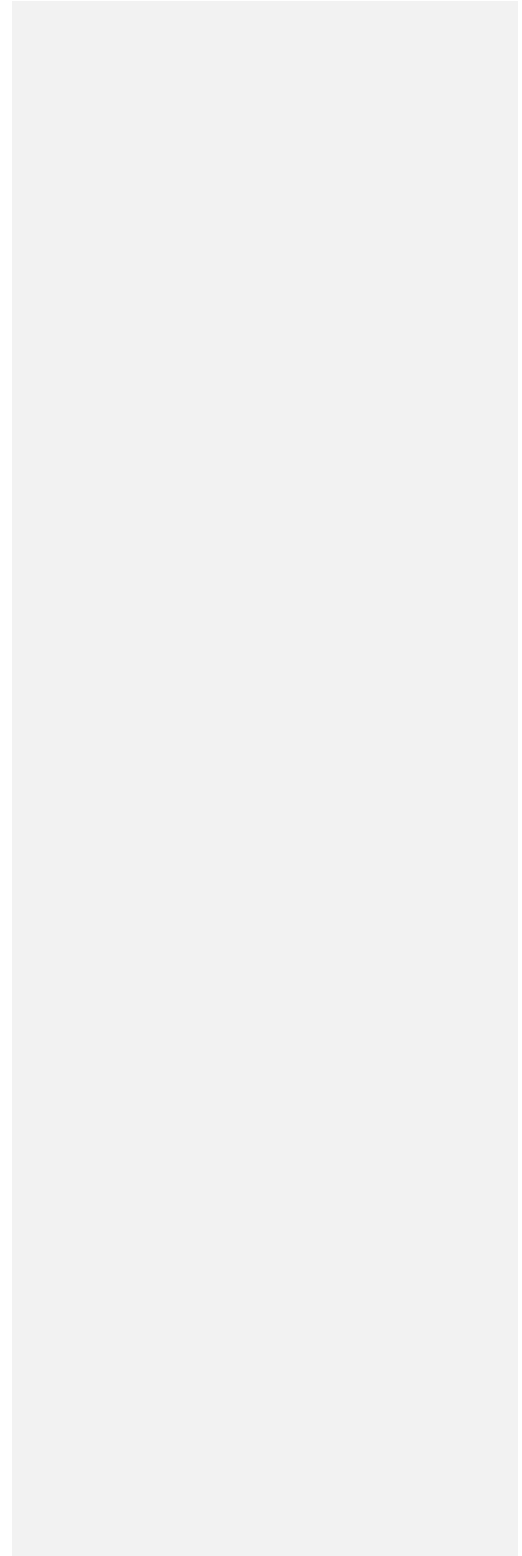


# **Today's Technology: Using Snapchat to Connect Educators, Learners, and Content**

Jana M. Thomas Coffman  
The University of Alabama



### **Abstract**

Today's educators are not expected just to teach academic content; they are expected to integrate culture, listening, speaking, creativity, and problem-solving as they prepare their students for a multi-cultural global world that relies increasingly on technology to create and maintain interpersonal connections. While computer-assisted language learning (CALL) on social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Blogger has gained much attention, less research has been done to emphasize another educational tool: Snapchat. This oft-overlooked video, text, and imaging platform offers teachers and students a myriad of ways to practice vocabulary, reach different styles of learners, and connect with each other and with other cultures (Ernstberger & Venable, 2016; Ram, 2015).

Snapchat is a free social media platform that runs on tablets or smartphones. Although primarily used for entertainment purposes, its popularity with American youth has prompted many educators to begin using Snapchat to supplement and augment their lessons (Sterling, 2015). Some advantages of Snapchat explored in this article are student popularity, immediacy, and visual/audio complements to traditionally written tasks. Disadvantages include the app-enforced brevity of communications, lack of access, and lack of student interest.

