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How Social Networking Helps Teaching (and Worries Some Professors)

By Jeffrey R. Young

San Jose, Calif.

Professors crowded into conference rooms here this week to learn how to use Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube in their classrooms, though some attendees raised privacy issues related to the hypersocial technologies.

About 750 professors and administrators attended the conference on "[Emerging Technologies for Online Learning](#)," run jointly by the Sloan Consortium, a nonprofit group to support teaching with technology, and two other educational software and resource providers.

A session on Facebook held Thursday morning attracted a standing-room-only crowd, with people packed into the room and huddled in the doorway. One benefit of the popular social network is that, unlike course-management systems such as Blackboard, students already know how to use it, said the presenter, Denise Knowles, a Web-application specialist at Los Medanos College in Pittsburg, Calif. She encouraged professors to use Facebook to send out announcements for their courses and to design assignments where students post responses using the service.

But she also recommended that professors set up two Facebook accounts—one for communicating with students and another for personal connections. That way, professors can clearly keep their professional identities walled off from other important aspects of their lives. "We need our privacy," she said. "I don't want people seeing pictures of my children, and I don't want people seeing pictures of my life."

Not everyone is so cautious, however. Tanya M. Joosten, a lecturer in the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee's department of communication, gave out her Facebook address during her session. She said she uses privacy settings in the service to control what various "friends" can see, and she suggested that professors set up a separate page on Facebook for a course, which allows students to connect to the page without seeing the personal information of the professor or others who have "liked" the page. Then professors can

post updates to the course Facebook page, which are automatically pushed to the pages of students who follow it.

"It's coming right down to them in a medium that they're already using anyway," she said. A [survey](#) she did of her own students showed that 83 percent approved of professors pushing class updates via Facebook. "I've never seen ratings so high in any emerging technology project I've done," she said.

3 Unusual Ideas

This year's conference dealt with three themes: the use of mobile technologies like iPhones; online video and other high-bandwidth tools; and social-networking platforms such as Facebook, said Jeremy W. Kemp, co-chair for the conference and a lecturer at San Jose State University.

Among the more unusual suggestions during presentations:

- Ask students to do role-playing exercises on Facebook or Twitter. For instance, students in an American-history course could each be required to set up a Facebook page for a historical figure and periodically post "status updates" of things the famous people did. Similarly, Utah State University organized a Civil War re-enactment on [Twitter](#).
- Learn how to use the tracking feature of [YouTube](#) to see how many students tune in to videos of lectures that professors post. Sam McGuire, an assistant professor of music at the University of Colorado at Denver, said by doing so, he learned that some students came back months later to watch his videos.
- Send students one-minute video reminders about class assignments using a free service called [Eyejot](#). Traci LaBarbera Stromie, an instructional designer at Kennesaw State University near Atlanta, said video messages, rather than e-mail reminders, could "keep students more engaged" in the class.

Technology Does Not Equal Learning

Some attendees stressed that there is a danger that professors would use new technologies just because they seemed cool, rather than for any specific learning goal.

"Everybody talks about using technology, but what is the effect on learning?" said Shari McCurdy Smith, associate director of the Center for Online Learning, Research, and Service at the University of Illinois at Springfield, in an interview after the Facebook session.

"I think this is a great concern I hear a lot."

She said she has seen some evidence that technology is improving learning, but more research should be done.

The attendance and interest in Facebook surprised her, though. After all, just a few years ago, it seemed that most professors complained about how much time their students frittered away on the service, she said.

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