

Insta‘Ag’Classroom: Tapping into Technology to Innovate Instruction

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Introduction / Need for Innovation

“Technology and online communications are dominant forces in students’ lives” (Greenwood, 2007, p. 2); therefore, students, parents, and teachers expect an education to reflect these forces. The consistent presence of the Internet in the lives of millennials can cause them to be seen as constantly networked (with friends) yet removed from institutions (Roberts, Harder, & Brashears, 2016). With phones constantly at their fingertips, secondary education students are consumed with the need to utilize cellular phones to not only socialize with their friends, but to keep track of their busy lives. This includes their education. One of the goals of the 2016-2020 National Research Agenda (Priority Area 2) is to increase the effective use of new technologies for education and change (Roberts, et al., 2016). Agriculture teachers need to feel confident in their abilities to use social media outlets as a pedagogical tool and find new instructional strategies to tap into the interest areas of students. It is not one particular instructional practice, but rather teachers’ attitudes and belief in the abilities of students that is critical (Roberts, et al., 2016). By teaching students how to properly use social media for educational purposes, and trusting them to do so, teachers can motivate students to ‘attach’ themselves to their agriculture program and to ‘network’ with their teachers. This innovative idea uses the creation of a private class Instagram account for 9th grade students to deliver agriscience instruction, promote FFA activities, and to connect students with their instructor.

How it Works / Methodology

On August 18, 2016, a private Instagram account with the username @agintegratedsci was created by the agriculture teacher who serves as the administrator to the account. The goals of this project were to increase student and teacher communications, provide a popular avenue for educational content, and to connect freshmen to FFA activities in the agriculture education program. This social media platform was chosen because teens consider Instagram an important social network.

Prior to the first day of school, the instructor invited 10 of the known incoming students who were active on social media into the course and posted a message to tell other students to request access. Before the start of the first day of school, 21 of the 95 freshmen were already following the account. The first day of school, the teacher “hid” from the students and left the account information, instructions, and Instagram post clues to navigate them on a scavenger hunt around the agriculture department, using video clues in the account to find the teacher. This activity served as the starting point for students to realize that if used properly, social media can serve as an educational tool to disseminate curriculum and to teach effective communication.

The students use the account for record keeping, note taking and referencing, substitute lesson plans, video messages, interactive warm-ups, and for posting class photos. They also use it to direct message the teacher questions they may have or to submit assignments upon the teacher’s request. “Technology has the potential to improve education but only if it is applied with purpose and consideration of the audience” (Murphrey, Rutherford, Doerfert, Edgar, & Edgar, 2012, p. 56). The 304 posts in the account promote interaction among students in the course with an awareness that their teacher is the moderator, supervising all aspects of the account. The National Research Agenda (Priority 4) states “that student-to-student networking is important,

creating meaningful, engaged learning opportunities that are paramount in future learning environments” (Roberts, et al., 2016, p. 38). When a student opens up their personal Instagram feed, our class posts will pop up among their social posts to remind them of significant content. This fosters the opportunity to practice mature responses to questions and to use correct grammar and emoji etiquette. Students use this outlet to direct message video or photo projects to the instructor. The instructor routinely shows the account on the screen for the entire class to view. On four occasions the teacher has left video messages explaining substitute lesson plans to the students. This account has supported collaboration with the science department through special guest speakers who have included the physics teacher explaining the strength of an egg and the chemistry teacher discussing space exploration. As students change courses throughout the year, this account keeps them connected to the activities the FFA program has to offer and highlights the successes of their peers through Career Development Event teams and academic achievement.

Results to Date / Implications

This innovation serves as a direct way to “improve student engagement and learning, and increase our academic discipline's knowledge of approaches that influence the practice of technology diffusion” (Bumguardner, Strong, Murphrey, & Dooley, 2014, p. 32). With over 85% of freshmen students following the account, it has served as a valuable resource for the students and teacher. There are currently 132 followers including 113 freshmen, 4 parents, 2 alumni, and 13 approved group followers. Approximately 15 non-agriculture students have requested access to the account. This account could potentially serve as a recruitment tool for students within our school interested in taking agriculture courses. FFA activity involvement includes over 65 of 90 participating in public speaking competitions, 75% of them obtaining all of their required activity credits, and close to 20 freshmen joining new CDE teams. Lastly, 115 of 130 freshmen have registered for 10th grade agriculture biology, which indicates that 88% of the current freshmen were retained for sophomore year.

Future Plans

The course registration process for each school year takes place in March. The Instagram account will be used to showcase courses available to students for the upcoming year. It will also promote career pathways and testimonials from students who have currently completed courses. Retention of students will be documented to determine the percentage of students who remained in agriculture courses. A new private class account will be created for the incoming freshmen class.

Costs / Resources Needed

The use of Instagram is free. Wifi access is provided by the school district. There are no costs associated with this project other than time, effort and a willingness on the part of the instructor to utilize social media as an educational component of their instruction. This innovative idea requires using ‘social media knowledge and talent’ as a resource. In addition, it is recognized that the use of social media has inherent dangers and should be approached with caution.

References

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