Keywords: educational technology, apps, Snapchat, mobile devices, CALL

## **Today's Technology: Using Snapchat to Connect Educators, Learners, and Content**

### **Introduction**

Snapchat is a phone and iPad application that allows users to send 10-second photos, chats, videos, and subtitles to friends on the app. After the 10 seconds, individual photo or video clips, called snaps, are permanently deleted from the phones of both the sender and receiver, making it ideal for quick, impermanent exchanges of an informal nature. The app has 35 million users in the United States alone, and the app facilitates the exchange of over 4 billion videos a day (Ernstberger & Venable, 2016). Despite its overwhelming popularity, the app is predominately used by teens and young adults (Sterling, 2015).

Many educators have already heard of Snapchat: 77% of college students use it daily (Lee, 2016), while teens reportedly use the app as much as Instagram and even more than Twitter (Bailey, 2015). Many educators are aware of the technological fads fleeting through our students' devices, from Clash of Clans to Flickr. Yet while so many student fads are difficult to shape to educational purposes, Snapchat can be an excellent tool to connect our students' classroom with their out-of-school world.

### **Current Literature**

Certainly, there is a link between learning outside of the classroom setting and educational gains (Lai & Gu, 2011; Gan, Humphries & Hamp-Lyons, 2004). Research has supported the notion that personal technological devices offer opportunities to move learning beyond the classroom into multiple spheres of students' lives (Burston, 2011; Wood, Zivcakova, Gentile, Archer, De Pasquale, & Nosko, 2011). Wood et al. (2011) state that the benefits of personal use technologies such as laptops, smartphones, tablets, and other smart devices open the door to Anywhere Anytime Learning (AAL) that can remove learning from a classroom-only activity to multiple and varied environments. Mobile technologies such as iPhones, tables, iPads, cell phones, and other web-enabled devices have been shown to facilitate increased levels of active engagement with subject matter, even outside of the classroom setting (Demouy, Jones, Kan, Kukulska-Hulme, & Eardley, 2015). Burston (2011) claims mobile phones have enjoyed far more popularity among educators than similar technologies such as Portable Digital Assistants (PDAs), the most well-known of which are Blackberries. In 2011, at 4.2 billion mobile phones, mobile phone usage almost quadrupled that of personal computers or laptops (Burston, 2011), and their popularity among younger populations is well documented (Lee, 2016; Ernstberger & Venable, 2016; Bailey, 2015; Junco, 2014).

#### *Potential Obstacles to Mobile Devices in the Classroom*

However, this is not to state that all mobile technologies have an equal place in education. These devices' educational possibilities are not automatically realities. In their examination of off-task student activity while using technology, Wood et al. state, "In general, there is a consensus that existing and emerging digital technologies have *the potential* to expand the reach and effectiveness of current educational tools" (emphasis added) (2011, p. 366). Possible detractors from achieving educational objectives with technology include the cost of devices and their associated data plans (Lindaman & Nolan, 2015; Kim & Kwon, 2012), limited storage capacity (Stockwell & Hubbard, 2013), student resentment of intrusion into their personal space (Sterling, 2015; Demouy et al, 2015; Burston, 2011; Kennedy & Levy, 2008), and student distraction from the task (Lindaman & Nolan, 2015; Wood et al., 2011; Krausshar & Novak, 2010).

While Burston (2011) notes educators embracing potential pedagogical applications for mobile devices goes back to the introduction of the mobile phone at beginning of the

millennium, he cautions that using students' personal phones for learning has always been fraught with obstacles. First, although students enjoy having their devices with them at nearly all times, they often perceive the phones' function as fun, personal use only, and resent the intrusion of teachers and other non-peers into their personal domains. He states, "[students] have proven rather intolerant of pedagogical messages invading what they regard as their private space" (Burston, 2011, p. 58). Similar findings were reported by Kennedy and Levy (2008), who found that a small minority of students, for all their enthusiasm about texting friends, disliked receiving even one educational text a day.

This resentment of educator intrusiveness was also described by Demouy et al. (2015), who found students elected to use their devices to listen to audio or watch videos with greater frequency than they did to read content-related material, write, or practice grammar. The researchers also found students preferred to use their phones or smart tablets to access online dictionaries and media, but did not reportedly enjoy using them for educationally-based social media tasks.

