

TWEETING THE NIGHT AWAY

Using Twitter to Enhance Social Presence

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INTRODUCTIONS

Many online educators tend to design the scope, structure, and function of an online course based on the tools available within a learning management system (LMS); that is, an LMS (e.g., eCollege, Blackboard, WebCT, Moodle) can constrain how online educators design and develop their online courses (Lane, 2007; Morgan, 2003; Siemens, 2006). While adequate for some basic learning activities (e.g., information and document sharing, asynchronous and synchronous discussion, and assessment via quizzes), LMSs are modeled after classroom settings with drop boxes, grade books, announcements, and so on. What tends to be missing is the just-in-time, and sometimes playful, interactions that happen before and after class, during a break, and when students and faculty bump into each other between class meetings. Out-of-the-classroom interactions like these and many others have potential instructional value (Kuh, 1995) and can help strengthen interpersonal relationships between and among students and faculty that enhance the learning community inside the classroom.

In this teaching tip, we describe our use of Twitter (2009)—a Web 2.0, microblogging tool—to enhance social presence in an online course by

providing a mechanism for just-in-time social interactions. We also touch on some other instructional benefits of using Twitter in online courses and conclude with guidelines to consider when using Twitter with students.

THE IMPORTANCE OF SOCIAL PRESENCE

Learning is a very human activity. The more people feel they are being treated as human beings—that their human needs are being taken into account—the more they are likely to learn and learn to learn. (Knowles, 1990, pp. 129)

When we design and teach online, we build in authentic and relevant opportunities for our students to interact and connect not only with the content but also with the instructor and each other (Dunlap, Dobrovolny, & Young, 2008; Dunlap, Furtak, & Tucker, 2009; Dunlap, Sobel, & Sands, 2007). In fact, students see social interaction and connection as a foundational attribute of our courses. We attend to the “socialness” of the courses we design and teach because we subscribe to the theory that learning, as a human activity, occurs within a social context, with higher cognitive processes originating from social interactions (Vygotsky, 1978). We also

believe that social interaction and connection has significant influence over student engagement.

A commonly used framework for “best practices” in undergraduate and graduate education, Chickering and Gamson’s (1987) *Seven Principles of Good Practice in Education*, describes seven principles that faculty can embrace to improve education. Developed from a review of fifty years of educational literature, Chickering and Gamson’s first principle is, “Encourages contact between students and faculty.” This first principle is influenced by instructor immediacy behaviors and participant interaction, with both having a positive influence on student learning and course satisfaction (Arbaugh, 2001, 2005; Baker, 2004; Hiltz and Wellman, 1997; Swan, 2002).

Contact between students and faculty in and outside of class is critical for student engagement because it influences student motivation and involvement. When faculty stay in touch with students through formal and informal communication and dialogue, students report that it helps them get through the rough times and keep on working. Knowing their instructors enhances students’ intellectual commitment and encourages them to think about their own values and plans (Chickering and Ehrmann, 1996).

Social presence, along with cognitive and teaching presence, is well established in the online education literature as a way of thinking about social connection and interaction for student engagement in online courses. As a component of the Community of Inquiry framework (see Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000), social presence 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, Anderson, & Archer, 2000, p. 89). Originally developed 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 (Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976).

Social presence theory took on new importance with the rise of computer-mediated communication (CMC) and later online learning (Lowenthal, in press, 2009). Now a central concept in online learning,

researchers have shown—to varying degrees—a relationship between social presence and student satisfaction (Gunawardena, 1995; Gunawardena and Zittle, 1997; Richardson and 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 and Swan, 2003). Because of results like these, researchers and practitioners alike continue to try out different ways to establish and maintain social presence in online courses. For instance, Aragon (2003) identified over a dozen different ways to create social presence in online courses (e.g., incorporating audio and video, posting introductions, frequent feedback). Others have looked at ways to create and maintain social presence by using tools outside of an LMS. For instance, DuVall, Powell, Hodge, and Ellis (2007) investigated using text messaging to improve social presence. Also, Keil and Johnson (2002) investigated using Internet based voice mail to increase social presence.

SOCIAL PRESENCE AND TWITTER

Although the typical LMS provides tools that—when used appropriately—can establish and increase social presence (e.g., asynchronous discussions, synchronous chat tools), the tools reside within the online system. Because students and faculty have to login and navigate to several different locations in the course to engage in discussion, collaboration, and sharing, the communication is sometimes forced and out of the context of day-to-day, hour-to-hour, and minute-to-minute experience. In other words, communication between and among students and faculty is scheduled based on when they have a moment to login to the LMS. This means that there are many lost opportunities during the day to interact and connect.

Another challenge of encapsulating all social interaction and connection opportunities within a LMS is that we tend to lose the informal, free-flowing, just-in-time banter and chitchat 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. This sort of informal connection between and among

students and faculty is one aspect of cultivating student engagement and social presence. Although we have tried to address this within the LMS by incorporating weekly fun activities (such as 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, these strategies do not seem to do enough to enhance social presence. As a result, we have been looking for additional ways to enhance social presence.

