Tweeting in Higher Education: Best Practices

Amy L. Chapman   Monday, September 14, 2015

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Key Takeaways

- A survey of **literature regarding Twitter use** in the higher education classroom finds substantial support and good advice regarding its **usefulness in pedagogy**.

- Research found that **Twitter aids students in building relationships**, fosters students' connections with each other, and allows them to **create meaning** through sustained communication.

- **More research** is needed to determine if **Twitter can affect active learning, class participation, and learning outcomes**.

When attending my teacher education program, I was repeatedly told to acquire as many tools as possible for my teacher's toolbox of plans, skills, and ideas to engage and educate. That advice proved invaluable to me as a high school teacher. Ten years later, as I begin teaching in higher education, that advice still holds, especially with the adoption of emergent technologies. However, questions persist regarding the appropriation of these new technologies into the field of education.
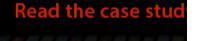
Among the new technologies included in higher education classrooms is Web 2.0, which over the past few years has produced inconsistent results. The preferred social media method for connecting within the learning environment, Twitter, is considered more appropriate for ongoing and public conversation.[1] The amount of information and the manner in which Twitter puts out that information might have particular usefulness for higher education; research indicates, however, that some faculty have wearied of including social media in their classes.[2] This article aims to calm the fears of faculty and instructors interested in expanding their repertoires of classroom techniques by including Web 2.0 strategies, particularly through the use of the microblogging site Twitter, as reported by various researchers and practitioners.

What Twitter Can Do in Classrooms

Of its several benefits, one significant finding of recent research was that Twitter use by students better connected those students to the content of their courses.[3] This connection includes sharing, analyzing, and applying the content to students' own ways of understanding and to their own life experiences.[4] Further research by Eva Kassens-Noor showed that students who used Twitter for their classes reported spending a higher amount of time on their coursework and evidenced greater engagement with the material.[5] In particular, the use of Twitter facilitated students' meaningful discussions about course content.[6]

A second significant benefit of the use of Twitter is that it promotes student engagement in courses. Reynol Junco, Michael Elavsky, and Greg Heiberger found that students who were required to use Twitter for a course in which the instructor regularly participated with them on the platform showed an uptick in student engagement and grades.[7] Another study by Junco and his colleagues found that, in using Twitter in a course, both faculty and students became highly engaged in ways that went beyond traditional classroom activities.[8] Beyond this direct research on student engagement, Meng-Fen Lin, Ellen Hoffman, and Claire Borengasser found that students enjoy using Twitter in their courses.[9] Additionally, in the study by Kassens-Noor, each instructor who used Twitter in their classes reported that it had a positive impact on student engagement, and Christine Greenhow and Beth Robelia found that students become actively involved in their education through the use of Twitter.[10]

An additional benefit of Twitter use in higher education classrooms is the ability to respond to student issues in a timely manner.[11] This finding has been reinforced by incorporating Twitter into a course to provide a rapid method for disseminating current topical information. Kassens-Noor wrote about Twitter as an instant feedback tool during class and as a learning tool, noting that it aided instantaneous peer interactions.[12]

Yet another benefit of Twitter use has been the promotion of a community of learners and the ability to connect with a professional community of practice; this happens both within and outside of the classroom.[13] Specifically, students who used Twitter were able to connect with each other in various nontraditional ways.[14] Noeline Wright also found that the use of Twitter developed a sense of community within classes.[15] The study by Lara Lomicka and Gillian Lord concluded that the sense of community was created and sustained through Twitter interactions.[16] Finally, Reynol Junco, Greg Heiberger, and Eric Loken found that the use of Twitter aids students in building relationships.[17] A study by Joanna Dunlap and Patrick Lowenthal concluded that it fostered students' connections

with each other and allowed them to create meaning through sustained communication.[18]

Similarly, Twitter has been found to increase connections in the form of interactions, connections, and on-going relationships between students and their instructors.[19] Going further, Lorena R. Munoz, Cynthia Pellegrini-Lafont, and Elizabeth Cramer found considerable communication from students with the instructors who used Twitter. In their research, they found that pre-service teachers requested help, sought clarifications on course assignments, and used the platform to express their opinions and thoughts on their futures as teachers.[20]

