Social Media as a Gateway: Forging Connections and
Enhancing Classroom Culture

SPEAKERS
Tierney King, Courtney Plotts, Staci Gilpin

Tierney King 00:01
This is the Faculty Focus Live podcast sponsored by the Teaching Professor. I'm your host, Tierney King, and I'm here to bring you inspiration, energy, and creative strategies that you can utilize in your everyday teaching. All right, today we have Staci Gilpin and Courtney Plotts, with us, who they've been working on some pretty important research on the impact of social media on higher education. But before we kind of dive into the research that you both are doing, just let us know who you are, and what's something about each of you that might surprise individuals when you tell them?

Courtney Plotts 00:39
My name is Courtney Plotts. I'm a former national chair of an organization called CASEPS, the Council for At Risk Student Education and Professional Standards. And I have recently kind of gone out on my own and I am focusing on the concept of neuroculture and how culture influences cognition. And something I think people don't know a lot about me unless they know me well, is I'm an introvert, even though I don't necessarily present that way.

Staci Gilpin 01:07
And I'm Staci Gilpin, I am here in Duluth, Minnesota. I recently completed my PhD at the University of North Dakota. And for the past few years, I've been working in teacher prep, teaching mostly online at the University of Wisconsin-Superior in the graduate special education program. And I also, it's kind of a weird mix, I also teach statistics and coding, and the research classes at the University of North Dakota for doctoral students. And before that, it seems like another life, I worked in K-12 schools. I was a third grade teacher as a special education teacher and I was an administrator too. And I too, am somewhat introverted, but people also mistaken me for being an extrovert, because it may not appear that way. And I think something that's really interesting that surprises people is I have an Instagram account for my dog. And it's been a surprising avenue for me to connect with incredible people who also manage accounts for their dogs. So engaging in research around social media use in higher education feels particularly aligned with my interests and these lived experiences, as I have personally seen the benefits of connections formed in this digital realm. And at the same time, though, as students, as the participants in our research, bring up, I'm aware of the downsides that come with it too.

Tierney King 02:31

Awesome. And let's kind of start from the beginning. So let's talk about what your research is, and what kind of fueled that fire to start researching on this specific topic.

Staci Gilpin 02:43
This is also it's like everything comes full circle. I connected with Courtney through social media.

Courtney Plotts 02:49
Four years ago, I think, right? It was 2020, I think, right? Yeah.

Staci Gilpin 02:54
On Twitter, which is now X. Like we were talking earlier today, before we started recording, she was discussing topics in a way that was completely new and captivating, which really drew my interest. And this connection coincided with the start of my career in higher education. I was doing all the things. I was teaching online, I was pursuing my PhD in a virtual setting, and I was really intrigued by all these different online environments that I was experiencing. And as someone coming from K-12, and instructional design and things like that, I was just really always wondering about how can we make these better, like the accessibility and the impact that we could positively have on people. And I was really interested in that relational component. And how the online classes that I was taking and I was teaching felt really disconnected. They felt transactional. So I've been really thinking about all through my research and connected to this is how can we sort of bridge these online classes. We don't want them to be like on-site classes, because that's not the intention, but how can we make them more relational? And so thinking about ways that foster students to be lifelong learners and thinking about their careers, as it connects to social media nowadays. And so how can some of these connections that students forge through social media and in other places, how can they be long lasting, like our relationships that sometimes we have, you know, on-site IRL (in-real-life)?

Courtney Plotts 04:29
Yeah, I think for me, it's just the basic, basically what Staci said, it's just the human connection. Like Staci, I've done some of my learning online and I've been a faculty in an online setting and there's so much of the fundamentals of online that are task oriented, that aren't built for relationship building. And so even when we look at quote, like quality checks for online spaces, they're very transactional right there to make the faculty member feel better about what they're designing, not necessarily with the intention of connecting in a way that's kind of hitting on things like altruistic behavior or just a real reciprocation of support right? Psychologically or socially. So for me, that's just the basis is really just looking at the human connection aspect. And I think COVID has taught us that if at this point, it's all hands on deck, whatever it takes to make that connection in any space is what we have to, at least at minimum, explore. Because obviously, if faculty isn't comfortable with it, it's not going to work as well as you would would want it to or as well as they would want it to. So I think it's just, it's just being more open to exploring what the possibilities actually are.

