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Tian Luo

Old Dominion University, tluo@odu.edu

Teresa Franklin

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“You got to be follow-worthy or I will unfollow you!” Students’ Voices on Twitter Integration into Classroom Settings

Tian Luo
Ohio University
USA
tl303308@ohio.edu

Teresa Franklin
Ohio University
USA
franklit@ohio.edu

Abstract: This research centers on a case study where twitter was integrated in an undergraduate level course. Under the instructor’s specific guidance and ongoing feedback, students actively participate in the course both in and outside of classroom. They perceived the incorporation of Twitter into classroom to be highly engaging and contributive to their learning. During the 10 week course, students’ initiatives in developing self-defined codes of conduct for tweeting, creating user groups, and assisting one another to become proficient in using Twitter, demonstrated a high degree of autonomous social learning in both formal and informal learning environments. Not only were they motivated to utilize social media, but they also developed a high degree of self-disciplined and self-exploratory learning attitude in using those social tools for learning.

Introduction

Microblogging is an online publishing blogging tool, which allows a small amount of text-based content to be displayed on the user’s profile page (Java, Song, Finin, & Tseng, 2007). By publishing content on one’s microblogging page, users are able to connect with others in a wide network and share what is happening to them with the rest of the world. Some microblogging tools also allow for multimedia content—the user can exchange small elements of multimedia content such as text messages, individual images, and video links.

The most well-known microblogging tool is undoubtedly Twitter, which was launched in 2006. By allowing for no more than 140 words in a post called a “tweet”, it enables users to publish brief text updates for real-time as well as asynchronous communication (Grosseck & Holotescu, 2008). There are a great number of other microblogging platforms, such as Tumblr, Jaiku, Qaiku, and Yammer. Google also launched GoogleBuzz in 2010 which added another new microblogging service. Speaking of Twitter alone, it takes up to 200 million users (Shiels, 2011) to date.

Although microblogging primarily serves as a communication tool, its unique affordances in education have been investigated in recent years. In essence, microblogging can serve as a mediating platform for student-student and student-teacher interaction. In formal classroom settings, microblogging can be utilized to enhance interactivity: students can post tweets to ask questions, share ideas, seek for advice or support by having discussion with each other (Grosseck & Holotescu, 2008). In after-class settings, microblogging provides a variety of opportunities to facilitate student collaboration and informal learning in a ubiquitous manner (Ebner, Lienhardt, Rohs, & Meyer, 2010; Ebner & Maurer, 2009; Franklin & Van Harmelen, 2007; Grosseck & Holotescu, 2008).

Such tools allow wider participation than a traditional chat room, and create online communities where interaction, discussion, and collaboration can take place among a group of users at different geographical locations (Java, Song, Finin, & Tseng, 2007). Although this interaction and collaboration are often perceived as informal and even sometimes playful (Dunlap & Lowenthal, 2009), many scholars believe that Twitter and other microblogging tools have potentials in promoting learning. With microblogging tools, resources can be instantly shared within a group of learners, ideas can be exchanged and feedback can be provided immediately (Click & Petit, 2010; Hansen, 2011; Paz, 2009; Thames, 2009). A learning community can be easily created and maintained through online communication supported by microblogging tools, making collaborative learning possible (Holotescu & Grosseck, 2009; Junco, Heiberger, & Loken, 2011).

Despite the enthusiasm in integrating microblogging tools into teaching and learning, empirical studies that rigorously investigate how students use of microblogging tools for learning and how students perceive microblogging-supported learning experiences are limited. This study aims to examine how students learn through the Twitter-enhanced environments and to explore students’ viewpoints on incorporating twitter into educational settings.

Research Questions

The research questions that guided this study are:

1. How did students perceive Twitter's integration in the course?
2. From students' perspective, how Twitter could be used in classroom settings?
3. From students' perspective, what are the constraints of using Twitter in classroom settings?

Methods

This study used case study methodology involving both quantitative and qualitative approaches to explain how this small unit, students used twitter to facilitate their learning. Twitter was integrated into the undergraduate-level class which aims to examine the structure, function, and social impact of the major forms of new media in the United States. The course gives students an understanding of the role of the new media in society and provides them with a foundation for becoming critical new media users and practitioners.

Twitter was introduced into the class in its second week. Although the instructor stated the educational benefits of and justifications for using Twitter in this class, the Twitter experiment was completely voluntary. The only explicit incentive was that students who participated in this Twitter experiment would be given five extra credits by the instructor. 14 students of the total 16 students voluntarily agreed to participate in the Twitter experiment. The instructor continuously provided guidance and feedback for students to better maintain the Twitter usage into their learning (See detailed activities in Table1). Starting from the ninth week, students were asked to participate in interviews conducted by the researcher and the interview process continued for two weeks. Ten of them participated in the interview, which lasted 15 to 30 minutes for each person. On the tenth week, all participants (12 students) were handed paper-based surveys to complete as a post-test.

