# Assumptions, Access, Universal Design, and You: The Mindful Use of Social Media Technology in Course Development

*by Julie A. Moser*

Research on the use of social media technology (SMT) in higher education learning instruction demonstrates a growth in use among faculty and instructors, and emerging research shows some connections to its use and improved learning engagement and outcomes (Dunn, 2013; Rodriguez, 2011). For this article, SMT is defined as web-based technologies that provide opportunities for students and faculty to explore and share existing and/or new information in a collaborative online environment. While incorporating SMT in higher education may show some promise as a tool that can enhance student engagement, critical thinking, and even grade point averages (Junco, Heiberger, & Loken, 2011), how can educators ensure that the use of social media includes *every learner*, *every day*? This article explores how checking assumptions, exploring access, and embracing Universal Design for Learning principles can incorporate SMT into teaching practices within higher education in a mindful way that seeks to reduce digital differences that exist for some learners.

While many studies explore the use of SMT in higher education as applied to marketing and alumni relations, at the time of this writing there are limited empirical studies that document the type and extent of SMT use in relation to teaching practices at the higher education level, especially at the community college level (Davis, Deil-Amen, Rios-Aguilar, & Gonzáles Canché, 2014). At a time when there is little research on this issue, studies show that community college leaders overwhelmingly believe SMT has substantial value as a way to cultivate social capital with potential and existing students through marketing and alumni relations, and that SMT also has moderate value in improving academic outcomes and student learning (Davis et al., 2014). In conjunction with a 2011 study by Pearson Learning Solutions and Babson Survey Research Group (Moran, Seaman & Tinti-Kane, 2011). that found two-thirds of faculty use SMT in class contexts, it is vital to explore the use of these tools through a lens that reimagines education by including every learner, every day.

It is important to distinguish studies that explore how learners in higher education who use SMT compare academically to students who do not from studies that focus on the impact of SMT as teaching tool when incorporated into the learning design of specific courses (Junco et al., 2011). While some empirical research on the use of SMT in higher education teaching strategies is emerging (e.g., Legaree, 2015; Rodriguez, 2011), there is still a knowledge gap about SMT in higher education as an adult learning strategy, and this gap creates unique opportunities for research. However, ensuring that learning strategies and studies incorporating SMT include every learner, every day requires an examination of assumptions about SMT access and use.

## Question Assumptions

So-called digital natives—generations that do not remember a time before the Internet—anticipate that SMT will continue to be a major feature in their lives (Davis et al., 2014). Usage of SMT, however, even among digital natives, varies widely in the frequency and types of use—for example, from observation and data downloads to identity exploration and activism (Palfrey & Gasser, 2008). This is an important reminder in the face of statistics and marketing hype that touts millennials and emerging generations as being fully

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connected and engaged in SMT. An infographic in 2012 by *Adweek* (Bennett, 2012), for example, that illustrated social media stereotypes, facts, and figures is intriguing more because of what it did not include than what it did; specifically, it did not include the percentage of users who were not engaged in social media during that time period. By naturalizing the idea of SMT usage itself, the infographic leaves out an important data point found in a 2012 Pew Research Center survey that stated only 67 percent of Internet users from ages 18 to 29 used social media and 33 percent of Internet-using millennials did not participate in SMT (Smith, Rainie, & Zickuhr, 2011). And despite data that shows more than 90 percent of students at four-year higher

education institutions report they have a Facebook profile (Davis et al., 2014), having a social media profile or an account on a social media platform does not directly correlate to use of social media or social engagement. For example, one study (Davis et al., 2014) estimated that while there were 100 million Twitter users in 2012, at least 40 percent of those users were not socially active and never shared information via tweets. In addition, reports show that personal use of SMT is different than its use in education (Legaree, 2015; Piotrowski, 2015). These are important reminders that not everyone who is connected is social, and even if they are, there may be differences in how learners use SMT in their personal lives as compared to educational settings.

Checking assumptions about SMT use therefore is an important first step to ensure all learners have both the ability and the desire to "share anything anywhere anytime" (Joosten, 2012). In all of my online courses, for example, I include an ungraded "Getting to Know You" survey that is completed during the first week of class and is only seen by the learner and me, as the instructor. I typically ask learners to share their life and academic passions, prior experiences related to the course material, online course experience, and ability to access the Internet and multimedia, as well as open-ended opportunities to share any thoughts or concerns they might have. I also customize each survey to include questions related to specific learning tasks I plan to include in the weekly forums. If I plan to include an activity that asks students to use social media or to create and upload a visual to share and explain, I would include a comment such as the following: "Our online forums are a vital part of our learning community. You may be asked to conduct a Twitter search (no account needed) or to develop a visual (via hand-drawing, chart, poster, PowerPoint, or whatever media works best for you) and upload it to the forum. Please share your thoughts and any assistance you might need to complete these learning tasks." I also make it a habit to respond personally within the first week of class, or as soon as the survey is completed, and I include any appropriate resources, advice, or motivation based on each learner's response. I implemented this type of survey into all my courses just over two years ago and the results have proven invaluable by providing me with a brief glimpse about who my online learners are, their passions, and their experiences, as well as their familiarity and comfort with technology and any potential access issues.