Even if learners enjoy using technology, it has not always proven beneficial to the learning process. With personal use technologies comes the increased risk of off-task activity that proves detrimental rather than complementary to the learning process. Wood et al. in particular demonstrated that technology as a learning tool can be a distraction to learning rather than an aid. Given the choice to use technology or not during 3 learning sessions, 33% did not choose to use any technology at all, 24% chose to use it only intermittently, and not even half (43%) used it for all three sessions. These findings indicate students may not be as enthusiastic about using technology in their learning environments as is sometimes assumed. Those with access to Facebook, chat, and email engaged in considerably more off-task activities, and the students who elected to use no or minimal amount of technology outperformed those who opted for greater technological use during the sessions.

Stockwell and Hubbard (2013) also add that educators should not assume so-called "digital native" students will automatically be familiar with the applications. Although students in today's classrooms may be adept at navigating a wide variety of device and applications, teachers should still expect there to be learners in every group who are not familiar with a target technology and that even those who are may not understand the complete array of functions and features the teacher is planning to use. This is especially true if the learners have never used the app for an educational purpose before, which is often the case with social media platforms like Snapchat. Therefore, careful instruction on how to utilize the target application should be an integral piece of introducing any new tool, even a seemingly widely-used one such as Snapchat.

Given these potential pitfalls to technology in the classroom, Lindaman and Nolan (2015) caution, "Significant preparation is required to design applications that are pedagogically sound, make the most of a mobile platform's potential for interactive learning, and are well suited for use in and outside of...classrooms" (p. 2). They believe there are several key factors to successfully utilize technology in the classroom, including collaboration, a student-centered mindset, and high levels of student engagement and participation.

#### *Successful Integration of Mobile Technologies in the Classroom*

Clearly, not all technological resources are appropriate for educational designs. Still, the potential of mobile devices and their associated social networking capabilities should not be overlooked. Currently, more than 2 billion people use social media, the most well-known of which are Facebook and Twitter, but which also includes Snapchat, Instagram, Pinterest, WhatsApp, Flickr, Tumblr, and more (Adami & Jewitt, 2016). Smartphone apps are personal and

student-centered (Kim & Kwon, 2012) and have been shown to increase learners' active interest in otherwise traditional tasks (Demouy et al., 2015). Further strengths of pedagogically sound use of technology-assisted learning are fingertip access to on-demand learning opportunities, contextualization of subject matter, spontaneous learning, lowered affective filters, a broader learning ecosystem, and increased student engagement in learning (Lindaman & Nolan, 2015).

Despite his warnings about the potential student-perceived intrusiveness of using student technological devices for educational purposes, Burston (2011) maintains they may reasonably be expected to be more effective at aiding in certain specific educational goals. He specifically mentions their effectiveness at aiding the acquisition of basic-level vocabulary, even more so when they have the capacity to combine rich multi-sensory input of text, graphics, audio, and video, which is exactly what Snapchat offers.

This idea was echoed by Kenney and Levy (2008), who posit that far from being appropriate for every out-of-the-classroom educational task, phones are useful for tasks that are naturally suited to short chunks of time that do not require elevated levels of concentration or a considerable time commitment. As such, the authors identify vocabulary-building as a particular strength of mobile phones as educational tools, as it lends itself easily to brief definitions or audio-graphic examples comfortably managed on a phone or other smart device.

In addition to vocabulary, the researchers used phones to send messages about Italian culture, suggest extracurricular Italian-themed music or videos that might be of student interest, and course announcements and reminders. Many posts therefore did not require a student response, but some did; for instance, the researchers sent a list of Italian words and ask students to respond with opposites, or they sent a photo and asked students to reply with a description of the image in Italian. The authors also found students enjoyed teacher-generated messages more when they were not repetitive (i.e. not reinforcing the same lexical item multiple times over several days). Many reported enjoying this method of vocabulary reinforcement as an extracurricular refresher for Italian vocabulary learned in class.