Activities

Set clear goals
Provided specific guidelines and instructions for posting
Set up an aggregator account @socialmedia470
Provide Continuous feedback in class
Reply for participation on Twitter
Ongoing weekly report through email

Table1: A List of Twitter activities

Students' Voices of Using Twitter into Classroom Settings

As analyzed in both the survey and the interview section, almost all of the students believed in the considerable potential of incorporating Twitter into educational settings. They considered the integration of Twitter in this course to be fun, engaging, and beneficial to their learning. Just as a great number of researchers suggested (Borau et al., 2009; Dunlap & Lowenthal, 2009; Ebner et al., 2010; Holotescu & Grosseck, 2009; Junco et al., 2011; Rankin, 2009; Wright, 2010), Twitter can maximize the possibility of augmenting students' engagement and participation, enhancing their sense of community, facilitate in-class formal learning and informal learning beyond the classroom, and so on. From the interviews, we also see that this heavy user group of Twitter all believed in the values of introducing Twitter into educational settings.

Creative ways of Twitter integration

When asked to make use of hashtags, the advanced learners responded quickly and used hashtags in their tweets. One of them specifically mentioned ways to incorporate Twitter into the classroom setting, including creating class Twitter accounts; making class hashtags; using hash-tags# to initiate a discussion; bringing it up on the projector screen to showcase students' updates and thought simultaneously.

They also shared great ideas on how to incorporate social media into education. One of them stated, "High education should definitely capitalize on the power of social media and empower the use of social media in education." Many of them also suggested good ways of using social media, such as using Twitter as a new form of discussion board; using it for a large-size class to promote student engagement; using it for after-class reflection posts; using it for students to post their questions in-class when they are not able to follow but too shy to ask; using it for enhance instructor and student interaction after classroom and office hours.

One of them also suggested that educators use Twitter for high-schoolers since they are the younger age group who are on Twitter more frequently compared to the college age group. Some of the ideas in students' minds are already conducted in some research experiments (Holotescu & Grosseck, 2009; Rankin, 2009; Wright, 2010).

Voices from advanced Twitter-users

As most of the students were advanced Twitter users, they did set rigid boundaries on who to follow and what to share on Twitter. Five out of eight were senior social media users who had been on Twitter more than a year and who have hundreds of tweets before starting this experiment. They were not easy to be fooled, since they themselves could probably know more about social media than the instructor or at least had more personal experiences on Twitter. Although they were asked to follow every classmate on Twitter, one of them refused because she thought "some of the kids in class are not follow-worthy. I don't want to see their tweets on my wall." She further explained that "someone follows you because they like what you have to say, they have to find value of your tweets in order to follow you." It demonstrates that she has clear-cut standards for people that she follows.

Three of them mentioned their clear purposes of tweeting and their own distinctive definition of correct usage of Twitter: "Twitter is not Facebook, you don't do back and forth talks more than seven times. If you need to, go to Facebook or just simply call." "Twitter is more about sharing and networking. You gotta make the distinction between Twitter and Facebook. Nobody is really interested what you're doing on Twitter. So you're not supposed to tweet things like 'I am in the library or 'I am feeling happy' all the time." One of them said, "I believe Twitter is more for communication purposes, and I believe it could be for educational as well. But I don't want to be like just following everybody in a class and say that's educational."

Constraints

Difficulty in organizing the tweets. Four of the eight students in the Twitter group stated that it is difficult for them to keep track of and pay special attention to their peers' tweets when seeing a mass amount of tweets on their wall. Although the list was found helpful, some of them still perceived a difficulty to move an extra step to click on the list and see people's tweets within the list. "I have more than 300 people to follow and about that number who followed me, so there is too much attention to be drawn to elsewhere because of this large number. It's hard to focus on the class Twitter."

Difficulty in conveying meaningful idea. Students believe that some of their tweets or many people in the class still tweet about themselves, which is of little meaning to others. Especially for the novice Twitter group, since this was their first time getting on board, they are more inclined to be tweeting things exclusively about themselves which makes the advanced user group annoyed since it's nothing to do with them. The 140 character limit also poses a challenge in conveying solid information. "The 140 character limit definitely makes it much harder to carry on a conversation, especially if you are geared towards academic discourse. To completely express what I want to say in 140 characters without using abbreviations or chatspeak is difficult in any sense."

Disconnect in information flow. Two of them mentioned that they find it hard to perceive a central convergence of the information flow. "People's tweets are always in pieces." "There's a disconnection among people's tweets. I am not sure whether it is because of our course subject or something else, but there's something missing." "Sometimes it's easier to initiate a conversation, but it's much harder to carry on a conversation because sometimes you don't see that the conversation goes anywhere. It's easier to get confused on Twitter."

Conclusion

This research discusses students' perspectives in an undergraduate-level course where Twitter was incorporated to support learning. In addition to acknowledging the benefits of the Twitter incorporation in this course, students also suggested concrete and creative means of using Twitter in classroom settings. As advanced Twitter users, this group of students also offered constructive opinions of what role Twitter can play in educational settings and what things educators and students should be mindful of when microblogging tools are incorporated. Future research is needed to investigate the characteristics of this advanced user group and educators should take their views and characteristics into account when integrating microblogging tools.

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