

Chapter 8

Instructional Uses of Twitter

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Learning Management Systems (LMSs) are modeled after classrooms. While they are fully capable of supporting some learning activities (e.g., information and document sharing, asynchronous and synchronous discussion, and online tests and quizzes), they are incapable of supporting others. For instance, LMSs currently cannot support the just-in-time, and sometimes playful, interactions that happen before and after class, during a break, and so forth. Out-of-the-classroom interactions like these have potential instructional value (Kuh, 1995) and can help strengthen interpersonal relationships between and among faculty and students. In the following chapter, we briefly highlight some instructional uses of Twitter—a Web 2.0, microblogging tool.

Social Presence and Online Learning

Social presence is a concept well established in the online education. It refers to the “ability of participants in a Community of Inquiry to project their personal characteristics into the community, thereby presenting themselves to other participants as ‘real people’” (Garrison et al., 2000, pp. 89). Short, Williams, and Christie (1976), originally developed it to explain the effect telecommunications media can have on communication, social presence was used to describe the degree of salience (i.e., quality or state of “being there”) between two communicators using a communication medium. It took on new importance with the rise of computer-mediated communication (CMC) and later online learning (Lowenthal, in press, 2009). Social presence is now a central concept in online learning; researchers have shown—to varying degrees—a relationship between social presence and student satisfaction (Gunawardena, 1995; Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997; Richardson & Swan, 2003), social presence and the development of a community of learners (Rourke, Anderson, Garrison, & Archer, 2001; Rovai, 2002), and social presence and perceived learning (Richardson & Swan, 2003).

Faculty have tried different ways to establish and maintain social presence within an LMS (e.g., incorporating audio and video, posting instructions, and providing frequent feedback; see Aragon, 2003 or Lowenthal and Parscal, 2008, for more strategies) as well as different ways to do it using tools outside of an LMS (e.g., DuVall, Powell, Hodge, & Ellis, 2007) investigated using text messaging to improve social presence).

Social Presence and Twitter

Despite the success faculty have had establishing social presence with the tools contained in an LMS, these tools seem inherently limited to some degree because they reside within the online system. Communication between and among students and faculty is scheduled based on when they have a moment to login to the LMS. Because of this, there are many lost opportunities during the day to interact and connect. Further, limiting all social interaction and connection opportunities within a LMS results in a loss of informal, free-flowing, just-in-time banter and chit-chat that we have with

students in our on-campus courses—the banter that helps us get to know each other, experience our personalities, and connect on a more emotional level.

We have tried to address this within the LMS by incorporating weekly fun activities (e.g., coming up with captions for goofy photos, or competing in online games), establishing discussion forums on non-academic topics, having students produce music playlists for the week, and the like. However, these strategies do not seem to do enough to enhance social presence.

And then we started using Twitter. Twitter (see <http://www.twitter.com>) is a multiplatform Web 2.0, application part social networking - part microblogging tool, freely accessible on the Web (Stevens, 2008). According to the Twitter website,

Twitter is a service for friends, family, and co-workers to communicate and stay connected through the exchange of quick, frequent answers to one simple question: What are you doing?

The people who participate in the Twitter community, however, use it for more than providing updates on their current status. In 140 characters or less, people share ideas and resources, ask and answer questions, and collaborate on problems of practice; in a recent study, researchers found that the main communication intentions of people participating in Twitter could be categorized as daily chatter, conversations, sharing resources/URLs, and reporting news (Java et al., 2007). Twitter community members post their contributions via the Twitter website, mobile phone, email, and instant messaging—making Twitter a powerful, convenient, community-controlled microsharing environment (Drapeau, 2009). Depending on whom you choose to follow (i.e., communicate with) and who chooses to follow you, Twitter can be effectively used for professional and social networking (Drapeau, 2009; Thompson, 2007) because it can connect people with like interests (Lucky, 2009). And all of this communication happens in real-time, so the exchange of information is immediate (Parry, 2008a; Young, 2008). If you are still having a problem getting your head around Twitter, view the following video cast our colleagues in CU Online at the University of Colorado Denver have created about Twitter: <http://www.techheds.com/2008/07/11/techheds-video-cast-1-twitter/>

Twitter in Action

Faculty have recently begun experimenting with using Twitter in the “classroom” (Parry, 2008a). Parry explains that despite his initial skepticism, he found that Twitter can be an effective tool in the classroom in part because of its ability to “blur the lines of the classroom” (Parry, 2008b). An example of how Parry uses Twitter in his classroom can be found online (see: <http://outsidethetext.com/trace/38/>). Communication faculty are not the only one’s using Twitter in the classroom; Twitter has also been used in public relations (Sweetser, 2008), project management (Keefer, 2008), medical education (van den Broek, 2009), language learning (Ullrich, Borau, Luo, Tan, L. Shen, & R. Shen, 2008), and information systems (Sendall, Ceccucci, & Peslak, 2008) courses, to name a few.

