Social Media in the Classroom: An Experiential Teaching Strategy to Engage and Educate

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Abstract

This article outlines an approach to engaging and educating college students through the use of social media. The project is designed for a substance use course at the college/university undergraduate level. However, it could be adapted for any health education course/health issue where education and/or communication via social media are appropriate. It is well suited for both face-to-face and online classroom settings and has been utilized in both venues. This project capitalizes on the growing trend of technology and social media use among college students to build essential communication/education skills among future health educators, improve learning capacity in the millennial generation, and contribute to the amount of research-based information available to the public via the World Wide Web.

Introduction

Growing up in the millennial generation that founded the social media movement (Nielson, 2014), college students are utilizing social media more than any other generation as illustrated by a current survey of 18 to 29 year olds, where 84% of the sample reported using Facebook, 44% reported using Google+, 40% reported using Twitter, and 36% reported using Instagram (Harvard University Institute of Politics, 2015). Some millennials have even created the social media tools used, such as Mark Zuckerberg who created Facebook and Kevin Systrom who is a cofounder of Instagram (U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation, 2014). Additionally, these social media tools have been increasingly used to disseminate health information (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2011). In fact, one third of survey respondents ($n = 1,040$), in a study conducted to explore consumer usage of social media for health-related purposes, reported using social media to obtain and track personal health information (iHealthBeat, 2012). Because of this growing trend, health educators are in a unique position to capitalize on the public's, especially the millennial's, use of social media to obtain health information, as theses educators carry out their role to "communicate and advocate for health and health education" (National Commission for Health Education Credentialing, Inc., 2008, Responsibilities and competencies of health educators, para. 37). One way to capitalize on the growing use of social media is for faculty to use this in the college classroom with millennial students. Because social media has been correlated with indices of student engagement (Heilberger & Harper, 2008; Higher Education Research Institute, 2007; Junco, 2010), this article outlines an approach to engaging and educating college students in a substance use course through the use of social media.

Teaching Method

Target Audience

This project is designed for faculty and students to use in a substance use course at the undergraduate college/university level. However, it could be adapted for any health education course/health issue where education via social media is appropriate. It is well suited for both face-to-face and online classroom settings and has been utilized in both venues.

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Learning Objectives

This project will not only facilitate in application and synthesis of substance use content but will also build essential communication skills among students. By the end of the project, students in a substance use course will be able to (1) research a specific substance use issue/problem within a community, (2) personalize and reinforce health messages to an intended audience, (3) apply social media communication skills to develop and carry out a social media campaign, and (4) evaluate the social media campaign based on an evaluation plan.

Materials and Resources

Instructor will need to have access to the following materials and resources, as well as ensuring student access: *The Health Communicator's Social Media Toolkit* available at http://www.cdc.gov/socialmedia/tools/guidelines/pdf/socialmediatoolkit_bm.pdf (CDC, 2011), project guidelines (see Figure 1), and grading rubric (see Figure 2).

Teaching Procedures

Allocating 10 to 12 weeks for this project is recommended to ensure proper time for students becoming familiar with and researching social media and substance use issues, planning for the campaign, carrying out the campaign, and evaluating and reflecting on the campaign. Procedures for this project are described by the following action steps to be implemented over a course term or part of a course term.

Step 1

The first step in carrying out the project is allowing students to become familiar with the project guidelines, substance use issues, and social media as a method for communicating with and educating the population. After reviewing project guidelines and grading rubrics with students (Figures 1 and 2), the instructor should preview one or more social media campaigns as samples, which can be found on the Internet. For example, Mothers Against Drunk Driving has launched a Twitter campaign aimed at carrying out their mission of stopping drunk driving (Mothers Against Drunk Driving, n.d.) and CBS (a commercial broadcast television network) also implemented a substance use prevention campaign using multiple social media tools ("#14 Days on the Wagon," 2014). Additionally, the instructor should assign appropriate reading assignments from *The Health Communicator's Social Media Toolkit* (CDC, 2011) to familiarize students with social media tools and strategies. From here, students should be given the chance to apply knowledge learned from the course and from observations made in their community or campus to research and identify an appropriate substance use issue and population served to be the focus of their campaign. Examples of substance use issues could be binge drinking on college campuses, adolescent smoking prevention, or addiction issues in general among a select population.

