

Using Social Media as a Learning Tool

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What would you say if I told you that you could reach around 80% of your students at all times of the day? You would probably say that I was crazy. But some educators are using social media to do exactly that.

According to the Pew Research Center (2015a), 74% of all adult internet users have some sort of social media presence. This number only increases among youth. In adults aged 18-29, 84% use social media. In teenagers, aged 12-17, 95% have internet access and of those, 81% use social media (Pew Research Center, 2015b).

This means that educators that can leverage the use of social media have a very powerful method of reaching out to their students.

Social media can encompass many things. We have all heard of Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. These sites allow people to connect with others regardless of distance. It also includes technology such as Skype, WebEx, or GoToMeeting. These let us conduct “face to face” conversations, meetings, lectures, etc. without actually being face to face. Other sites, such as Pinterest and Flipboard allow the user to collate information from across the web.

This post will briefly discuss how to use Twitter, WebEx, and Pinterest in a learning environment.

### **Twitter**

Twitter is micro-blogging site that allows users to post short messages, and send those messages to any person that is following them or following the hashtag used in the post.

One middle school teacher in Texas, Jessica Caviness, used Twitter to engage her students in learning outside of the classroom (November & Mull, 2012).

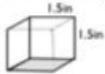
While attending a Texas Rangers game, Ms. Caviness asked her students a asking them to create a math problem concerning a soda cup.



Image from: <http://novemberlearning.com/educational-resources-for-educators/teaching-and-learning-articles/how-twitter-can-be-used-as-a-powerful-educational-tool/>.

Many of her students responded to her tweet with tweets of their own. One example:

The height of the soda in this right cylindrical cup is 5in, and Mr. Caviness wants to add 3 cubes of ice to the cup, can he do so without the soda overflowing?



Nolan's goal for last night's game is to sell 35,000 cups, & his goal was successful. Find how much soda was needed for Nolan's goal, if each cup has a height of 8 in. and a radius of 2.5in. Each cup is filled with only 1 in. remaining.

Image from: <http://novemberlearning.com/educational-resources-for-educators/teaching-and-learning-articles/how-twitter-can-be-used-as-a-powerful-educational-tool/>.

Twitter allowed Ms. Caviness to engage her class outside the classroom. It allowed her to engage them on a forum that they were already using. What is somewhat surprising is how many of her students took the opportunity to read her tweet, think about it, and create a response.

Remember, her students were not at school, they were on their free time.

Another teacher was able to use Twitter to place his students inside a current event situation (November & Mull, 2015). On February 10, 2011, Cairo, Egypt erupted into unrest as President Mubarak gave a less than pleasing speech to a large crowd gathered in the city. Rather than following this development on traditional news sites such as CNN or Fox, Mr. Brian Mull had his class following the activity on Twitter. This enabled his class to see in real time what the local people felt about the speech. Mr. Mull could have let it go at this, instead he sent out his own tweet asking about the situation and using the hashtags #Egypt and #Jan25 (the two most prevalent hashtags used by the protesters). Soon, his class was conversing through Twitter with people directly involved in the protest. He was also able to arrange a Skype session with one of the protesters the next day.

Twitter allowed Mr. Mull to bring a situation happening thousands of miles away from his students close to them by allowing them to observe the real-time feelings of the protesters and even to interact with them as the protests were occurring.

### **WebEx**

WebEx is a video conferencing technology. Like all video conferencing platforms, it allows users to “meet” with one another regardless of physical location. WebEx allows users to host meetings and share their desktop with the other participants. This means that any presentation, video, image, etc. on your desktop is seen by all other participants. WebEx also allows you to use your web cam to share your real-time image, stream your voice, use a white board, and use chat features.