During the fall of 2008, we incorporated Twitter into our online instructional design and technology courses. We did not require students to participate, but invited them to join us in our Twitter adventure as we tested its instructional potential. Although not everyone chose to participate, most did with positive results. The following describes our students’ typical experiences using Twitter:

- A student is reading something in the textbook and has a question about the chapter on multimodal learning. She immediately tweets (i.e., posts) her question to the Twitter community, and gets three responses within ten minutes)—two responses from classmates, and one from Joni (her professor).
- A student is working on an assignment and is wondering about embedding music into a slideshow presentation. He tweets a question to the group and a practicing professional points the student to different online resources that explain how to embed music. Within a half hour, the student has embedded music in his slideshow presentation.
- A student sends a private tweet (i.e., a private message that only the named recipient receives) to Joni regarding a difficult situation with a project team member. While in the middle of a meeting, Joni immediately tweets back, arranging a time to talk with the student outside of Twitter.
- A student finds a great video about storyboarding on YouTube and posts the URL to Twitter. Her find is retweeted (i.e., reposted) three times because others also think the video is great and worth sharing.
- Joni and Patrick, who are both away at conferences, tweet various updates about what they are hearing and seeing at the conference.
- A student tweets that she is tired and going off to bed. She receives two tweets back from classmates wishing her a good night.

By using a tool that enables just-in-time communication with the local (our course) and global (practicing professionals) community, we were able to engage in sharing, collaboration, brainstorming, problem solving, and creating within the context of our moment-to-moment experiences. Because of Twitter's ability to enable persistent presence (Siemens, 2007), our social interactions occurred more naturally and immediately than when we have to login to the LMS, navigate to the appropriate discussion forum, post a message, and then waiting for someone to respond (after we already moved on to other work, thoughts, and issues). For another instructional example of Twitter in action, see <http://teachingpr.blogspot.com/2008/01/48-hours-of-twitter-class-assignment.html#links>

Other Instructional Benefits of Twitter

Besides the benefit of enhancing the potential for positive social presence during online learning opportunities, Twitter has other instructional benefits:

- **Addressing student issues in a timely manner.** Our students used Twitter for time-sensitive matters: to ask us for clarification on content or assignment requirements, notify us of personal emergencies, and alert us to issues that need our attention and action.
- **Writing concisely.** Because a tweet is limited to 140 characters, this encouraged students to write clearly and concisely. Although a very informal writing style, it is a professionally useful skill for students to develop, especially given the growing popularity of this category of communication tool.
- **Writing for an audience.** Although Twitter elicits open sharing and an informal writing style, it is nevertheless critical to know your audience and share accordingly. Participating in the Twitter community helped our students learn to be sensitive to their audience, and make professional decisions about what perspectives and ideas they should publically contribute and what perspectives and ideas should remain private.

- **Connecting with the professional community of practice.** A great benefit of participating in Twitter was that many practicing professionals also participate, including the authors of two of our textbooks. Besides the networking potential, students received immediate feedback to their questions and ideas from practicing professionals, which served to enhance their understanding of our course content and their enculturation into the professional community of practice.
- **Maintaining on-going relationships.** Although the semester is over, we are still in daily communication with several students from the courses. This allows us to continue to advise students academically and professionally.

Possible Drawbacks

Twitter, like other Web 2.0 tools, is not appropriate for all instructional situations. For instance, Twitter can be time-consuming, addictive, and possibly even encourage bad grammar as a result of its 140-character limit (Grosseck and Holotescu). Further, faculty and students alike might prefer not to be a part of each other's social network. See Grosseck and Holotescu (2008) and Lavallee (2007) for a complete list of drawbacks of using Twitter for educational purposes.

Conclusion

We set out to enhance the social-presence potential of our online courses using Twitter. Overall, we found that Twitter helped us accomplish this. We have found Twitter to be a powerful tool for establishing informal, free-flowing, just-in-time communication between and among students and faculty, and with the professional community at large.

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Bios

Dr. Joanna Dunlap is an associate professor of instructional design and technology at the University of Colorado Denver. An award-winning educator, her teaching and research interest's focus on the use of sociocultural approaches to enhance adult learners' development and experience in postsecondary settings. For over 13 years, she has directed, designed, delivered and facilitated distance and eLearning educational opportunities for a variety of audiences. She also works in the Center for Faculty Development as the Faculty Fellow for Teaching, sharing ideas about teaching with online and on-campus faculty across the university.

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