

7-19-2011

Connecting with What Is Out There!: Using Twitter in the Large Lecture

Adam W. Tyma
University of Nebraska at Omaha, atyma@unomaha.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/commfacpub>

 Part of the [Communication Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Tyma, Adam W., "Connecting with What Is Out There!: Using Twitter in the Large Lecture" (2011).
Communication Faculty Publications. 92.
<https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/commfacpub/92>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Communication at DigitalCommons@UNO. It has been accepted for inclusion in Communication Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@UNO. For more information, please contact unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu.

Connecting with What Is Out There!: Using Twitter in the Large Lecture

Adam Tyma

Objectives: Students and teachers will develop both practical skills and theoretical/cultural understanding with regards to how Twitter can be used to present ideas and create dialogue between individuals and communities within and outside the classroom.

Course(s): Primarily, this student engagement method can be used in any large lecture class (e.g., Introduction to Mass Communication, Introduction to Communication Studies). However, such methods can be used for any course where frequent and short communications are required and/or encouraged between members of the class.

Rationale

Walk across any K-12 or college campus today and you will more than likely see community members (students, faculty, etc.) “attached” to some sort of portable multimedia web-browsing device. With the desire for more and more campuses to develop their online or hybrid curricula, expanding our pedagogy to include realtime technology in the classroom not only makes sense but can also be done with little or no additional technological investment. The use of technology in the classroom to aid in student learning, help streamline grading, assignments, and discussions, or simply to alleviate physical office hour meetings has not only been around for some time but has been pushed, debated, and left many faculty feeling the “hype” surrounding classroom technology does not meet their needs. Research into that same use of technology, particularly with the rise of Facebook, “clickers,” and Blackboard (or its peers), has recently increased in the academic literature (e.g., Boon & Sinclair, 2009; Liu, 2008). For communication scholars and teachers, however, the “how-tos” that are often necessary with such technologies are not that easy to find. Since web-based social media technologies within the classroom are relatively new, this is not surprising.

Particularly in a large lecture course, Twitter (a social media networking tool) can be used as an additional way for students to have voice in the large lecture classroom. As is experienced by most large-lecture classroom instructors, anonymity is a student’s best friend and worst enemy (e.g., Kryder, 2002). Though there may be a room of 125 students (as it is for this pilot project), the same 1015 students will engage in face-to-face discussion, while the rest are using laptops, smartphones, or other mobile devices, perhaps to take notes on the class; unfortunately, though, this is not always the case.

Twitter provides students with an additional channel to communicate in the classroom using technology with which they are already familiar. The logic behind using Twitter in the classroom is threefold: (1) it is free to use; (2) it allows for a cataloging of the conversations; (3) the chance of students bringing appropriate technology into the

classroom (e.g., laptop, Smartphone, mobile phone with a texting plan) is rather high - why not use the technology to our advantage?

Other web-based platforms are available for teachers to use on campuses (e.g., BlackBoard; Desire2Learn) and have similar functionality. However, unlike those other platforms, Twitter can be accessed by either computer or mobile phones (smartphones by application or web browser, other mobile phones by text message). In addition, Twitter's inherent limitations (no more than 140 characters may be entered and transmitted at a time) construct an environment where students must be on-task and to the point in their communication. Other disciplines have begun using this particular technology in their classrooms (e.g., Parslow, 2009; Young, 2009), with both successes and additional questions coming out of the experiences. The following discussion presents how Twitter was used in the introductory mass communication course at a medium-sized, Midwestern, urban university. Though the ideas presented are particular to that course, you should be able to adapt this to your particular needs.

Objective(s)

First and foremost, particularly in an Introduction to Mass Communication course, it is important for students to not just read about or study the various media in the abstract but engage it first hand; using Twitter in the classroom allows for this. Second, using Twitter during the class allows for students who are more comfortable interacting digitally rather than verbally to express themselves. Third, as students develop ideas, they can simply post them rather than raising their hands and waiting to be called on (a large lecture rooms will, unfortunately, distance students from the instructor). By monitoring the Twitter feed, the instructor can incorporate these ideas into the overall discussion. Finally, through this possible co-construction of the discussion in the class, students are provided the space to have stock in the class, allowing them to develop the class and, by extension, their own knowledge.

At the broadest level, Twitter allows for convenient and instantaneous feedback via an alternative medium from students during a course discussion, lecture, and so on. Additionally, Twitter use by students provides a way for students to give their ideas voice in an environment (the large lecture classroom) that is sometimes considered frightening or intimidating. Plus, this technology provides an option for students 176 Communication Teacher (and faculty) to experience technologically mediated interactions without investing into additional hardware or software for students and universities alike.

Activity

What is "Twitter"?

