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TWEETING #PODHBCU

CONTENT AND PROCESS OF THE 2011 POD HBCUFDN CONFERENCE TWITTER BACKCHANNEL

Mary C. Wright, Rachel K. Niemer
University of Michigan

Derek Bruff
Vanderbilt University

Katherine Valle
University of Michigan

This study analyzes the ways in which 2011 POD HBCUFDN Conference participants used Twitter to communicate about the annual meeting. Many messages mapped onto key faculty development priorities that were established in a prior large survey of faculty developers. However, important distinctions also arose, namely emphasis among tweeters on how faculty and students learn, faculty roles and rewards, and approaches to effectively engage in educational development work. We suggest that the conference backchannel served an important communicative function through development of social networks and resource sharing.

Social media have changed many facets of academic life, including attending and participating at conferences. In this chapter, we analyze messages, that is, tweets, posted to the microblogging service Twitter during the joint conference of the Professional and Organizational Development (POD) Network and the Historically Black Colleges and Universities Faculty Development Network (HBCUFDN) held in Atlanta, Georgia, October 26–30, 2011. In particular, themes of the tweets are compared to typical program offerings of educational development units as determined by the national survey of faculty developers reported in *Creating the Future of Faculty Development* (Sorcinelli, Austin, Eddy, & Beach, 2005). Comparing their survey data (collected ten years ago) and the 2011 Twitter content, we suggest potential new trends in educational development priorities. We also use findings about the identities of the participants in the conference backchannel, and how it was used, to make recommendations for enhancing communication within the faculty development community.

Microblogging is the act of sharing brief messages through a common Internet-based platform; the most commonly used platform is Twitter. Twitter allows users to post 140-character messages, known as tweets, which can be viewed by anyone visiting the user's Twitter profile. A Twitter user can also retweet another user's message, to share with others, making it possible for a tweet to spread very quickly through social networks. Often Twitter users (sometimes called tweeters) include URLs in tweets, linking to interesting Web sites and articles.

As scholarly communities have adopted social networking for professional purposes, conference organizers have begun using official hashtags (keywords preceded by the hash [#] symbol) in conference materials to facilitate the creation of a conference backchannel. A backchannel is "a line of communication created by people in an audience to connect with others inside or outside the room, with or without the knowledge of the speaker at the front of the room" (Atkinson, 2009, p. 17). Internet-connected mobile devices, such as laptops, smart phones, and tablets, have led to increasing use of Twitter and other platforms for backchannels at live events (Atkinson, 2009).

Previous research on conference backchannels has focused largely on the deduced intentions of posts (Ebner & Reinhardt, 2009; Ebner et al., 2010, Jacobs & McFarlane, 2005; McCarthy & Boyd, 2005; Ross, Terras, Warwick, & Welsh, 2011), the semantics of conference Twitter posts (Letierce, Passant, Decker, & Breslin, 2010; Weller, Dröge, & Puschmann, 2011), or the nature of the networks seen in the Twitter stream (Letierce et al., 2010). However, little research has investigated

what the content of tweets suggests about the interests of those participating in a conference backchannel.

There has been more scholarship about the function, or process, of backchannels at conference settings. Before Twitter, McCarthy and Boyd (2005) analyzed messages posted to the Internet relay chat backchannels made available at a 2004 conference and found that most messages concerned the shared work of those at the conference, with other messages about logistics and social bonding. Informal interviews with backchannel participants indicated that some participants were concerned with the division of attention the front- and backchannels required, and some conference speakers "expressed dismay" (p. 1644) at attendees using laptops during talks. However, first-time attendees were particularly positive about the backchannel, indicating it provided them with a way to familiarize themselves with the conference and other participants.

Others have concluded that one key purpose of conference backchannels is to provide information to those not attending the meeting, although the extent of this function is a matter of debate. Ross et al. (2011) analyzed tweets from three digital humanities conferences held in 2009 and surveyed a subset of those who participated in the backchannels. They found that many of the tweets were intended for the benefit of people not physically present at the conference. In contrast, in an analysis of the EduCamp 2010 Hamburg Conference, others noted that the majority of tweets were not likely to be relevant to those absent because more context was necessary to understand their meaning (Ebner et al., 2010).

