

CUTTING-EDGE TECHNOLOGIES
IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Teaching Arts and Science with the New Social Media

Les Wankel

Book covers a wide range of approaches to applying social media in teaching arts and science courses. The first part of the book, *SOCIAL LEARNING AND NETWORKING PRACTICES TO TEACHING ARTS & SCIENCE*, covers collaborative social media in learning courses, the use of wikis as a platform for co-creation of digital content, and the use of social media to augment face-to-face meetings.

Second part, *SOCIAL MEDIA PEDAGOGIES FOR THE FUTURE OF ARTS & SCIENCE LEARNING*, describes the expansive vistas enabled by these new technologies. The use of content creation in public social media forums as an enabler of critical reflection is considered, and the use of social media to augment face-to-face meetings.

Third part, *LEARNING ARTS & SCIENCE IN THREE-DIMENSIONAL VIRTUAL WORLDS*, discusses the opportunities and downsides of this immersive technology. Design recommendations for instructors are put forth.

Fourth part, *BLOGGING AND MICROBLOGGING IN A NEW EPOCH OF TEACHING ARTS & SCIENCE*, looks at a welter of applications and implications for teaching practices. For example, the use of a Twitter as a sandbox where students share ideas before arriving in class or as back-channels to classes is explored.

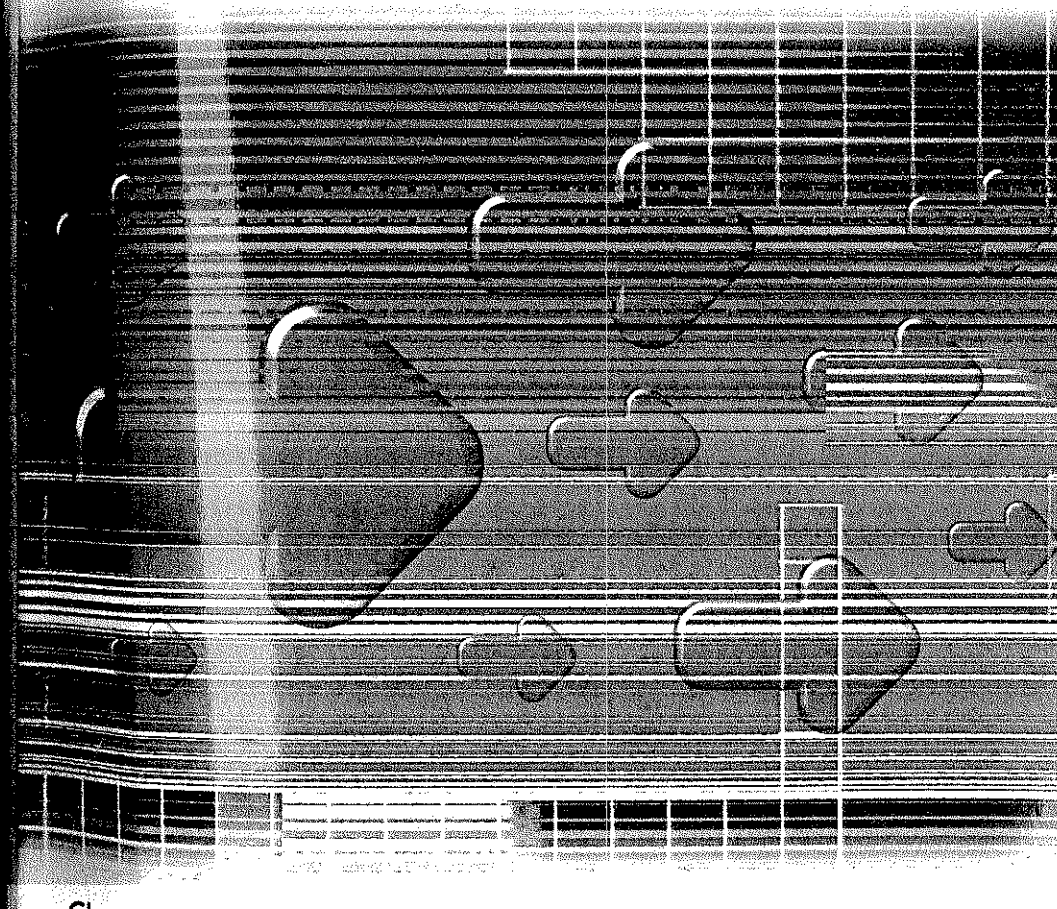
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What are commonplace in K-12 education. This chapter contains sagacious advice, based on real-life examples on how to plan and run personal learning networks.

