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Perhaps the most daunting challenge facing educators in the 21st century classroom is creating an environment that promotes real student connection in the online learning environment. When successful, the result of such community building is increased accountability, retention and, ultimately, graduation rates. When unsuccessful, students may feel isolated, unsupported and cast out of their own education.

Online learning and teaching, while still a nascent modality, has opened access to higher education at a level not seen since the G.I. Bill. In order to retain and prepare these students for the world and the workforce, faculty and academic support must build true communities in asynchronous online learning environments. The answer in how to do so may already have been discovered by our students.

Virtual study groups build unreachable peer groups

Social networking sites are increasingly the tools of choice for DIY students taking classes online. For peers hundreds or thousands of miles apart, [Facebook](#) study groups have been a solution for at least two years – the most notorious of which brought a Ryerson University student, facilitating such a group, to the brink of expulsion in 2008 after he was accused of academic misconduct.

Since then, such study virtual gatherings have become more commonplace (and better understood by academics). Students seeking to customize their own made-from-scratch online study space may choose [Ning.com](#). Or, for those who wish to add a physical, geographic element to their study experience, study groups may use [Foursquare](#) to let their friends know where they're currently cramming and for how long. It would be a smart bet that the student who becomes the Foursquare Mayor of your college's Accounting 101 study spot will persist to graduation.

Embracing social media will empower your interactions with students

It is incumbent upon faculty to offer and embrace the social networking tools available to improve student-to-student connection in their online courses. All of these are free for you and your students:

- A [Facebook](#) study group is a more casual meeting place to discuss problems, and let your students work amongst themselves. Think of this as the Web equivalent of gathering with your students at the campus coffee shop – meeting them where they already live.
- Use [Foursquare](#) to let your students know on the fly when and where you may be available for impromptu office hours and where they plan to study.

- [LinkedIn](#) can be used to begin students' professional networking prior to graduation.
- Use [Twitter](#) to stay up-to-speed on job openings and fresh trends in their respective fields. Following the right people and organizations can give soon-to-be graduates a leg up on those against whom they're competing for work.
- [Skype](#) is great for synchronous and video-linked office hours.
- A [Ning](#) is a build-your-own social network, customizable to your class's needs ([but will no longer be free](#)).

Odds are that your students, regardless of age, sex or income, are using at least one of these social networking platforms right now. Recent data show the fastest growing Facebook demographic is those older than 55 years of age. And it's not a great leap from Facebook to Foursquare and beyond.

No longer the “new” fad, social media continues to dominate

Faculty teaching online might be surprised by how much more cohesive their students become when presented with these networking avenues. It's true that not every student will take advantage of all these platforms – after all, there are roughly 50 million Facebook users in the U.S. and just about 100,000 in Foursquare. But as these options already exist for your students, highlighting them as a way to build community may lead to greater student connection and accountability to others in their cohort.

Employing social networking platforms in the classroom is certainly not a fresh concept. There have been proponents -- and vehement opponents -- for years. Those opposed often cite fears that modern technology, particularly social networking and texting, will deplete the English language as we have known it. I posit that such fears are not only misplaced, but that modern technological communication may, in fact, be the impetus to the resurrection of English, albeit in a more modern edition.

Neil Postman warned us in the 1980s that the pervasiveness of television would move us from a culture of words and typography to one of scattered images without context. Social networking platforms, when utilized as a form of scaffolding by faculty and students, may once again improve how we, as a global community, connect and educate ourselves through words.

***About the author:** Brooks Doherty is the Dean of Faculty at [Rasmussen College](#) in Brooklyn Park, Minn. Doherty received his MA in literature from University College London after graduating Phi Beta Kappa from the University of Minnesota with majors in Political Science and English. Before becoming dean at Rasmussen College's Brooklyn Park campus, Doherty was General Education Faculty Coordinator at its Eden Prairie campus (MN), teaching writing and communication courses to students of varying disciplines.*

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