platform you can use within each class, you can start to think less about the platform and more about what you can share. With Facebook, it's text, images, video, audio, links and polls. The majority of teenagers check Facebook on their mobile phones that have video and camera functions built in. Why not use this to your advantage? If you've set an assignment, instead of accepting written responses, ask for video interviews to be shared within the FB Group. Then get the students to do some peer review on the outcomes.

And it doesn't have to be limited to curriculum based sharing. Encourage students to share their extra curricular experiences that are relevant to the subject. Did they see a film that made them think of something they'd discussed in class? Are they playing a computer game that made them think about modern warfare?

Google Plus

Moving on from Facebook, have you started to investigate Google Plus? Google's very own social network provides lots to get excited about. For teachers, the thing I would recommend the most is Google Plus Hangouts.

At the most basic level, Hangouts are like Skype. However, unlike Skype, you can have up to 10 users on a video call together without having to pay. The other difference is that you can stream your Hangout directly to YouTube. This is handy both for recording conversations and sharing with a wider audience.

The other great news about Hangouts is that some of the most interesting individuals and organisations are giving you the opportunity to 'hang out' with them – NASA, National Geographic, Barac Obama and Steven Spielberg to name but a few.

If you're thinking of running your own Hangout, why not use it as an opportunity to connect with a major museum or a school exchange? Resources for excursions need not be a limit to what you can showcase for your class.

Similar to Facebook Groups, Google Plus has recently launched Communities. While Facebook has the advantage of your audience already being users, Google Plus Communities may be a harder sell. However, the fact that you can combine these with Google Drive (online documents, spreadsheets and presentations) is a big advantage. Google Drive is free and enables multiple users to collaborate on a document in real time.

YouTube

What about the level of resources available to you on social networks like YouTube? Many US universities are providing online video, as well as professional bodies who use 'how to' clips as a way to promote their services. Large inspirational events like TED [ted.com] and The Do Lectures [dolectures.com] are the perfect place to get inspiration if you're not sure where to start.

Why not create a school YouTube channel and use it as a way for students to showcase their own projects? It's a great way to test understanding of a topic and helps younger students to understand more about the subjects they're interested in pursuing further.

Twitter

Twitter is a great democratiser. It gives you access to public figures and organisations in a way that was previously unthinkable. I'm not saying everyone will respond to tweets from students but here is a directory or specialists who (if active) are already conversing on a world wide scale with strangers who just happen to be enthusiastic about the same subjects. From journalists to politicians, musicians to artists and scientists to movie directors – you can follow these people and learn more about the world they inhabit.

As a tool on it's own, twitter is a great way to get students thinking about language. The challenge of saying something meaningful within 140 characters doesn't have to resort to sloppy grammar and text speak. Check out the 'real life' tweets of Shakespeare's Juliet (twitter.com/julietcap16) and WWII tweets from 1941 (twitter.com/RealTimeWWII).

Social media is still in its infancy and as such the possibilities are as limited as your imagination and willingness to try new things. Combining social media tools with traditional teaching to move beyond the classroom is both an exciting and inevitable prospect. Don't be afraid to learn from your students on this one, they may well try things before you do and if you set the culture of sharing, they will lead you to great collaborative ideas. What better way to empower students to take control of their own learning experiences?

By encouraging students to use these technologies for more than just sharing cat pictures, you're helping to prepare them for their future in the workplace. When I'm not teaching, I spend time with organisations preparing their staff for a digital future. Using social media for business development, relationship building and communication is something all employers will expect in the not too distant future.

Moreover, this is an opportunity to encourage students to keep a clean online profile and to regularly audit what exists of their lives online. By taking social media out of the ghetto or peer

to peer and making it something more integral to their school (and later, professional) lives, they will begin to appreciate the potential consequences of over sharing. And it's not just for students, either. At my college, we recently created a private Facebook Group for the teaching staff. It works very much like an old fashioned online forum where you can quickly post any madcap idea (perhaps one that popped into your head after a cheeky gin on a Friday night) and either share a giggle about how bad it is or inspire each other to create something new and exciting.

If you create an atmosphere of discovery and openness when it comes to digital media, you empower staff to lead each other to new places. The resources mentioned above from top universities aren't just valuable for students. Google Hangouts aren't limited to how you can use them to deliver great lessons. Share expertise across your school and beyond by setting aside evenings where you can run peer training sessions with other schools via video link. The only limit here is your imagination and broadband capacity, not your budget.