There’s an ongoing debate about the role social media should play in education. Advocates point out the benefits that social media provides for today’s digital learners while critics call for regulation and for removing social media from classrooms. Finding a middle ground has become a challenge.

As an educational tool, social media enriches the learning experience by allowing students and teachers to connect and interact in new, exciting ways. Web sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn provide a platform where users can dialog, exchange ideas, and find answers to questions. These sites are designed to foster collaboration and discussion.

Despite these benefits, critics argue that there are serious risks to using social media in the classroom. What are these risks—and do they outweigh the potential for opportunity?

**PROS**

**Educational Tool** Today’s students arrive on campus, fluent in Web and social networking technologies. Educators can leverage this knowledge to enrich the learning experience. With social media, instructors can foster collaboration and discussion, create meaningful dialogue, exchange ideas, and boost student interaction.

**Enhance Student Engagement** Social media is an effective way to increase student engagement and build better communication skills. Students who rarely raise a hand in class may feel more comfortable expressing themselves on Facebook, Twitter, or YouTube. Social networking platforms enable teachers to establish “back channels” that foster discussion and surface ideas that students are too shy or intimidated to voice out loud.

**Improve Communication Among Students and Teachers** Facebook and Twitter can enhance communication among students and teachers. Educators can answer students’ questions via a Facebook page or Twitter feed, post homework assignments and lesson plans, send messages and updates, schedule or announce upcoming events, and share interesting Web sites and multimedia content. Students can use Twitter to get help from instructors or other students. A great way for instructors to give participation points in addition to in class participation is by having students tweet about something that was discussed in class.

**Preparing Students for Successful Employment** Students entering the workforce can use social networking sites to network and find employment. With LinkedIn, students can establish a
professional web presence, post a resume, research a target company or school, and connect with other job seekers and employers. College career centers and alumni associations are using Twitter to broadcast job openings and internships. Students should follow businesses or professional organizations on Facebook and Twitter to stay updated on new opportunities and important developments in their field.

CONS

Social Media can be a Distraction A common complaint among educators is that social media is distracting in the classroom. These instructors maintain that tools like Facebook and Twitter divert students' attention away from what's happening in class and are ultimately disruptive to the learning process. With the possibility that the use of social media tools can be an invitation for students to goof off, instructors should make sure they won't be abused.

Cyberbullying While social networking sites provide a way for students and teachers to connect, they can be a weapon of malicious behavior—even on college campuses. In a study about cyberbullying at Indiana State University, researchers Christine Macdonald and Bridget Roberts-Pittman found that almost 22 percent of college students admit to being harassed online. Of this group, 25 percent report they were bullied through a social networking site. Instructors who use social media as part of their course activities should be aware of potential dangers and plan to intervene on minor incidents before they become more serious. "By intervening at minor behaviors, we can stop more severe negative behaviors," said Macdonald. "We must insist on civil and respectful behavior."

Discouraging Face-to-Face Communication Some educators are concerned that while real-time digital stream may create a safe harbor for students who are uncomfortable expressing themselves, students are missing valuable lessons in real-life social skills. Students may find themselves at a disadvantage during college admission or job interviews when they need to command attention and deliver a coherent message. At social gatherings and in personal relationships, they need to be able to effectively express themselves and connect with others.

Ultimately, while the debate continues over what role social media should play in the classroom, no one can argue the influence that social networking has on today's students. This tech-savvy generation conducts much of their life through social media channels. Not surprisingly, they're already using YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter as tools for learning and collaboration. They expect that their campuses will follow suit. With this in mind, it seems prudent for today's institutions to get on the social media train and find ways to successfully integrate these tools into the classroom.

About the Author

Karen Lederer is from Dominican University's School of Education.