

Chapter 15

Working toward Expert Status: Love to Hear Students Go Tweet, Tweet, Tweet

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ABSTRACT

Twitter represents a virtual, global classroom of collective intelligence and an epistemological shift in which the “experts” in the exchange are not necessarily the traditional teachers. The experts on Twitter are those who share information of value and do so often, a definition that could and should include students engaging the medium for academic purposes. As an academic tool, Twitter offers students the opportunity to engage in a wider discourse than the classroom environment and to gain confidence in their knowledge and potential “expert” status. Furthermore, the nature of Twitter closely aligns with Tapscott’s (2009) identified norms for the Net Generation, which includes current high school and college-aged students. The eight norms—freedom, customization, scrutiny, integrity, collaboration, entertainment, speed, and innovation—provide an appropriate theoretical framework for a curriculum-related question such as: What is the value of implementing Twitter into classroom instruction?

INTRODUCTION

You’ve felt it; I’ve felt it. Change has become central to life in the 21st century. Sometimes the speed of this change is overwhelming, especially in a world where the Internet places so much information right at our fingertips ... The pace of this change will be limited only by our ability to manage it. Our students will encounter even

more rapid change when they graduate, especially in the information they will require to perform effectively in the workplace. Thus, the ability to read and write becomes even more important to our children’s future than it was to ours. Rapid change will be increasingly a part of their lives, and we need to begin now to prepare them. (Leu, 2001: paras. 1 & 2)

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Recently, I served as the official Twit (someone who uses Twitter—also known as a Twitterer) at a conference for published and aspiring authors of fiction. The role required my fingers to be glued to my netbook keyboard so that when an author, literary agent, or other publishing professional shared some wise kernel of information I could launch that message into the Twittersphere in 140 characters or fewer. Inevitably, an attendee would ask the question that Twitter enthusiasts often hear: “Why in the world would I use Twitter?” A discussion ensued in which I defended Twitter’s value as a Web 2.0 technology that engages authors, agents, editors, and readers in publishing discussions, a discourse in which this particular skeptic wished to take part. Such interaction offers writers unique opportunities to share insights and be judged by the value of those insights rather than solely on some designation of expert status. With Twitter, the emphasis is not placed on who you are but on what you say. In other words, the experts are not necessarily those with impressive degrees and decades of experience (although they are not omitted from the list of Twitter experts). A Twitter expert is a Twitterer who shares valuable information with others and does so often; they are judged by what they say online and not by their résumé offline. Such a power structure is often very different from that in face-to-face experiences, including traditional classrooms where teachers are considered the experts. Furthermore, by limiting all users to 140 characters, Twitter encourages an additional balance of power compared to power structures in traditional classrooms where teachers have historically possessed the prerogative to lecture throughout the entire class period or perhaps grant portions of time to hear a few student voices.

Even instructors with the best intentions of fostering student interaction and mining student voices in the classroom face limitations such as time, student confidence, and opportunity. Twitter is a tool that classroom teachers can embrace

to better engage student voices and to encourage students to value their own opinions and those of their classmates. To that end, this chapter will 1) explain the basics and benefits of using Twitter; 2) illustrate how Twitter embraces Net Generation (current high school and college) students as experts who contribute to rather than simply absorb knowledge; 3) offer examples of how Twitter has been successfully implemented in classrooms; 4) troubleshoot potential challenges for classroom use; and 5) consider what the future of a Twitter-friendly classroom might mean for students and educators.

BACKGROUND

Although Twitter is grossly underutilized in classroom instruction, it remains one of the many Web 2.0 technologies transforming the ways in which Internet users communicate and gain knowledge. Just three years ago, only 24% of Americans kept a profile page on a social networking site; the most recent data from 2010 showed a participation rate of 48%. The greatest popularity lies with Americans aged 12–17 years, 18–24 years, and 25–34 years at 78%, 77%, and 65%, respectively (Webster, 2010: 12). This means that many of these Americans are in their school years (elementary through post-secondary), a fact that leads instructors to question what collaborative technologies could mean for the classroom. “Just as advances in computing and telecommunications have improved medicine, finance, manufacturing, and numerous other sectors of society, these changes are reshaping education—transforming what we learn, how we acquire knowledge, and how our schools function” (Dede, 2000: 171). Some experts believe technology is changing more than our industries, including education. More specifically, scholars believe technology has actually changed the ways the current generation of students process information (Carr, 2010; Prensky, 2001).

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