eTools: Using Twitter in the Classroom

Hayley C. Hoffman, University of Kentucky

Introduction

At a time when students' in-class technology use is on the rise, why not take advantage of a social media platform that they are already using to in order to supplement their learning? Twitter offers a space in which to not only support but also expand upon course content and class discussions for educators at all levels.

What is Twitter?

Launched in 2006, Twitter is a social networking platform that allows user to share 240-character (previously 140) "tweets" with others (Twitter Inc., 2014). The platform now boasts over 330 million users (Molina, 2017), all of which are given a handle (denoted with the symbol @) so that others may tag them in their tweets. After creating an account, the possibilities for engaging in lively discussion and debate are nearly endless. For example, tweets can include hashtags, denoted with the symbol #, which are easily searchable and often used to foster discussions amongst niche audiences on the website (e.g., #BlackLivesMatter, #FakeNews). Users can also share others' Tweets by "re-tweeting" their 240-character messages, sharing content either with or without their own commentary attached at the press of a button. Finally, users can view Twitter aggregated lists of popular hashtags and events, called "Moments," for quick summaries on the day's biggest news and entertainment stories.

With extensive outlets for discussion, there are many ways in which instructors can utilize Twitter in their classrooms. For example, instructors can create their own accounts and share their handles with students, many of whom are digital natives and no doubt already hold

an active account, so that they may share course content and/or spark class discussions on the platform. Though the information is public, a unique hashtag for each class will set these tweets apart and guarantee that only those with knowledge of the hashtag can view and/or access the discussion.

How can I get Twitter for the classroom?

In order to gain access to Twitter, all one needs is an active email account. Go to www.twitter.com and click on "sign up." You will then be prompted to enter your name, your email address, and password of your choice. You will then choose a handle, either from a list generated by Twitter or of your own creation. You will then double-check your information before clicking sign up once more. Twitter will then prompt you to choose your interests and to select several existing accounts to follow (e.g., Barack Obama, Donald Trump). After verifying your email address, your account will be active and you will be able to begin tweeting immediately. After an instructor has signed up, she may want to walk her students through the process so that those who do not have an existing account can join in classroom discussions. Students may choose to set up an account for academic use with their .edu email address and can do so by following the steps outlined above.

How can I use Twitter in the classroom?

Twitter offers ample opportunities to engage students in discussion as well as remain connected to and engaged with the course content no matter their physical location. More specifically, Twitter can be used:

1. **As "clickers" in the classroom.** Paul and Iannitti (2012) used Twitter as a replacement for clickers in the classroom, tracking student questions about and responses to lecture

material via a hashtag. Their setup allowed students to track the hashtag during class as well, with one screen behind the lecturer projecting questions about content and the over tracking students' responses in real-time. Instructors can use a class hashtag in a similar fashion to gauge students' interest and understanding throughout lectures and in-class activities.

2. **To add depth to classroom discussions.** Under the tenets of communication accommodation theory (CAT; Giles & Smith, 1979), Twitter has the potential to cause convergent communication amongst educators and their students. Parcha (2014), using this theoretical framework, had his students extend their classroom discussions on public speaking to the Twitter-verse. Using their class's hashtag, both he and his students critiqued and discussed sample speeches to extend their conversations beyond the classroom; Parcha (2014) wrote that the experience brought him closer to his students, with both parties able to "interact in the classroom more meaningful" (p. 234). Instructors can extend discussions beyond the physical classroom in a similar fashion, setting up and engaging online with students via a Twitter hashtag for the course.

3. **To update the course syllabus and instructor office hours.** Instructors can use their account to post updates for students, including changes to the syllabus (e.g., pushed back due dates for essays) or even update their office hours. For example, Dr. Jaemi Loeb, a professor of music at Grinnell College, uses her Twitter account (https://twitter.com/thedailyjaemi) to update her office hours and rehearsal schedules so that students may reach her when needed.

4. **To connect students with professionals in their field of study.** Instructors can connect students to the world beyond the classroom walls by engaging them in content-related discussions with professionals on Twitter. For example, Taylor and Weigel (2016) had students use the hashtag #scistuchat to discuss their course content with scientists on a weekly basis. Similarly, Messner (2009) used Twitter to connect her elementary-aged students with the authors of books they read in class. The students submitted their questions for authors to Messner (2009) in the days leading up to their planned chat, and then watched as their teacher sent their questions to the author via a pre-planned hashtag (i.e., #yeschat for the book *Operation Yes*). Connecting students with professionals via Twitter can help expand their personal learning networks (PLNs), allowing them to both connect with professionals and practitioners in their respective fields while also reminding them of a course's relevance outside the classroom.

Conclusion

Twitter is an excellent tool that allows educators at all levels to extend engagement with course content beyond the traditional bounds of a classroom. Having remained a popular social media platform since its inception over a decade ago, the possibilities for educational uses of Twitter truly are endless. As courses and course material become increasingly available online, Twitter provides opportunities to connect students, instructors, and professionals no matter their physical location—with a world of opportunity just a tweet away.

References

Giles, H., & Smith, P. (1979). Accommodation theory: Optimal levels of convergence. In H. Giles

(ed.), *Language and social psychology*. Baltimore: Basil Blackwell.

Kruger-Ross, M., Waters, R.D., & Farwell, T. M. (2013). Everyone's all a-twitter about Twitter:

Three operational perspectives of on using Twitter in the classroom. In K.K.

Seo(Ed.),*Using social media effectively in the classroom: Blogs, wikis, Twitter, and more*

(117-131). Philadelphia: Routledge.

Messner, Kate. (2009). Pleased to Tweet You: Making a Case for Twitter in the Classroom.

School Library Journal, 55(12), 44-47.

Molina, B. (2017). Twitter over-counted active users since 2014, shares surge on profit hopes.

USA Today. Retrieved from

https://www.usatoday.com/story/tech/news/2017/10/26/twitter-overcounted-active-

users-since-2014-shares-surge/801968001/

Parcha, J. (2014). Accommodating Twitter: Communication Accommodation Theory and

Classroom Interactions. *Communication Teacher, 28*(4), 1-7.

Paul, J., & Iannitti, N. (2012). On Beyond Clickers: Twitter as a Classroom Response System.*The*

Journal of Health Administration Education, 29(4), N/A.

Taylor, A., & Weigel, E. (2016). Using Twitter for Student Learning & Connecting with

Scientists.*American Biology Teacher, 78*(7), 599-602.

Twitter, Inc. (2014). Twitter turns six. *Twitter*. Retrieved from

https://blog.twitter.com/official/en_us/a/2012/twitter-turns-six.html