

2011

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Recommended Citation

Rockinson-Szapkiw, Amanda J. and Szapkiw, Michael, "Engaging Higher Education Students Through Tweeting" (2011). *Faculty Publications and Presentations*. 183.
https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/educ_fac_pubs/183

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Engaging Higher Education Students Using Twitter

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Abstract: Social media such as Twitter helps engage learners and promotes interaction with course content. Twitter allows learners and educators to interact via “tweets” via Smartphones, laptops, or any device with Internet access. This presentation will demonstrate how to use Twitter as a platform for discussion, polling, question and answer sessions, and other collaborative interactions in a higher education classroom. It will step educators through the process of setting up a Twitter account and the process of planning a lesson with Twitter applications.

Introduction

Social networking is an exponentially growing phenomenon. Sixty percent of adults maintain profiles on some type of social networking site. Seventy percent of adults read tweets and blogs (Galagan, 2010a). Over 190 million Twitterers tweet around 65 million times per day (Costolo, 2010). Mobile technology is perpetuating the use of social media. Ninety one percent of mobile users use their mobile devices for social networking (Galagan, 2010a). There is an ongoing debate about the role of technology, particularly social media, in the classroom.

Some faculty have adopted a zero tolerance technology policy, viewing technology, and particularly social media (Facebook, Twitter, Formspring, Tumblr, etc.), as a distracter (Galagan, 2010b). Some practitioners are even increasingly blaming technology for behavioral and engagement problems (Galagan, 2010b). While some practitioners view technology as a distracter, other faculty view technology as an enhancer and are readily incorporating it, particularly social media, to engage their students. So, is social media a distracter for college students or can it serve to engage them in the learning experience? The answer to both questions is, yes. Social media can distract students from studying and being actively engaged during class; it can also be leveraged to engage students in the classroom.

In engaging a technologically savvy generation of learners, the importance of incorporating technologies to enhance instruction and engage students in the learning process is a growing challenge for educators. Social media applications provide educators with the opportunity to foster engagement and interaction in their higher education classrooms. Specifically, Twitter helps engage learners using a media application in which they are interested. It enables educators to curb the traditionalist comprehension based model and encourages critical thinking, synthesis, and evaluation throughout the learning process. Twitter allows learners and educators to interact via “tweets” via Smartphones, laptops, or any device with Internet access.

This paper briefly discusses the importance of engagement and how technology can be used to support engagement; how to set up a Twitter account for educational use; and how to use Twitter as a platform for discussion, polling, question and answer sessions; and other collaborative interactions inside and outside a classroom.

Engagement and Using Technology to Engage

Drawing from engagement theory, student engagement for the purpose of this paper is defined as involving students in active cognitive processing (e.g. evaluating, problem-solving, reasoning, decision-making, etc.) and motivating them to learn due to the meaningful nature of the learning activity (Kearsley & Schneiderman, 1999). Furthermore, a student that is engaged is devoting attention, time, and energy to the learning process, which can be both inside and outside of the classroom (Kuh, 2003). Researchers have demonstrated that student engagement is vital in the learning process. Student engagement is necessary for retaining information (Barkley, 2005; Shulman, 2002) and critical to motivation to learn (Wishart & Blease, 1999).

Technology can be used to engage students in the learning process. Means, Blando, Olson, Middleton, Morocco, Remz, and Zorfass (1993) purport that technology, if used to facilitate pedagogically sound instructional strategies, can enhance student engagement and productivity in the learning process. Chen, Lambert, and Guidry (2010) further support this statement in their study which shows a positive correlation between learning outcomes and student engagement and students' use of Web-based learning technology.

Using technology to facilitate sound instructional practice has been shown to increase student motivation and the cognitive complexity of the task at hand (Baker, Gearhart, & Herman, 1994; Dwyer, Ringstaff, & Sandholtz, 1990; Means & Olson, 1995). Using technology in innovative and creative ways has also been shown to improve learning (Wishart & Blease, 1999). Thus, educators have the opportunity to engage their students; and thus, improve their learning by implementing technology supported, pedagogically sound instructional strategies (Bryant & Hunton, 2000). Twitter is a free technological resource that has the potential to engage students in education classrooms.