Step 2

The next step in project implementation is planning the social media strategy. Using the Social Media Communications Strategy Worksheet (CDC, 2011), instruct students to work through the entire worksheet to plan their strategy, including identifying a target audience, determining campaign objectives, defining audience communications needs, developing appropriate messages, and outlining campaign activities and initial evaluation measures. Students also should be asked to identify social media tools for their campaign, and instructors are encouraged to ask students to identify multiple tools in order to provide their messages in several formats. This should increase accessibility of and reinforce messages (CDC, 2011). Part 1 of the project guidelines (Figure 1) asks students to choose one tool from List 1 and one tool from List 2, but instructors could modify this list as they see fit. However, social media tools selected should be appropriate for campaign objectives and target audience.

If this is a daunting assignment for students, it may be wise to provide a guidance document for the worksheet to guide planning and clarify what is expected. The instructor can also use this document to explain questions that may not be entirely relevant or easily understood, such as Question 4—goal integration (see Figure 3). Because each component of the project builds on the last, it is essential for the instructor to provide feedback on each student's worksheet before they move on to the next step of the project. Students should also be encouraged to address any areas for improvement before moving on, and instructor may choose to evaluate each project component multiple times or provide opportunities for peer review along the way.

Step 3

Once students have completed the Social Media Communications Strategy Worksheet (CDC, 2011), they will be ready to move on to the Social Media Evaluation Worksheet (CDC, 2011). This worksheet will instruct students to identify inputs, activities, outputs, and outcomes for their social media campaigns. They also will develop evaluation questions for each of these components. Evaluation questions need to be realistic and

Social Media Project Guidelines

Part 1: Developing your Social Media Strategy

- You will work through the Social Media Communications Strategy Worksheet after reading *The Health Communicator's Social Media Toolkit*. Be sure to complete each question as thoroughly as possible and ask any questions you have. When you get to #7 (Identify Social Media Tools), you should choose 2 social media tools (one from each list below) that best match your objectives and target audience:

  List 1   **List 2**
  Buttons & Badges (you will develop 1)   RSS Feeds
  Image Sharing (you will develop 1)   Podcasts
  eCards   (you will develop 1)   Widgets
                                                              Mobile App
                                                              Twitter
                                                              Facebook

- You will develop just one message for the tool chosen from list one, and you will be developing and delivering weekly activities (for five weeks: Dates) for the tool chosen from list two. Your weekly activities should be appropriate for the tool chosen (frequency of communication, types of messages created and delivered, interaction with the audience), your target audience, and your objectives. **Be sure your messages and activities consider the "three P's"- Personalization, Presentation, and Participation (p. 7 of *The Health Communicator's Social Media Toolkit).*

Part 2: Evaluation

- You will work through the Social Media Evaluation Worksheet after reading *The Health Communicator's Social Media Toolkit* and completing the Social Media Communications Worksheet. Be sure to complete each question as thoroughly as possible and ask any questions you have. Your evaluation questions should be realistic and measureable because you will actually be using them to evaluate your efforts at the end of the project. Be sure you develop questions that you can evaluate!

Part 3: Carrying Out Your Social Media Strategy

- Now that you have developed your strategy, it's time to carry it out. For five weeks, you'll have the opportunity to carry out your plan. You will be evaluated on your ability to carry out the plan that you have developed, as well as your ability to adapt to unforeseen changes. You will keep a weekly log of activity, take screen shots of everything you do for documentation, and monitor your progress. You'll be expected to identify areas that need improving (ex. Your Facebook posts aren't receiving traction, so you may decide to modify your page or set up a Facebook fan page and send out more requests for followers), and make adaptations to improve your campaign.

Part 4: Evaluating Your Social Media Campaign || Final Reflection & Summary of Entire Campaign

- During and after your social media campaign, you will be using your evaluation plan (developed with the Social Media Evaluation Worksheet) to determine how successful your social media campaign was. You will determine how best to answer all of your evaluation questions, gather the necessary data, and generate a 2-page report outlining your evaluation results. The 2-page report should include: 1) each evaluation question, 2) the results/data gathered, and 3) a 1-3 paragraph summary of results and conclusions drawn about the success of your program and changes that might make the campaign stronger the next time around.

