

Twitter in Action: One Professor's Experience

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Abstract: Twitter, a social media tool, is a current traditional media darling. Twitter began as a way to share information between friends, particularly the everyday exchanges that make up any social group, but Twitter became much more, due to its ability to capture the global pulse with immediacy and to expand on its bare 140 characters with hyperlinks. At present, Twitter is one of the fastest-growing social media sites. The researcher seeks to bring the immediacy to her college course on government, LAW101, to increase student perception of the relevance of governmental actions to their lives. This paper describes the usage by the researcher of Twitter in her online, face to face, and hybrid LAW101 courses over the past three semesters.

The educational component

Educators often push the boundaries of education and technology in a constant search for better tools with which to communicate, encourage discussion, promote observation, and support critical thinking. Studies on how learners learn (Csapo & Hayen, 2006) support the use of varieties of these methodologies, not because they are new, but because they support the multiple ways by which learners learn. One new tool that has been the subject of considerable interest in academia is Twitter. Twitter, often defined as a type of microblogging, allows any user to post a short message and have it read, spread, and retweeted to the four corners of the world in much less than a day. No longer just the province of the geeks, Twitter has become mainstream, being featured on the cover of Time magazine in June 2009 and in numerous New York Times articles in 2009 and 2010. Twitter has a lot to offer, but it does not always fit neatly into academic practice. In this paper, the researcher demonstrates the ways that she used Twitter for three semesters in a row in the same course, each in a different format: face to face, hybrid, and online.

The research issue

Twitter is a popular social media tool that allows users to post brief updates of up to 140 characters, called tweets, to other Twitter users. It first went online in August 2006, and by December 2008, 19% of online adults ages 18 to 24 and 20% of online adults ages 25 to 34 have used Twitter or one of its less-popular competitors (Lenhart & Fox, 2009). While the initial use of Twitter was purely social, soon government, business, and news organizations began participating in Twitter. Now media outlets such as the New York

Times, the Wall Street Journal, and the Los Angeles Times; businesses such as Nike, Starbucks, and United Airlines; and government and service agencies such as the Red Cross, the United States Senate, and the Los Angeles Fire Department provide these Twitter updates for their followers. The content of these tweets is usually very timely. In some instances, such as the crash of an airplane into the Hudson River in February 2009, the first news report and photograph of the incident came on Twitter (Lamont, 2009).

The researcher teaches a course, LAW 101, the Hawaii Legal System, at Kapi`olani Community College, in which one of the course objectives is to familiarize the students with governmental functions in the legislative, executive, and judicial branches at the federal, state, and county levels. I often started the weekly face to face LAW 101 course with a newspaper clipping the tied currents events into these governmental functions. However, the once a week class time meant that often the clipping was several days old by the class date, and thus was not always topical. In addition, I also was starting to teach the course in an online asynchronous format, so the traditional start of class announcements would not be available.

I experimented with use of Twitter as a way to present the class with timely, same-day information to help the students see the relevance of real life experience to the classroom, and as a method that would work with online students as well. Social media is popular among college-age students (Pempek, Yermolayeva, & Calvert, 2009), and that use of Twitter might be seen as positive, not only for the content, but through the method itself.

I received anecdotal indications through classroom discussion that students were reading the tweets in the online, hybrid, and face-to-face LAW 101 sections. The purpose of this paper is to chronicle the use of Twitter over three semesters in an undergraduate law course. It is hoped that the findings will prove useful to educators implementing or considering the implementation of this technology tool.

Literature review

Twitter is an extremely popular but still a relatively new social media tool, having gone public in August 2006 (Lenhart & Fox, 2008). The Centre for Learning & Performance Technologies (<http://c4lpt.co.uk>) ranks the popularity of Web 2.0 tools for learning and polls technologists world-wide to develop a list of the “Top 100 Tools for Learning.” The most recent list, release in October 2009, ranked Twitter first, noting that in 2008 it was ranked 11th and in 2007, 43rd (<http://www.c4lpt.co.uk/recommended/index.html>) (Hart, 2009). Part of its popularity is due to the fact that compared to tools like email and blogging, Twitter is fast, short, and consumes a minimal amount of the users time (Java, Song, Finin, & Tseng, 2007).

Twitter’s rise has been meteoric, but there has been little educational research conducted on using it. While many websites talk about Twitter usage in the classroom, formal study is lacking. The less formal articles and discussion produce evidence that seems promising: one instructor used Twitter in computer-mediated classroom to get his students to feel part of a community (Skriba, 2008). Other instructors use Twitter during

classes to allow students to ask questions (Kirkpatrick, 2009; Kolowich, 2009). Medical and other libraries are using Twitter as a broadcast medium to deliver up to date information (DeFebbo, Mihlrad, & Strong, 2009). One instructor used it as a collaborative tool for his US-based students to write a book, collaboratively, one tweet at a time, with students from six different countries (Ash, 2008).

