



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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USING TWITTER TO STAY CONNECTED

Never have both worlds and languages been so far apart as between me, a middle-aged college professor of 25 years, and my generation Y students. The world has changed dramatically in the 30 years that separate us. However, with the onslaught of the information age, fundamental ways of knowing and communicating have changed, too, making the same old system of conducting classes and interacting with students less relevant and almost obsolete.

Communicating in this new paradigm requires a different “language” than most college professors are accustomed to speaking, at least this college professor. To bridge this growing gap, and in an effort to increase engagement with my students, I decided to try to meet them in their unique communication arena—social networking sites. I hoped that by trying to speak to them in a language and a modality to which they would be more receptive, I would foster feelings of connectedness to the class and to me, and thus increase satisfaction with the course experience.

Toward this end, I set up Twitter accounts for each of my classes and encouraged my students to follow me through text messaging. I sent two to three tweets per week to each student, reminding each of current class topics, assignments, and tests, or just encouraging good work. I conducted a formative survey to collect attitudes towards using technology in this way and to get some baseline population data. I followed up at the end of the semester with a summative survey to see if Twitter was something worthwhile and valuable for me to use again. I found the results and feedback encouraging, and have expanded my use of Twitter this semester.

Twitter is a social networking website, created in 2006. A micro blog or tweet is a message of up to 140 characters. To use Twitter, authors set up accounts and invite people to “follow” them. When the author posts a tweet, the message is delivered to followers via the followers’ Twitter pages online or through

text messages. Celebrities such as Lindsey Lohan, Brittany Spears, Ashton Kutcher, and their fans’ age cohort use Twitter to keep their friends updated on current happenings in their lives—sometimes for things as mundane as what’s for lunch or who is wearing what. The author also has the ability to send a direct message to any one of his followers. Followers can have followers, potentially spreading information to millions of people through a complex web of followers.

According to Twitter, as of June 2010, nearly 65 million tweets were posted daily, which translates into about 750 tweets sent each second. Twitter is so popular that it is ranked as one of the 15 most-visited websites in the world. Although studies show that most of the content on Twitter, nearly 41%, is what cynics call “pointless babble” or what some social networking researchers call “social grooming” or “peripheral awareness,” my plan was to see if it could be used as an educational tool.

Procedure

For this study, four Twitter accounts were opened from the twitter.com website and four corresponding email addresses created through cableone.net. In each of three of my classes, I guided students through setting up a Twitter account for themselves via text message and then sending the request to Twitter to follow my Twitter feed for their class. This process is fairly straightforward and took about 10-15 minutes of class time. I then began sending tweets to each class on the days before the class met each week. My tweets, sent by text message to each student’s cell phone, consisted of reminders about homework, test dates, test study tips, as well as words of encouragement.

Each student received two to three texts from me each week. Students were surveyed at the beginning and end of the semester to get some baseline demographic data, information about technology-based literacy, and attitudes concerning technology. The summative survey was designed to see if any attitudes changed over the semester and to get the students’ perspectives on the success or failure of using Twitter for the class.



Results

Formative Survey. Ninety-eight students from one section of introductory chemistry and two sections of nutrition participated in the study. My student population was 85.7% female, with an average age of 21—with most students majoring in nursing.

The formative survey showed that students were open to the experiment—78.6% considered themselves to be technology literate, and 97.8% were interested in learning new technologies. Only 14.3% had ever used Twitter, compared to 76.8% having used Facebook. In terms of cell phone use, almost all students (98.9%) used cell phones for text messaging; 93.2% received several texts per day. Most students, 94.1%, have unlimited texting on their cell phone plans and were experienced texters. As far as preferred method of communication, 72.7% preferred text messaging.

These results are interesting in light of the fact that 88.8% of the students had been using the Internet for more than five years, and 84% communicated by email. However, only 59.8% indicated that they checked their email one or more times per day, and just 10.2% listed email as their preferred communication medium.

Summative Survey. The summative survey indicated that 90.4% of students followed my Twitter feed from their cell phones; and of those, 100% reported that they found it helpful in keeping up with course material. More than 95% said that using Twitter made them feel more connected to the class, and 98.5% would be interested in using it in another course. As an added bonus, using Twitter seemed to bolster students' confidence in their ability to learn new technologies—e.g., 68.2% indicated that they felt more literate in technology as a result of using Twitter.

Discussion

The results indicated that almost all of my students enjoyed and felt that they benefited from using Twitter in my classes. On two occasions I forgot to send out tweets; students noticed, and several asked after my welfare. They actually seemed to look forward to receiving my tweets. Many commented that the tweets reminded them to do work or prepare for tests they had forgotten.

The formative survey showed that although most students have email accounts and teaching faculty and schools use email to communicate, students do not check their email frequently and prefer getting information through text messaging. Most students have text messaging capabilities on their cell phones, are adept at using text-messaging, and have plans that allow for unlimited use.

Conclusion

Based on these favorable results, I have expanded my use of Twitter this semester to include Internet sections of my courses. This mode of communication may be even more effective in the distance format where traditional interaction between students and teachers is less personal. In the future, I plan to conduct further studies to determine if Twitter usage has any influence on class performance.

In this project, I attempted to use Twitter as an added means of communication with my students. Because students frequent social networking sites and are familiar with interacting in this way, I hoped that Twitter would help keep my students connected and interested. The study was more successful than I could have imagined. I am using Twitter now with all of my classes—pretty hip for an old fogey.

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