Tierney King 05:43
So in your research, you both wrote an article for Faculty Focus, the link for that will be in the recommended resources, but you share the stories of Abigail and Charlie in your research, and kind of

explain just the, you know, educational benefits of social media for these two specific individuals and what your research kind of uncovered from this,

Staci Gilpin 06:05
I think, the thing that kind of grounds all this is just thinking about numerous students arriving in their learning environments with well-established sense of community. It's been fostered and you know, both their academic experience prior non-academic, digital, and they leverage those connections, those relationships for support. So when things get tough, when they're exhausted, you know, because I'm taking classes, I'm working on all this, I need a pick-me-up, I need someone to talk with, I need someone to jump on FaceTime with me, like all those things, right? Well, not all students come to higher education to these spaces with those communities. And social media acts as a gateway to a portable and adaptable community reaching far beyond the constraints of a specific course. Thereby it really enhances the overall learning experience. And this was particularly pertinent for students that I interviewed like Abigail and Charlie. They were each grappling with their unique challenges of marginalization, and social media provided a vital platform form for them to forge connections with others sharing similar experiences and connections that might be elusive in other contexts. And those relationships, be they academic or personal, are crucial for overall wellbeing and form the foundation for academic achievement. Now, also interesting is there's often a void of such relational connections and online courses we talked about, but similarly in some on-site courses for reasons, including introversion, when I was taking classes, and I was taking them on-site back in the day, I really kind of struggled with that connection. And so I think about how social media might have been beneficial for me.

Courtney Plotts 07:39
Yeah, I love that. I think we have to be honest with what faculty are capable of doing. Faculty can't provide everything. You know, even if you have gone to every seminar, and you have every degree and you have every every, you can't be everything to everyone. And so social media, when it's used appropriately, and embedded in the classroom appropriately, takes some of that pressure off the faculty, and can do all that supportive work like the affirming and the inclusion piece, on some level. It doesn't mean that that will necessarily translate to the physical space on campus or the online space, but psychologically, it provides some sort of support. And I think the other piece that you will see in in the article that we wrote is that there is a socioeconomic factor tied to social media. Faculty who use social media use it for self-promotion, a lot of times for their research and students do the same. And so it is part of career development, it is part of those those broader social pieces. And when we look at programs across the country, social media isn't necessarily tied into those career goals necessarily, across any curriculum, unless it's marketing specific, or something to that effect. And so I think that those are the two things that you'll see highlighted in those student cases. And I really just want to just support faculty by saying, I think if before COVID, during COVID, and now, it just seems like people just want more and more and more and more from faculty. And we just have to be honest about the limits. And social media is something that can really help us if we know how to use it. And if we partner with our students to understand how we can use it together effectively in a classroom, it can really take off some of that pressure and really support faculty in developing classrooms that are robust. And when you talk to faculty, at the end of the day, they really just want more student engagement. So if this is a medium for that, then hey, you know, that's that's something worth exploring.

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Tierney King 09:49
And we'll kind of go through, you know, some of the strategies that both you recommend that educators can use to maximize these but what specifically maybe have you implemented or have you seen implemented of instructors using social media in their classrooms - that's worked or had some good feedback from the students?

Staci Gilpin 10:09
Oh, well, something that I've done and I really want to connect this back to what Courtney talked about is as an instructor, I mean, I don't have the bandwidth really to do anything, you know, more. But there's lots of things that I think we think about student-driven learning that as instructors, we kind of take off our plates. I'm always surprised that when I work with students to coordinate, we'll talk about this more, but some structures, like structures around social media structures around how we're going to, you know, engage in our discussion boards and things like that. Well, students really step up when I give them that. When I teach, I've encouraged students to set up group chats with their peers on platforms that make sense to them. And I just say that, and I've taken lots of online classes in my time, and I haven't ever had, like instructors come out and say that. I know that I have kind of done that on my own sometimes, but I just really think like having it be said like, that's okay, because we need to think about our students. They're part of a generation that's grown up with social media, when I interviewed them, they don't know life without social media. And so it's deeply ingrained. So we need to kind of provide structures and then get out of the way for them right? And so what I do is I provide them, you know, suggestions about how they might create these groups if they want to, if it's what they need. And so students, I then will interview them after, I'll just anecdotally talk to them, and they talk about, you know, creating and using them, like almost daily. And what I think is really cool about this connection is for non-academic things, like they'll be sharing memes, you know, they will ask questions about, what was, you know, Staci talking about in this or that, but really, those connections with one another that last long beyond the course. But one time I was in a room, doing a live session and a student wasn't there. And then another student said, "Oh, I'll just Snapchat them." I mean, so just those sorts of things that students like they can do, they can do so many of these things on their own if we provide them the space and the structures.