Twitter (<http://Twitter.com>) is a social networking utility, in some circles referred to as "micro" or "nano" blogging, used by companies, organizations, and individuals alike to bring information to subscribers and the public alike. Unlike other social networks (e.g.,

Facebook; MySpace, Friendster), Twitter's interface allows short, 140-character posts (referred to as "tweets") to be broadcast. These tweets can then be re-tweeted (essentially forwarded) by other users, expanding the reach of the original message. Simply put - the more people that subscribe to your particular Twitter account, the more potential primary, secondary, and tertiary receivers of your message there are.

Twitter in the Classroom - Preparation

In order to have success in the classroom with Twitter, you will want to become knowledgeable about Twitter and its functionality. You will also want to be sure that you have the proper technology in the classroom to facilitate a real-time online discussion. I am fortunate that the classroom in which I teach has two large screens that can be operated independently of one another (e.g., one screen can have the actual Twitter feed from the computer while the other is used for presenting a movie). You will also want to be sure that phones and Wi-Fi connections work in the classroom. Alternately, your classroom may have Ethernet ports into which students can plug laptops. In any case, you will want to be sure that your students are able to engage the discussion properly. Technological shortcomings in the room will quickly dissuade your students.

After some personal trial and error, here are several steps to complete before Twitter should make its appearance in the classroom:

(1) Become familiar with Twitter before you start using it in the classroom. The easiest way to do this is to create your own account and start following others (if you want to follow my feed for practice, you can at <http://Twitter.com/AdamWTyma>);

(2) Once you have become familiar with how Twitter operates, create a new Twitter account for your class, something that is not only unique but that can be used repeatedly for that case (e.g., for my class, <http://Twitter.com/UNOIntroToMComm>). In addition, create a "hash tag" (e.g., #JOUR1500p1) to help track the conversation. A hash tag is a line of text that Twitter can use to track any tweets that have that line of text in them (search "#UNOJOUR1500PNL1 or 2 or 3" on Twitter for an example from recent speaker panels in my class). Each student adds this to her or his post to make it a more smooth conversation on Twitter;

(3) Now that the feed is developed, you must decide how you will use it in the classroom. These are the guidelines used in my particular class (Currently, these rules are created by me. As more students become familiar with this particular text, co-constructing the rules would be preferable):

a. Use of the Twitter feed is not mandatory, nor is it graded. This is important for students to realize, particularly those that are unable or see no value in using this particular technology. Do not make the mistake of

unintentionally shaming students by privileging this technology (and those who are using it) over students who do/cannot;

b. The Twitter feed is one of several communication media that might be used during our class sessions;

c. You may use the Twitter feed to comment on the discussion in the class or to bring up ideas we may not have even considered. In addition, you are more than welcome to post relevant links, events, and so on that the class could benefit from examining or attending;

d. You may NOT publish personal attacks (“flaming”), inappropriate comments or links, or otherwise utilize the Twitter feed in a non-course related way. It is important that students realize you are serious about this. Twitter is a real-time feed, meaning (like an instant message chat) there is no way to monitor what may actually be tweeted if it is to be projected in the classroom. I might encourage an honor point system that can impact the student’s grade if s/he engages in such behavior. As we engage this technology more, we may be able to find ways to stop a comment from becoming public;

(4) Once the rules have been developed, you will want to run a quick tutorial on how to use Twitter for you students. I have included the link to an online tutorial video below;

(5) The final step is to simply start using it. It may take a couple of sessions to work the kinks out, but the benefits of the conversations being on the “big screen” really do outweigh the start-up “costs.”

Though these steps may not cover everything that would be particular to your needs, they should help you start down the right path.

Twitter in the Classroom - Uses

Once you have set up the Twitter account, practiced with the various functions within Twitter, and put together how you want to use it, it is time to start the first conversation. In my classroom, there are several ways that Twitter will be used. I will outline each of them in turn to give you an idea of what you can do with it:

(1) Guest Speaker - Throughout the course of the semester, I had the fortune to host three guest speakers from the community. The first is a news reporter at the local newspaper; the second is the director for the non-profit independent movie house in city; the third is the direction for media relations for our campus, as well as a member of the social media elite in our city. During each of their discussions, the Twitter feed would be available for students to post questions or comments if they so chose instead of raising their hand and communicating verbally. The guests appreciated the fact that they could not only read the

questions but also post their own thoughts, examples, links, and so on on the feed for students to look at (and for me to archive). As more students would use the feed, others would follow suit. The conversation became more interactive in these sessions than I have seen in others where an alternative communication channel did not exist.

(2) Class Discussion - The central reason to use Twitter. During particular discussions, the Twitter feed allows students to ask questions or post ideas that help to move the conversation forward. Twitter will update automatically, so you do not need to keep a vigilant eye on the computer the entire time. However, if the feed is slow, or the connection is lagging, you may need to refresh the page every few minutes. Alternately, you could ask one of your students or (if you are fortunate to have one) your teaching assistant to do the same. The ability for students to see their ideas on the screen and how those ideas shape the trajectory of the conversation that day may aid in how they see their place as an active owner of the learning process.