Gavan P. L. Watson in *Micro-Blogging and the Higher Education Classroom: Approaches and Considerations* offers reflections on the successes and failures of integrating the micro-blogging platform Twitter into a first-year university class. Twitter, intended as a way to answer the question "What are you doing?" is now used in originally unexpected ways. Broadly speaking, Twitter's popularity can be traced to three broad factors: conversation between users, a decentralized ecosystem of third-party applications, and the distributed nature of its users. Adopted by educators in higher education, Twitter has been used as an object for study, a tool to communicate classroom announcements, a means to enable students to reflect on their learning, a chance to get instant feedback from students, and as a tool used to facilitate in-class conversations. The ongoing use of micro-blogging also appears to have the ability to change the social dynamics of a classroom, expanding the social dimensions of the classroom beyond the physical dimensions. While identifying Twitter's limitations, the chapter outlines the most significant outcome from the author's integration of Twitter: an evolution of blended learning, proposed as a plesiochronous learning model, where learning occurs outside of the classroom with learners and instructors in different places but occurring at (virtually) the same time.

As you can see, there is quite a diversity of social media to try. I suggest you not only view this volume as a collection of ideas and experience on how to proceed but also view the chapter authors as colleagues to connect with, share with, collaborate with, and learn together with. The current social media available are but slates on the path to the future. It is our hope that you will join us in proceeding into it with us in a robust way.

REFERENCE

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FOSTERING MEANING AND COMMUNITY IN WRITING COURSES VIA SOCIAL MEDIA

James Schirmer

ABSTRACT

This commentary is a reflective discussion of how to use simple social media tools in college-level writing courses, and contains research elements such as effective examples of what is attainable and possible when incorporating blogs (e.g., Posterous) and Twitter in the college classroom. In order to do this, it uses reflective writing with a focus on failures/successes in past courses, and also incorporates students' own comments on blogging and Twitter. The chapter's findings include the following: The overall ease of use and relative simplicity of certain social media tools make for low barriers of entry for a majority of students. The mobile accessibility of these online communicative technologies should also be of specific appeal. These characteristics should encourage student participation in ways that content management systems like Blackboard do not. The convenience of and allowance for quick and easy sharing of information via blogging and microblogging can also mean that each is often quicker than email for contacting someone. What makes both better than Blackboard concerns how they, when taken together, sustain class discussion, keeping it alive, present, and continuous. If proper affordances are made in terms of framing and timing, social media can make for successful additions

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to college-level courses. Simple tools allow and encourage students to document and reflect on their own learning in ways that are meaningful and unique as they are.

INTRODUCTION

Teaching most any kind of writing is not only about aiding students in the construction of identity but also in the development of a community. The appropriate use of online communicative technologies aids the formation and illumination of both. In particular, bringing simple social media tools into college-level courses can facilitate and coordinate greater attention, encourage meaningful interaction and participation, promote better collaboration, and help students develop narratives of their own learning as well as hone the critical consumption and crafting of academic and nonacademic work. An extension of such work involves challenging students' notions of what qualifies as writing, interrogating their prior knowledge and experience while also encouraging new forms.

In essence, using online communicative technologies and social media tools can serve a dual purpose by not only scaffolding student learning in college-level courses but also supporting professors' own scholarly pursuits. Posterous, a quick-and-simple blogging service, functions as a vehicle for working through ideas in a public format and recording the directions research interests take. Twitter, a popular microblogging service, provides a way to announce as well as brainstorm new work. There is an implicit encouragement to Twitter in finding community with others, but it also functions as a launching pad to other online spaces, such as blogs, social bookmarking sites like Delicious and Reddit and even other social networking sites like Facebook and MySpace. As such, much of this chapter draws on my own research and teaching experiences as from current documentation of the knowledge of others.

