Why Can't We Be Smarter?
The Reason Social Media Must Be
Incorporated into Higher Education

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As a person born around the beginning of the Digital Revolution, you are a witness to the most influential change in technology in history. No doubt, you are familiar with the vast libraries of information available to humanity. It is now possible to teach yourself any academic subject from almost any location on the planet—a reality that has enabled many to gain an education when they previously could not. Therefore, it would seem logical to conclude a rise in human intelligence is likely to occur in the near future, if such a rise is not occurring now. However, a recent study compared the intelligence of the modern

Figure 5 Social Media by Sofiaperesoa/Wikimedia Commons

individual with our Ancient Greek counterparts ("People Are Getting Dumber"). The results of the study suggest modern humans are *less* intelligent than they have been in the past, a suggestion that may lead some to wonder why, "[w]ith all of the advances humans have made, . . . aren't we smarter?" Part of this problem may be due to technology itself, which has taken away much of society's need and ability to think critically.

Social media is the most powerful product of the Digital Revolution, and it will undoubtedly have a greater impact on human interactions as time goes on, whether people accept this change or not. Will social media lead to a technological utopia? Possibly, but such an outcome will depend on how the so-called "Millennial Generation"—the generation that has grown up with social media—responds to it.

Because the period of time that defines the Millennial Generation includes those born in the last decade of the twentieth century, a large group of children and young adults, especially those that live in the United States, will attend some type of post-secondary institution (Rai). They will become the most important part of the workforce and world economy. Therefore, their use of social media will determine things such as their career success and business progress. It may also determine human thought processes and society's approach to problems, both on small and global scales. Those who educate the new generation of college students are thus endowed with an important task. This essay will prove how the proliferation of social media creates a unique responsibility for college professors, that of promoting its use in academic work and teaching college students how to use it properly.

The Important Role the College Professor Should Have in Social Media Education

Understandably, some professors may be hesitant to incorporate social media into their

teaching. Many currently use teaching techniques that proved successful for many years. Older, experienced professors may dread the possibility learning new teaching methods. Students' use of technology may also be a cause of worry for these educators. Because of their daily use of social media, students may believe they know more about it than their professors. Finally, students' tendency to use social media for things that are not related to classwork may cause professors to avoid its use in the classroom completely.

While they may have legitimate reasons for having second thoughts about the use of social media in the classroom, the current and potential negative effects of this form of technology make professors' teaching of its proper use very important. Of these negative effects, multitasking and time-management are the most detrimental to education. If you were to walk into your campus library and casually watch students for about an hour, you would notice at least half of the students are on Facebook. Multitasking, especially the viewing of social media while attending to important matters, is common among this generation of students, and most of their time may be spent on social networking sites instead of completing assignments. A student may complete a page of an assignment, but it is only a matter of time before a student goes online to update his or her Twitter status, upload pictures, or look at the statuses of Facebook friends. Many may agree with the words of one student, who admits "[Social media is] a vortex that sucks you in, and you have no idea you've been caught until your mom comes home and asks you why the dishes haven't been done" ("Four Questions"). Because social media is relatively new, children, teens, and young adults who are "born digital" have taught themselves how to use it, usually without supervision or time limits. Ironically, efforts made to teach social media use have been directed towards older citizens. Few realize that the younger generations need this education more.

Because of the inexperience associated with youth along with the reduction in privacy due to social media, mistakes in the digital world have the potential of occurring frequently and with disastrous effects. It is a well-known fact that many employers are beginning to look at the online profiles of potential employees. Images, comments, and other material can easily impact their hiring decisions. While young adults may be focused on having "fun" and posting images and content displaying their various escapades, such content can negatively affect future employment opportunities. Even after one has obtained employment, failure to maintain a clean online profile has caused many to experience irreparable reputation damage (*The Facebook Obsession*). By using social media in the classroom, professors are given the opportunity to warn students of these dangers. As classroom use of social media increases, students will naturally become more aware of how their online presence can affect their reputation.

The final, and perhaps most important, reason why social media should be incorporated into a college education is because it will be an important part of future communications, business, and social interactions. Because college students will be a significant part of the workforce, many of the effects on business, commerce, and the economy will deal with how well they can use social media. The rate of improvement to all forms to technology is increasing exponentially. This has created a situation in which the addition of information to humanity's body of knowledge is also increasing at a similar rate. Many of the facts college students learn, especially those studying computer and information technology, will be outdated by the time they graduate from college (VideoShreadHead, The Huffines Institute). Therefore, improving one's ability to learn will become a more important part of a college education than learning facts.

Social media has the unique ability to give students easy access to information. Many social networking sites allow users the latest information about any topic, sending updates daily, or even hourly. Many scientific, business, and governmental organizations make use of social media, so accurate information can be right at students' fingertips. The reliability of such information is easy to determine, as the

source can easily be traced. Various studies, along with many college instructors, acknowledge this fact: when students work to increase their knowledge, technology, such as social media, increases their interest and engagement in learning (The Economist Intelligence Unit 7). For these reasons, every college campus must consider the use of social media in their classrooms. Professors who hope to reach their students effectively may have to think like Dr. Robert Gold, a professor of Public Health at the University of Maryland, who states "some teachers walk into a classroom, will tell students to turn off their cell phones because they want people to focus. I walk into a classroom and tell people to take out their cell phones and turn on their laptops because I want to make it part of the educational experience" (The Huffines Institute).