(3) In-Class Exercises - Contrary to some thoughts, you can have small group activities in the large lecture classroom (Yazedjian & Kolkhorst, 2007). Twitter provides a near-immediate conduit for such activities. Once the groups are selected (either through creating work teams the beginning of the semester, grouping by location, or self-selection), ask the group to ensure that at least one of the members can post on the Twitter feed. As the group comes up with ideas based on the activity prompt, the group member can post to the feed. Once the feed updates, and while the other groups continue to work, you can announce what is coming across. This allows students to self-monitor their group progress compared to others.

There are other ways that the Twitter feed could be used in the classroom, but these three are the primary uses that have developed in my own classroom.

Debrief

As a Teacher

The whole reason I wanted to try this came after seeing a video on YouTube (Smith, 2009) discussing a professor at UT-Dallas (Dr. Monica Rankin) using Twitter in her own classroom. I was quite inspired by the comments by both the instructors (professor and graduate students) and the students. From my place at the “head” of the class, I have watched students engage the conversations that may not have otherwise. It has been inspiring to see students who find themselves in the proverbial “nosebleed” seats of the lecture hall engaging the class. They may not be raising their hands, but their ideas have progressed and inspired the overall conversation in the class.

As a Student

As with all technologies, Twitter in the large lecture classroom has both its fans and critics. There have been both positive and negative responses to this experiment in my own classroom. During a formative assessment of the class (around midsemester) and the semester course evaluations, I asked students to discuss the Twitter component of the class voluntarily as part of the overall course experience. Where some students feel that the Twitter feed “really helps with the class,” “I really enjoy this class with the interactions and Twitter feeds,” and “I like that my voice can be heard without interruption,” others commented that “it was a good idea but I think you need to tell people it should just be used for discussion and not random rants about useless things,” “a quick tutorial would be helpful,” and “to me it is a distraction.” There were comments on both sides of the fence, but the majority of the students thought it worked well. As the Twitter component to the course is developed further, the suggestions from the student assessments will help in its use and usability.

Appraisal

Overall, using Twitter as an additional or alternative communicative medium in the large lecture classroom was a success. Given the comments above from students, Twitter was not something that everyone wanted to use. Some students saw Twitter as “one more thing” to keep track of while others thought the technology was clunky. In part, this might be alleviated by a more directed training session at the beginning of the class. Even with these comments in mind, the Twitter experiment was overall a positive one and will be used again in the future with further assessment.

Twitter provides a way for the large lecture students to present their ideas, to help shape the conversation within the classroom, and really to take ownership of their learning. New and cost-effective technologies can provide a way for the student to become an active part of the pedagogical process - Twitter provides one way to make that happen.

Suggested Academic Twitter Feeds

Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication
(<http://Twitter.com/AEJMC>)

Critical Theory and the Study of Popular Culture (<http://Twitter.com/PopAcademy>)
Twitter feed for Critical Theory and Popular Culture course at Christopher Newport University (North Carolina)

Introduction to Mass Communication (<http://Twitter.com/UNOIntroToMComm>) *Twitter feed for Introduction to Mass Communication, University of Nebraska at Omaha (Nebraska)*

National Communication Association (<http://Twitter.com/NatComm>)

Suggested “How-To” Videos for Twitter

Howcast.com (n.d.). How to use Twitter [Video file]. Retrieved from <http://www.howcast.com/videos/149055-How-To-Use-Twitter>

References and Suggested Readings

Boon, S., & Sinclair, C. (2009). A world I don't inhabit: Disquiet and identity in Second Life and Facebook. *Educational Media International*, 46(2), 99-110.

Kryder, L. G. (2002). Large lecture format: Some lessons learned. *Business Communication Quarterly*, 65(1), 88-93.

Liu, M. (2008). An Extreme Facebook Makeover: Using social network sites to teach interpersonal communication. Paper presented at the 2008 National Communication Association Annual Convention, San Diego, CA.

Parslow, G. R. (2009). Multimedia in biology and molecular biology education. Commentary: Twitter for educational networking. *Biochemistry and Molecular Biology Education*, 37(4), 255-256.

Smith, K. (2009, May 2). The Twitter Experiment UT Dallas [Video file]. Retrieved June 30, 2010 from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v6WPVWDkF7U8>

Yazedjian, A., & Kolkhorst, B. B. (2007). Implementing small-group activities in large lecture classes. *College Teaching*, 55(4), 164-169.

Young, J. R. (2009, November 22). Teaching with Twitter: Not for the faint of heart. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Retrieved June 20, 2010, from <http://chronicle.com/article/Teaching-With-Twitter-Not-for/49230/>