- You will also include a (no more than) 1 page final reflection of the process. This should be a reflection, not a summary. Tell me how this process was meaningful to you, how you think you developed as an effective communicator/advocate/health educator, how you would like to see the project adapted, etc.

Figure 1. Project guidelines.

Part 1	**Distinguished**	**Proficient**	**Basic**	**Unsatisfactory**
Target Audience	Appropriate person(s) identified, including thorough description of appropriate primary and secondary influencers.	Appropriate person(s) identified, including adequate description of appropriate primary and secondary influencers.	Appropriate person(s) identified, but description of primary and secondary influencers not always accurate/relevant.	Person(s) identified not appropriate, and description of primary and secondary influencers not always accurate/relevant.
Objectives	All objectives clearly indicate what you want to achieve through your social media outreach, All objectives are SMART.	All objectives clearly indicate what you want to achieve through your social media outreach, Most objectives are SMART.	Most objectives clearly indicate what you want to achieve through your social media outreach, Most objectives are SMART.	Objectives do not clearly indicate what you want to achieve through your social media outreach, Objectives are not SMART.
Communication Needs	The audience's health information needs are researched and clearly described.			The audience's health information needs are not researched and/or not clearly described.
Communication Content	Key messages are all clear, appropriate for audience, reflective of their health needs, and catchy.	Key messages are mostly clear, appropriate for audience, reflective of their health needs, and catchy.	Key messages are missing 2 components: clear, appropriate for audience, reflective of their health needs, and catchy.	Key messages are missing 3 or 4 components: clear, appropriate for audience, reflective of their health needs, and catchy.
Social Media Selection	One tool from each list is selected and appropriate for audience. Activities for each tool are appropriate, detailed, interactive, and include credible/data driven/evidence based information.	One tool from each list is selected and appropriate for audience. Most activities for each tool are appropriate, detailed, interactive, and include credible/data driven/ evidence based information.	One tool from each list is selected and appropriate for audience. Activities for each tool may not be appropriate, detailed, interactive, and/or include credible/data driven/ evidence based information.	Did not select one tool from each list.
Part 2	**Distinguished**	**Proficient**	**Basic**	**Unsatisfactory**
Model	Appropriately identifies all of the following: Inputs, Activities, Outputs, and Short-term and Long-term Outcomes.	Appropriately identifies 4 of the following: Inputs, Activities, Outputs, and Short-term and Long-term Outcomes.	Appropriately identifies 3 of the following: Inputs, Activities, Outputs, and Short-term and Long-term Outcomes.	Appropriately identifies 0-2 of the following: Inputs, Activities, Outputs, and Short-term and Long-term Outcomes.
Assessment	Evaluation questions are appropriate for media strategy.	Evaluation questions may be appropriate for media strategy.		Evaluation questions are not appropriate for media strategy.
Measurement	Your plan to assess each evaluation question (what data will you gather) has been clearly addressed and is appropriate.	Your plan to assess each evaluation question (what data will you gather) has been clearly addressed and is mostly appropriate.	Your plan to assess each evaluation question (what data will you gather) has been somewhat addressed and is mostly appropriate.	Your plan to assess each evaluation question (what data will you gather) is not clearly addressed nor appropriate.
Part 3	**Distinguished**	**Proficient**	**Basic**	**Unsatisfactory**
Written Documentation	Weekly logs completed all 5 wks; log shows you have carried out your entire social media strategy.	Weekly logs completed all 5 wks; log shows you have carried out nearly all of your social media strategy.	Weekly logs completed for 4 wks; log shows you have carried out nearly all of your social media strategy.	Weekly log completed for 3 or fewer wks and/or log does not show how you have carried out social media strategy.
Visual Documentation	Provided screen shots for all social media activity.			Did not provide screen shots for all social media activity.
Ability to Adapt	Areas for improvement/ change are identified/ appropriate/ carried out.	Areas for improvement/ change are identified and appropriate; not always carried out.	Areas for improvement aren't always identified/ appropriate; some not carried out.	Areas for improvement are not identified/ appropriate/ carried out.