The results in this study were promising: 84% of respondents enjoyed the messages, 83% reported the activities improved their vocabulary acquisition, and 80% indicated an increased level of interest in the course content. However, the study also revealed students found these messages more useful for vocabulary learning, with fewer numbers reportedly enjoying course reminders, audio or video suggestions, or cultural information. The study results also indicated the students used the messages for their own self-study purposes, but the messages did not tend to increase interest or discussion among classmates or with the teacher after the message had been received (Kennedy & Levy, 2008).

Another survey of smartphone apps in the classroom revealed that these applications, including social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, WhatsApp, and Snapchat, have broad educational potential in the areas of vocabulary acquisition, reading comprehension, writing, grammar, speaking, and listening (Kim & Kwon, 2012). One study done with Japanese learners of English found that, when students became comfortable making videos in English, they were able to produce increasingly lengthy and complex videos in the target language (Gromik, 2012). Snapchat offers an informal way for students to practice making short videos to build target skills.

While not every popular student app can be harnessed for educational goals, prior research supports the use of mobile technology and social media in certain cases. Educators hoping to connect with students via technology should carefully plan and collaborate with their peers and local technology experts and design pedagogically sound, student-centered activities

(Lindaman & Nolan, 2015). They need to tailor the technology to appropriately short tasks such as vocabulary building, basic review, and providing brief contextualization of simple classroom concepts (Kim & Kwon, 2012; Burston, 2011; Kennedy & Levy, 2008). Taking these factors into consideration, educators can apply these tenets to introducing Snapchat into their array of educational tools.

#### *Snapchat as a potential learning tool*

Like any other tool, Snapchat has its detractors. Some teachers view Snapchat as inappropriate for the classroom setting, citing students' continuous use of the app in class for non-related purposes as disruptive to the learning process and at times dangerous (Sterling, 2015). In addition, the impermanency of Snapchat interactions made it famous for its ease and expediency of sexting (Miller, Costa, Haynes, McDonald, Nicolescu, Sinanan, Spyer, Venkatraman, & Wang, 2016; Bailey, 2015; Sterling, 2015).

Junco (2014) does not dispute Snapchat's popularity among teens and young adults but maintains the app is still inappropriate for school. One foreign language teacher who used Snapchat to reinforce vocabulary later reported disappointing results, as students only interacted with the word for 10 seconds each before moving on, which she believed led to lower vocabulary retention rates (Lee, 2016). Echoing Burston's (2011) critique of mobile devices in general, Sterling (2015) cautions that not all students will react favorably to educators attempt to integrate Snapchat into the classroom, as it may be viewed as adults attempting to invade an adult-free, private space. He further adds that while snaps may be educational, they disappear quickly and students cannot reference their work later.

Yet as Miller and Sinana (2017) point out, this platform-required brevity of Snapchat interactions can be facily circumvented by using the screenshot or screen-capture function. As an added measure of safety, Snapchat alerts the original sender when a recipient has taken a screenshot of an image, but this allows both educators and learners to save still images to their photo roll for later perusal or subsequent uploading to another platform or site, such as a classroom website or Facebook account.

Sterling (2015) adds that Snapchat has other positive attributes, such as an inherent flashcard-like feel to the app due to its Story feature, which allows a user to save several 10-second media clips over a 24-hour period. These snaps can be viewed in sequential order an unlimited number of times over that 24 hours by friends on the app. It is also useful for brief collaboration among students or between a student and the teacher, and it provides a free way for students to create an original visual narrative on a topic of their choice.

Like Sterling, Lee (2016) defends the use of snaps for learning, expressing the attitudes of many educators: "If you can't beat 'em, join 'em." Snaps can be sent to show examples of concepts taught in class, as study prompts before a test, and to access students' prior knowledge. Kim and Kwon (2012) suggest individual apps such as Snapchat should be used occasionally as one tool among many varied technological tools, and Demouy et al. (2015) cite apps such as Snapchat to be easily applicable to learning vocabulary in many content areas. Bailey (2015) found the app to be very accessible, as it is free on any phone or iPad, easy to participate in, and boasts privacy features such as letting students follow a teacher-led or classroom/school account without the teacher needing to follow them back. In fact, many major universities now have a snap filter that allows students within the geographical campus area to add school-related icons and graphics to their snaps, as well as to upload their personal snaps to the school's account for moderation and potential posting by a university-appointed moderator.

