

Investigating Twitter Use in Lower Division Online Classrooms

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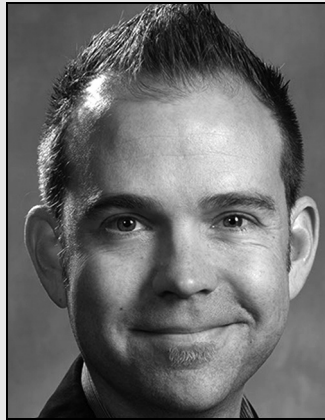
INTRODUCTION

Reporting 313 million monthly users and a total audience near 800 million, the power of Twitter is palpable (Mims, 2016). With such an audience, Twitter's reach is vast and varied. Anyone with a computer, tablet, or smartphone can be instantly updated on anything imaginable with Twitter. You can follow Twitter's biggest celebrities such as Selena Gomez or Beyoncé, great writers such as Neil Gaiman or Margaret Atwood, or bask in American political dialogue as we all get

informed, enlightened, and entertained in 140 characters or less. Given its vast appeal and broad content, it is not surprising that Twitter has begun to work its way into online classrooms. Whether it truly has a place as a viable learning tool in higher education deserves exploration.

BACKGROUND

Twitter's broad scope and appeal leads educators to the task of determining whether Twitter is an effective tool for edu-



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cators and students alike. In this study, specific attention is focused on the feasibility of implementing Twitter effectively into lower division undergraduate classes in online education. Close to 30% of students in the United States attend distance learning courses at degree-granting postsecondary institutions (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). Additionally, despite enrollment in distance education growing over the last 10 years, retention consistently reflects rates 10%–20% lower than traditional postsecondary higher education institutions (Carr, 2000, Diaz, 2002; Frankola, 2001; Willging & Johnson, 2009; Xenos, 2004). Overall, online students with less professional as well as academic experience, namely first year students, drop out more frequently than others (Lee & Choi, 2011). Additionally, research indicates that such online students often withdraw from class not because of content-related concerns but because of navigational and operational concerns (Morris & Finnegan, 2008). A variety of personal and environmental factors will always influence student persistence, but research indicates that more attention should focus on course design and policy because this is a feature online institutions can more readily control and adjust (Lee & Choi, 2011). Additional guidance on how to more readily meet the needs of online students, especially lower division higher education students, is needed.

The typical first-year student at an online university has a diverse set of academic and time management skills and is often taking care of dependents, including children and/or adults. He or she is often employed full or part time. This student population poses a variety of risk factors, leading many instructors to develop innovative strategies to help students be more engaged with the course objectives, faculty, and peers. Additionally, such practices are implemented in order to improve learning outcomes and aid in overall stu-

dent success. Contemporary innovation in higher education is often technological and without commenting on the learning management system (LMS), multimedia, or interactive learning resources, this brings us to social media.

To limit the scope of this article, the social media tool of Twitter alone will be discussed because of its intense popularity and because it has been used and studied in higher education ever since its founding in 2006. Researchers Fernández-Ferrer and Cano (2015) note, “There is a need for a better understanding of how to use Twitter in education” (p. 13). Additionally, the need for more insightful research on Twitter’s use in the classroom echoes throughout much of the literature on its implementation (Evans, 2014; Prestridge, 2014; Yakin & Tinmaz, 2013).

TWITTER’S BENEFITS FOR LOWER DIVISION COLLEGE STUDENTS

The positives of Twitter in higher education include: instant engagement with fellow students and faculty; instant access to diverse learning resources; portability and established presence via smartphones and tablets; and limited character count, enabling succinct and focused communications.

TWITTER BUILDS COMMUNITY

One of the major benefits of Twitter is its ability to connect students and increase engagement among them (Evans, 2014). In providing an additional way for students across the country, or even world, to connect in a group setting, Twitter works to further reduce feelings of disconnectedness and isolation in the online learning environment. In connection, some instructors might use Twitter as a way to remind students of upcoming assignment due dates or class cancellations, further building community in the online classroom.

TWITTER AS AN INFORMATION STOREHOUSE

Twitter caters to varied news sources, myriad topics, and diverse audiences. Due to its rich resources, Twitter has been “integrated successfully into a classroom for an additional information source” (Jacquemin, Smelser, & Bernot, 2014, p. 26). This key finding highlights the importance of having instant access to current resources that augment in-classroom learning. It is conceivable that the resources available on Twitter can support the textbook, provide information in an alternative multimedia form, or otherwise encourage the student to stretch learning through the use their critical thinking and analysis skills. In addition, Twitter allows students to discuss, question, and contemplate these additional learning resources while interacting with fellow students, faculty members, and even the world at large due to Twitter’s international presence.