Figure 2. (continued)

Part 4	Distinguished	Proficient	Basic	Unsatisfactory
Assessment Commentary	Report includes each evaluation question and plan for measurement including data/ instruments.	Report includes each evaluation question and plan for measurement; not all data/ instruments included.	Report is missing some evaluation questions or plans for measurement.	Report is missing many elements.
Outcomes Commentary	All results are provided and explained. Attempt made to present results professionally.	All results are provided and explained.	1 or 2 results are missing.	Many of the results are missing.
Comprehension/ Analysis Commentary	Summary of results is clear, comprehensive, and accurately explains important findings and conclusions of the social media evaluation.	Summary of results is clear, comprehensive, and accurately explains most of the important findings and conclusions of the social media evaluation.	Summary of results is, at times, unclear, non-comprehensive, but accurately explains most of the important findings and conclusions of the social media evaluation.	Summary of results is, at times, unclear, non-comprehensive, and it does not accurately explain the important findings and conclusions of the social media evaluation.
Critical Evaluation Commentary	1 pg reflection was meaningful and provided an analysis of importance and development.	>1 pg reflection was meaningful and provided an analysis of importance and development.	<1 pg reflection was meaningful and provided an analysis of importance and development.	Reflection was not meaningful; did not provide an analysis of importance and development.
Mechanics (in all four parts)	No spelling and/or grammar mistakes.	Minimal spelling and/or grammar mistakes.	Noticeable spelling and/or grammar mistakes.	Unacceptable number of spelling and/or grammar mistakes.

Figure 2. Project grading rubric.

Communications Strategy Worksheet Question (CDC, 2011)	Guidance Provided by Instructor
4. Goal Integration a) Describe how your social media objectives support your organization's mission and/or overall communications plan.	This sounds confusing, but all I'm really looking for here is for you to discuss how your social media strategies/project fits into what you are learning in this course. How are you able to take what you are learning about substance use and applying that information in your social media campaign? Maybe you are utilizing statistics from chapter 10, effective strategies for a specific drug from the text, etc., etc., etc.
4. Goal Integration b) How does it support other online or offline components – what events (either national/state/local) present communication opportunities?	Now I want you to take it a step further and find out how other people/organizations/groups are focusing on the same issue. For example, what is Alcoholics Anonymous doing to promote designated driving? What is M.A.D.D. doing? Can you learn anything from these efforts?
6. Resources and Capacity Determine who in your organization will be responsible for implementation, and determine the number of hours they can allocate for content creation and maintenance.	This will be you, of course, but I'd like you to think through the feasibility here. You are busy people with various levels of social media comfort. Tell me about this. Maybe you chose Twitter over mobile app creation because your skill-set facilitates Twitter. Maybe you've created a photo campaign before, so you are comfortable utilizing that skill. What are you capable of doing?

Figure 3. Sample guidance document for worksheets.

measureable, as students will be using the questions later in the project to determine social media campaign success. Again, a guidance document for this worksheet may be appropriate for students unfamiliar with program evaluation components, and timely feedback is essential before students move on to the next step of the project.

Step 4

Once students have finished planning and revising any areas of concern, it is time for them to carry out their campaigns. Five weeks have been chosen as the time frame for social media implementation to allow sufficient time for becoming familiar with social media tools selected, for experimenting with various methods to reach the target audience, for making adjustments in strategies utilized, and for reaching a sizeable audience. To prevent deduction of points from students that are not technologically savvy or who are unfamiliar with social media, it is important to avoid grading students solely on their ability to reach all of the evaluation questions developed. In fact, the instructor may want to ask students about their comfort level and experience with social media (on Question 6 of the Social Media Communications Strategy Worksheet, for example) prior to starting or implementing the project. Knowing which students do not feel comfortable with the assignment or with social media will help the instructor provide extra guidance as necessary and grade work based on improvements made in ability level or attempt to master social media skills.

During social media implementation, students will be delivering the messages they developed via the tools selected. Each week students should document implementation by taking screen shots of all activity as well as identifying areas for improvement and adaptations made. The instructor may choose to require students to develop a separate social media account (if they already have a personal account), so they can have access to the account for monitoring. However, allowing students to use their personal social media accounts may aid them in reaching a larger target audience with their messages. Instructors should weigh this choice based on their own priorities for the assignment. The instructor also may want to set up an online discussion (or set aside class time) where students can communicate with each other about strategies that are and are not effective, how best to reach specific audiences, readability of specific messages, and so on.