Adami and Jewitt (2016) point out that the self-expression allowed by the creation of personalized avatars, provided by the app Bitmoji within the Snapchat app, are popular with young learners such as pre-teens and teens. Within Snapchat messages, these Bitmoji avatars can be personalized to look like students and have a myriad of fashion choices, including some brand name clothing lines and costumes based on popular media icons (such as the HBO series *Game of Thrones* or the rap group The Lonely Island). Therefore, students can be engaging in self-expression while practicing classroom concepts.

A specific use for Snapchat is that, like Instagram, it is most effective when the desired focus is visual, rather than text-based, in nature, making it a strong candidate for use in art classes or to convey content-related visual information such as math graphs, historical art, or scientific charts, as well as for visual and auditory learners. If desired, Snapchat allows for “a conversation that is almost entirely without voice or text” (Miller et al., 2016, 177). This allows users to communicate multimodally. It also provides rich opportunities for teachers to visually communicate content to ELL students, students with low reading levels, or those with special needs (Miller et al., 2016).

### **Practical Applications**

#### *Ideas by Educators, for Educators*

For those educators intrigued by the possibility of connecting with students using Snapchat as a tool, the authors of the aforementioned articles have several ideas that can be specified and tailored to any subject area:

- Student-to-student collaboration (Sterling, 2015)
- Student-to-teacher collaboration (Sterling, 2015)
- Flashcards A: Teacher sends all users a snap using audio or photo; students reply with a snap and identify in the target language (TL) (Sterling, 2015)
- Flashcards B: Teacher gives all students a list of vocabulary words in class; students find and snap the objects, possibly with subtitles or TL pronunciation (Sterling, 2015)
- Teacher sends all users snaps with brief summaries of topics covered in class each day (Bailey, 2015)
- Students send teacher snaps with feedback on activities from the previous class (Bailey, 2015)
- Teacher sends a series of snaps as a study guide before a formal assessment (Lee, 2016)
- Students snap a series of reflexive photographs to create and build their identity in the TL and target culture (Wallace, 2015)
- Ask students to perform segments of TL literature, such as Shakespeare, Voltaire, or de Cervantes (Ram, 2015)
- Users find real-life examples of vocabulary or concepts from class and share them with other members of the classroom community (Pannoni, 2015)
- Teacher sends all users a question as homework. They are given a certain amount of time to respond via snap (Popoff, 2014)
- Use Snapchat to communicate announcements, reminders, and alerts, as well as to communicate weather or emergency alerts at your institution (Ernstberger & Venable, 2016)

In addition to these ideas from prior literature, my own experience as a Snapchat-using educator has allowed me to expand my school and classroom from a geographical, time-specific experience to a holistic one that can be accessed by learners anywhere and at any time of day.

For instance, school administrators can use snaps and a public snap story to connect with parents and the community by sharing videos and snapshots of sports events, fundraisers, music and drama productions, and art displays. Snapchat can be used to document and publicize school efforts to give back to the community, as well as spread awareness about community and school events of interest. These short, 10-second video or photo clips provide public interest and opportunities for parent, educator, and student engagement on an informal, fun platform.

#### *Beginning to Use Snapchat as an Educational Tool*

For those educators convinced about this app's educational potential and ready to start introducing Snapchat to their universities, district, or classroom, it's simple to begin. System requirements include any brand smartphone or iPad with a functional internet connection. Users can search for and download Snapchat for free in their device's App Store. The download should take only 1-3 minutes, and it takes less than a minute to create a username and password. For educator accounts, I recommend creating a separate account using an institution email account and a corresponding username, such as *Professor\_Martinez*, *MSU\_HistoryDept*, or *SeñoraCoffman*. Reserve personal email and Snapchat accounts for non-school activities to preserve professional distance and decorum.

