Social Media in Today's Classrooms

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Gone are the days when students bring physical books into the classroom. Millennials live and breathe on social media. Students these days are constantly on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram posting various updates about how their day is going, what are they eating, where they are, and what they are doing. If teachers want to be relevant in today's classroom, they too will have to keep abreast of the latest happenings and not live in a cave. Students have become media literate, which is essential to the 21st century learner. These skills will have a positive impact on students and make them relevant once they have graduated.

However, the use of social media is not all positive, and its use in the classroom requires thought and care to be successful. Would you give the keys to a brand new Lamborghini to a 17 year old with no driving lessons nor license and say 'drive this car across the country and have fun while you are at it'? We are essentially doing this with social media. The younger generation is heavily dependent on visual aids. When you ask them about privacy and the sharing of personal information online, they are unware of the dangers or are not particularly bothered about it.

Thus, serious questions that educators need to consider are: What has made social media one of the greatest education tools of all time, even though it is not taught anywhere? Shouldn't students be taught how to use social media properly in the context of the classroom? It is time for educators to embrace and bring the 'real world' into today's classroom. Integrating social media into the classroom and teaching students its proper use in this context can be an extremely powerful educational tool that provides unique and dynamic learning experiences to students and teachers alike.

What is Social Media?

From Facebook to Twitter to blogs, social media tools are an integral and important part of society, and they are here to stay. Social media is about collaborating, networking, sharing, and generating knowledge and content, and all of these features are of great value in the context of higher education. Today's universities have well-developed social media strategies and use a suite of social media tools for various purposes, including internal and external communications, recruitment, sharing research findings, and highlighting exciting student initiatives (see detailed review by Davis et al. 2012). Social media tools and technology are also making their way into the classroom, although the 2013 Pearson Report (Seaman & Tinti-Kane 2013) indicated that its use in teaching lags behind other uses. However, active proponents are quick to relate how these tools increase student engagement and have a positive influence on teaching and learning.

Why Use Social Media?

A recent Edutopia blog post argues that using social media not only brings current technology to the classroom, but it also helps bridge the digital divide among lower-income students. These students may not have the constant access to social media that their counterparts do. Why should they be left behind as technology continues to march forward? The commercialized sites can be useful for demonstrating social media to students, and education-based sites such as Edmodo, Edublog, and Kidblog provide alternative social media sites for posting status updates and announcements, blogging, and microblogging.

Social learning theory says that students learn best when they learn from each other. Various research studies have found that when students study together, they earn higher grades, are more engaged, and are more motivated. According to Dr. Richard J. Light (2001), from the School of Education at Harvard University, the strongest motivations for students' success in college is their ability to form or participate in small study groups. He suggests that this is more important than their instructors' teaching styles. Student research participants who studied in groups, even only once a week, were more engaged in their studies, were better prepared for class, and learned significantly more than students who worked on their own. Today's learners view social media as 'cool', making it useful for providing social learning activities that are both educational and engaging.

There are many different types of learners, ranging from shy to outspoken. The use of social media platforms gives everyone a fair chance of communicating with the educator. Shy learners who struggle to speak in front of their classmates will definitely feel more at ease speaking out on social media. This provides an alternative for students who are too intimidated to raise their hands in class. The other benefit of this type of interaction is that social media relies heavily on one's writing skill to get the point across, therefore making it an excellent means for students to improve their writing skills.

