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And Finally ... Social Media and Online Learning: Pros and Cons

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Social Media and Online Learning

Pros and Cons

Michael Simonson

"Social media are cool. I have 325 Facebook friends."

Are social media applications empowering or addicting—or both?

Certainly, social media provide a type of interaction and connectivity that was unheard of a few years ago. In the modern

distance education era, the quest for interaction and connectivity has been a hallmark of well-designed online learning, and social media applications seem to provide a needed and desirable dimension to online instruction. But it seems that there are pros and cons to the use of social media applications in teaching—empowerments and additions.

Seven positive consequences of social media when used in online instruction come to mind and these seven might be referred to as *the seven empowerments*.

1. Social media are *cool*. Sites like Facebook and Twitter give the impression of being modern, so classes that have a social media dimension are perceived as new and generational.
2. Social media promote the *ego syndrome* of users. We can access information about our classmates, and they can do the same. Teamwork is promoted.
3. Social media promote *self-education*—users can find out what they want quickly and this can expedite the teaching and learning process.

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4. There is an *instantaneous phenomenon* to social media. When instructors post, students receive, and vice-versa.
5. There is a needed match between *instructional design* and social media. If social interaction is a part of a course, a well-planned instructional design strategy is mandatory.
6. The *third party* is removed. Social media are if nothing else, personal. We do social media without the need for help, or supervision. The information technology professional's role in social media-based instruction is minimized.
7. Social media make instruction seem *friendly*. The whole basis of connecting and interacting is to be social. This works for education also.

Unfortunately, there seems to be a less positive side to the use of social media in online learning. Let's call these seven the seven distractions ("addiction" seems too strong a term). The seven distractions now being referred to in the literature as nomophobia (*no-mobile* fears, get it?) are:

1. There is a *greediness* dimension to the use of social media. In other words, users want likes and expect repeated and rapid interaction.
2. *Gluttony* is another of the cons of social media in online learning. There is a need to know everything related to what is being examined and discussed.
3. There is a level of *lustfulness* when social media are used. I want this or that or everything. These three deadly sins—greed, gluttony, and lust—are related and harmful in the extreme.

4. *Pleasure seeking* is a documented consequence of social media use. Learners look for what makes them happy and contented, and this is often not what instructors want. Education must sometimes hurt a little.
5. Some *students are afraid* of social media uses in online instruction. They do not want to interact so often or in the level of detail that others in their class might want. Research shows that if someone is positive in social media, readers perceive this as neutral, and neutral responses are perceived as negative. Truly negative interactions are ego shattering for some.
6. Unfortunately, instructional design, while important and even critical in any online instruction, is often ignored when social media are used. Social media are so easy that *systematic planning is often ignored*.
7. *Feeling left out* happens. If instructors and classmates do not respond in the manner of social media users, some wonder what has happened, or what did I do, or what did I miss.

How do we decide if social media applications have a place in online instruction? The answer is simple; there is no choice, students have already decided. The real key is how distance educators harness the positives and reduce the negatives.

And finally, as Johnny Mercer and the Pied Pipers sang "accentuate the positive, eliminate the negative, latch on to the affirmative, don't mess with Mister In-Between."