Additionally, Twitter also provides a way for students to become lifelong learners by promoting learning in an authentic environment. By locating real-world content in Twitter’s vast platform, the student’s learning environment expands past the virtual classroom’s walls and bleeds into the world at large while also exposing students to informal and formal learning (Hsu & Ching, 2012). Another way that Twitter augments learning is by meeting the dual-coding needs of learners (Clark & Mayer, 2011). Many students learn best through the combination of visual and audio formats, and the use of the written language shared in 140 characters, images, and embedded videos addresses such specific student learning needs.

While Twitter serves as a storehouse of information for students, it additionally serves as a place where diverse pools of colleagues can meet to tweet. For instance, through such an informational resource, instructors can solicit instructional practices, share resources, seek advice, and promote research. Twitter as a resource for

scholarly purposes amidst colleagues, however, is fledgling (Veletsianos, 2012).

TWITTER’S PORTABILITY

Another benefit worthy of consideration is Twitter’s portability and accessibility. Today’s student is a student on the go, and the portability and inclusion of Twitter in the classroom can aid students in varied ways. Caballé, Xhafa, and Barolli (2010) note, “Having a look at the near future, mobile technologies will become more ubiquitous, pervasive and networked, with enhanced capabilities for rich social interactions, context awareness and Internet connectivity, and such technologies can have a great impact on collaborative learning” (p. 44). Betrus (2012) makes a similar prediction, noting that apps easily accessed by mobile devices such as iPhones, iPods, and tablets will continue to grow in popularity and usability. The mobility of Twitter holds clear benefits for mobile learners.

TWITTER AS A WRITING TOOL

Another academic benefit of students using Twitter relates to its ability to improve student writing. An important finding by Fernández-Ferrer and Cano (2015) found that the quality of Tweets made by students over time improved to be more academically focused, more clearly articulated, and more rigorously supported through research. Therefore, such writing activities can help students more readily adjust “to the key academic requirements of this kind of experience in the context of higher education” (Fernández-Ferrer & Cano, 2015, p. 13). In connection, the typical Tweet will use shorthand, vernacular, and often vulgarities. By raising the level of their writing even in 140 characters, or a series of tweets, students can learn how to meet the academic requirements of higher education, an especially important competency for lower division students to acquire.

TWITTER'S CHALLENGES TO LOWER DIVISION COLLEGE STUDENTS

Among the challenges of using Twitter are: students and faculty proficiency in the use of Twitter; short duration of online classes; inconsistent use and implementation of Twitter; student privacy issues; questionable credibility; and efficacy.

TWITTER'S PROFICIENCY AND TIMEFRAME CHALLENGES

The first two challenges when using Twitter are the short duration of online classes and student and faculty proficiency. Many people use Twitter, but not everyone uses it or is proficient at using it. Additionally, in the context of a 5-week class, it would be difficult for anyone to become proficient with a social media platform while also becoming acquainted with various institutional LMS tools and system expectations. Noting the complications that accompany the shift to a new learning environment, one source reminds educators that transitions into the online environment "require that students not only learn the technical complexities of using digital tools, they must also learn specialized discourses associated with online participation and a wide array of new literacy skills and reading comprehension strategies ... necessary for efficient and effective navigation" (Nicholson & Galguera, 2013, p. 22). To offer as an example of the general challenges of Twitter use in the classroom, one study reported that Twitter ultimately helped students to improve their "reflective, critical judgment and information selection skills" (Ricoy & Feliz, 2016, p. 246). This result, however, was observed in a master's level program over a 6-month period and included extensive training for both students and faculty on the use of Twitter. Therefore, given the time frame of a typical online class being in the range of 5–7 weeks, the inclusion of Twitter becomes shortsighted. Additionally, student and faculty proficiency may be ques-

tionable because the student or faculty member might not know how to use it effectively. Training on the appropriate and effective use of Twitter is necessary for it to succeed in the educational environment; due to the brevity of many online courses, Twitter's inclusion is not feasible.

TWITTER'S IMPLEMENTATION CONCERNS

Another challenge posed by Twitter is its implementation. When implemented, Twitter in the classroom needs to be coupled with clear expectations and communication as found by Bista (2015), who reported on Twitter's innovative value as a learning device in the classroom as long as it was accompanied by clear directions and instructions. From the beginning of class, when a faculty member uses Twitter, he or she needs to communicate how Twitter will shape learning, how Twitter can effectively be used by students, and how Twitter use will impact grades. Without clear expectations, using the platform will be confusing and negatively affect student learning and satisfaction (Prestridge, 2014).

Additionally, there are a variety of ways that Twitter has been implemented across schools, as each implementation of Twitter is uniquely designed. For instance, in one study, a real-time Twitter feed was embedded into the course shell to allow for ready access to the program; additionally, a specific hashtag was used to sort responses (Rohr, Costello, & Hawkins, 2015). Because there is no consistency of use from faculty member to faculty member and because of the uniqueness of each class's objectives, it is not a program that affords for consistent implementation across multiple course designs. If Twitter was used differently in every class, it could potentially be confusing as each student progresses through his or her degree programs. One of the key job requirements of a faculty member in any class is to clearly communicate expecta-

tions. If Twitter is haphazardly added, it would negatively impact student learning.