In sum, research on the use of conference backchannels suggests that Twitter may be an effective tool to build community, especially with newcomers and potentially with those not able to travel to a meeting. There has been little prior scholarship on the content of tweets. We build on this research to analyze the Twitter backchannel at the 2011 POD HBCUFDN Conference.

Who Were POD HBCUFDN Tweeters?

In 2011, the organizers of the POD HBCUFDN Conference took steps to encourage a productive Twitter backchannel, following the advice of Bruff (2011a). First, they designated #podhbcu as the hashtag for the event. Then, they recruited a "Twitter team": ten conference attendees who committed to tweet regularly during the conference in an effort to encourage other conference attendees to participate. Twitter team leader Derek Bruff recruited members from the POD Network's Electronic

Communications and Resources Committee and from his own followers on Twitter. In order to make participating in the conference backchannel more accessible for those not already using Twitter, a short YouTube video, "Twitter 101 for Conference Backchannels," was created and shared with the POD Network listserv, along with an invitation to participate in the backchannel at the conference (Bruff, 2011b).

A large number of tweets (1,320) were made during the week of the event, from 10:00 P.M. on October 23 to 11:08 P.M. on October 29, 2011. These tweets were made by 106 individuals, 14 percent of the number of official conference registrants. (However, not every tweeter was physically present at the conference.) Over half (54, or 51 percent) of the individuals posted just one or two messages. At the other end of the distribution, seven people had posted more than fifty times each.

Using Twitter profiles, Google, and university Web sites, titles and institutional affiliations were identified for all but two individuals who tweeted during this period. (Each of these unidentified individuals had just one tweet.) U.S. higher education institutions were classified according to the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching typology.

Among all of the Carnegie types, the largest percentage (44 percent) of tweets was written by individuals who work at research or doctorate-granting universities. (For a full breakdown of participants' affiliations, see Table 20.1.) This figure would suggest a substantial overrepresentation of a research institution perspective, given that doctoral/research universities comprise only 22 percent of teaching-learning development units in the United States (Kuhlenschmidt, 2011). However, given the comparisons made in this chapter to findings presented in *Creating the Future,* it is notable that an equivalent proportion (44 percent) of their respondents reported that they were employed in research and doctoral settings.

Among those working in higher education, all institutions were located in North America, which is surprising given greater moves toward internationalization of the POD Network and faculty development work generally (Lee, 2011; Van Note Chism, Gosling, & Sorcinelli, 2010). Five U.S institutions were historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) and three were Hispanic-serving institutions, a low number given that the 2011 Conference was cosponsored by POD and the HBCUFDN Network. (As one tweet commented, "Seems like the #podhbcu Twitter backchannel is mostly populated from the POD side. Any HBCUers in the mix?")

Table 20.1. Affiliation of 2011 POD Conference Tweeters, by Carnegie Classification or International Status.

Institutional Classification	Percentage (Number) of Tweets	Percentage (Number) of Individuals	Percentage (Number) of Institutions
Associate	7.4% (98)	1.9% (2)	2.8% (2)
Baccalaureate	0.5% (7)	5.7% (6)	5.6% (4)
Master's colleges and universities	37.4% (494)	30.2% (32)	25.0% (18)
Doctorate-granting universities	1.2% (16)	4.7% (5)	6.9% (5)
Research universities	42.5% (561)	37.7% (40)	38.9% (28)
Special-focus institutions	4.6% (61)	2.8% (3)	2.8% (2)
Canadian universities	4.2% (56)	6.6% (7)	6.9% (5)
University in West Indies	0.1% (1)	0.9% (1)	1.4% (1)
Other (for example, publisher, K–12 organization)	1.8% (24)	7.5% (8)	9.7% (7)
Unidentified affiliation	0.2% (2)	1.9% (2)	—
Total	1320	106	72

Method

All tweets posted to #podhbcu were saved to one author's laptop, using the Archivist, an online tool to archive and export tweets. The coding framework took two stages: an analysis of the content of the tweets and a close examination of the communication patterns in the messages. Given that the key data used for this study were tweets, it is important to treat findings as a text-based representation of communication about the conference, not a representation of the conference sessions, which observational methods or an analysis of the conference program might generate.