Twitter immediately seemed like an additional way to enhance social presence. Twitter (2009) is a multiplatform Web 2.0, part social networking—part microblogging tool, freely accessible on the Web (Stevens, 2008). Other popular Web 2.0 microblogging tools include Jaiku, Tumblr, MySay, Hictu, and Edmodo. Twitter, however, is one of the most popular of these microblogging tools (Java, Song, Finin, & Tseng, 2007; McFedries, 2007) and, therefore, was our tool of choice because it is well-established, has a large and growing participant base, interfaces well with other Web 2.0 tools, and is easily accessible.

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?* (Twitter, 2009). However, the people who participate in the Twitter community—people who are geographically distributed across all continents (with North America, Europe, and Asia having the highest adoption rate) (Java et al., 2007)—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).

TWITTER IN ACTION

Faculty have recently begun experimenting with how to use Twitter in the “classroom” (Parry, 2008a). Parry explains that despite his initial skepticism, he found that Twitter could 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 Parry, 2007).

Communication faculty are not the only ones using Twitter in the classroom. Twitter has also been used in public relations (Sweetser, 2008), project management (Keefer, 2008), medical education (van den Brock, 2009), language learning (Ullrich, Borau, Luo, Tan, L. Shen, & R. Shen, 2008), and information systems (Sendall, Ceocucci, & 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). This leads to several subsequent posts, including comments from two practicing professionals.

- 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 gets a response from Patrick (his professor) and a practicing professional. Both point the student to

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 a Professional Community of Practice

A great benefit of participating in Twitter is that many practicing professionals also participate. In our courses, for example, a number of the textbook authors participate in Twitter. Besides the networking potential, students receive immediate feedback to their questions and ideas from practicing professionals, which serves to reinforce the relevance of Twitter participation and enhance their understanding of our course content and their enculturation into the professional community of practice.

Supporting Informal Learning

Informal learning involves “activities that take place in students’ self-directed and independent learning time, where the learning is taking place to support a formal program of study, but outside the formally planned and tutor-directed activities” (Aspden and Thorpe, 2009). Twitter was one tool that students used to support their informal learning activities. Through their participation in the Twitter community, they discovered resources and tools that they effectively applied to their coursework.

Maintaining On-going Relationships

Student and faculty use of Twitter is not bound by the structure of an LMS or the timing of a semester. Twitter enables faculty and students to maintain on-going relationships after a course ends. 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. It has also allowed for a much more natural and organic progression of our relationships;

instead of severing our connections at the end of the semester, we are able to continue to be in community together, learning from each other and sharing our moment-to-moment experiences.

Possible Drawbacks of Twitter

Like most, if not all Web 2.0 tools, Twitter is not appropriate for all instructional situations. For instance, Grosseck and Holotescu (2008) identify a number of problems with using Twitter for educational purposes. 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, 2008). Further, while Twitter is free to use on a computer connected to the Web (whether accessed via a web browser or a Twitter client like Twirl), faculty and students might be charged texting or data fees if they access Twitter on their cell phone (depending on their cell phone plans). See Grosseck and Holotescu (2008) and Lavalley (2007) for a complete list of drawbacks of using Twitter for educational purposes.

Despite possible drawbacks like these, the instructional benefits encourage us to continue to incorporate Twitter in our online courses (as one more tool in our toolbox), and look at other Web 2.0 tools that may help us extend the instructional power of a LMS and further enhance the social-presence potential of the online learning opportunities we design and facilitate.

GUIDELINES FOR USING TWITTER WITH STUDENTS

Based on our experience using Twitter with our online students, we offer the following five guidelines:

Establish Relevance for Students

First and foremost, the use of Twitter in an online course needs to be relevant—have a clear purpose—for students to attend to it in personally, professionally, and academically meaningful ways. If students see using Twitter in a particular course as irrelevant then they will fail to participate in Twitter as hoped, and will fail to take anything of value away from the experience. Our strategy has been to show students

their jobs and families were doing. This is something much more intimate than mandatory weekly discussions, although they carry their own merit.

I really LOVE twittering with everyone. It really made me feel like we knew each other more and were actually in class together.

Twitter was a big part of my connected-ness, with course colleagues and with you. Even though I didn't post a lot of tweets, I watched the Twitter dialogue. It made the connections stronger and helped me learn more about folks in the course and you. And, Twitter led me to some great resources. Thanks, Joni, for being such a responsive Twitterer.

We also, and unexpectedly, concluded that involving students in the Twitter community also helps us attend to the other two components of the Community of Inquiry framework: cognitive and teaching presence.

Cognitive Presence

Cognitive presence is “the extent to which the participants in . . . a community of inquiry are able to construct meaning through sustained communication” (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000, p. 89). Interacting with us and other professional practitioners in Twitter, our students constructed meaning through sustained communication.

Teaching Presence

Teaching presence is the ability of a teacher or teachers to support and enhance social and cognitive presence through instructional management, building understanding, and direct instruction. Reflecting on the additional instructional benefits of Twitter, we clearly engaged in interactions with our students via Twitter that helped us attend to instructional management issues and students' knowledge building.

We encourage others to begin experimenting with Twitter in their classroom. However, formal and systematic research is needed to truly assess the value of using Twitter in the classroom as well as its relationship to social presence. All in all, though, 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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