Twitter Defined

Twitter is considered an information network that connects users with topics and discussions that are important and meaningful to them. Each user can post informational "tweets" that consist of 140 characters in length or less using a computer or mobile device connected to the Internet and the Twitter network. Other Twitter users can follow the tweets of others to stay up-to-date on the information they post in their accounts. Twitter provides an information pane that displays detailed information on specific tweets when desired by a Twitter user. In addition to short messages, users can share Web links, photos, videos and other media content. An optional feature for Twitter users who would like their tweets to be protected from public viewing includes the ability to make tweets exclusively available to those users to which they have explicitly given access ("About", n.d.). Though Twitter started as a means for users to connect with family, friends, and acquaintances on an informal basis, the network of Twitter users has expanded to more formal uses to include business and education.

Using Twitter to Engage: Six Setup Steps

The first step to using Twitter in the classroom is setting up a Twitter account. There are six easy steps to setting up a Twitter account:

1. The first step is to navigate to www.twitter.com to create an account. By clicking the "Sign-Up" button, the educator is led through a step-by-step process for setting up an account. It is advisable that educators create specific accounts for their classes and not use their own personal Twitter accounts.
2. The educator will need to decide how many class Twitter accounts they want to set up. The decision will need to be made whether to create one account for all classes (i.e. www.twitter.com/DrD.InstructionalDesign) or individual accounts for each class (i.e. www.twitter.com/DrD.InstructionalDesign1). Two options should be considered. 1) Create an account for all similar courses (that is, one account for all of a teacher's Instructional Design classes, another for all their Trends & Issues classes, and so on) or 2) Create an account for each section of a course (one for Instructional Design section 1, another for Instructional Design section 2, another for Instructional Design section 3, and so on.) Naturally, there are advantages and disadvantages to each. For option one, creating an account for all similar courses, an advantage is that students may view the questions and responses by peers

in another class and they may also interact and collaborate with them through the material. A disadvantage, however, is that this could create an excessive amount of Tweets and make it somewhat difficult for teachers to regulate and could also inhibit student participation outside of class. For option two, creating a unique account for each course, students may be more comfortable to interact with just their classmates and could be more likely to engage with the material. A natural disadvantage is that the amount of interaction and collaboration across classes will be eliminated altogether unless introduced by the teacher. Because student engagement is key here, it seems option two would be more fitting.

3. After creating an account, it is important to check account settings and ensure that the profile setting of “Protect My Tweets” is selected. This will ensure that the class interaction will be protected and not exposed to members outside the group.
4. Ask students to create class Twitter accounts. Students should follow the same instructions as the educator when creating their account. It is important that they too set their privacy settings to “Protect My Tweets” to keep their Tweets and information from being exposed to people outside the class.
5. Provide the URL for the class Twitter account to students and ask them to follow the class Twitter account.
6. As students begin requesting to follow the class account, the educator must approve them as a follower. This is done by logging into the class Twitter account and approving each student.
7. Once a Twitter account is set up and students are following it, various strategies can be used to engage students inside and outside the classroom.

Using Twitter to Engage: Three Engagement Strategies In and Out of Class Quizzing and Polling

Traditionally, informal student assessment in the classroom involved the educator posing a verbal question and, by “a show of hands,” students were polled. Similarly, informal quizzing to check for understanding also required students to raise a hand to answer. While these methods accomplish the task of assessment, more options exist for educators to make quizzing and polling a more engaging, interesting, and inclusive experience for students.

Twitter can be used for instant student quizzing and polling. Although Twitter does not have a native quizzing feature, educators can incorporate programs into Twitter such as Poll Everywhere (www.PollEverywhere.com) that allow educators to add quizzing and polling options within Twitter. After an educator has downloaded and followed the directions for Poll Everywhere, they can assess students through Twitter during class. Educators can ask students a question that is projected onto a screen, and have them tweet their answers.

Quizzing/Polling taken through Twitter gives the instructor immediate feedback concerning student thoughts and comprehension concerning the current course material, and it can do this with a live graph in the instructor’s presentation that shows results as the students submit their answers. The advantage of using Twitter is that it provides an environment that many students are accustomed to using, Twitter, and provides an added level of engagement through the use of technology.

Another advantage of polling through Twitter involves its inclusive nature. *All* students are able to submit their answers instead of only a *few* students willing to answer in traditional polling. Submissions from students are also anonymous, which may allow for greater accuracy and transparency due to student anonymity.

