# Is Facebook the next frontier for online learning?

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Recognized as one of the most social media savvy professors in America, Michigan State University's Christine Greenhow led a study suggesting that Facebook can facilitate serious scientific debate. Credit: Michigan State University

Social-networking sites such as Facebook can help students learn

scientific literacy and other complex subjects that often receive short shrift in today's time-strapped classrooms.

In a first-of-its-kind study, Michigan State University's Christine Greenhow found that high school and college students engaged in vigorous, intelligent debate about scientific issues in a voluntary Facebook forum.

Such informal learning not only could supplement the content knowledge students acquire in class, but also connect them with professionals and experts in the field, spur interest in careers and inspire civic engagement.

"One of the things we struggle with as educators is how to take students' spark of interest in something and develop it in ways that can serve them," said Greenhow, assistant professor of educational psychology and educational technology. "If students had these kinds of niche communities to be part of, in addition to their formal curriculum, that could really provide a rich environment for them."

For the study, which appears online in the journal *Computers in Human Behavior*, students ages 16-25 voluntarily joined a Facebook app that dealt with climate-related science news such as coal-burning regulations and environmentally friendly housing.

Greenhow, recognized as one of the most social media savvy professors in America, analyzed the students' activity on the Facebook app and found their discussion on various science issues to be largely on-topic, civil and sophisticated.

Past research has looked at online forums run by the teacher or professor and found mixed results when it came to student engagement and the quality of debate.

This appears to be the first study of social media forums that are voluntary and more informal. Greenhow said students likely feel comfortable participating in the informal forum because it's already part of their everyday lives and can be less hierarchal and forced than a forum mandated by an instructor.

The findings make a case for popular online sites such as Facebook as possible learning tools. Facebook has more than a billion users, but critics say excessive use can distract kids from academics, spur loneliness and depression, and facilitate cyberbullying.

Greenhow's previous research suggests another popular site, Twitter, has become a new literary format that is improving learning for students. Thus, while there's a huge push to integrate new technology into classrooms, she said, more consideration should be given to this informal online learning that occurs in students' natural environments.

"While any social network site can be misused," Greenhow said, "there's also a significant and underexplored opportunity to develop these spaces as forums for learning, healthy academic debate and career development."

Provided by Michigan State University