Social Media Tools

In the previous chapter, you learned about podcasts and their effectiveness as an online teaching tool. Since they are on demand, learners can easily fit them into their busy schedules and listen at their convenience on their mobile devices. Plenty of podcasts are freely available on any subject. If you cannot find a podcast to meet your learning needs, you can easily and inexpensively create your own with a few simple tools.

Not only are podcasts mobile device friendly but also easily shareable via social media networks. Social media has changed the way people receive and share information as well as connect and build relationships. With social distancing due to Covid-19, social media is being relied on more than ever. Likewise, it has removed geographical boundaries that once prohibited relationship building. Why not take advantage of it within the online learning experience?

The Rise of Social Media

Prior to social media, the primary traditional education communication methods used by educators with learners were mail, phone, and email. These methods could be considered one-way communication because typically the
educators were the ones initiating the contact. Once the contact was initiated, its effectiveness depended on the learner's response.

Although it seems social media exploded on the scene in the mid-2000s, it has been around since 1997. Sixdegrees.com was the first social media site similar to what we have grown accustomed to today. Six degrees of separation has been described as “everyone in the world is connected to someone else through a network of connections that are no more than five links.” This concept resembles the social media network LinkedIn which people can connect to others through mutual connections or reach out to make new connections. Although sixdegrees.com had around a million users, it was bought and closed in 2000.

By nature, people are social creatures. One of the selling points for traditional education has been socialization. In an online learning environment, socialization between educators and learners utilizes a variation of the traditional socialization methods via online tools such as web conferencing and social media. According to Pew Internet Research, in 2019, roughly 72% of US adults used at least one social media network.\(^1\) To help learners learn, educators must be willing to meet them where they are rather than where they want them to be. Some examples of popular social media sites today include:

- Facebook
- Instagram
- LinkedIn
- Pinterest
- TikTok
- Twitter
- YouTube

Social media platforms such as Facebook can be used on mobile devices and smartphones which are typically always with you and your learners. When was the last time you left your cell phone home and quickly returned home to retrieve it? Probably more times than you care to admit. By having mobile devices always available, everyone can connect instantly and learn at his or her convenience.

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\(^1\) [www.pewresearch.org/internet/fact-sheet/social-media/](http://www.pewresearch.org/internet/fact-sheet/social-media/)
Social Media Feeds

Incorporating social media feeds within online learning can help foster collaboration and keep learners informed of trending news stories. It is a good way to make the connection between the course material and real-world application. For example, incorporating a Twitter feed about a particular industry or subject can supplement the course content (Figure 9-1). Feeds from social media sites such as Facebook and Instagram can also be customized to enhance learners’ experiences. Once the feeds are incorporated, they are easy to maintain and update.

Figure 9-1. Twitter feed that can be incorporated into online learning
Facebook Pages

You and other educators probably already have personal social media accounts. However, you probably want to keep these accounts separate to establish boundaries between your professional and personal life. With so many instances of companies firing employees due to the content of their personal Facebook Pages, you might want to take this into consideration. One solution is Facebook Pages. Facebook Pages are separate from your personal account and are typically used by the following:

- Artists
- Public figures
- Businesses
- Brands

They can be used by anyone who wants more ways to engage with customers and target audiences that might not be your Facebook friends. Before creating a Facebook Page, you must have a personal Facebook account or profile. If you decide to create a Facebook Page, you can create a Facebook Page for your course that is frequently updated with interesting videos and links from other websites to supplement the course material and share the page URL with your learners in your course’s LMS via announcements or email. By providing real-world, practical examples, learners gain different perspectives on the subject matter. Learners can also connect and engage with you and others by commenting on your posts. They can also share your posts with their Facebook friends, which can increase your exposure and popularity. If learners do not have a Facebook account, they can still access the Facebook Page but will not be able to leave comments. Since it is a public page, anyone on Facebook can see it via the News Feed. You can also encourage learners and others to follow your Facebook Page.

Twitter Chats

Twitter chats, or Tweetchats, are regularly occurring chats hosted on Twitter utilizing the same Twitter account. You can think of them as virtual meetups on Twitter. They happen at the same time on a weekly or monthly basis. The duration can range from 30 minutes to 1 hour. These chats are based on a central theme or topic with its own hashtag. For example, if you wanted to have a Twitter chat about digital learning, you could create a hashtag such as #digitallearningchat that discusses a specific topic of digital learning on the date of the Twitter chat. The key is that every tweet must contain the hashtag to be included in the Twitter chat.
Once you have decided on your subtopic of the main Twitter hashtag, you can begin preparing your questions to engage your learners. Questions typically consist of five to fifteen and begin with “Q1” which stands for question number one. As long as someone knows your Twitter chat hashtag, anyone can join, but he or she must have a Twitter account. Twitter chats are a great way for you and your learners to connect outside of the online learning classroom and engage in meaningful conversations. You can also engage with others to gain a different perspective. It is also a good way to display your expertise while increasing your Twitter followers.

