

SOCIAL MEDIA AS A TEACHING STRATEGY: OPPORTUNITIES AND BARRIERS

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ABSTRACT

In health professions education social media represents an emerging field. As it is one of the most popular technology resources used by current society, it gives teachers the opportunity to engage with students in meaningful ways. The inclusion of social media in education can result in many benefits, such as increased students satisfaction, collaboration and relatedness. Nevertheless, its use has also reported several barriers and challenges to be faced. In this paper the authors aim to discuss the current use of social media as a teaching strategy within the health professions education environment, focusing on the benefits and challenges presented for students and teachers, and to stimulate future research.

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In recent years, teachers have been looking for innovative ways to engage students in practices that involve interactive learning, where they can act as facilitators and students can take more responsibility in the learning process. One of the most popular technology resources used by current society, including our students, is social media. Because of its significant influence on today's students, it gives teachers the opportunity to engage with them in meaningful ways.¹

Social Media has been defined as web-based technologies in which individuals contribute, interact, explore, and express content, mainly created by users and for other users. In this way, information and support runs effectively.² In this paper, social media is referred as all the online technologies that facilitate

idea sharing through collaboration, interaction, and discussion; including tools such as Facebook, Twitter, Google+, LinkedIn, Skype, YouTube, and Flirck among others. Excluding platforms that are based on static distribution of information, such as distance learning programmes.

Twitter and Facebook are two of the most popular social media networks. Facebook has nearly 1 billion users (i.e. 14.2% of the world population) and nearly half of them check their accounts every day.³ On the other hand, twitter is akin to a mini blog, in which you can text a maximum of 140 characters per message (i.e. a "tweet"). An average of 340 million tweets are send per day.³ It provides a concise, simple, and real time dialogue.^{1,4}

The question that rises is whether teachers and students are actually

using social media in Health Professions Education and how are they using it?

In health professions education social media represents an emerging field. A recent survey conducted over 1000 health professions students reported their preference for social media as a source of information, specifically referring to Facebook.⁵ Students have reported that social media represents an extension of the classroom, giving them the opportunity to interact and engage with information in a different environment.⁴

Students mainly use social media for personal connections, followed by professional networking, research and study. When they were asked how they would want to use social media within their studies, the majority intended to interact with their teachers before and after classes, followed by the enhancement of lectures, seminars and tutorials.^{3,4} Overall students felt that using social media could actually benefit their learning.

On the other hand, teachers from five dental schools reported, through an online survey, that Facebook, Skype and YouTube were the most popular networks among

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them,¹ however 22% of the sample answered that they did not use any kind of social media. Most of the faculty staff reported using social media for personal issues and not for professional work or as a teaching source.

Including social media in education can result in many benefits. Students' learning satisfaction is increased,⁶⁻⁸ mainly because they are used to be in this environment and they enjoy it. As a result, students are more engaged with the course material. The online setting also increases students' collaboration, interactions, and communication with each other and with teachers.⁴ Thus, increasing students' relatedness and removing barriers to self-expression and contribution. It is important to mention that fulfilling students' needs for relatedness with pairs and teachers contributes to an increase in their intrinsic motivation and self-determination towards academic activities.⁹

Using these kind of networks could provide mentoring outside class, additional student questions, requests, group discussion, and document uploads. Indeed, Facebook gives the option of creating 'class groups'. These can be public or private (i.e. private-closed or private-secret). In private closed groups, anyone is able to see the member list but not the posts or commentaries. On the other hand, in private secret groups only members are allowed to see any of the available content.¹⁰

Considering these benefits, teachers should take advantage and create opportunities to enhance their teaching strategies and connect with students. Social networks provide the flexibility and accessibility for students to adapt and customise their learning.³ In addition, teachers may provide continuous and more feedback than traditional methods, including peer feedback.¹¹

Nevertheless, the use of social media in health professions education has also reported several barriers and challenges to be faced. One

of the most relevant barriers reported deals with privacy and professionalism matters. Professional administrators are concerned about issues of identity and confidentiality, and social networks put these at risk. A survey to dental teachers revealed that one of the main concerns was regarding students' privacy, specifically for them not to be exposed to people outside the class.¹ As it has been mentioned, there are several options that networks offer to set privacy into an online group, with no need for students to be exposed or for the teacher to share personal information with the students. Engaging in an online network does not mean sharing personal details about teachers, students or patients. It is very important to clarify this to the students.

An important barrier is dealing with technology. Students are used to and belong to a technology era, but teachers have reported not feeling confident and that it would be a time consuming task.^{1,3} To address this challenges, faculty development and training courses could be provided as a mean of supporting teachers' involvement. Another important concern is the level of participation of students. As it is expected, students do not access as often to course sites as they access to their personal social media accounts.¹ Teachers should be aware of this challenge and regularly be checking the network and stimulating students to participate.

A significant issue that must not be undermined is the institutional ethos.¹³ Professional, legal, and ethical matters should be clear before using social media with students. A useful guideline was published by the American Medical Association in 2010; this policy statement about the proper use of social media can guide teachers and institutions.¹ Quality assurance issues concern the university administration. Educational or administrative business is not normally carried out in a public arena, and social media is perceived as that. In addition, it is difficult for

an institution to determine if the media is normally used, or by adopting the use of social media, the institution is encouraging students to join a network only because the university uses it. A simple example is email. Whilst it is normal for universities to use email to communicate with students, the university provides the email address, and a secure server in which to record all messages. This would be difficult to achieve and manage with social media. However, it is the case that Educational Technology has a place in higher education¹⁴⁻¹⁶ and bespoke learning resources, podcasts, and other applications are commonly used within the password protected electronic environment.

Another concern of teachers is the real impact and usefulness of social media. There is a small but growing body of literature concerning the use of these networks in health professions education. Most studies are based on quantitative methods,³ and to a less extend on qualitative approaches. Therefore, little information is reported about the opinions and experiences of health educators. Unless future research shows the usefulness of social media and its benefits, teachers lacking of interest in web-based networks will probably not engage with students and peers in the online environment. There is abundant room for further progress in determining teachers' impressions and experiences. Knowing how teachers feel about these technologies and understanding the opportunities and challenges faced by them could improve the use of social media and become a benefit for students and teachers.

Due to its popularity among junior and senior students,^{1,3,14} social media should be considered as an opportunity for innovation in the clinical teaching environment.³ Despite the many benefits for students and faculty staff, there are many barriers and challenges to face before these networks can be fully integrated in different curriculums. As educators,

it is our role to update our teaching strategies and include new technologies to engage with students, therefore, leading us to a contextually updated, different, and possibly even better quality of teaching.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

CO has made substantial intellectual contribution in conceptualizing and drafting the manuscript and has given final approval of the version to be published. PE has made significant contribution to the manuscript by critically reviewing it for important intellectual content.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

Authors declare no conflict of interest.

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