Once an account is created, users decide how Snapchat can best be personalized as a tool for their audience, whether it is an entire university or district community or the students in your 7<sup>th</sup> grade English classroom. Educators can opt a top-down communication method where they send messages to their audience without requiring a reply, such as course reminders and announcements, or elect to use a two-way method designed for interaction between educators and recipients. This two-way communication is best suited for educators who envision their lesson designs to require interaction between the educator and individual students but not among the students themselves. A third option is whole-class or whole-group communication, where all student and teacher users interact with each other, best suited to models where group collaboration and study are being used to reach academic objectives. If this option is used, educators must clearly outline their expectations for sharing, as users must first add other users to their contact list and then individually select each message recipient. Of course, when deciding from among these three communication models, the age and maturity of the students, as well as each individual school or institution's technology policy, should be the final guide.

Before using Snapchat in the classroom or educational setting, it is necessary to assess the app's requirements and gauge the intended audience's access to those resources. In general, Snapchat is very accessible, although be aware it is most well-known among younger populations, often middle school to undergraduate college students rather than older adult populations such as might be found in a PhD program (Sterling, 2015). In cases where a learner might not have the necessary device or access to internet, an easy alternative is to modify the assignment so the learner can complete it using a camera or camera phone, then emailing or printing the images.

The short video or image files created using Snapchat, referred to as *snaps*, can be used at any learning level to create content-rich media clips and files, practice content vocabulary, communicate brief messages to students, and allow students to play with academic material in a low-risk, informal atmosphere. At its most basic, Snapchat sends 10-second clips of a photo or video. However, there are a variety of filters, fonts, drawing tools, emojis, and animations that can allow students to create their own stories and narratives in the classroom. Try singing the alphabet as a gun-firing cowboy, or perhaps model new content words in context while appearing to the audience as a unicorn adorned with falling flowers. One of the most appealing



aspects of Snapchat is its inherent user maneuverability combined with easy-to-use personalization features. The app has many fun features to try, many of which will be demonstrated in the live presentation component of this paper.

In my experience, Snapchat has the capacity to be a powerful tool for forging essential connections among educators, learners, and their target content. In my foreign language classroom, I have used Snapchat at the secondary and university levels to narrate my experiences in Puerto Vallarta, Mexico, over spring break, including close-up videos of market haggling in action, artisans making intricate designs, and an Aztec ballet performed by a high school co-ed dance group. The sights and sounds of the city, as well as my reactions and comments, were well-viewed by my students, many of whom responded with snaps of their own or referenced my snaps in face-to-face conversations later, encouraging interest in the material as well as encouraging connectivity between learners and the target language and culture.

Additionally, I have used the app to teach low-frequency Spanish vocabulary that would not appear in an introductory foreign language course, such as a video of my daughter snoring and the caption, “*Ella ronca*” (Spanish “She is snoring”) displayed in text across the image. The next day, several students either asked me if *roncar* meant “to snore” or used it in classroom conversation, indicating they had both understood the verb and remembered it. For their part, students have used Snapchat to send me a picture of online homework that was giving them trouble, often with subtitles expressing their questions or area of confusion. In these cases, I was able to give a brief grammatical explanation in a series of one to three 10-second snaps. Finally, students will often use the app to ask me brief questions that don’t seem to warrant an email, such as, “Is there homework due today?” or “The quiz is only over Ch12, right?” Ultimately, however it is used, Snapchat offers a unique way to connect educators, students, and academic content outside of the classroom norm.

### **Conclusion**

Snapchat is a popular, free application specializing in temporary, 10-second video clips and images that can be sent to individual or group users. The app has risen in popularity to equal that of Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter, especially among younger student-aged populations (Miller et al., 2016; Sterling, 2015). While not originally educational in design, the app can be harnessed and adapted to meet a myriad of educational goals, creating an innovative way for educators to connect with students and to make classroom content come to life.

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