Concerns have been cited over using Twitter in educational setting, such as the loss of teacher control over content (Ash, 2008) and the arguably negative impact on student writing (Miners, 2009). For these reasons, Twitter is a tool that needs further research and exploration.

How Twitter Works

The Twitter format is deceptively simple. A person signs up for an account on the twitter.com webpage and selects a unique name. Once that is done, the new Twitter user can post short entries of up to 140 characters, including letters, punctuation, and spaces, called “tweets.” The next step is for the new Twitter user to begin building her community of followers by subscribing to other Twitter users she would like to see tweets from on her home page. This is called “following.” If that person finds the new user’s tweets of interest, he can follow her, but this is not required.

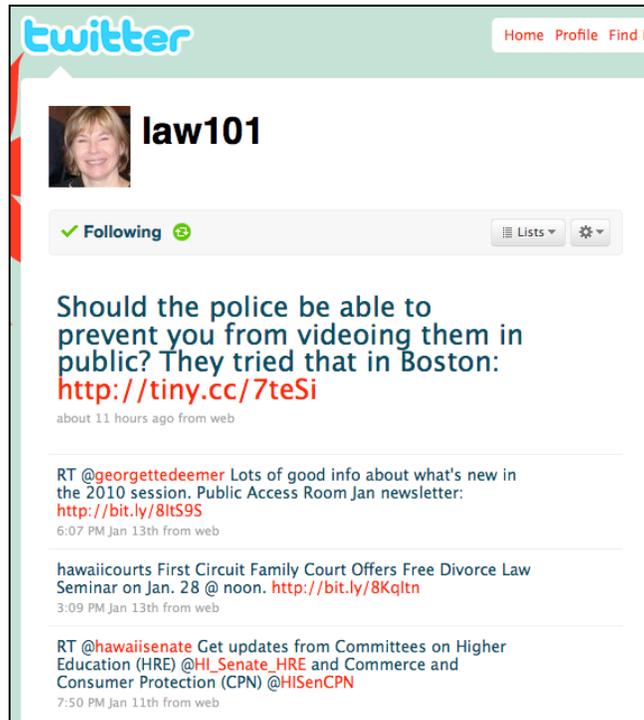
Twitter uses an asymmetrical model of community building (Java et al, 2007), as opposed to the symmetrical model used in popular social media sites such as Facebook. In Facebook, both parties have to agree to “friend” each other before either can see the other’s page. Everyone on a Facebook user’s friend list can see all of that person’s posting, and be seen by him. In contrast, each Twitter user selects which other Twitter users she wants to follow (the “following” list), and those users are notified of the new follower, but they are not obliged to follow her in return (to become a “follower”). While some Twitter users choose to follow everyone who follows them, which looks like the Facebook symmetrical model of “friends,” more typically the Twitter user carefully subscribed to - curates - the people that she wants to follow. For example, at the time this paper was finalized, Oprah Winfrey’s Twitter account was followed by 3,001,630 other users, meaning that Oprah’s tweets appeared on the home Twitter page of 3,001,630 followers. However, Oprah herself was only following 18 other Twitter users, meaning that she only saw tweets from 18 people she herself selected to follow.

A Twitter’s user’s curation, or careful selection of the people whose tweets she wants to see, plus the ability to elect to follow any public Twitter account without the need for reciprocity, allows the Twitter user to build a customized news source. My curation of my own personal Twitter page gave rise to the decision to begin using Twitter in the classroom.

Setting Up the @law101 Account

I already had a personal Twitter account. Some of the people I selected to follow were sources with material relevant to law and government. For example, Hawaii news sources, such as the political reporters for the Honolulu Advertiser and the Honolulu Star

Bulletin, and TV station KGMB9; national new sources, such as the New Your Times, the Los Angeles Times, and the Wall Street Journal; and legal resources, such as law librarians, paralegals, government officials, and lawyers, post regularly to Twitter. By following their Twitter accounts, their tweets came automatically to my personal account. I reviewed my Twitter account several times per day and often found at least one news item that would be relevant to the LAW 101 course. I then created a second Twitter account, called @law101 (Twitter names are preceded by the “@” sign), which I populated with selected relevant tweets gleaned from my personal account and outside research. Creating this second Twitter account, dedicated to the LAW 101 course, ensured me that I would be in full control over the tweets that appeared for my students.