Social Media Tools

Many different social media tools are available to help educators enhance teaching and learning in their courses. Most social media platforms are very user friendly and require very little work to start up. Even older generation teachers will not find it hard to kick start their classes. Some of the attributes of the more common platforms used are described below:

FACEBOOK

- Provide bonus points for exams when students answer questions that are posted
- Easily create special interest groups using hashtags to collect information
- Easily remind students about homework assignments that are due, schedule events, and post notes by creating a Facebook page
- Students can share online resources related to coursework
- Facilitate online discussions about course material
- Provide an avenue for students to ask teachers questions about difficult course material
- Use of Facebook apps and groups such as Flashcards and WeRead to make learning and studying easier and more enjoyable
- Become a news source by posting status updates or tailor the feed to follow other media and prominent leaders

TWITTER

- Improve contact among students and between students and the instructor
- Increase cooperation among students
- Promote active learning whereby students' experiences (inside and outside the classroom) are more easily linked to course materials
- Help create a strong learning community among students
- Increase participation by students, including those who would otherwise be intimidated by the lecture hall environment
- Track hashtags, memes, and current events by setting up specific feeds the entire class can monitor
- Create a feed for the classroom and tweet about upcoming assignments, events, and class news
- Connect with other classrooms, teachers, and parents to increase communication and build community
- Follow other educators' tweets to keep up with the latest teaching trends, get ideas, and support one another
- Post supplementary materials such as links to articles and videos so students can continue learning even when class is over

YOUTUBE

- Search for on-topic videos for use in the classroom to bring lessons to life, making them more memorable
- Record lessons and post them on YouTube so students can review them whenever they want
- Take videos to the next level by adding quizzes, annotations, and more
- Teach students how to produce and edit video by having them film and upload videos to a class YouTube channel
- Curate organized playlists so students can easily find and watch related and approved videos on a topic

BLOGS

- Create a class blog so students can stay up to date on upcoming projects, due dates, and events
- Encourage students to post on a class blog weekly to develop their own voice and work on their writing
- Students can share what they know with the world by hosting blogs and inviting other classrooms to see what they have learned
- Students can reflect on what they have learned through blogs
- Online discussion forums can be created to further discussion about classroom topics
- Publish student work on the blog or have students set up their own blogs as online portfolios
- Post daily or weekly homework assignments on the blog so students who were absent can find out what they missed
- Post discussion topics on the blog, then give students a few days to reflect on the topic and comment

PINTEREST

- Search Pinterest for inspiring tips on how to organize and decorate your classroom
- Search, find, pin, and organize images, projects, videos, and more for future lesson plans and projects
- Allow students to use Pinterest for presentations and projects. Later, set up boards to promote students' final assignments
- Use community boards for group projects and brainstorming so multiple users can save resources in one place
- Share ideas and collaborate with teachers and students from other classes and schools

INSTAGRAM

- Students can participate in 'scavenger hunts' by snapping pictures of course-related items and then hashtagging them so other students can find them too

Several detailed, quantitative case studies have tested the value of specific tools in the context of the classroom environment in higher education. Junco et al. (2011), for example, used a controlled experiment to assess whether students using Twitter in the classroom had higher levels of 'student engagement' relative to a control group (engagement in this context was broadly defined and included active participation and investment in academic activities, co-curricular activities, and interactions with faculty and peers). They found that this social media tool positively affected student engagement, and students in the experimental group ended up with higher grades.

How can teachers engage student during class

Encourage Students to Share Work Socially

Lecturers can create their own Facebook page or a whatsapp group for a particular course, thus encouraging students to interact and participate in learning the subject matter at hand. Some examples of encouraging students to share work socially are given below:

'Art 10: Introduction to Visual Studies' was created by Anna Divinsky from Penn State University. She adapted this course into a MOOC on Coursera called 'Introduction to Art: Concepts and Techniques', and it amassed more than 58,000 students worldwide. Students were left in charge to evaluate each other's online work for every assignment. Social media played an essential role in connecting students and creating an online community.

#Artmooc was trending on various social media sites such as Twitter, Flickr, and Facebook in mid 2013. A random hashtag check on these sites still show that it is still trending, even though the class ended for some time now. Students from all corners of the world were connecting with each other and building their own community.

What was surprising was how social media allowed students to self-organize into smaller, independent groups. These groups were based on commonalities such as age, language, and art proficiency levels. By allowing students to share on the site of their choosing, social sharing comes more naturally.