In and Out of Class Discussion

Twitter can also nurture in and out of class discussion. During instruction, an educator can project the live class Twitter feed onto a screen. Students can then be encouraged to tweet in questions, thoughts, links, and photos related to the material throughout the class period collaborating with the instructor and peers. This gives students a chance to stay engaged with the content and contribute to the learning of others.

As with traditional class discussion, Twitter discussions can be extremely beneficial, but they can also quickly become a counterproductive distraction. To make this activity beneficial, educators must lay out clear ground rules for discussion as well as clear repercussions for abuse within discussions. Students need to recognize Twitter class discussions as an atmosphere of respect that should only be used responsibly. Matteson (2010) suggests assigning groups and having one student from each group responsible for moderating and tweeting in the overall class discussion. This can help to maintain controlled discussions – especially in larger classes. Another fact to keep in mind is anyone who tweets in a class discussion will also be posting their Twitter name, so the instructor

will be able to identify the source of inappropriate tweets, if necessary. Again, only those users whom the instructor has allowed to follow the Twitter course name will be able to post to discussions.

The ability to extend class discussion outside of the class period is an added advantage of class discussions using Twitter. Discussions started during class can be encouraged to continue as students continue their day or work on assignments at home or on the go. Many existing discussion management systems can be difficult to use on a mobile device, or they require users to be at a computer to participate. Since Twitter is easy to use and easy to access on mobile phones and devices, students are able to continue class discussions wherever they may be, which further encourages student engagement. With Twitter, when students perform research, they can post their findings to Twitter with a URL, picture, or video allowing the class to easily view and interact with the material. Students can tweet throughout the course to review material, to complete homework, to find clarification on confusing or difficult subject matter, or to establish any number of other educational interactions. Additionally, the teacher or a designated student can go back and review the feed to ensure all students are participating.

As students tweet to Twitter discussions, the use of Twitter hashtags should be encouraged and implemented to help organize topics within the discussion. Twitter defines a hashtag as, “The # symbol, called a hashtag, is used to mark keywords or topics in a Tweet. It was created organically by Twitter users as a way to categorize messages” (“What Are Hashtags [# Symbols]”, n.d.). If, for example, students are discussing mobile education, keywords that could be used for hashtags could include *#mobileEd*, *#software*, and/or *#mobileResources*. These hashtags could be established during class to maintain consistency for topics, so when students want to do a quick search of student tweets for a specific topic such as *mobile resources*, they can search in Twitter using *#mobileResources* and find every tweet that included that hashtag.

In and Out of Class Creative Group Work

Twitter can also be used to inspire creative group work. Traditionally, individual contributions in groups were often difficult to track. Some group settings often have members with ideas that go unheard due to different personalities or dominant group members. With Twitter, class group work can give all group members ample opportunities to contribute through tweeting. For instructors, group discussions in Twitter can be monitored and individual contributions are, essentially, logged for easy grading or verification of adequate participation. For example, if an instructor wanted to divide a chapter of a course textbook into sub-topics for group research, Twitter could be used to facilitate this. Each student group could be assigned a topic from the textbook and given a unique hashtag for each topic. If the topic is *educational website design*, the hashtag could be *#edsitedesign*. Students in the educational website design group would then begin researching their topic and tweeting their findings using their group’s hashtag (*#edsitedesign*) for each tweet. Tweets could include discussion mixed with links, images, videos, or any other noteworthy information. And even though each group may have its own specifically assigned topic, all students in the course would have access to all tweets, which allows students to also learn from the efforts of other groups.

When assigning any Twitter group work, the instructor should set guidelines regarding the number of required tweets (if a minimum/limit is desired) and any other necessary criteria to ensure active participation and quality of work; however, the instructor should also be careful not to limit creative thought and interaction with guidelines that are overly restrictive or stringent. This, of course, will depend on the topics and lesson objectives being covered in any given class/course.

Conclusion

Twitter is not just for leisure tweeting anymore. Twitter has great potential for making educational experiences engaging, creative, fun, and interactive for learners. Traditional approaches to teaching and learning can be enhanced by incorporating Twitter into the learning environment. When the use of Twitter aligns with lesson objectives, tweeting can be an effective way to facilitate learning and provide educational collaboration and variety to the classroom. Educators stand to benefit as they explore and implement new uses for emerging technology and stand out as being cutting edge in their field.

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