Chapter 10
Applying Twitter as an Educational Tool for Concept Learning and Engaging Students

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ABSTRACT

The challenge of engaging students beyond a typical class meeting session is a longstanding issue in educational research. This chapter outlines Twitter as a potential tool for enhancing student engagement while also enhancing concept learning. Twitter's efficient microblogging format allows instructors to share information quickly in real-time, while the hashtag feature enables a user to develop a list or repository of targeted tweets. These functions among others make the popular platform an educational tool that instructors should consider implementing carefully while modeling a good electronic footprint for their students.

INTRODUCTION

The challenge of engaging students in a traditional college classroom setting is a longstanding issue. Researchers have reported that only a small number of students engage in class discussions in a typical college classroom (Fassinger, 1995; Nunn, 1996; Weimer, 2013). Since the inception of popular social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, and Instagram communication continue to explode in popularity and global use. This chapter focuses on using the microblogging network Twitter to promote communication, enhance concept learning and engaging students beyond the constraints of an on-ground class session.

According to statistics from a survey conducted by the Pew Research Center (2018) almost half (45%) of all young adults (18-to 24-year olds) use Twitter. Despite sharing features with other social media networks, Twitter has distinct characteristics that make it unique. Twitter shares characteristics with other social media networks, yet it is distinctive in a variety of ways. The most notable difference is that it serves as a micro-blogging tool that supplies participants with a "retweet" function (Kieslinger, Ebner, & Wiesenhofer, 2011). A re-tweet is provides attestation of content created by other users while also serving as a form of admiration (or sarcastic disdain) for another user's comment. Retweeting helps distribute information to a broad audience while helping Twitter users expand their influence (Boyd, Golder, & Lotan, 2010).

While a popular tool, research also supports the contentions of educators who are wary of infusing Twitter into their teaching. A study reported that Twitter caused students to get distracted off task from their coursework (Dhir, Buragga, & Boreqqah, 2013). The Crimes Against Children Research Center at the University of New Hampshire estimated that in one year approximately 2,322 sex crime arrests were made in which the perpetrator initiated a relationship using social media (Wolak, Finkelhor, Mitchell, & Ybarra, 2010). While students logged into social media accounts may be at risk, there are a number of cases where educators have found legal trouble because of their social media use (Eckes, 2013; Downey, 2011; Oppenheim, 2013).

While there are inherent risks in using Twitter, the platform continues to grow in popularity with young adults and teens, making it attractive as a potential educational tool. It is therefore imperative for educators to understand how to safely model online behavior and customize their social media use to meet the needs of their classes. Twitter has made a positive impact on informal learning, class dynamics, motivation, and academic development (Dhir, Buragga, & Boreqqah, 2013). Further, McKerlich, Riis, Anderson, and Eastman (2011) reported that Twitter enhanced both the student learning environment and a learning outcome in a college setting. Much like in-class communication, students need to be properly motivated and gain a feeling that Twitter content is relevant in order for it to be effective (Rinaldo, Tapp & Laverie, 2011).

Twitter's website explains that hashtags were organically created by Twitter users employing the # symbol to mark keywords or topics in a tweet. Truman and Miles (2011) reported that Twitter hashtags could be used like interactive flash cards for both live in-class and out of class review. Twitter is an effective forum for flashcards because as students tweet flashcards in live time, their ideas may serve as prompts that inspire other classmates. Similarly, students are able to post each individual flashcard in real time, as opposed to the instructor compiling a list from student emails and discussion board posts. They are also easily accessible in one repository on Twitter by searching for the hashtag.

The purpose of this chapter is to provide some tools and best practices for using Twitter as a tool for engaging students in the process of concept learning. While the anonymity of Twitter can lead to confrontation and even volatile discourse, the efficient and free flowing nature of the instrument has the potential to add value in education when used properly.

ENGAGING STUDENTS

Bill is a first year undergraduate, commuter student who lives in a quiet one-bedroom apartment in the city. Bill commutes to his job as a data entry specialist on the subway and quietly scrolls along on his smartphone. He has a full day ahead of him, taking lists of information and inputting them into a cor-

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