

eTools: Using Instagram in the Classroom

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Introduction

With new mobile applications available daily, it is important to think about incorporating these tools into the learning environment. Because students already use apps to communicate with each other, why not find a meaningful use of these apps in communication pedagogy? In this article, I examine Instagram, which is one of the more successful available mobile apps. Because of the participatory, visual environment of Instagram, this app is appealing to millennial learners.

What is Instagram?

Instagram is a mobile application for iOS and Android devices that allows users to capture, edit, share, and comment on images and brief (15-second) videos. Photos are confined to a square image, which invokes the nostalgia of Polaroid. However, customization features such as pre-selected filters and manual editing tools, along with the ability to tag and share photos and video to sites such as Twitter and Facebook, provide the user with a distinctly modern digital image experience.

How can I get Instagram for use in the classroom?

Instructors and students can download Instagram for free directly to their mobile devices using the App Store for iOS users or Google Play for Android devices. Once the app is installed on your device, simply create an account with a username and password.

Students who do not have a smartphone or access to another mobile device can ask a friend whom they trust to borrow a device. However, in my experience, this has never occurred as many college students today tend to have access to some form of technology. Alternatively, students can upload photos taken with a digital camera (which often can be borrowed from university media centers) to a computer and edit the images using enhancements similar to those on Instagram using a free web application (e.g., Picasa). They then can share links to their photos or videos to a learning management system or via e-mail, depending on instructor preference.

How can I use Instagram in the classroom?

Instagram is a social app. Students can customize their profile descriptions and images in order to get to know each other better outside the classroom. The ability to follow and mention other Instagram users, as well as tag photos with searchable terms, highlights its sociability. There are two things to consider, however, before using Instagram with your students. First, to enable them to find images from each other, you may want to require the use of a particular course tag (e.g., in my media aesthetics course, I use the tag #COMM312). Before you assign a tag to your course, search to make sure it is not already in use. Second, although the majority of the uses of Instagram discussed in this article involve student use of Instagram, it is not imperative that instructors own or have access to a smartphone to incorporate Instagram in the classroom. While the app is necessary to edit and share images and video, the photos

and video can be accessed from a web browser for instructor assessment.

Once students and instructors have practiced the basic editing and sharing features of Instagram, it can be used as:

1. *journal prompts*. You can use an Instagram photo as a prompt to ask students to journal about communication concepts. For example, you can capture an image of a small group of people talking in a café and ask students to discuss how these people are engaging in nonverbal communication. In the persuasion course, you might share a photo of a billboard image or other advertisement and ask students to respond to the type(s) of persuasive appeals used.

2. *a way to grasp concepts*. Students can capture their own photos or videos to demonstrate their understanding of particular types of communication. In the nonverbal course, students can tag images with a concept such as #haptics or #kinesics and use the comment feature to summarize the concept. In a gender course, students can share and comment on images that demonstrate gender stereotypes.

3. *photo essays*. A series of images or videos can serve as an alternative to an essay and can be tied to any prompt. I have asked students to use Instagram images and video in a culture jamming assignment. (Culture jamming is an activity that disrupts the normal flow of advertising and branding. For example, refiguring a brand logo to highlight unethical business or social practices would be an act of jamming consumer culture.) Because many brands have an Instagram presence, students also can comment

to incorporate images for an interactive approach. This type of assignment is particularly enhanced by students developing their own creative tags.

4. *visual culture activities*. A photo/video composition assignment can capture students' understandings of practices of looking and visual culture. For example, students can share images with concepts of (a) power to comment upon a power relationship, (b) iconic to represent a symbolic icon, (c) kitsch to play with understandings of high art and sentimentalism, and (d) appropriation to remix (or place into new context) an existing cultural artifact or process.

5. *practices of perspective, reflexivity, and subjectivity*. Students can share selfies and compare them to images of themselves captured by a classmate. These practices also can be explored when students are assigned to take photos of the same object or site, especially when they are required to use filters and other image enhancements as no two photos will look alike.

6. *conversations about privacy*. Privacy issues are imperative in social, image-based technology. Requiring students to seek consent from individuals for the ability to share their images on Instagram encourages critical analysis of how images are used.

7. *professional networking*. Opportunities to connect to potential employers abound on Instagram, where students can practice professional uses of identity expression. In either a public relations or an organizational communication course, students can follow companies and individuals on Instagram as well as offer comments

on images.

8. *visual portfolio*. When you incorporate Instagram in classroom assessment, students can select their best work to include in either a department-required senior portfolio or a web portfolio resume component for job searches.

Conclusion

Instagram capitalizes on a mobile technology that students already use in their personal lives and instructs them on best practices to incorporate it into their professional lives. This app is one way in which students can translate the mundane into both the theoretical and the conceptual. Using Instagram allows students to become active agents in their learning process by using the everyday technologies available in their own pockets.