

Twitter in the Classroom

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By now everyone should be familiar with Twitter – mostly for its role in the 2011 uprising in Egypt. The microblogging platform began in 2006 and proved to be an easy way to communicate with like-minded people.

Twitter is now used for global breaking news, industry chats, writing haiku and other innovative ventures. Almost as quickly as Twitter appeared on the scene, early adopting educators began experimenting with the platform as a pedagogical technique to augment traditional approaches to teaching. Some examples follow:

- a) In 2009, Dr. Monica Rankin, a professor of History at the University of Texas at Dallas experimented with Twitter as a way to extend course discussions. According to a YouTube video summarizing the trial, her students were receptive to the idea (Smith, 2009).
- b) Currently, a German foreign language instructor is incorporating Twitter into her teaching by building on Andrew Fitzgerald's (2013) TED talk "Adventures in Twitter Fiction". The idea, "a creative, collaborative Twitter project playing with the genre of the short story," will focus on character development and storylines in German – published in the public sphere. The goal is to enhance students' language and writing skills. Although this assignment could be implemented on Blackboard or Moodle, the Twitter platform provides invaluable immediate feedback from the public at large in addition to comments from the instructor and classmates.
- c) The Twitter Scavenger Hunt (TSH) is an assignment, which I've successfully executed every semester since 2011 in my 200 level Multimedia Writing course at AUC. Students in the course work in pairs to tweet the responses to ten questions. The questions are provided at the start of class and the students have the class period to complete the assignment. This assignment fulfills several of the course learning objectives, gets the students out of the classroom and applies new technology to their field of study. More specifically, for this assignment, students worked in the field (i.e. the campus), conducted interviews, learned to write concisely, edited their writing, took photos, worked under a deadline and utilized new technology. For writing based disciplines, those accomplishments could be the gateway to enhance traditional teaching methods.

All of the students who completed this semester's TSH informally responded that they "enjoyed the TSH" though students who rarely utilize the platform on their own commented that they would benefit from a more detailed tutorial on how to generally use Twitter more effectively.

RESEARCH

Academic research on the effectiveness of Twitter as a classroom tool is mostly in its infancy, but some research exists. The results vary. Research by Dhir, Buragga, & Boreqqa (2013) explored the advantages and disadvantages of Twitter for educational purposes and "discovered that Twitter has positive impact on informal learning, class dynamics, motivation, as well as the academic and psychological development of young students" (p. 672).

It was also stated by Abe and Jordan (2013) that "in many cases the benefits of using social media appear to outweigh the limitations" (p.16).

The research has overwhelmingly indicated that Twitter can be effective as a discussion format. Student engagement seems to increase, for example, and students who are less likely to participate in discussions in large classes become active participants in the Twitter class discussions. That was the case with Rankin's history class of 90 students (Smith, 2009).

Obviously with Twitter, you don't have the face-to-face contact where kinesiology plays a significant role in how people express themselves. Abe and Jordan (2013) point out an additional anxiety that may prevent educators from adopting Twitter in the classroom in that "faculty concerns may arise from the manner in which social media imposes 'blurring of the lines between the personal and professional roles of the lecturer and students'" (p. 19). Despite that risk, the researchers go on to say, "it is important to recognize the benefits of connecting with students as well as to consider alternative ways in which students may be motivated to participate in the classroom" (p.19).

OTHER IDEAS

If you're considering implementing a Twitter based activity, here are some easy ideas that have been employed in classrooms: 1) Tweet pre-class discussion/reading material questions; 2) Tweet news and current events for quiz material; and 3) Twitter Haiku (or "micropoetry" – see Cripps, 2013).

CONCLUSION

There's a good chance that you're asking yourself if it's a good idea for *you* to use Twitter in the classroom? Well, here are some points to consider: What do you wish to achieve by incorporating Twitter? How will you assess the Twitter activity? Will incorporating Twitter be more laborious and does the potential outcome outweigh that additional workload?

Twitter in the classroom can be an effective tool to reach out to students on a platform that is already a part of many of their daily lives. A 2012 study by the Pew Internet and American Life Project notes that "20% of 18-24 year olds use Twitter on a daily basis," that's a 400% increase from 2010. It's likely that the percentage has increased since then.

Those numbers show that you could potentially leverage the opportunity to successfully initiate Twitter in your course. A good way to start could be with an easy-to-assess extra credit assignment.

CITATIONS

Abe, P., & Jordan, N.A. (2013). Integrating Social Media Into the Classroom Curriculum. *About Campus*, pp.16-20. doi: 10.1002/abc.21107

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Smith, K. (2009, May 2). The Twitter Experiment - Twitter in the Classroom [Video file]. Retrieved from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6WPVWDkF7U8>

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Eyler, J. (2013, April 18). Teaching with Twitter; or, Adventures in Student Engagement. *A Lifetime's Training*. Retrieved from <http://josheyler.wordpress.com/2013/04/18/teaching-with-twitter-or-adventures-in-student-engagement/>

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