Use a Hashtag to Facilitate Guest Speaker Discussion

According to a recent YPulse survey, 21% of Millennials use Twitter as their primary source for finding news. Students these days are more engaged and socially active, and social media make it a lot easier for them to raise important questions online. During talks, or when guest speakers are around, students can be encouraged to engage with guest speakers via Twitter.

As an example, during an investigative journalism class at New York University, one professor invited prominent journalists to speak to the class of more than 200 people. He encouraged students to live-tweet the interview using the hashtag #IJNYU. It has been a year since the talk took place, yet the hashtag is still occasionally a trending topic in New York City because the class was so large and the tweets so frequent. Students were also required to turn in a Storify summary based on their classmates' tweets within 24 hours.

Another way to incorporate hashtags during classroom discussions is to encourage students to tweet questions to a guest speaker as the speaker is talking. This is exactly what Mara Einstein and Chad Boettcher did for NYU's 'Innovations in Marketing class'. This method ensures that students don't interrupt the speaker while he or she is talking. More importantly, however, is that it also engages the students' social communities outside of the classroom, so people who aren't taking the class can also chime in with questions for the guest speaker.

Require Students to Keep a Blog

Blogs have been around for more than 20 years. The modern blog evolved into a modern diary in which people of all walks of life would keep a running account of their personal life. The contents of blogs have changed dramatically over the course of 20 years. Currently, the roles of blogs are becoming increasingly mainstream, as fashionistas, actors, political consultants, news services, and candidates use them as tools for outreach and opinion forming. Educators also have jumped on this bandwagon. While teaching 'The Business of Media', another class at NYU, Ted Magner required students to keep a 'trends' blog on the media sector of their choosing. There were many benefits from this activity; it kept the students reading relevant articles every day, and it also required them to become familiar with hyperlinks, image embeds, and how to cite sources digitally. Perhaps most importantly, it gave them material to include in portfolios after graduation.

Keeping a blog is a phenomenal way to work on your voice as a writer and to truly explore and hone in on your personal interests. However, between essays and homework assignments, many college and high school students see blogging as more of a chore than a positive career move. By requiring students to keep a blog in place of some traditional assignments, you make your job as a teacher easier, and you help them establish their digital presence as an emerging thought leader.

Require Original Expert Sources

LinkedIn is a business-oriented social networking service that is used mainly for professional networking. Ten years ago there were only 20 million users, but the figure has grown to 364 million users today. For employers, LinkedIn has proven to be an invaluable tool to reach out to sources, from CEOs to corporate PR representatives, and get them to come in for interviews or just to seek out professional advice. Educators can use this to their advantage by encouraging students to reach out to sources directly through LinkedIn.

The basic functionality of LinkedIn allows users to create profiles and connections to each other in an online social network that may represent real world professional relationships. It should be noted, however, that free accounts on LinkedIn are mostly intended to be used for professional networking. One must subscribe to LinkedIn Premium in order to make the source-gathering process easier.

Use Google Hangouts

If you're teaching remotely or if you're teaching an online class, Google Hangouts can be a great way to check in with students face-to-face, as it is an instant messaging and video chat platform developed by Google. It replaces three messaging products that Google had implemented concurrently within its services (i.e., Google Talk, Google + Messenger, and Hangouts; the latter is a video chat s ystem present within Google+). This is also a good option for adjunct professors who wish to conduct office hours but may not be on campus often enough to meet with all of their students.

Create a Social Classroom on Edmodo

Educators can use Edmodo to create a social, digital classroom. There are many advantageous and excellent features of Edmodo. Educators can vote, post assignments, create a class assignments calendar, and upload photos and messages to students, thus making the class more interactive and fun.

With more than 17 million users, Edmodo has been a highly successful endeavor. It allows students to get real-time feedback by taking quizzes online. Teachers can also engage socially with one another by sharing lesson plans online and asking questions of their online communities. In addition, Edmodo's Global Read Aloud program encourages students to practice their reading and public speaking skills with other students from around the world.

