Teaching with Twitter

Instructional activities, like Kathleen Denny’s social theory assignment (described in the 9/23 short form), can tap into many students’ interest in social media, such as Twitter. Twitter is an online social networking tool that allows users to post and read 140-character messages called “tweets.” At our peer institutions, faculty (e.g., a Davidson biology professor or a Hendrix religious studies professor) have experimented with using Twitter in their teaching: to extend conversations beyond the classroom, to integrate information literacy into a course, to make diverse interpretations of a text visible, to connect to professional communities of practice, or to help students practice the skill of close reading.

In Educause’s “Tweeting in Higher Education: Best Practices” (2015), Amy L. Chapman reports that “a survey of literature regarding Twitter use in the higher education classroom finds substantial support and good advice regarding its usefulness in pedagogy.” According to her lit. survey, Twitter can:

- help to connect students to the content of the class (students spend more time on their coursework and are more engaged with the material)
- encourage the formation of a community of learners (students connect and build relationships with one another)
- promote student engagement (and enjoyment!) in courses
- allow instructors to respond to student issues in a timely manner (quickly disseminate current topical information or feedback on learning)

Based upon the available literature, Chapman offers several recommendations for instructors who might be interested in using Twitter to teach, including the following (lightly adapted):

- **Provide a short Twitter overview** to introduce what might otherwise be a new learning tool to students in the course. Don’t assume students are proficient.
- **Clearly communicate the pedagogical rationale**, regardless of any objective benefits of using Twitter.
- **Require use of the platform.** A number of students in a study by Lin, Hoffman, and Borengasser (2013) advised integrating their Twitter activity into the class requirements. Junco, Heiberger, and Loken (2010) found it necessary to require students to use the platform in order to reap its benefits, rather than simply encouraging it.
- **Participate on Twitter regularly** along with the students. Studies by Junco, Elavsky, and Heiberger (2013) as well as Prestridge (2014) concluded that instructor engagement with Twitter is essential for it to have an effect on student outcomes.
- **Refer to and reinforce the tweets in class.** For example, questions can be tweeted to the students and then discussed during class time to encourage everyone’s involvement.

Wendy Apfel, Instructional Support Manager for the Center for Learning and Technology, would be happy to speak with you further about how to use Twitter, if you are interested.

-Emily

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