Content Analysis

The content of the tweets was analyzed using a combination of deductive (Miles & Huberman, 1984) and grounded theory (inductive codes), with a broad conceptual lens (Charmaz, 1983, 1995; Glaser, 1987; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Deductive codes were derived from the "portrait of key current issues that are being addressed through faculty development services" (Sorcinelli et al., 2005, p. 69), which document eight faculty development issues that educational developers reported were most important to address and were currently offered by their programs, as well as five areas that were important to address but not currently offered to an extensive degree.

These thirteen areas formed the key framing for the substantive coding of the Twitter feed in order to identify the ways that the 2011 POD HBCUFDN tweets mapped onto programmatic priorities of the field. Inductive coding found that an additional four thematic areas emerged from the tweets, illustrating other content that was discussed frequently in the messages. Some of these issues were similar to *Creating the Future* survey items but at that time, not reported as "important to offer." Table 20.2 offers sample topics for all seventeen areas, and illustrative tweets are provided in the text that follows.

One author coded all 1,320 tweets, using the full list of these substantive codes that can be found in Table 20.2. To check for interrater reliability, two other authors coded a subset (25 percent) of the tweets. The kappa statistic, a measure of interrater reliability, was 0.68 ($p < .001$), signifying substantial agreement (Vierra & Garret, 2005).

Process Analysis

The second type of coding focused on an analysis of how the Twitter feed functioned as a communication tool. This coding approach was solely deductive (Miles & Huberman, 1984), focusing on the following communicative functions:

- *Conference announcements.* These described POD Conference events, such as openings in excursions and availability of registration table staff.
- *General connections with colleagues and resources provided.* These tweets shared Web resources with others, as well as greetings to colleagues.
- *Dissemination of information around key events.* For the conference's plenary sessions and special invited talk, we applied

Table 20.2. Content Codes from 2011 POD HBCUFDN Conference.

	Sample Coding Topics	Number of Tweets Addressing Topic
Topics named as "important to offer" in *Creating the Future* (Sorcinelli et al., 2005)		
Integrating technology into traditional teaching and learning settings	E-portfolios, Blackboard	154
Changing faculty roles and rewards	Tenure, promotion, formative evaluation	69
Assessment of student learning	Learning outcomes, rubrics	54
Balancing multiple faculty roles	Writing groups, faculty time pressures	54
Teaching for student-centered learning	Learning-centered classroom	38
Active, inquiry-based or problem-based learning	Team-based leaning, problem-based learning	30
Multiculturalism and diversity related to teaching	Nontraditional students, students of color	16
Departmental leadership and management	Chair preparation, leadership development	14
New faculty development	Early-career faculty mentoring	13
Scholarship of teaching	Encouraging the scholarship of teaching and learning	12
Training and supporting part-time and adjunct faculty	Adjunct support	2
Interdisciplinary collaborations	Interdisciplinary, discipline	2
Writing across the curriculum	Interest in writing across the curriculum	1
Emergent themes		
Strategies for effective faculty development practice	Impact of faculty development programs, teaching center Web sites	187
Learning theory (student learning and faculty learning about teaching)	Visual thinking and learning, learning preferences	168

(*Continued*)

Table 20.2. (Continued)

	Sample Coding Topics	Number of Tweets Addressing Topic
Course, curriculum, and classroom design	Design of classroom spaces, goals	47
Future faculty, graduate students, and postdoctoral scholars	Certificate programs, teaching assistant training	17

focused codes to better understand how information was being transmitted. For tweets time-stamped during these three events, three codes were used: repetition of content related by the speaker; application or evaluation of content, in which the tweeter critically analyzed the information presented; and tweet not at all relevant to the presentation's content. For this focused coding, two authors (Niemer and Bruff) who had attended these events applied these codes, basing the analysis on their notes of the events and the texts.

Tweets fitting multiple themes could be coded with up to three codes, although given the brevity of tweets, only one code was applied to most messages. Retweets were coded for each time the message appeared in the Twitter feed. A possible drawback of this research is that we analyze only tweets labeled by #podhbcu. However, given the extensive number of messages with the #podhbcu hashtag, we suggest this to be a minor limitation. Another potential drawback is that we have no data on backchannel participants who read tweets but did not contribute to the backchannel.

Findings

After coding, findings from the study indicated patterns within both content and communication processes of the conference tweets.

Content Analysis

Of the 1,320 tweets, 776 (59 percent) addressed at least one content area as identified in the coding schema described. Looking first at the themes derived from *Creating the Future,* there were several similarities between the topics that resonated with the POD tweeters and the self-reported frequency of program offerings in the faculty development survey.