Step 5

The final step in the project is evaluation and reflection. During the 5-week implementation phase, students should be documenting social media activity and data

measures based on the objectives and evaluation questions developed. On conclusion of implementation, they will develop a report based on this documentation and their reflection of the project. This report should be prepared professionally and describe how successful their campaign was at reaching the target audience, answering each evaluation question developed, and adapting to any unforeseen obstacles along the way. Conclusions should be drawn about the success of the campaign and modifications that could make such a campaign more successful in the future. Finally, students should be encouraged to reflect on the project and the process of utilizing social media as a form of health education/communication. The instructor may ask students to reflect on the meaningfulness of such an assignment, the growth in communication and/or technology skills, or the translation of this project to other areas of health/life.

Assessment Procedures and Evaluation Rubric

Each of the project's steps will be assessed using the grading rubric provided (see Figure 2). Providing the rubric to students at the beginning of the project will allow them to clearly understand project guidelines and adhere to expectations set forth. As stated throughout, it is essential to provide feedback after each step of the project as each component builds on the next, and a misunderstanding in one step will influence success thereafter.

Discussion

This project has been implemented in one face-to-face substance use course (36 students) as well as one online substance use course (28 students) where students in the face-to-face course completed the project with a partner and students in the online course completed the project individually. While students' topics and social media tools varied, some observations were made along the way that may assist instructors to carry out the project in a way that improves quality of student learning. First, those students who were truly interested in the chosen substance use topic appeared more engaged during the project and produced higher quality campaigns that were successful in reaching the target audience. For example, one student wanted to prevent smoking among her own children and was able to develop a successful Facebook campaign that involved discussion from her child's entire classroom (see Figure 4, top left). Another student was a former addict and used her knowledge and past experiences to develop a Twitter campaign that was successful at reaching people both online and in a recovery group (see Figure 4, top right). The author suggests the following to

Figure 4. Samples of student work.

facilitate interest in the project and topic chosen: (1) spend significant time on the first step of the project to enable students to thoughtfully contemplate a meaningful topic; (2) prompt students with reflective questions to help them personalize the topic to their own lives/communities; (3) set up an online or face-to-face discussion where students spend time communicating with classmates about substance use issues and possible topics to facilitate brainstorming; (4) "sell" the project early on by explaining to them the possible impact their efforts can have on a community or group of people (instructor might consider having students draw their own conclusions about the value of the project as well).

Second, technology comfort levels or abilities affected success or quality of student effort. Those students who were highly proficient with technology or who used social media tools regularly seemed to have an easier time with the project, enjoyed the process, and produced quality campaigns. For example, one student was able to develop his own images to gain the interest of his audience (see Figure 4, bottom right), and another student was able to capitalize on her Twitter experiences to develop a hash tag to be used to elicit behavior change during the entire campaign (see Figure 4, bottom left). Conversely, those who were resistant to technology or who had minimal or no experience with social media resisted the project and produced campaigns that were unsuccessful at reaching an audience or improving personal technology skills. To address this instructors might: (1) provide extra guidance (in the form of one-on-one mentoring, peer mentoring, or tutorials) to students who report limited technology or social media expertise; (2) limit the number of social media tools available for use in order to reduce complexity of the project; (3) allow students to develop their own personal goals regarding technology and evaluate them on their ability to make improvements on those goals; or (4) allow students to complete the project in groups or as an entire class to establish a structure where students are able to utilize their individual strengths while learning new skills from others.

Conclusion

The primary benefit of this project is its versatility. It can be used in any type of classroom (face-to-face, online, or hybrid), and it can be used to educate or communicate about a variety of health issues (in any number of health

courses) including human sexuality, environmental health, bullying, nutrition, or physical activity.

Additionally, social media is utilized heavily by the public as a means of obtaining health information (iHealthBeat, 2012), and it is certainly used by students in our classrooms (Harvard University Institute of Politics, 2015). By capitalizing on this trend, a project such as this allows instructors to build essential communication/education skills among future health educators, improve learning capacity in the millennial generation, and contribute to the amount of research-based information available to the public via the World Wide Web. This project can be used to engage the millennial generation that has grown up using the Internet as well as social media platforms. Millennials report that technology makes their lives easier, so incorporating a project using technology or social media allows the instructor to meet the students where they currently are, using technology (Nielson, 2014).

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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