**Keep Access in Mind**

While checking assumptions about SMT, offering choice activities, and including universal design for learning (UDL) in higher education teaching strategies may help educators use SMT in a way that reimagines education every day, it doesn't necessarily address the full issue of access for all learners. One group of learners with limited or no access to SMT, for example, includes learners who would like to participate in an SMT activity but are unable to because of limitations related to accessibility. A 2014 event hosted by the Federal Communications Commission on the topic of accessing social media drew an audience of advocates, nonprofit and government staff, and concerned citizens and only one representative from an SMT company. LinkedIn was the lone attendee amid a pack of well-known companies, such as Facebook, Twitter, Google, Instagram, Pinterest, and Tumblr (Federal Communications Commission, 2014). The US Department of Justice has yet to review regulations for private sector websites in relation to the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), and courts in the US are conflicted about whether websites are "places of public accommodation" as described in the ADA (Robinson,

2009). In the meantime, efforts by the Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy and others are under way to help government agencies evaluate and improve the accessibility of their social media programs. While a movement toward generating user content that is more accessible is an important part of the process toward improving accessibility in SMT, the reality for learners who rely on screen readers and other adaptive equipment is that SMT is still mostly inaccessible.

Yet another group of learners who may experience a difference in access to SMT can be found among community college students. While research shows that more than 90 percent of college students from any type of higher education institution use the Internet, how those students access the Internet varies, with community college users reporting more limited access to broadband (high-speed) access than other undergraduate and graduate students (Smith et al., 2011). Access to broadband Internet among community college students is reportedly 12 percent higher than that of all adults, but it is also 15 percent lower than their learning colleagues in other higher educational settings. In 2013, the Pew Research Center reported that "having broadband strongly affects how one uses the Internet" and that individuals with more limited Internet connections engage in fewer online activities due to connection speed (Smith et al., 2011). In addition, with 94 percent of community college learners reporting they are Internet users and only 85 percent reporting they have personal access to the Internet through wireless connections via laptop or cell phone, that leaves up to 6 percent of community college students who don't engage in the Internet and up to 15 percent who must access the Internet using public devices during limited timeframes, such as computers at public libraries.

**Embrace UDL**

Another strategy is to use SMT in learning design activities that allow learners to choose whether they will participate. In a summer 2015 online course, for example, I presented students with a choice activity in which they could participate in two out of three activities

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for the week. One option was to conduct a search on Twitter as it related to one of the week's key learning concepts and to share findings, along with a description about how their new learning connected to assigned readings, within a closed forum available only to other learners in the class. Nine out of the 11 learners who opted to complete this activity openly stated that it was their first time ever using Twitter. This is an example of how even when educators check their assumptions about the prevalence of SMT use, each class is a unique composite that may defy statistical averages. Providing a choice activity that encourages willing participants to explore SMT and share findings within a secure learning management system is one way to encourage self-direction and social collaboration among diverse learners, and it provides multiple means of engagement, representation, action, and expression—all core UDL guidelines (CAST, 2011).

Although four of the learners in the class opted not to participate in the SMT activity, all four were exposed to and engaged in dialogue related to the new learning that was shared in the forum as a result of SMT.

## Conclusion

All of the factors described—and more that this article doesn't touch upon—can present real challenges related to access of SMT. It is in that spirit that the following tips are offered to help guide SMT use in higher education teaching strategies:

- *Always ask*. Providing learners with a chance to share information early in the semester about their Internet and SMT access and use practices can help educators design SMT activities that meet learners where they are. One-on-one surveys, anonymous polls, and private conversations with students may help minimize unknowns related to a learner's ability or desire to access SMT. Remember to always check assumptions; a learner who loved SMT last semester may have deep reservations about engaging in it this semester.

- *Explore access*. Many web accessibility checkers will not even attempt to perform a scan on social media sites because of the complex compliance issues related to such sites. Curious about what it is like for someone who is blind or visually impaired to access SMT? Consider downloading a screen reader from the American Foundation for the Blind to experience the navigation firsthand.

- *Embrace UDL*. Design SMT teaching instruction that provides multiple means of engagement, representation, action, and expression to provide the best possible chance for all learners to participate.

Understanding who our learners are is an important factor in using SMT in a mindful way that reimagines education every day while striving to include all participants.

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