Second Life is an online virtual world. *Second Life* users create virtual representations of themselves called avatars and are able to interact with other avatars, places, or objects. An educator from Northwestern University used this platform with his Philosophy students. Students created accounts on *Second Life* to explore themes such as online identity, online community building, and in-game economics. What made the class interesting and surprising was that some days the students would meet in the virtual world instead of meeting at a real-life lecture hall. The professor would send out an email saying, 'Class on Tuesday will be held in *Second Life* instead of the lecture hall. I'll email you all the coordinates soon'.

Negative Aspects of Using Social Media

It is often assumed that millennials are social media experts because they grew up with interactive media, but this expertise is not all positive. Although they might know how to use social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter, many of them do not understand the strategy that goes into using social media to accomplish professional, personal, or organizational goals. Social media (more specifically chatting on a cell phone via text or Twitter) is preventing our students from being socially aware of anything beyond themselves or their immediate social circle. A bored teenager no longer has to listen to adult conversation in the car, at the dinner table, or on the living room TV, so they pick up on absolutely nothing that is not already familiar and of interest to them.

According to the National School Boards Association, although students are performing as well as expected on standardized tests even when exposed to a high volume of technology, it also as downsides. Schroeder et al. (2010) provided a good overview of the strengths and weaknesses of social media in higher education, and they report important concerns related to increased workload, quality of interactions, data ownership and assessment, among others.

Furthermore, when technology is abused and used inappropriately, it can destroy students' potential. Instructors must be well equipped and aware when teaching, as potential hindrances caused by technology can bring a halt to the learning process. Some negative effects of technology in today's classrooms are that it can take away valuable learning time, be overused, make students self-absorbed, and it can also turn educational experiences into games for students. Therefore, educators have to instill good behavioural traits and educate students about the proper and more productive uses of social media.

Takes Away Learning Time

In today's classroom, teachers are pressed to make every minute count. One of the major issues with using technology is technical problems. If the teacher and students are not experienced with technology in the classroom, valuable time is often wasted. In some situations classes have to be cancelled if the LCD projector or wifi is not working, In addition, the teacher faces the difficulty of having a class full of students at different skill levels: Some might be expert users and others might be novices. While it is important to educate these students about technology, it must be done at a pace that meets every individual's needs or more learning time will be wasted.

Overuse

In some classrooms technology is overused, which can lead to a variety of problems. Many students learn best by physically and mentally interacting with what they are studying. If most of the teaching is done using a computer, these students' needs are not being met. Technology should be used to supplement the course curriculum, but it should not be used as the sole source of learning.

Self-absorption

Young people have a tendency to want to be 'heard', even if they are uninterested in what others have to say. Many students love to post information about their daily activities, whereabouts, and the food they eat. Thus, when a teacher or student is presenting in class, others are busy on their gadgets. What they fail to recognize is that if they don't want to listen to others, others likely don't want to listen to them. Most social media sites merely perpetuate this phenomenon, and they are creating a whole generation of adults who are self- absorbed. Facebook has become one huge 'All About Me' project, and it has turned us all into self-absorbed teenagers.

Game Mentality

One problem that many educators face is that students often use computers primarily for games. Because of this, many students associate computers and technology with game playing. Although educators can use this to their advantage, some students may get distracted and off task quickly if this issue is not addressed. Therefore, use of social media tools in the classroom requires careful attention to these issues, and universities certainly need to develop guidelines for the use of social media tools in the classroom. Instructors also must be savvy about social media technologies, etiquette, and 'terms of use' before introducing them into the classroom context.