Courtney Plotts 12:15
Yeah, I love that, Staci. Yeah, I think one of my things that I've seen work, and I like things that faculty can just do and like doing immediately, right? It doesn't take like an earth shifting thing to think about. I think we just have to shift from policy surrounding social media, to the goals of social media. And so when right now you're looking at current practices around course design, syllabus design, the goals or the goals for the course, but they're not broken down in a way that's going to build things around communitybuilding, right? Community culture, cognitive culture, how you're thinking about the culture that you're in. And so I think one of the easiest things that faculty can do is just kind of break it down and create some some kind of framework goals for social media in your course. So what is it that you're trying to do? Are you trying to increase participation? Are you trying to increase engagement? Are you trying to increase the number of responses or interactions with written content or video content that you have, and then kind of scale out from there, and then just work it out with your students. There are some students, you know, if especially if you're teaching smaller groups, you might have a group that's

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like, "Hey, we don't really care either way about social media," there might be other groups that are like, "Yes, we definitely want this," "No, we definitely don't." And the best thing is, you know, it's always an option. It doesn't have to be mandatory. It doesn't have to be anything that's punitive. But it can just be an avenue. And I think the other thing is, is know your university policy on social media, what the university is already saying what's already in place, and obviously operate within those ideas. But when we're thinking about goals for a course, there's no one who's moving right now in the workplace without some form of social media, whether that's looking for a job, and going on that Facebook page and seeing what people are saying, or whether it's them using LinkedIn to boost their profile. So these things are happening. And then there's all the backdoor chats that are happening with maybe some things that are more personal. So I think that just understanding embedding that in the classroom has to start somewhere. And I think it just starts with just outlining your goals for what you're trying to do with social media. Because I think it's also, I want to say for faculty members who didn't grow up with social media, it can be an extremely overwhelming thing. When you look at your relatives who are 20 and 25, and they are they have a million apps and they're proficient at all of them. That can be an extremely overwhelming prospect, right? And then you go into the classroom and you see that times 20 or 40, or 100, that can be super overwhelming. So I think that just kind of starting with something and learning about what you're going to be comfortable with would also be beneficial to you as an instructor, and maybe even you on a personal level or professional level in another space would be a great place to start.

Tierney King 15:09
Yeah, and, you know, Staci, you mentioned, you know, just having a little chat of sending memes to each other. And I'm thinking about my college days, and it would just have been nice to be like, Oh, these other students are stressed too about this, like, it's not just me. Do you think there's a difference between online and in-person of being able to implement this? Or do you think it's kind of easy to integrate this into both types of classes?

Staci Gilpin 15:34
I've taught undergraduates on campus and online, and I've seen similar behavior patterns in both spaces. I am thinking back to a lecture I would do, and I would have 30 or 40 students sitting in the class and during downtime, or different things, they'd be snapping one another. I mean, and they had, you know, they would form their small groups in that class, and they would all share, like, you know, they would be texting, but then they were also sharing social media, and, you know, setting up group chats and things. So, you know, it's permeating our society. So it's permeating higher education spaces, whether you acknowledge it or not, it's there, and students are using it.

Tierney King 16:17
So both of you, you know, propose numerous strategies in the article about how educators can kind of use social media as a benefit in their classroom. So if you guys just want to take maybe one or two of those specific strategies, and just kind of expand on them.

Courtney Plotts 16:32
I think that, again, low hanging fruit, because of faculty bandwidth, I think establishing establishing a community identity is a great thing to do with social media. I think it's easy to do on its on its most basic

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run, right? You're creating a page, it's for the students, it's an extra place of community, it's maybe where you can put those overflow questions on the course, it's maybe where you can share those memes, and it's a visual representation of the community. And also, sometimes in those in social media spaces, they have accessibility tools that might not be in the space of the online classroom. And so it's just another way that students can connect with one another. And I think that that's really important. Because again, it's an all hands on deck kind of concept. And it's however we can get people connecting is something, and again, we have, like Staci said, we have students who have literally grown up on social media. So they're also used to the accessibility tools and other places way more so than they would be to maybe some of those tools that the campus office offers just because they're so engrained in those other spaces. So that would be my my suggestion.

Tierney King 17:49
Perfect. And then Staci, if you want to dive into one of the strategies.

