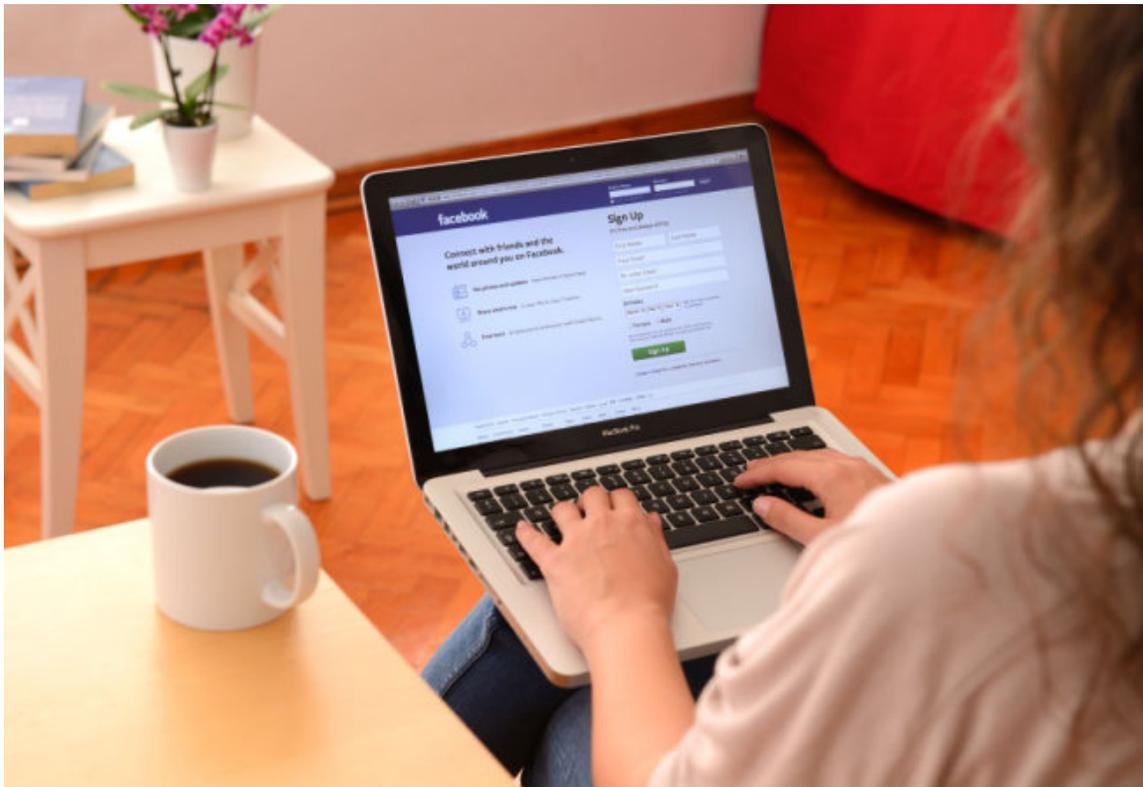




Social Media Gains Momentum in Online Education

By Jordan Friedman Nov. 5, 2014 | 10:30 a.m. EST + More

Social media tools allow online students to share information and build a sense of community, experts say.



Results from one survey suggest online instructors are more likely than on-campus instructors to use social media for both personal and professional reasons.

In his University of Hawaii online course, Introduction to e-Learning, associate professor Michael Menchaca requires his students to introduce themselves to each other by creating 15-second videos on Instagram.

Later in the semester, students "meet" to discuss their group projects using Google Hangouts. Twitter is popular in his classes, too, enabling students to share resources and engage in discussions, Menchaca says.

These are just two examples of the social media tools Menchaca uses to foster communication among his students.

"We've had online learning for quite a long time – since the 1990s, when it started to become popular – but the inclusion of social media is something that's relatively new," Menchaca says. "A lot of us are starting to use it more. I guess we're still tinkering around and trying things."

There isn't much precise data available on social media's presence in the realm of online education, experts say. But what does exist indicates that professors of both online and in-person classes are more open to incorporating social media into class material.

"About five years ago, it was very much experimental, very much an 'I'm going to go out there and be a pioneer' mentality," says Jeff Seaman, co-director of the Babson Survey Research Group, which conducts research on technology's impact on higher education. "It wasn't necessarily thought out. Now, the more established faculty, those using it more, have begun to think of it as one more tool in the arsenal."

Faculty who teach online courses are more likely than those who don't to use social media for both personal and professional reasons, according to a 2013 Babson and Pearson Learning Solutions survey. About 41 percent of professors in online and face-to-face classes have used social media in their teaching, the survey says.

The use of social media in online learning varies very widely among professors, Seaman says. But, the tools remain a natural way for students to communicate given their prevalence today – even for adult students, says Abbie Brown, professor in the department of mathematics, science and instructional technology education at East Carolina University.

"People entering into online education are probably a bit more open to and experienced in using electronic social media," he says.

Beyond traditional social media platforms, learning management systems that have a social media component, including Blackboard and Moodle, are also common in online learning, says Bethany Smith, director of the media and education technology resource center at North Carolina State University's College of Education.

"We mimic kind of what Facebook is doing, but in a learning environment," Smith says.

Seaman, with Babson Survey Research Group, points to two main benefits of using social media in an online classroom: the sense of community it fosters among students, and the ability for students and professors to share information with each other.

Jonah Preising, a student in Menchaca's class, agrees.

"Social media definitely has a place in education, and for me that place was getting information, even in aspects of research, and in finding emerging trends," says Preising, who is pursuing a master's in educational technology.

Linda Weiser Friedman, a statistics and computer information systems professor at the Zicklin School of Business at CUNY—Baruch College, uses blog sites like WordPress and Blogger to facilitate discussion among students.

For instance, in the first or second week of her Principles of New Media class, students create their own blogs and then post a paragraph or two each week on an assigned topic. Students also comment on their classmates' work and give each other feedback, creating a kind of "conversation in cyberspace," Friedman says.

Friedman adds that sites like Twitter also facilitate conversation, though she added that she believes professors "aren't quite sure what to do with Twitter." She did note, however, that professors have started using Twitter in hybrid courses by beginning a discussion in class, showing the post to the students and then continuing the conversation outside the classroom, designating a creative hashtag so that it's easy to find the relevant tweets.

But social media's integration into the online classroom may also have disadvantages. Students can become involved with so many social media platforms "that it becomes difficult as a consumer to manage all of the tools available," Menchaca says.

Anything that's posted on social media is likely available for anybody to see, which Seaman says might be a deterrent for students to "freely speak their minds." But Smith, with North Carolina State University, says it could have a positive impact.

"It ends up making students work harder because the whole world can see it and respond," she says.

Seaman also points to academic integrity as a key issue, since some faculty wonder how to verify whether the individual posting an assignment is actually the student.

As for the future, Brown says social media will likely enhance opportunities presented in online courses.

"I think that as we all become more comfortable with using social media, it will generate more opportunities for students to network, communicate informally with their professors and instructors and eventually enrich and enhance the overall educational experience," Brown says.