Conclusions

This summary has only scratched the surface of the debate about social media in today's classrooms, and there is clearly work to be done, more literature to read, and more examples to discuss. However, if one of the goals of teaching and learning is to support and improve student engagement, we should continue to explore the ways that social media tools may help accomplish this goal. These tools can help create an important learning community, facilitate active learning, and improve communication among and between students and the instructor. These are fundamentally good principles in pedagogy, and given the prevalence of social media in our daily lives, faculty should consider (and certainly not dismiss) the potential for using social media tools in teaching and learning.

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A Teacher's Guide to **SOCIAL MEDIA**

As popular as certain social networking sites and platforms may be, some educators may wonder what these sites can do for them. Here are just some of the many ways that educators have incorporated social media into the classroom:

STATISTICS

Faculty who have been teaching for **20 years** are just as aware of social media sites as any other teachers.
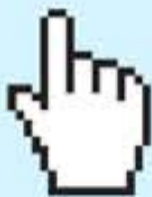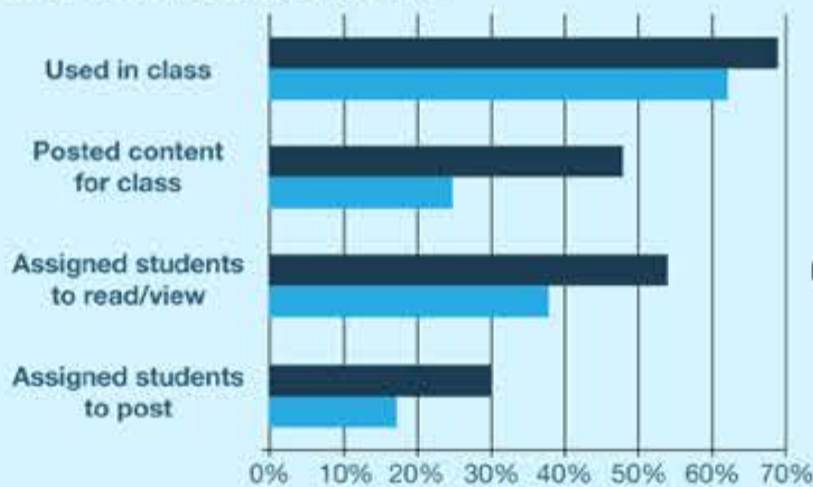
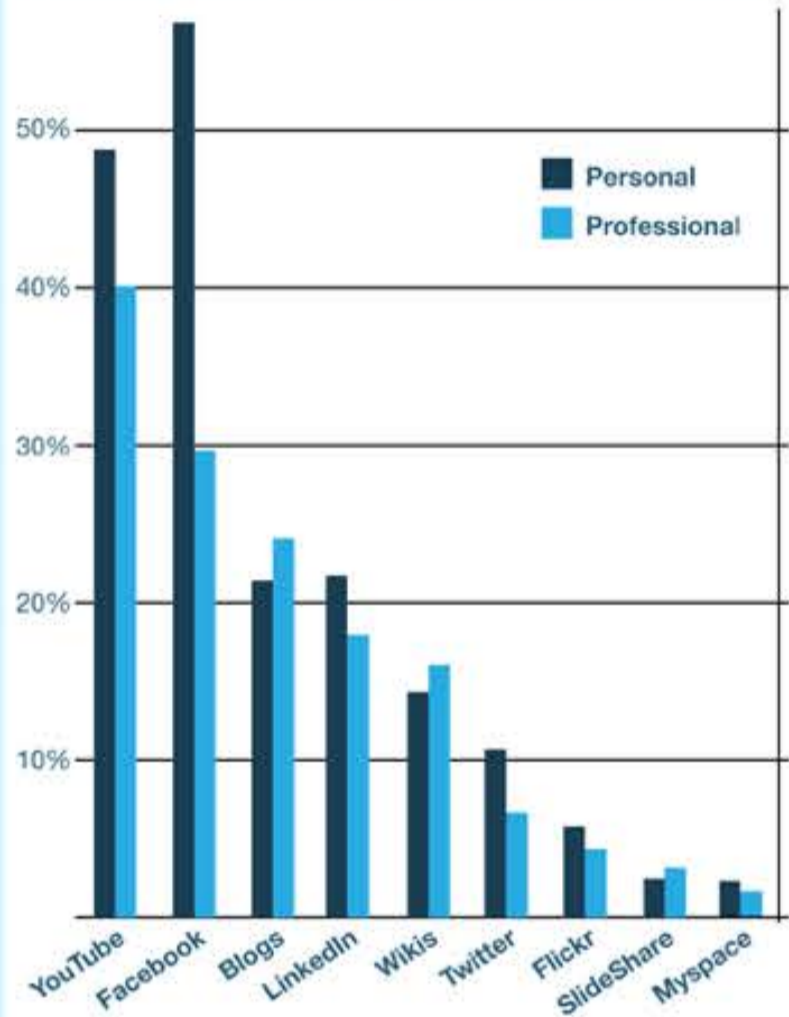**2/3** of all faculty have used social media during a class.