Not sure how to begin? It is a good idea to attend a Twitter chat to get familiar with how it works before planning your Twitter chat. You can find Twitter chats by using the search feature in Twitter and search for #TwitterChats. Once you find a Twitter chat that interests you, participate and take notes of what you liked and did not like so you can structure your Twitter chat for maximum engagement. You can find more information on starting your Twitter chat on the following websites:

- [https://sproutsocial.com/insights/twitter-chats/](https://sproutsocial.com/insights/twitter-chats/)
- [https://blog.hubspot.com/blog/tabid/6307/bid/28979/8-steps-to-hosting-a-successful-twitter-chat.aspx](https://blog.hubspot.com/blog/tabid/6307/bid/28979/8-steps-to-hosting-a-successful-twitter-chat.aspx)

**Social Media Groups**

Many social media networks such as Facebook and LinkedIn allow users to create groups. These groups can be public or private and be considered similar to an online meetup. As long as a group does not violate the social media platform’s term of use policy, a group can be created. A group’s permissions and rules are established at creation to determine who can join and what he or she is allowed to do to remain a group member. Similar to Facebook Pages, most social media groups require that you already have a personal profile or account. For example, by creating a Facebook Group, members can participate in the following:

- Create and respond to posts
- View pre-recorded and live videos
- Participate in a Watch Party
- Ask for recommendations
- Take polls
- View photos
Within a Facebook Group, you can also conduct events to gain more exposure. For instance, you could conduct a Facebook Live event on a course topic or have guest speakers that are available only to your group members. You could also add the event to the Facebook Event Calendar for other Facebook users to discover.

LinkedIn is another social media platform that also allows its users to create groups and invite members to join (Figure 9-2). Similar to Facebook Groups, users can perform some of the same functions. These groups are a good way to promote your course material, events, and expertise.

Figure 9-2. Creating LinkedIn Groups is another way to use social media to engage learners

Direct Message (DM)

Many social media networks have built-in messaging communication known as direct messaging, or “DM” for short. Similar to a text message, these direct messages allow users to send messages to people they know or do not know while on social media platforms. This could be another way for learners to connect with educators. For example, Facebook uses Facebook Messenger to allow its users to send other Facebook users messages. However, each user must use Facebook Messenger for it to be effective. Likewise, Twitter, LinkedIn, and Instagram also allow users to send other users messages. What does this mean for you? Learners can reach out to you via direct messages. They can also attach videos, photos, links, and other items to their messages to get help. However, you must be cautious of what you click on to prevent viruses and malware from infecting your devices. Malware can easily be
disguised within links, so please be vigilant and attentive as you receive links from students. It is a good practice to have antivirus or malware software installed and frequently updated. Staysafeonline.org provides advice on how to stay safe while on social media.

**Facebook Rooms**

A new Facebook feature that could be helpful in online learning is Facebook Messenger Rooms. Similar to Zoom, Facebook Messenger Rooms can be used to invite up to 50 Facebook users and non-Facebook users to a video chat without a time limit. Messenger Rooms can be created either in Facebook Messenger or Facebook. Once a Facebook Messenger Room is created, Facebook provides a URL for your Messenger Room which can be shared on other social media networks. With the Covid-19 pandemic, educators and learners have another way to connect while physically apart. However, be aware that the security for Messenger Rooms is not end-to-end encrypted, so be careful what material you share.

**Social Media Live Events**

Social media networks such as Facebook and Instagram allow users to create live events. Live events allow users to broadcast their video immediately or at a scheduled time for other users to view. For Instagram users, videos and Instagram TV (IGTV) videos can be scheduled for business accounts through Facebook’s Creator Studio. Facebook Live Events can be downloaded once completed and uploaded to YouTube for additional exposure. Live events are available to everyone, so you want to be mindful of the information you share.

**Summary**

With careful planning and research, social media can be incorporated into online learning to increase not only learners’ understanding but also engagement. Many tools are available that can help educators meet and greet learners where they are. However, educators must know which social networks will provide the best impact for their learners. Social media has become an essential part of our lives, and we must embrace it. Otherwise, we will miss potential opportunities to connect, share, and collaborate with others no matter where they are located.