In the POD HBCUFDN Conference Twitter feed, the most frequently addressed topic was integration of technology into teaching and learning settings, with 154 occurrences (Table 20.2). This is not surprising, given the technology-based backchannel medium (Twitter). However, instructional technology also maps closely onto one of the most prominent service areas in *Creating the Future.* Indeed, the authors note, "The work of faculty developers is increasingly impacted by technology, not only as developers help faculty solve the challenges of integrating technology into teaching, but also as they integrate teaching technologies into the organizational structures of their institution" (Sorcinelli et al., 2005, pp. 77–78). Although tweets addressed numerous technologies, tools that were frequently mentioned included VoiceThread, cell phones (addressed in one of the keynotes), iPads, blogs, and e-portfolios.

In *Creating the Future,* the topic area that rated highest for both the most important issue to address and the one offered most broadly was student-centered learning, or "a range of classroom methods that shift the teacher's role from dispenser of information to facilitator of student learning" (p. 73). Although this theme arose in the Twitter feed through comments such as, "Let us adapt to our students' learning needs!" it did not appear to be as prominent as the faculty developer surveys would indicate (thirty-eight messages, Table 20.2). However, "course, curriculum classroom design," an inductive code that is similar to "teaching for student-centered learning," was also relatively frequently mentioned, with forty-seven tweets. For example, this tweet, while most directly addressing curricular and cocurricular alignment, also spotlights the need to engage in this process with a student-centered perspective: "Consider getting curricular & co-curr folks together to talk about their interactions w/students and how best 2 work together." In addition, assessment of student learning outcomes, a topic that also foregrounds the student in the learning process, had fifty-four occurrences. It is possible that many tweeters assumed the importance of student-centered learning in their comments without mentioning it explicitly.

A third similarity was the topic areas that were less frequently named in both studies. *Creating the Future* identifies the following issues as important to offer yet available to only a slight or moderate extent: training and supporting part-time and adjunct faculty, changing faculty roles and rewards, departmental leadership and management, balancing multiple faculty roles, interdisciplinary collaborations, writing across the curriculum, and the scholarship of teaching. In most cases these topics also occurred relatively infrequently in the POD HBCUFDN Twitter feed.

(The exceptions were two topics related to faculty roles, which were well represented in the backchannel and are discussed below.)

Although there are a number of similarities between the ideas expressed in the 2011 POD HBCUFDN Twitter feed and the survey findings in *Creating the Future,* there are also a number of important differences. We highlight these distinctions to suggest possible emergent priorities in the field of faculty development. In the Twitter feed, the most frequently represented idea was how to effectively engage in faculty development services, such as evaluation, strategies for publicity, and approaches to managing a teaching center (187 occurrences, Table 20.2). This topic was not presented in *Creating the Future,* given that study's focus on issues offered through programming, although related issues such as "support of institutional change priorities" and "unit and program evaluation" were reported to be unimportant and not extensively offered (Sorcinelli et al., 2005). Many tweets with this theme were posted during James Anderson's keynote, "Examining the Quality of Students' Education from an Organizational Perspective." However, the tweets also frequently addressed other conference sessions as well, such as creating strategic plans, measuring outcomes, and the use of e-portfolios and other online systems to document faculty development work.

A second key topic was theories of learning (168 messages), an issue not directly represented in Creating the Future (see Table 20.2). This code pertained to general discussions about how to best help students learn or assist faculty in their own learning. Tweets addressed ways to teach clarity, characteristics of millennial students, and beliefs about learning, such as the provocative post, "There are no such things as learning styles," which was tweeted or retweeted eight times. In addition, messages focused on changes in faculty beliefs about teaching, as well as motivational issues in faculty development, such as, "Don't try to persuade an instructor to not do something—just inform them of the consequences of what they are doing." A prominent portion of these posts were devoted to the topic of visual thinking and learning, the focus of several conference sessions. Indeed, of the sixty hashtags used in the Twitter feed (other than #PODHBCU), the most frequent tag was "#vizthink," with ninety-three occurrences.