90% use social media in their class-rooms or for their professional careers.

FACULTY USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN CLASS AND FOR STUDENT ASSIGNMENTS

- Used in class
- Posted content for class
- Assigned students to read/view
- Assigned students to post

0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70%

■ Teach online
■ Not online

COMPARISON OF FACULTY'S PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA BY SITE

■ Personal
■ Professional

50%
40%
30%
20%
10%

YouTube Facebook Blogs LinkedIn Wikis Twitter Flickr SlideShare Myspace

HOW TO USE SOCIAL MEDIA IN CLASS

Key:
- Connect
- Notify
- Teach
- Curate

Intertwine class projects with Facebook by sharing book reviews, polling your class and promoting student work.

Improve communication by allowing students to easily message teachers and other students with questions.

?

Use Facebook apps and groups like Flashcards and WeRead to make learning and studying easier and more enjoyable.

Make a Facebook page for your class where you can schedule events, post notes and remind students of assignment due dates.

Become a news source by posting status updates or tailor your feed to follow other media and prominent leaders.

Post supplementary materials like links to articles and videos so students can continue learning even when class is over.

Track hash tags, memes and current events by setting up specific feeds the entire class can monitor.

Create a feed for your classroom so you can tweet about upcoming assignments, events and class news.

Connect

Connect with other classrooms, teachers and parents to increase communication and build community.

Follow other educators' tweets to keep up with the latest teaching trends, get ideas and support one another.

Share ideas and collaborate with teachers and students from other classes and schools.

Use community boards for group projects and brainstorming so multiple users can all save their resources in one place.

Search Pinterest for inspiring tips on how to organize and decorate your classroom.