Best Practices for Using Twitter

Recommendations for Twitter's implementation and use promote the benefits described. These recommendations — based on current research and best practices — support successful implementation of Twitter in higher education classrooms. In considering the following list, note the importance of integrating the platform in educationally relevant ways: It would be counterproductive to use Twitter simply as a novelty or as a natural or emergent mode of engagement with students.[21]

Recommendations

1. **Provide a short Twitter briefing** to introduce what might otherwise be a new learning tool to students in the course(s).[22]

2. If using Twitter in class is new, **clearly communicate the pedagogical rationale** — regardless of the objective benefits of using Twitter.[23]

3. Instructors interested in using Twitter in their courses should **require use of the platform.** A number of the students in the study by Lin, Hoffman, and Borengasser advised integrating their Twitter activity into the class requirements.[24] Prestridge's study found that her participants did not share or collaborate; she proposed

that this occurred because she did not require the use of Twitter and hypothesized that if she had, students would engage differently with the platform.[25] Finally, Junco, Heiberger, and Loken found it necessary to require students to use Twitter in a course in order to reap the benefits of it; in other words, students in the study who were not required to use Twitter did not see the benefits in engagement and GPA.[26]

4. **Instructors must participate on Twitter** regularly along with the students. Studies by both Junco, Elavsky, and Heiberger and Prestridge concluded that instructor engagement with Twitter when the platform is used during a course is essential to have an effect on student outcomes.[27]

5. **Define a hashtag for the course** and use this hashtag in every tweet. That way followers can see the tweets, but the instructor can also search for the hashtag on Twitter to see what is being tweeted.[28]

6. Continue to **reinforce some of the tweets during lectures**. For example, questions can be tweeted to the class and then discussed during class time to encourage class involvement.[29]

What the Future Might Hold

While the field of educational technology has contributed greatly to the best practices for using Twitter in higher education classrooms, some of the research is inconsistent with these recommendations. However, as Munoz, Pellegrini-Lafont, and Cramer pointed out, Twitter use has not been studied extensively among culturally and linguistically diverse populations.[30] Future research should address these deficiencies in the literature to discover whether Twitter is a useful tool across all populations in higher education.

Another avenue that the next wave of research into the use of Twitter should include is whether Twitter and other social

media can affect active learning and class participation. Research indicating increased engagement by students with the course and its content, other students, and instructors did not also look for an impact on class participation. Further, while Twitter use clearly has some benefits to the overall learning experience of some students, is it possible that it actually affects learning outcomes? These topics and questions need attention in the next wave of research on Twitter in higher education classrooms.

Conclusion

Twitter remains a relatively new method of engaging and educating students in higher education, and a gap exists between the use of social media (including Twitter) and the incorporation of that social media into higher education classrooms.[31] This article is meant to fill in pieces of that gap with benefits and recommendations elicited from current research findings. While the incorporation of Twitter into higher education is new and research is still being conducted to identity all of its potential uses and benefits, it clearly can have positive implications when implemented in ways consistent with research. Great possibilities await with the advent, not only of this new tool, but with the research indicating how best to use it.

Notes

1. Reynol C. Junco, Greg Heiberger, and Eric Loken, "**The Effect of Twitter on College Student Engagement and Grades**," *Journal of Computer Assisted Learning*, Vol. 27, No. 2 (April 2011): 119–132.

2. Stephen J. Jacquemin, Lisa K. Smelser, and Melody J. Bernot, "**Twitter in the Higher Education Classroom: A Student and Faculty Assessment of Use and Perception**," *Journal of College Science Teaching,* Vol. 43, No. 6 (July/August 2014): 22–27.

3. Denise P. Domizi, "**Microblogging to Foster Connections and Community in a Weekly Graduate**

Seminar Course ," *TechTrends*, Vol. 57, No. 1 (January 2013): 43–51; and Noeline Wright, "**Twittering in Teacher Education: Reflecting on Practicum Experiences** ," *Open Learning,* Vol. 25, No. 3 (October 11, 2010): 259–265.

4. Meng-Fen Grace Lin, Ellen S. Hoffman, and Claire Borengasser, "**Is Social Media Too Social for Class? A Case Study of Twitter Use** ," *TechTrends*, Vol. 57, No. 2 (March 2013): 39–45; Sarah Prestridge,"**A Focus on Students' Use of Twitter—Their Interactions with Each Other, Content, and Interface** ," *Active Learning in Higher Education* (July 2014): 101–115; and Junco, Heiberger, and Loken, "The Effect of Twitter."

