

Social Media in Education

Caleb VinCross

LaSierra University

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All learning is on some level a social function. It has long been known that students learn best when they interact with their peers and with their teacher. Social media platforms offer a plethora of opportunities for communication and collaboration. It is also well understood that the best learning happens in a convergence of multiple sensory pathways. Social media, as a stream of text and images, is inherently multimedia. This combination of social interaction and sensory diversity makes social media a fertile field for educational use (Deaton, 2015).

Social media use in an educational context has been shown to increase the amount of communication and collaboration between students. This peer engagement has likewise been shown to improve overall student learning. Since students are already comfortable using social media to communicate they are able to naturally leverage its use in an educational context more effectively without having to learn a new method to do so. (Bozanta & Mardikyan, 2017) Social media platforms offer powerful communication and collaboration systems which are already fully natural to the majority of students. This fluency can of course be leveraged to increase student peer interaction and more seamless multi-sensory learning.

One of the key advantages of using social media as a student interaction platform for learning is the way that it can create a less risky social environment for some students. Students who may otherwise be less willing to risk engagement often find it easier to give their input through a digital medium. (Bozanta & Mardikyan, 2017; Crone & Konijn, 2018)

Social media platforms can be a powerful tool for education, when chosen carefully so

as to meet the specific learning objectives. Like any powerful tool there are significant risks and downsides to their use. Research is bringing to light significant concerns about the way in which regular social media use impacts its users - particularly young people. These concerns center around biochemical addiction, scaffolded identity expression, social manipulation, and sleep deprivation. This brief paper will touch upon each of these aspects of social media consumption.

In December of 2017, Chamath Palihapitiya, a former vice president of Facebook went on the record with his concerns about the way that social media platforms are negatively impacting society. He said that he deeply regretted his role in creating the “short-term dopamine-driven feedback loops” which he feels are “ripping society apart.” He went on to say that he does not use social media and that he does not allow his children to use it either. Facebook’s response was not to downplay the content of his criticism but to instead assert that Facebook has changed in the last few years - becoming more aware of its important role in the world (Vincent, 2017). While there certainly have been changes in the social media industry in the last few years, the underlying model of mediating social connection and identity expression through the disembodied curation of media objects and approval tokens remains the same.

Social media apps and web based platforms are specifically designed to create social validation feedback loops. This is a way for the company operating the platform to generate more user engagement by directly stimulating the user’s biochemical social reward system - releasing pleasurable dopamine bursts with each online social validation. By manipulating this highly sensitive pleasure center in the brain, social media companies keep users coming back for more stimulus. Advanced algorithms adapt to each user to

maximize their ‘engagement’ in the platform. Because human beings are highly social we are particularly vulnerable to this manipulation (Kugler, 2018). Children who become addicted to this kind of stimulus are much more likely to experience clinical depression and sleep problems (Guo et al., 2012; Schuelke, 2013).

One of the primary development tasks of any young person is the formation of identity as they differentiate from their parents and form new connections with others. Social media platforms provide a very significant venue for identity exploration for young people today. (Yust, 2014, pp. 135-137) Social researchers and educators are concerned, however, that the nature of social media as a venue of identity formation is fundamentally problematic. Young users of social media are prone to patterns of “attached detachment” which may set back their actual community engagement in favor of a self-absorbed pattern of tally keeping as they count “likes” and other markers of social approval and popularity. In this digitized social model, person-hood is reduced to content placeholders such as pictures, videos, and comments. This limited structure of self expression, while seemingly offering adequate personal uniqueness, is actually profoundly limited as compared to actual embodiment in an interconnected community. The concern is that young people may be stunted in their social development by this “scaffold” of expression options (Yust, 2014, pp. 140-141). “Liking,” ignoring, or commenting are not the only real options for interacting with other people. A person and their “media” are profoundly different things. The world of social media blurs those distinctions, both reducing what it means to be a person while at the same time elevating the status of the media representing them to the most important element. This is a very serious psychosocial problem.

Social media vendors are able to manipulate the social landscape of young users in

highly problematic ways. Just as social feedback algorithms can maximize addictive engagement through dopamine release patterns, they can also directly target users with advertising content - linking social pleasure with targeted product placement. As young people increasingly rely on the social media space for their personal identity expression they are vulnerable to any manipulation which the vendor chooses to orchestrate (“Facebook manipulated users’ moods in secret experiment,” 2014).

The Internet, and social media in particular, are what can be referred to as supernormal stimulant (Ward, 2013). As a cooperative species our social engagement is one of our most important biological functions. The rapid dopamine feedback loop created by social media engagement is a completely new phenomenon in our history. It is no surprise then that studies reveal that 1 in 5 young people are currently losing significant amounts of sleep due to social media use. This loss of sleep is directly correlated with increased levels of stress and reduced mental functioning (Schuelke, 2013).

Social media, as a communication and collaboration toolkit, offers tremendous opportunity for enrichment in an educational context. I intend to use this tool whenever doing so can add to the social dynamic of what is being learned. I will also use it as much as possible to market and communicate what I do in the classroom to my student’s parents. Social media is a tremendous stimulus for everyone who uses it. This stimulation can be used to motivate and enrich the learning experience as well. It is inherently exciting and makes the learning experience feel connected and relevant to my students. At the same time, I am aware of the subtle, and not so subtle, damage that it’s use is doing in the lives of my students. I feel that as educators we should leverage this tool as much as we can, even as we attempt to help students cope with the physical, emotional, and social setbacks

that they may be experiencing from their time spent with this highly addictive and socially corrosive activity.

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