Teaching Current Directions in Psychological Science

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Aimed at integrating cutting-edge psychological science into the classroom, Teaching Current Directions in Psychological Science offers advice and how-to guidance about teaching a particular area of research or topic in psychological science that has been the focus of an article in the APS journal [Current Directions in Psychological Science](#). Current Directions *is a peer-reviewed bimonthly journal featuring reviews by leading experts covering all of scientific psychology and its applications and allowing readers to stay apprised of important developments across subfields beyond their areas of expertise. Its articles are written to be accessible to nonexperts, making them ideally suited for use in the classroom.*

The Net Result: Do Social Media Boost or Reduce Well-Being?
by David G. Myers

[**Clark, J. L., Algoe, S. B., & Green, M. C. (2018). Social networking sites and well-being: The role of social connection.**](#) ***Current Directions in Psychological Science, 27, 32–37.***

In their timely and student-relevant essay, Jenna Clark, Sara Algoe, and Melanie Green (2018) recap the research that apparently swayed Zuckerberg to prioritize "more meaningful social interactions [among] friends, family, and groups" on Facebook's News Feed. The first wave of research revealed the time-sucking social costs of Internet use. After acquiring computers and Internet connections, people's face-to-face interactions diminished and their depression and loneliness increased (Kraut et al., 1998; Nie, 2001). Social psychologists also worried that the Internet might exacerbate social polarization, as people network with like-minded others and reinforce their shared biases.s social animals, we thrive on connection. Mark Zuckerberg, a former psychology student, understands this. In 2012, he recalled founding Facebook "to accomplish a social mission — to make the world more open and connected." Later, in 2018, he affirmed studies summarized by his research team (Ginsberg & Burke, 2017) showing that, when we use social media to connect with people we care about, it can be good for our well-being. We can feel more connected and less lonely, and that correlates with long-term measures of happiness and health. In contrast, passively reading articles or watching videos — even if they're entertaining or informative — may not be as good.

But these observations are from that long-ago time before Facebook had more than 2 billion active users and before Twitter, Snapchat, Instagram, WhatsApp, and YouTube existed. In today's world, argue Clark, Algoe, and Green, social network sites can either enhance or diminish well-being; it all depends on whether social network use "advances or thwarts innate human desires for acceptance and belonging" (p. 33).

The downside. "Social snacking," the phenomenon of passively lurking on others' feeds without interaction, can breed isolation. Lurking can also feed demoralization as one socially compares one's own "mundane" life with others' seemingly more exciting ones. Students who see others as having richer social lives than their own — as most students do — report lower well-being (Deri, Davidai, & Gilovich, 2017; Whillans, Christie, Cheung, Jordan, & Chen, 2017).

The upside. Social media engagement can also be more active. It can be a vehicle for mutual self-disclosure that has benefits similar to face-to-face disclosures and can increase our sense of supportive connection with others.

Zuckerberg's advocacy for active over passive Facebook use echoes Clark et al.'s report that "research has empirically distinguished between passive Facebook use (defined as consuming information without direct exchanges) and active Facebook use (defined as activities that facilitate direct exchanges with others)" — and reinforces that only passive Facebook use has been linked to a decline in well-being.

In *iGen*, Jean Twenge (2017; Twenge et al., 2018) affirms the benefits and pleasures of social media, but also — for adolescents (and especially for early teen girls) — the psychological costs of excessive use. As smartphone use soared post-2011, fewer teens were out drinking, having sex, and getting in car accidents, but more were experiencing sleep-deprivation, depression, and loneliness, and more were committing suicide. In both correlational and experimental studies, more screen time (beyond 2 hours daily) entailed increases in these mental health issues. Alternatively, more time spent on face-to-face relationships (for which nature designed us) equaled greater happiness and development of social skills. Other researchers have likewise confirmed that time on social media (across active and passive use) increases depression and social isolation, and that a social media fast can diminish social comparison and increase feelings of well-being (Arad, Barzilay, & Perchick, 2017; Babic et al., 2017; Kross et al., 2013; Lin et al., 2017; Primack et al., 2017; Shakya & Christakis, 2017; Tromholt, 2016).

Assessing Smartphone Use

All but 4% of entering US collegians use social networking sites (Eagan, 2017). Taking this into account, instructors might, a week in advance of the class discussion, invite students to respond to two simple questions:

Do you have a smartphone? ___ If yes, about how many times a day do you check it? (Make a guess.) ____

About how many minutes of smartphone screen-time do you experience in an average day? _____

After students make their estimates, invite them to download a free screen-time tracker app, such as Moment for the iPhone or QualityTime for the Android. A week hence, have them add up their actual total screen time for the prior 7 days and divide by 7 to compute their daily average.

Did your students underestimate their actual smartphone use? In one small study of university students and staff, participants estimated they checked their phones 37 times a day, but actually did so 85 times per day (Andrews, Ellis, Shaw, & Piwek, 2015). In another small study, Asian students underestimated their screen time by 40% (Lee, Ahn, Nguyen, Choi, & Kim, 2017).

Instructors could also ask students about their prior week's hours of sleep and assess whether (as in other studies) more screen time predicts less sleep time.

Self-Managing Smart Smartphone Use

So how might students manage their social media time to optimize their life? In small groups, invite students to share their experiences and their aims:

1. Is their screen time optimal for their academic and social success? Too little? Too much?
2. To what extent is their screen time passive rather than active? What are examples of active screen use? Do they recall feeling any different after, say, passively reading others' Facebook posts versus interacting with people online or in person?

3. How do they — or how might they — manage their time spent on social network sites and responding to messages and emails? What strategies can they share? Do they:

- monitor their use so that it reflects their goals and priorities?
- hide the news feeds of distracting friends?
- disable sound alerts and pop-ups?
- study or sleep away from their phone?
- use social media as a study-break reward?
- install an app that limits total daily engagement?
- plan for ample face-to-face time with friends?

As Steven Pinker (2010) has noted, "The solution is not to bemoan technology but to develop strategies of self-control, as we do with every other temptation in life."

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