The Use of Social Media in Learning from Experts

One of the most appealing aspects of social media is that it helps students learn from the professor in ways they could not in the past. Consider the example of the use of the social networking site, Twitter. Dr. Gold, mentioned previously, has a Twitter hashtag for his courses. While he is teaching, his class is allowed to make comments on his lectures, which can be displayed for the rest of the class to see. This allows them to ask questions and make comments. He also projects the Twitter feed for his class on a screen while giving presentations. This gives students, especially those who do not usually comment in class, an opportunity to express their opinions about what he is teaching (The Huffines Institute). Some teachers may fear negative comments or disparaging remarks about their teaching. However, it is important to remember that social media facilitates the expression of ideas, a concept that is important to learn, but one that not all students may apply in lecture-style courses.

Social media also allows professors to promote students' learning outside of the classroom. Google has a variety of social media services that can be used in an educational setting. Google Calendars allows students to

post assignments and change due dates quickly if such information needs to be updated. Google Documents also allows instructors to monitor the progress of individual students and to make comments on their work in real-time. One example of Google Document's utility is the drawing feature, which allows users to create concept maps. This lets students make connections between concepts taught in a particular class and across other classes as well. And with Google Drive's ability to edit the concept maps at any time throughout, and even after, the semester, students receive
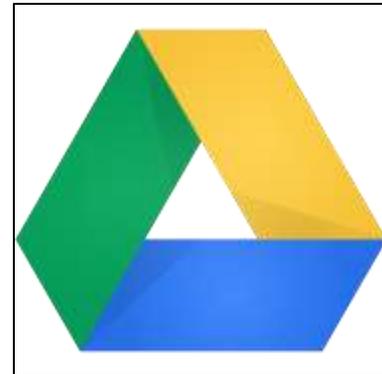
visual guidance to connect different ideas throughout the course.

Making connections between different lessons and courses is an important part of the learning process, one that is sorely lacking in today's educational system (Foli 4). Professors that teach upper-level courses may find this useful, especially when teaching subjects that require knowledge of many different areas of study. Seung H. Kim and Ying Xie, professors of Instructional Technology and Systems, both suggest the use social media in the connection and analysis of previous knowledge with newly-gained knowledge (180).

Google Plus, a newer social networking site, also has many uses in higher education. Professors who want to separate their personal life from their academic life have the option of placing their contacts, including students, into "circles" with certain designations. The professor is then able limit the material students are able to view. Different aspects of Google Plus, such as the "Hangout," a videoconferencing feature, allows for a greater amount communication between students and professors (Erkollar and Oberer 1889). In

addition, Google Plus's videoconferencing feature is similar to teleconferencing used in business. This may help professors to maintain a professional image, a common cause of worry among those who hope to adopt social media use in the classroom.

Aside from increased learning through the student-professor relationship, social media allows students to connect with professionals and experts in their field of interest. The most useful social networking website for this is LinkedIn. LinkedIn allows the user to set up a profile displaying all of their academic and work accomplishments. It also makes connecting with professionals in their field much easier. Take, for example, a student interested in the field of Exercise Physiology, a relatively uncommon field and one that few students on this campus may be interested in. Professional social networking sites allow this student to connect with those who share his interest in the occupation. LinkedIn will send that student information about various professional networks of exercise physiologists and other sports medicine professionals. Joining such groups is very helpful, especially if a student has a question about the field. Experts and prominent members of the sports medicine community from all over the world may answer the student's questions, closing the communication gap between students and professionals. In addition to establishing professional relationships, LinkedIn allows users to learn about advances in their field, create and improve their personal brand, and network with professionals that could end up being future employers (Snyder 229). This facet of social media certainly has the potential to deliver students far more information and experience than what can be obtained in the classroom

The Use of Social Media in Collaboration

If properly directed, collaboration through social media can facilitate an exchange of ideas that will aid students' learning ("Integrating Web 2.0" 366). A study involving social media was conducted on a group of students from two universities. The study compared the learning outcomes of standard individual essays as opposed to the learning obtained through use of social media, such as discussion forums, wikis, and news logs. After analyzing the data, the researchers concluded the positive effects of collaboration through social media outweighed the negative effects. They observed a reduction in cheating and a rise in idea expression, which lecture-style teaching can actually discourage ("Integrating Web 2.0" 379). Web applications, such as Google Docs, as mentioned above, allow students to work simultaneously on documents, presentations, tables, and other assignments. The benefits to students' learning are infinite.

By using social media to learn in class and collaborate with their peers, students are actually being prepared to use it effectively in the work world. As technology continues to connect our society, collaboration with people from other locations will be very important. The Web applications mentioned previously are already being used in many employment settings, and allowing for their use can prepare students for entry into the workforce. Students who have experience collaborating with professionals outside of the classroom will be more likely to express their ideas, learn from people of other cultures, and work on projects with greater efficiency. Their experience with social media will create a professional and desirable online profile.

In its present state, social media is far from being a technological utopia. However, consider this important fact: social media gives the new generation of college students access to an increasing amount of collective knowledge. If they learn how to use it effectively, they will continue to put humanity on a course towards "educational utopia," a state in which reliable knowledge can be gained and distributed. At the beginning of this paper, the question posed was "why aren't we smarter?" However, after considering the facts presented in this essay, you should be considering a new question: "Why *can't* we be smarter?" By playing a part in educating the Millennial Generation about the proper use of social media, college professors will turn this generation into a "Smarter Generation."

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