

Anecdotal Uses of Facebook, Google Calendar, and Cell Phones in a High School Classroom

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As a high school educator, one of the biggest priorities (after covering the required standards tested on state assessments) is finding a way to engage students and "meet them where they are." In a world of fast-paced and flashy media, sometimes school classrooms can feel like a time warp for students. While working to find a way to create a rigorous Pre-AP Chemistry course, I have determined that utilizing some new technologies has been successful without sacrificing course content. Over the past few years, I have incorporated Facebook, Google Calendar, and cell phones into my curriculum with favorable results.

In a world of digital communication, students, unlike many professional adults, do not feel the pressing demand or necessity to check their email daily; in fact, a number of my students have confessed to checking their email once a month or less. In an effort to find a more effective way to contact students other than calling or texting, I decided to create a Facebook account and group for my chemistry classes. The majority of my students spent much after-school time on their [Facebook](#) accounts, and I soon found that communication with them became quick and effective through my chemistry group.

After setting up an invitation-only Facebook group, most of my students joined and participated, though involvement was not required. By sending out group reminders or posting important events on my Facebook group "wall," I watched my homework completion rate and class preparedness spike. My Pre-AP chemistry students, who were already highly motivated but mostly over-scheduled, no longer forgot to wear correct lab attire or to turn in major assignments. I also found an increased level of communication, as many students felt more comfortable addressing me through Facebook rather than in a face-to-face class discussion.

Since the Facebook group was optional and not accessible to all students, I also posted all information on my school website. But, I found that the information on Facebook reached more students. Even the most motivated of students did not go to the school website on a regular basis or "hang out" there for fun, yet free time spent on Facebook's site was a norm for even the "nerdiest" of high-schoolers. At first a few students thought it odd to have an overlap between their social life and school life, but most saw that the benefits overshadowed any issues created. In a survey, one of my students commented that Facebook, for her, had become "a common thoroughfare, a one-stop school and extracurricular info spot."

Fresh off the success of Facebook, I felt the need to organize the daily calendar for my classes. Our campus instructional technologist introduced me to the fabulous organizational tool [Google calendar](#), which has proved invaluable in my classes. After creating a public calendar for my chemistry classes, my students were able to subscribe to it for free and immediately populate

their own Google calendar with information on upcoming events in my chemistry class. Users with a google account (also free to create) could sign up for email reminders and/or texts from their Google calendars. The daily posting of a calendar entry detailing the minutiae covered in class, including specific homework, was now available to every student from the comfort of their own home or anywhere with internet access. I no longer had to worry about an inflexible, print-out syllabus that could easily and quickly become outdated, especially in the high-school world of last-minute assemblies, pep rallies, and other class interruptions. Absent students no longer had to seek me out to find out their makeup work, as they could check the calendar from home and get caught up on their own. (For a high school teacher, putting this responsibility in the hands of the students was a wonderful help and relief!)

Another perk to using Google calendar was the ability to embed it on all websites. So, instead of populating 3 different calendars from 3 different website programs, I was able to put my class calendar, which was now always accurate and current, on all websites and programs used for my class, and it was automatically updated. Consequently, I have found my course content is more organized, which has been a help to both my students and me.

After the incorporation of Facebook and Google calendar into my classes, I felt ready to take a big step and work on conquering many classroom teachers' and professors' biggest fear: the cell phone! I had heard the facts: one of the most widely unused tools in American classrooms is the cell phone; with computing power beyond that of the first mainframes, a handheld cell phone has many powers that we have been wont to embrace in our halls of learning; and one of the most common quotes in classrooms today is "Please put your phones away." But, after listening to an innovative teacher present on different means to tap the powers of the cell phone, I decided to give it a try.

I learned about [Poll Anywhere](#), a website that allows the user to create a free account and then create free polls with limited options. In lieu of clickers, I created polls eliciting student responses via text, web, tweets, or smartphone voting. These polls worked in the same manner as voting for a favorite on American Idol or Dancing with the Stars, so students were familiar with the format and immediately understood the process. Poll Anywhere also provided a link that kept a live update as student responses were entered, and I was able to post the live poll on a website or Powerpoint presentation shown at the start of class. I used the polls as a way to grab student interest for the topic of class that day. Of course, there were expanded options with a paid monthly fee, such as matching responses to specific students, moderation of open-ended comments, or polling of an audience of more than 30 at a time, but, for the general purposes of providing a "hook" to grab a student's interest, the free membership worked well in my high school classroom.

I am fortunate to teach at a school where I have an administration that is supportive in the incorporation of new technologies and where over 90% (and probably closer to 100%) of students own cell phones, many of which are smart phones. So, the utilization of these technologies into my classroom did not create some of the hurdles that many teachers have experienced. However, I would encourage chemistry educators to find means to embrace new methods of communicating and interfacing with their students. Globalization and progress points to the fact that we as educators are preparing our students to perform in a society in which job

skills and technologies are still undeveloped today. So we must teach our students to be adaptable, and we must adapt ourselves, to an ever-expanding technological culture. While that may sound overwhelming, it is easy to start with implementation of simple, user-friendly ideas like Facebook groups, Google calendar, and cell phone polls.

Websites:

Facebook. <<http://www.facebook.com>>

Google Calendar. <<http://calendar.google.com>>

Poll Anywhere. <<http://www.pollanywhere.com>>

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