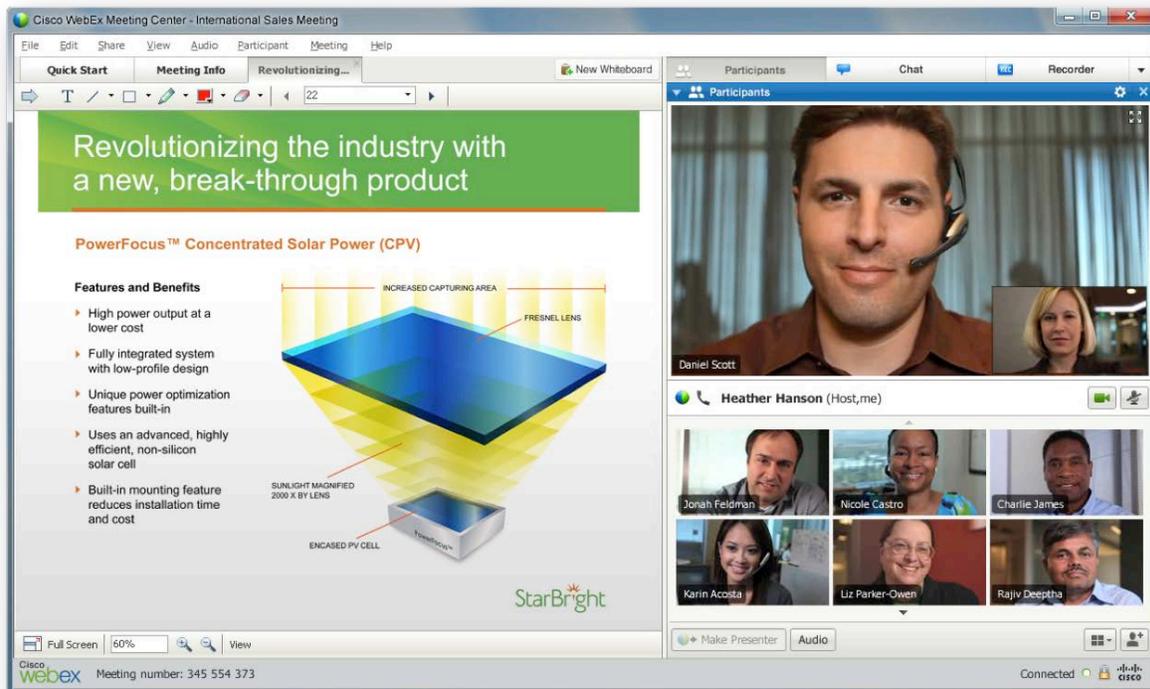


Image from: <https://gkelegha.wordpress.com/2014/04/03/cisco-webex-meetings-server/>.

My company makes frequent use of WebEx. My organization has eight manufacturing locations throughout the United States. These are located in Golden, CO; Milwaukee, WI; Irwindale, CA; Fort Worth, TX; Eden, NC; Elkton, VA; Trenton, OH; and Albany, GA. Additionally, we have corporate offices in Denver, CO; Milwaukee, WI; and Chicago, IL. My particular department, Learning and Development, has a presence in each of these locations. For us to meet together physically would be vastly cost and time ineffective. However, with WebEx, we are able to “meet” on a weekly basis.

We conduct weekly, half-hour long, learning sessions. As an example, our last session concerned the subject of Visual Design. One of our corporate managers conducted a session on visual design best practices for PowerPoint presentations. He was able to share his material through his desktop. We were able to ask questions both through a conference call and via the

chat feature on WebEx. We were all able to see one another through our webcams. For all practical purposes we might as well have been in the same room.

WebEx, or similar technology, could be used in online or distance learning programs to replace class discussions, lectures, or other typical classroom interactions. It could even be used to replace office hours. Additionally, these sessions can be recorded so they can be viewed by your students later.

## Pinterest

Pinterest is basically a photo sharing site. But, it is its organization that makes it an effective learning tool. User can “pin” any item from the web to their personal board. This collects the information that is of interest to them in one central location. They can also organize their boards by subject matter. Additionally, the user can “re-pin” pins from other people’s boards to their own.



Image from: <http://www.zdnet.com/article/pinterest-as-a-learning-tool-do-the-two-compute/>.

Pinterest offers several ways in which it can aid in learning (Bhaskar, 2013).

1. It can serve a resource board. Teachers can pin material to their boards for use either by themselves or by their students.
2. It can serve a classroom schedule. Teachers can pin images of their lesson plans, assignments, etc. to the board. Their students then have a very easy means of viewing these materials.
3. It can help promote collaboration, both within and without the classroom. Both teachers and students can search for other people with similar interests, see what interests them, ask for feedback, etc.
4. It can promote a community of learning. Teachers can create a classroom board, then allow their students to pin items to the board. This engages the students in collaborative learning and allows each student to access the resources used by other students.

One History teacher, Ole Molvig, used Pinterest to engage his class in various subjects throughout the course (Molvig, 2015). He created a course board for the class. Both he and the students pinned material that was relevant to each subject. This not only engaged the collective work of the class, but also linked them to other Pinterest users with similar interests. This led them to even more information than they were able to find by themselves.

### **Conclusion**

Social media and social networking sites can be powerful learning tools. They engage students within a platform they are familiar with. They leverage the student's current use of social media. They promote collaboration. They encourage learning outside of the classroom environment. Lastly, they are not limited by distance. Used carefully, social media can augment classroom learning and promote higher level thinking among students.

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