

Chapter 78

Pre-Service Teachers Engaging with Twitter as a Professional Online Learning Environment

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ABSTRACT

New ways of utilizing technology in the online space are challenging different ways teachers and students can interact with each other and learning content. Social media is one such technology that is a flexible and powerful tool in higher education; however, as yet, it is still under-researched. Twitter challenges notions of public global dialogue, continuous discussions in the online space beyond the four walls of a physical classroom, and the role of peer-to-peer interactions. This chapter discusses a project that aimed to address the need to understand more deeply what happens pedagogically in the classroom when integrating Twitter into learning activities. The case shared is of one undergraduate second-year class located in Teacher Education. The change over time with students' ability to professionally engage with Twitter demonstrated a shift in being able to confidently participate and critically think about this social media as a valuable online learning environment.

INTRODUCTION

Virtual learning environments, multimedia, and social networking tools are giving people unprecedented opportunity to download resources, discuss their ideas (Hillier, 2009) and record their learning. Twitter is one such social media service that allows a combination of personal publishing and communication with a new type of real-time interaction, allowing opportunities for immediate and anytime, anywhere feedback (Dunlap &

Lowenthal, 2009; Lemon, 2013a; Rodens, 2011; Sinnappan & Zutshi 2011). Participation in Twitter can be seen as “learning opportunities” (Wenger, White & Smith, 2009, p.9) and the richness that can be attained between the distinction of active and passive members are varied. It is about dialog – two-way and at times multiple voice discussions bringing people together to discover and share information (Reuben, 2011; Solis, 2008).

In the context of Teacher Education, Twitter is a social media service that has been underutilized

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by institutions and educators as a way to support ongoing professional discussions and connections with others while supporting pre-service teachers to prepare for the profession (Lemon et al., 2012; 2013b). Currently, it would be common for some pre-service teachers to engage with Twitter on a personal level, but most report they do not know what to do and have little or no idea of how to use this platform for professional engagement and development (Lemon, 2013a; Lemon et al.). In an educational context where technology is mandated to be taught and integrated to support meaningful and authentic learning activities, this brings to light an underdeveloped area. Collaboration, community building, participation, and sharing are key outcomes and drivers of social media use (Lemon, 2013b). For pre-service teachers, this can offer innovative and unlimited possibilities for extending their personal learning network and supports connections with both electronic resources and people (Steeple, Jones, & Goodyear, 2002). Both are necessary for efficient and effective learning (Collins & Berge, 1996) while becoming a teacher. Networking within PLNs can support continuing conversations, the asking of questions, the seeing of different perspectives, and the chance to be inspired. These are important factors of ongoing learning and professional development in this industry (Lemon, 2013b; Steeples, Jones, & Goodyear). Pre-service teachers can make connections, share ideas, collaborate, and follow through on innovative learning and teaching practices that inspire themselves and in turn their own students (Lemon et al., 2012). The PLN allows pre-service teachers to become a networked learner and, in turn, become a networked teacher by selecting whom they engage with for learning purposes. This way of networking supports possible replication in the classroom and the opportunity to continually learn on a global level anytime, across sites and borders. Active users of Twitter are displaying interesting ways to collaborate and participate in this virtual com-

munity; but as Junco, Heiberger and Loken (2010) comment that “despite the widespread use of social media...very little empirical evidence is available concerning the impact of social media use on student learning and engagement” (p. 1) and also the pedagogical decisions the educators make. This chapter shares a research project that aims to address this need by introducing and using Twitter with pre-service teachers who are second year undergraduate students. A case study of the planning and preparation behind the online interaction to support and scaffold student use is presented. The students in this case study are pre-service teachers learning to not only use social media for professional use but to also consider engagement with digital technologies for professional connections and development. There is also a layering that pre-service teachers need to be competent users of a variety of digital technologies, as they will have to integrate technologies into their own teaching practice upon graduation. The pedagogical decisions and design demonstrate emerging best practices for social media integration into the higher education learning context based on research undertaken within this field.

This chapter is divided into three sections: first the literature and contextual background to social media and pre-service teachers in the higher education learning context; second, a presentation of the teacher pedagogical decisions; and finally, the student perspective of working with Twitter from a professional stance is presented. This chapter is not about providing and identifying “distinct classes of Twitter users and their behaviors, geographic growth patterns and current size of the network, and compare crawl results obtained under rate limiting constraints” (Gill & Arlitt, 2008, p. 19), nor is it about a content analysis of Twitter (Humphreys, Gill, & Krishnamurthy, 2010). Rather, it contributes to presenting the perspective of students and teachers in how they have accessed social media in the higher education context.

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