

Teaching with Social Media

By Debra Caplan

Over the past few years, I've gradually started to incorporate social media into assignments and activities in my courses. I began using social media in my teaching for three reasons:

- (1) To enable students to document work done outside of the classroom in real time
- (2) To engage students in broader conversations about course-related topics happening “in the real world”
- (3) To empower students to share their ideas with a broader public

The traditional class assignment, in which students submit a piece of writing to an instructor, has its place in the curriculum, but does not allow for dynamic conversation. Social media, the increasingly dominant communication medium of our time, is based on the premise that the exchange of thoughts, images, and media in real time and before a public audience has intrinsic value. The distance between the potential audience and impact of an undergraduate academic essay and internet communication does not escape our students, nor should it. Students are accustomed to a world in which communication is immediate and publicly available. Why not harness the power of these new forms for educational value?

A few years ago, for an assignment asking students to give an oral presentation about a theater company outside of the United States, a student delivered a memorable and powerful presentation that included a conversation between her and the artistic director of a premiere South African theater. It turns out that the student had sent a tweet to the theater company's Twitter account mentioning the assignment, and the artistic director had responded and invited her to ask questions. This, too, is the power of social media – it can quickly and easily give students access to primary sources of information (artists and writers, heads of organizations, ordinary people living through a newsworthy event, etc.) that would be extremely difficult to connect with otherwise. As anyone who conducts research knows, communicating with another human being is a powerful experience that can shed tremendous light on a topic or problem. The experience can also be memorable and empowering for students.

I have used many different types of social media for class assignments and activities. These include:

- A theater history scavenger hunt, documented by students in real-time using Twitter (https://storify.com/debra_caplan/theater-history-scavenger-hunt)
- A final assignment that asked students to create an online exhibit on a topic that integrated a map, a guided video tour of a neighborhood, an oral history, and research content (<http://blogs.baruch.cuny.edu/childrenandyiddishtheater/>)
- A midterm project for which students collaboratively develop an artistic concept for a theater production and document their process on Pinterest (<http://www.pinterest.com/manpreet0993/theater-othello-costume-design-board/> and <https://www.pinterest.com/mariapiletskaya/the1041-props/>)
- An assignment for which each student had to conduct a 10-minute interview with a contemporary artist using Skype and then blog about it.
- Assignments asking students to curate a narrative about a hot-button issue using Storify (example: <https://storify.com/leejennifer/arts-in-k12-education>)

I have found all of these assignments successful and effective so far, and I plan on continuing to experiment with incorporating social media into my classroom. I'm particularly interested in including more Skype and Twitter assignments in order to get students talking to other people outside the classroom more and more.