Furthermore, Twitter's platform and fast-paced interface indeed are associated with many negative student concerns. For instance, Fox and Varadarajan (2011) report that students found many of the class tweets to be overwhelming, rapid-fire, confusing, repetitive, limiting, constraining, and unhelpful. An additional study found Twitter to simply be "too obtuse" for classroom discussion (Jacquemin et al., 2014, p. 22). Furthermore, Prestridge (2014) reports that functionality was a stumbling block for many students, whereas Welch and Bonnan-White (2012) noted that adding one more technology source to check into every day led to login overload, further adding to first-year student frustration. Research also indicates that students using Twitter began to "resent the incursion of staff into 'their' online space, fearing censure (rightly or wrongly)" (Manca, Lafferty, Fioratou, Smithies, & Hothersall, 2014, p. 336). Given the unique and varied needs of lower division college students, it is especially important in the online environment to choose learning venues that support student success while avoiding learning activities that may exacerbate frustrations or may unknowingly discourage students (Appana, 2008, p. 18). Because of the reported concerns associated with the use of Twitter, its implementation as a pedagogical tool must be seriously considered.

TWITTER'S STUDENT-PRIVACY CONCERNS

Next, an additional concern relates to student privacy. Twitter is open to everyone, and privacy settings must be considered. Faculty members should be careful when publically correcting students on Twitter because of the visibility of those Tweets and potential Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act issues if anything specific about a student is shared. Faculty

and students do not have to be as worried when using an LMS because it is always self-contained behind the institution's security. Students appreciate the privacy that the LMS affords and find it cumbersome and more risk-fraught to leave the LMS (Ross, Banow, & Yu, 2015). Also, when asked about the use of social media in the classroom, many students noted that what they liked least about social media is the lack of privacy that accompanies it (Gualtieri, Javetski, & Corless, 2012). Another concern is data collection; some institutions require anything that is graded to be submitted within the LMS. This might lead to a complicated grading procedure, further requiring students to complete convoluted additional steps to submit assignments or meet due dates. Due to such concerns, Twitter's use and implementation too easily becomes troublesome for both students and instructors alike.

TWITTER'S PERCEIVED QUESTIONABLE CREDIBILITY

Yet another perplexing concern associated with Twitter relates to its credibility. Due to Twitter's reputation being known as a social network, its academic authority as a source of information was often questioned by students (Bista, 2015). Furthermore, students often viewed the inclusion of Twitter as being a gimmick or trend rather than as a credible source of knowledge (Manca et al., 2014). Because Twitter is not perceived as a sound academic source by many students, its use in the online classroom needs to be limited or used sparingly, especially with students new to online learning in lower division courses to best protect the credibility of online learning.

TWITTER'S AMBIGUOUS ACADEMIC EFFICACY

A final potential concern regarding Twitter's use is that research conflicts

regarding the efficacy of it. As found by Ross et al. (2015) regarding first-year college student experiences with Twitter although “students who took part in the Twitter portion of the course did report a higher ‘sense of community,’ there was little difference in terms of ‘sense of engagement’” (p. 137). In addition, Twitter “does not achieve an improved perception of learning by the participants nor objectively of the total performance in the subject” (Fernández-Ferrer & Cano, 2015). Also, importantly, when using Twitter as a learning tool, intellectual growth was hard to measure given its use in the classroom (Bista, 2014). Manca et al. (2014) echo this observation, noting that around half of the students in their study did not find the way Twitter was used in their classroom to be helpful to their learning experience. Such information greatly concerns any faculty member who is trying to help her or his lower division students become more prepared for upper division programmatic courses and eventual graduation.

CONCLUSION

When selecting social media or multimedia tools to enhance learning, Kirkwood and Price (2014) warn against implementing technology-led learning activities, which are expected to transform learning through the use of technology rather than first identifying the educational problem and then choosing the most appropriate technological tool to address it. Given the controversial use of Twitter in the classroom, it is critical for instructors to take both the advantages and concerns associated with Twitter into consideration when using it in lower division courses. Moreover, its perceived questionability as a credible source and unclear efficacy as a learning tool should lead an instructor to carefully consider its inclusion in his or her curriculum.

Finally, in a study by Boston, Ice, and Burgess (2012) on retention in online

higher education, it was noted that many students who enter online universities tend to do so in a more exploratory attempt than in a traditional university. Coupled with this finding in the study, it was also noted that the ability to maintain a satisfactory grade point average contributes more to a student’s decision to remain enrolled than simply progressing, highlighting the importance of ensuring a user-friendly learning environment. Given these key findings on retention and because research indicates students often find Twitter to be complicated and overwhelming, when striving to create a learning environment meant to engender lower division student success, instructors should in general avoid incorporating controversial and complicated technologies such as Twitter. #edtech #successfulstudent

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