Another key difference is the relative importance of communication about faculty roles and rewards in comparison with the survey study. Although named as important, services pertaining to faculty rewards and role balance were reported to be offered to a slight extent by survey respondents (Sorcinelli et al., 2005). In contrast, for conference tweets, these were among the most frequent themes, with sixty-nine occurrences

for messages about faculty evaluation and rewards and an additional fifty-four about working with faculty to balance their multiple roles. In the former category, tweeters frequently addressed the evaluation of teaching for formative and summative purposes. For example, one attendee noted, "In ur faculty observation formative review indicate ur report should NOT be used for T&P. Could be used as argument for or against." Another tweeter queried, "At the centr of resistance 2 faculty development in higher education: reward system, how are faculty rewarded?" In turn, those tweeting about balancing multiple faculty roles frequently addressed educational development initiatives to address faculty stress, writing productivity, and myriad functions that faculty play in their academic positions, including as advisers and nurturers. The relative prominence of these themes is partially attributable to the conference program content, given the addresses by Claudette Williams, "The Role of the Faculty in the Twenty-First Century," and Robert Boice, "Creativity-Based Improvements for New Faculty as Teachers and Writers." However, it was also clear that the content of these sessions resonated with tweeters, and messages were found outside the time frame of these two large events.

In summary, there are many similarities in the key faculty development programmatic priorities documented by Sorcinelli et al. (2005): the importance of instructional technology and student-centered learning (and course, curriculum, and classroom planning based on this approach), as well as the lack of emphasis on ideas and programs addressing leadership, interdisciplinarity, writing across the curriculum, and the scholarship of teaching. This overlap is especially interesting given the differing modalities for data collection (a survey of all POD members versus tweets at the 2011 POD HBCUFDN Conference), as well as the ten-year span between these two studies.

In spite of the close alignment between the survey findings and the Twitter feed, there are also key differences that are important to highlight. Tweeters gave particular emphasis to communicating about how faculty and students learn, faculty roles and rewards, and approaches to effectively engaging in faculty development work. Although these topics were certainly forefronted in the large keynotes and invited presentations at the 2011 conference, it is significant that the ideas resonated enough with attendees that they were communicated to colleagues. One possible reason for the difference in findings is that the *Creating the Future* survey asked respondents about how these issues were addressed through services. It may be that such topics are not offered through programs but are instead important elements of the (usually implicit) foundation of our work as faculty developers. However, we also suggest that these three

topics—how faculty and students learn, faculty roles and rewards, and effective faculty development practices—represent growing priorities in the field. Indeed, two related issues—faculty roles and student learning—were similarly defined by Sorcinelli et al. (2005) as "top challenges" that they indicated would have the potential to shape future priorities. Albeit directly representative of the focus of 106 conference attendees' tweets, it is also true that these themes are well represented in other recent overviews of faculty development work (Debowski, 2012; Gillespie & Robertson, 2010; Hines, 2011; Schroeder, 2010).

Process Analysis

We now turn to process issues, or how tweets were used as a communication mechanism. Of the 1,320 tweets, nearly 10 percent were devoted solely to making an announcement about a conference event, including both "curricular" (for example, keynote speakers scheduled for the day) and "cocurricular" elements (for example, morning yoga). (For a full breakdown of communicative function coding, see Table S-2 at http://tiny.cc/TWEETINGPODHBCU.) Slightly more frequently, POD conference tweeters passed along another attendee's message, indicated by the abbreviation "RT." Some of the most frequently retweeted ideas and resources were the winning video from the Create@POD contest, "How to Prank Your Boss Using Integrated Course Design" (Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning, 2011), with five retweets, as well as the idea that the "visuals we use in presentations are a window into who we are. Think about relationship between function and aesthetic" (with four retweets).

However, most frequently, tweets were used to create social networks through both personal linkages and distribution of resources. Social connections were evident from the beginning of the Twitter feed, when conference attendees noted that they were "boarding the plane for #podhbcu." However, these connections were demonstrated throughout, as tweeters welcomed newcomers or noted that they were "inspired by this group." In addition, over two hundred messages offered functional enhancements to POD session content, such as links to recommended books, center Web sites, and, most frequently, resources on visual literacy. The social connections and sharing of resources fostered by the conference Twitter feed mirror the passing face-to-face conversations that occur at conferences. For example, in the limited time of an elevator ride, or in 140 characters in the case of Twitter, attendees can share a reference of interest, make plans for a future interaction, or present a brief reflection on what they have learned (Tufekci, 2001). This finding is consistent with

other research: over half of Twitter users at conferences report using the tool to share resources or communicate with others (Reinhardt, Ebner, Beham, & Costa, 2009).