Curate

Allow students to use Pinterest for presentations and projects. Later, set up boards to promote students' final assignments.
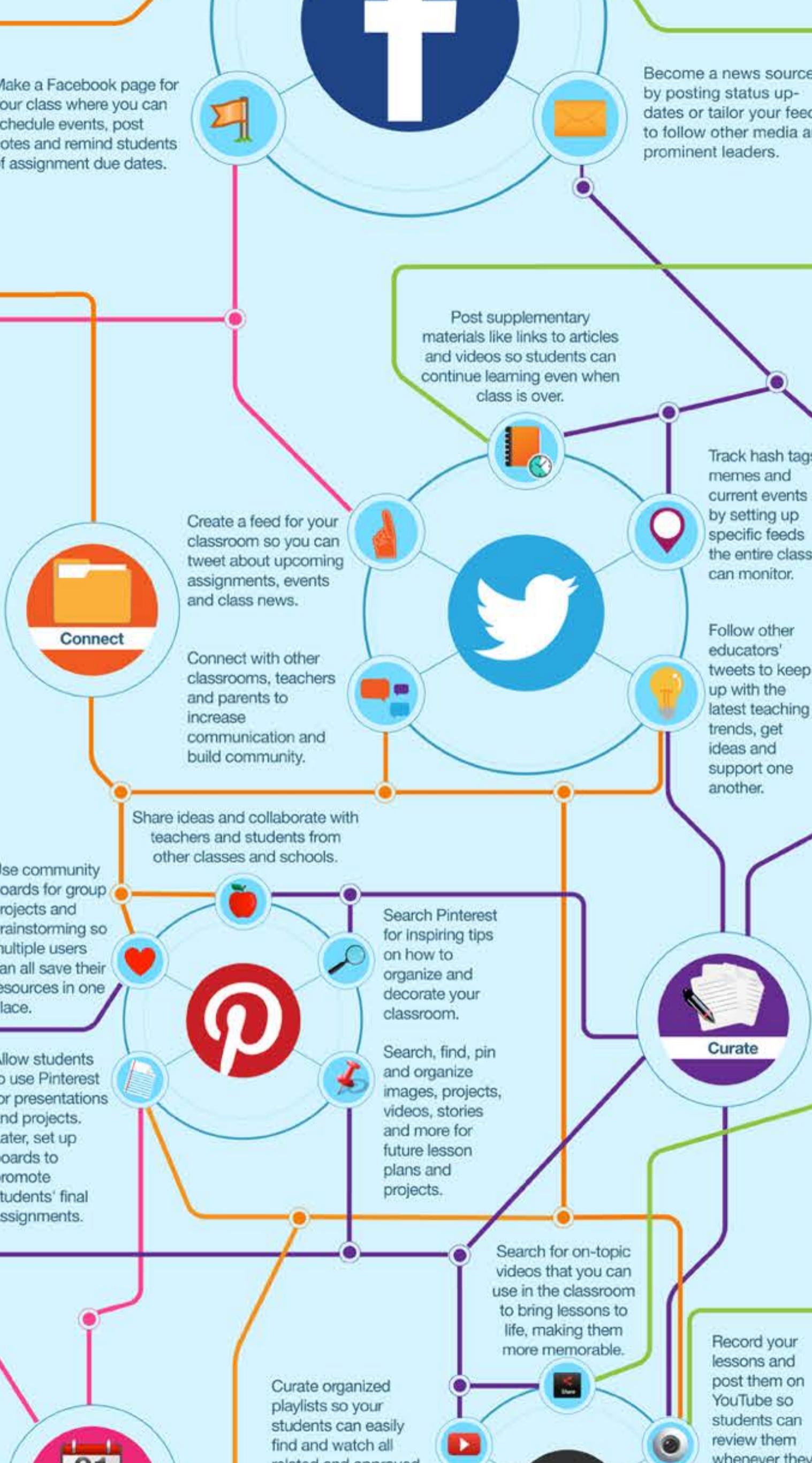
Search, find, pin and organize images, projects, videos, stories and more for future lesson plans and projects.

Search for on-topic videos that you can use in the classroom to bring lessons to life, making them more memorable.

Record your lessons and post them on YouTube so students can review them whenever they

Curate organized playlists so your students can easily find and watch all

Notify

related and approved videos on a topic.

Teach students how to produce and edit video by having them film and upload videos to a class YouTube channel.

You Tube

whenever they want.

Take your videos to the next level by adding quizzes, annotations and more.

Create a class blog so students can stay up-to-date on upcoming projects, due dates, events and other reminders.

Post daily or weekly homework assignments on the blog so students who were absent can know what they missed.

Post discussion topics on the blog; give your students a few days to reflect on the topic and comment.

Publish student work on the blog, or have students set up their own blogs as online portfolios.

Encourage students to post on a class blog weekly to develop their own voice and work on their writing.

Teach

Sources: Teaching, Learning, and Sharing: How Today's Higher Education Faculty Use Social Media I edutopia.org I pearsonschoolsystems.com I facebook.com I apps.facebook.com I edudemic.com I reallygoodstuff.com I openeducation.net I teachhub.com I nea.org

ONLINE COLLEGES