5. Eva Kassens-Noor, "**Twitter as a Teaching Practice to Enhance Active and Informal Learning in Higher Education** : The Case of Sustainable Tweets," *Active Learning in Higher Education,* Vol. 13, No. 1 (March 2012): 9–21.

6. Junco, Heiberger, and Loken, "The Effect of Twitter."

7. Reynol C. Junco, C. Michael Elavsky, and Greg Heiberger, "**Putting Twitter to the Test: Assessing Outcomes for Student Collaboration, Engagement, and Success** ," *British Journal of Educational Technology,* Vol. 44, No. 2 (March 2013): 273–287.

8. Junco, Heiberger, and Loken, "The Effect of Twitter."

9. Lin, Hoffman, and Borengasser, "Is Social Media Too Social for Class?"

10. Kassens-Noor, "Twitter as a Teaching Practice"; and Christine Greenhow and Beth Robelia, "**Old Communication, New Literacies: Social Network Sites as Social Learning Resources,** " *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, Vol. 14, No. 4 (2009).

11. Lin, Hoffman, and Borengasser, "Is Social Media Too Social for Class?"

12. Kassens-Noor, "Twitter as a Teaching Practice."

13. Domizi, "Microblogging to Foster Connections and Community"; Lin, Hoffman, and Borengasser, "Is Social Media Too Social for Class?"; Junco, Heiberger, and Loken, "The Effect of Twitter"; Lara Lomicka and Gillian Lord. "A Tale of Tweets: Analyzing Microblogging Among Language Learners," *System*, Vol. 40 (2012); and Wright, "Twittering in Teacher Education."

14. Domizi, "Microblogging to Foster Connections and Community"; and Lin, Hoffman, and Borengasser, "Is Social Media Too Social for Class?"

15. Wright, "Twittering in Teacher Education."

16. Lomicka and Lord, "A Tale of Tweets."

17. Junco, Heiberger, and Loken, "The Effect of Twitter."

18. Joanna C. Dunlap and Patrick R. Lowenthal, "**Tweeting the Night Away: Using Twitter to Enhance Social Presence**," *Journal of Information Systems Education*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (2009).

19. Prestridge, "A Focus on Students' Use of Twitter."

20. Lorena R. Munoz, Cynthia Pellegrini-Lafont, and Elizabeth Cramer, "**Using Social Media in Teacher Preparation Programs: Twitter as a Means to Create Social Presence**," *Perspectives on Urban Education,* Vol. 11, No. 2 (Summer 2014): 57–69.

21. Junco, Heiberger, and Loken, "The Effect of Twitter."

22. Ben Lowe and Des Laffey, "**Is Twitter for the Birds? Using Twitter to Enhance Student Learning in a Marketing Course**," *Journal of Marketing Education*, Vol. 33, No. 2 (August 2011): 183–192.

23. Ibid.

24. Lin, Hoffman, and Borengasser, "Is Social Media Too Social for Class?"

25. Prestridge, "A Focus on Students' Use of Twitter."

26. Junco, Heiberger, and Loken, "The Effect of Twitter."

27. Junco, Elavsky, and Heiberger, "Putting Twitter to the Test"; and Prestridge, "A Focus on Students' Use of Twitter."

28. Lowe and Laffey, "Is Twitter for the Birds?"

29. Ibid.

30. Munoz, Pellegrini-Lafont, and Cramer, "Using Social Media in Teacher Preparation Programs."

31. George Veletsianos, "**Higher Education Scholars' Participation and Practices on Twitter**," *Journal of Computer Assisted Learning*, Vol. 28, No. 4 (August 2012): 336–349.

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Chris Buddle · 7 months ago

I too am curious if the author is on twitter - I've not been able to find her!

This is an interesting article, and I agree entirely that a lot of work on Twitter in the classroom has not been done in diverse classrooms. That is an important point.

I disagree with the third recommendation: I do not think students should be required to use twitter as they may have ethical/privacy concerns, and should students be uncomfortable using off-site software in a classroom setting, the instructor needs to be accommodating.

I can also offer the following reference on using twitter in the classroom - in this paper, we studied effects of twitter on learning dynamics: http://f1000research.com/artic...

I can also point to some other resources around guidelines for using social media in the classroom: http://teachingblog.mcgill.ca/...

and here about the value of social media in higher ed:

http://teachingblog.mcgill.ca/...

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Stephen diFilipo · 7 months ago

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