Most striking, the Twitter feed also helped create connections with those not able to travel to the annual meeting. To illustrate, one tweet noted, "Thanks to everyone at the #podhbcu conference who is contributing tweets and sharing links. Great for those of us unable to attend." Although conference backchannels are no substitute for attendance at a conference, as educational budgets limit conference travel further, they may become increasingly important for maintaining a sense of community and sharing resources.

A third way that the conference tweets were analyzed was through a focused coding of 187 tweets generated during the large, communal events, that is, the keynotes and invited talks. The key rationale for this focused coding was to better understand how attendees were processing the information generated at these events; coders for this piece of the analysis had attended these sessions and took notes on them. In 146 cases (78 percent of the tweets during this time frame), the tweets aligned with the content of the keynote, and these texts were coded for how the tweeters relayed the information. (For a full breakdown of keynote communicative function coding, see Table S-3 at http://tiny.cc/TWEETING PODHBCU.)

Over half (53 percent) of the tweets during keynotes involved dissemination of information similar to that given by the presenter. For example, during a keynote, a tweeter wrote, "Must have evidence, an assessment plan, willingness to present findings to public scrutiny," reflecting James Anderson's main points. Although we can only speculate, it may be that these summary tweets were intended for Twitter users not physically present at the conference—those following the backchannel from afar, as well as followers of those tweeting during the plenary events.

In the other cases (47 percent of the tweets), attendees evaluated or applied the presentation content, such as this participant who positively evaluated a session: "Loving the use of images in Dr. Williams talk." Others applied the keynote ideas to their own practice, such as an attendee who learned from the Anderson keynote that we need to "stop throwing away money on fragmented models, find what works best, do that." These evaluation- and application-oriented tweets suggest that the backchannel provides a useful medium for peer-to-peer interaction during keynote events that otherwise lack participant interaction.

In summary, the process codes indicate that the POD HBCUFDN Conference Twitter feed was a significant communicative tool. In

addition to posting announcements about conference events, one of its most important roles was to foster social networks and the sharing of resources, including those who were not able to attend the annual meeting. Also, the focused coding of tweets generated during the large communal events indicated that the Twitter feed enabled participants to engage with the keynotes by disseminating and, to some extent, critically analyzing the content of those sessions.

Conclusion

This study analyzes the ways in which 2011 POD HBCUFDN Conference participants used Twitter to communicate about the annual meeting. Results show that most tweets mapped onto many key programmatic areas, as established in a prior large survey of faculty developers, but important distinctions also arose, particularly emphasis among tweeters on how faculty and students learn, faculty roles and rewards, and approaches to engage effectively in educational development work. We also found that the conference backchannel had important communicative functions for announcements, networking, connections with those not in attendance, and processing of information. Faculty developers seeking to use Twitter on their own campuses for events may wish to consult resources such as Bruff (2011a) and the Twitter feeds that many teaching centers now have (for a list of these, see http://Twitter.com/#!/UMich_CRLT/faculty-development).

The results of this study have implications for future POD Network conference programming and suggest growing areas of interest within the organization. How faculty and students learn, faculty roles and rewards, and effective faculty development practices all appeared frequently in tweets and are important to address in future POD conference sessions or publications. In addition, given our findings about the primarily replicative nature of tweets during the large, communal events at the conference, we would suggest that future keynote speakers more pointedly ask conference attendees to adapt and evaluate ideas for potential application and use and leverage the conference backchannel during their talks to foster more peer-to-peer learning.

Most significant, we find that Twitter builds community for POD, providing a lively backchannel in which audience members and nonattending participants can exchange views and ideas in real time. Given this richness, the use of the conference backchannel should be continued and developed further. Specifically, we recommend that participation in the POD Conference Twitter feed be encouraged across the organization in

order to promote a greater diversity of tweeters. Two possible ways to accomplish this aim are to engage in more direct outreach to POD Network subcommittees and international educational development associations, as well as to more broadly publicize participation in the backchannel. As the conference backchannel grows, future research might examine historical trends, compare tweets with program content, or describe participant perceptions of backchannels.

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