Staci Gilpin 17:54
Yeah, I think the one that I'm talking about aligns with number seven, kind of content, curation and things like that. So this is just full circle. Once again, I have a LinkedIn page, I use it a lot like lots of faculty do. And yesterday morning, I was browsing and I stumbled upon a post from a doctoral student that I'm really familiar with. And they had shared a project from their course and were inviting their network to give feedback and engage in discussion through comments. And I was very intrigued. And so I immediately messaged them, inquiring about this infographic they had posted, and I said, "You know, what's the deal with this? This is so cool. This is aligns with my research." They said, "Hello, Dr. Gilpin, thanks for reaching out to me. And for your appreciation. I posted this advocacy infographic as part of the class project that I mentioned in my post. One of the guidelines of this project was find a means of communicating your position to a wider audience. So that is people outside of your classroom. So you will have to identify a venue that you could be able to do this in, however, you're only required to present to your peers to meet the requirements of the final assignment." So giving students control over where their project is going to be, is going to show up. "It might be to publish on the internet for the whole world to see or do a local demonstration of some kind. You're encouraged to experiment with formats that are new to you." So research, including ours, indicates that students often feel uncertain about establishing professional networks. I interviewed students and they would talk to me about how they spent all this time on their LinkedIn profiles. LinkedIn came up a lot. They're using LinkedIn. And so primarily due to their heightened awareness and audiences and digital footprints, they're just really uncertain about how to do these things and worried about, you know, what other people think, what will future employers think, and things like that. So this assignment really serves as an excellent example of how we can create safe environments for students to explore and experiment, creating that connection that we're talking about. Maybe developing some friendships but at the same time, maybe they start to curate, like this student is on their LinkedIn account. And this is something they already had. The instructor didn't have to say, okay, now everyone we're going to set up our LinkedIn account in class, they gave the students a choice. And the student is like, hey, I have a LinkedIn account, this, you know, project is pertinent to my career. I'm going to put it out there. And I thought it was super cool because other people in other disciplines were commenting on their posts and things. So yes, this is the work.

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Tierney King 20:31
And then kind of going off of that you've expanded on your findings about, you know, professional networking and everything to help their professional image as you just kind of showcased. So how does this fit into the broader research? And what possibilities you see in your research for being able to fit professional development and social media into classes?

Courtney Plotts 20:54
Okay, yeah, I think it's tough, right? Because it's just another thing that is on the radar for everybody. So it's, you know, the students know how to use it. And when do we as a educational body have enough information that can be cross curricular into how to use this effectively. But I think the big piece is that educational uses of social media may or may not align with workplace social media, may or may not align with personal promotion, may not you know...so it goes on like that. And I think that's a big piece of it. I think there's enough research to show us the benefits. There's enough research to show us the drawbacks, but I honestly believe it's more of a a geographical and local thing. I think social media is so powerful for communities, and I think if we look at it, like a community builder, as far as this is, where I live, this is what I'm able to do here, and then scale it out on a more global impactful scale, I think that is how you kind of merge all of that together, right? You can have the personal, you can have the professional, you can have the educational, and again, that's also dependent on major and those other things, right, but but at the end of the day, we're all just trying to improve the lives of the people around us. I think when when you when you have a good heart, and you're, you know, a decent human being, and so I think that that's the power of social media, it can change one individual's life in a minute in a positive way. And it can, it can document it, it can do all of these amazing things. But I think it really just comes down to helping supporting faculty and understanding how it can be beneficial in their classroom, and then how the students can reciprocate that benefit back in the community.

Staci Gilpin 22:46
Well, I wanted to share just a little anecdote from my research that connects with this. I had more than a couple students talk about how they had forged relationships on social media with people they never met, like in real life before, and how meaningful these relationships were. I had one student, and it was just really kind of like I was almost in tears, because it was just so heartfelt, that they were a non-binary student, and they had talked about some of the struggles they've had connecting and things and their best friend was someone they met on a Discord chat, and how important that person like was to them in helping them get through the pandemic and their studies. And then another student shared they've met their best friend on social media, and they haven't met in person yet, but they were going to fly across the country to meet them in January. So students are they're wanting connection. And they're doing these things already. So I just think about as faculty, how can we just give them a little bit of a nudge and a little bit of support. And I think that really, they can figure the rest out?

Courtney Plotts 23:50
Well, and I mean, full disclosure for me, I don't I don't know why I'm sharing, but I mean, I only met my husband twice and married him and I met him online, right? And so we've been together almost 18 years, and at the time, it a was around 2005, and people thought like, Oh, you don't know this person, you know. And you know, in that sense, I don't know is that why I'm interested in social media, I don't know. But it speaks to that same thing which is humaneness can transcend technology, it really can.

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And that's what it comes down to is what at the end of the day, we can't be everything for every student, but we can give them access to what they need in those psychological and social spaces for a relationship, for connection, for those other those other important pieces of of learning, right, because learning is not done alone. It's done in a community.

24:45
And to add to that, one more thing is using social media and all the ways we talked about for some courses and for some communities may not make sense, and that's okay. However, I think it's important as faculty that we know all of our options and we know about different things that we can do. So when we might come into a space where it does make more sense, we're like, "Oh, that's what that was about."

Tierney King 25:05
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