Applying Twitter to the Courses

The structure of the three courses revolved around a course management system which supplied materials and a private social media tool, Ning for the class discussion. For the fall online course, the course management system was WebCT; for the summer hybrid and fall face to face course, the course management system was the open-source Sakai, rebranded for the University of Hawaii system as Laulima. For the fall online course, the tweets were fed into the Ning site using an RSS feed, so that the students did not have to go outside the two course sites, Laulima and Ning, to view them. This was the first semester that I used Twitter in class, and the first time I taught LAW 101 online. I found that I posted many more items on Twitter than the number of news items I had previously shared in class, as the class announcements were constrained by time and the tweets were not.

Another part of the reason for the increased number of news items conveyed through tweets was the ease of finding relevant, fresh news topics on Twitter. Another part of the difference is due to the staleness of news items when they are provided only once per week. A news item that I could bring in to class on the same day is fresh and topical; one that has been introduced, discussed, and concluded by the news media six days earlier is less stimulating, either due to the lack of novelty if students had already heard about it, or because it was not still being discussed in the news media or on the web, so there was no easy follow-up for the student by reading a newspaper, listening to the radio, or watching TV news. While I could have emailed the students or blogged about the news item, email was more formal and intrusive than I wanted, and blogging too slow and a process that requires students to come to a site to view the news. Twitter presents students with information at the course website. Because tweeting was less intrusive, I was free to post as often as I wanted. I posted 50 tweets for the 15 week semester, including four introductory tweets to prepare the students for Twitter. This averaged out to 3.3 tweets per week, which is an increase from the prior face to face course, where I would bring in at most one newspaper clipping per week.

For the summer hybrid version of LAW 101, I attempted a different approach. I set up a different Twitter account, @law101s09, and required each student to join Twitter and follow the account. In turn, I followed them, making the followers/following ratio symmetrical. Everything that I wrote as @law101s09 would be seen by the students on their home Twitter pages, and I would see everything they posted. It was hoped that making Twitter more interactive would increase the sense of community (Vesely, Bloom & Sherlock, 2007) and instructor immediacy (Schutt, Allen, & Laumakis, 2009) .

Sixty-one tweets were posted by me to the account, of which ten were specifically directed to answering student questions. This was a higher rate than in the fall, as the summer tweets were made over a six week period, so that the rate of informative tweets was 8.5 per week, a substantial increase over the spring rate of 3.3 per week. While the informational aspect of Twitter improved as more tweets were posted, my expectation that requiring students to have their own Twitter accounts would provide an added benefit was not realized. There were two key factors that prevented the student Twitter accounts from providing additional interactivity and educational benefit : first was the compressed scale of the summer course, which was taught in 6 weeks instead of 16. There was insufficient time for the students to get used to the tool. Second, during one class session in which the use of Twitter was going to be highlighted, Twitter experienced a denial of service attack that deprived most of the class from accessing it (Wortham, 2009), which lessened student confidence in using Twitter. As the enhanced benefit that I had expected did not materialize, I did not pursue this approach the following semester.

The fall face to face course reverted to the same Twitter account as the online spring course and dropped the interactivity feature. I posted 118 tweets, for a rate of 7.38 per week, or just over one per day. The rate of tweets increased from the spring posts due to the increasing number of news sources that had come online, making it easier for me to find relevant posts on a virtually daily basis. I did an informal class survey on the

successfulness of Twitter from the students' point of view. The results were encouraging and prompted me to obtain permission from the university's institutional review board to do a formal study of the student experience. At the time of this writing, the survey was in progress.

Conclusion

Twitter is a popular and easy to use tool that can assist an instructor in finding and posting extremely current information in his or her discipline. In the case of law and government, I have been able to find a variety of reliable primary and secondary sources that I provide to my student on a virtually daily basis. The increasing ability to post more current events from a variety of global sources has expanded the scope and thus the value of my tweets from the @law101 account. I am again again tweeting from the @law101 account to my spring online LAW 101 course this semester and will continue to study ways to apply Twitter to these courses.

Using Twitter solely as a communications tool sells the tool short. I predict other types of value that arise from Twittering in class, such as the increased sense of social immediacy for the students, which is particularly hard to establish in an online course. I also see a place in the class for students to become producers, not just consumers of knowledge, by giving them access to the LAW101 account and encouraging them to post news or observations relevant to class topics. I hope to move in this direction in a future course.

Samples of Tweets from @law101

Hawaii's government-mandated health care system is so good we're asking for exemption from fed plan: <http://bit.ly/2v7SSb>

Should the government ban sex offenders from church? If there are children there?
<http://bit.ly/37EraM>

How referendum skews the balance of powers: RT @richards1000: Chief Justice Speaks Out on California's Referendum System <http://j.mp/jC7I0>

Woman goes to jail because of Facebook poke: <http://bit.ly/q9Lbu>

RT @TechCrunch: Why The FCC Wants To Smash Open The iPhone
<http://tcrn.ch/2CGU> [see what the FCC, a fed agency, is doing to preserve access]

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