Requiring the use of blogs and Twitter in the college-level courses I guide came from a desire to streamline the communication process, to remove the tedium of email attachments and related incompatibility issues. Taking important discussions beyond the face-to-face classroom was of additional interest. Intensive course development training with Blackboard was another impetus, though, as much prior experience teaching with the content management system proved frustrating. Across the courses requiring students' use of blogs and Twitter, though, it was possible to identify

progress in terms of student engagement with these technologies rivaling that of Blackboard in past courses.

Part of this might have to do with how having students engage each other online promotes collaboration and community among them, with blogs and Twitter better mirroring their more everyday actions than Blackboard. As observed by Duffy and Bruns (2006), many students already interact and comment on each other's work in Internet-based environments, indicating "a growing impetus towards personal expression and reflection, and also the sharing of personal 'spaces.'" Jessica Gross (2009) writes in the *Huffington Post* about how this is also an indication of the influence of laypeople and how they have replaced trained experts as "the people who define what's true in our world." This increasing reliance on peers for information should be acknowledged by "teaching students to learn from and with each other" (2009).

Because "students' lives are infused with each other's viewpoints" (2009), it makes sense for educators to capitalize on that, to act as facilitators and mediators of students' collaborative and community-building efforts in learning contexts. As described later, there is some disagreement over what constitutes collaboration and/or community in such contexts.

What follows, then, is some reflective discussion of the use of these online communicative technologies as manifest in a range of college-level courses, from first-year composition to a graduate class in digital rhetoric, concluding with a potential model of online engagement for not only students but also instructors.

AN INTRODUCTION TO BLOGGING

The term "blog" is the commonly accepted abbreviation of "weblog" (Paquet 2003), which is a personalized website with dated entries presented in reverse chronological order. As emphasized by Duffy and Bruns (2006), "blog" is both a noun and a verb as those who maintain a blog are called "bloggers" while the act of posting to a blog is called "blogging." Particular features of blogs include an archive of past blog entries, links to other blogs, the quick publishing of content with little technical skill required, and comments, the last of which allow others to offer feedback on the author's entries (Downes, 2004) (Fig. 1).

Because of the opportunity for reflective interaction, the ability to link to related ideas, and the freedom for readers and other bloggers to "suggest additional considerations and explorations of the idea presented and promote

against multiphrenia

almost everything is here



James Schirmer

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<http://www.digo.com/profile/betajames>
<http://8tracks.com/betajames>
<http://www.godwinjones.com/betajames>
<http://twitter.com/betajames>



TAGS

writing 100
 multiphrenia 100
 pedagogy 100
 research 100
 community 100
 first-year 100
 technical 100
 composition 100

Back to blog

prevailing visibility: a bit further

Three days ago, I posted a gloss of Bill Wolff's *Deleuze at #wds210*, attempting to reinforce some of the ideas he put forth. I focused on his notion of expanding "composition" to include bookmarking and tagging (among other online actions). I also carried the idea how I've reorganized my online research library. Brian Mahaly was kind enough to acknowledge the post, mentioning its connection to his and Derek Mascher's *Research* talks. Mahaly's is on his blog, so I'll let him speak for himself: "Mentorship and Professionalization in Networked Purses."

One of the recent links I shared on Twitter, which Nian Harrison retweeted, was a piece in the *Atlantic* about how disorganized terrorists often are and the importance of emphasizing this fact. "Can being more realistic about who our foes actually are help us stop the truly dangerous ones?" the authors ask. It's a piece worth reading, hence the sharing via Twitter (and here later tonight as part of #wds210), but I mention it in this moment for another reason, one I think related to Bill Wolff's *Deleuze* and Brian Mahaly's link at #wds210.

I maintain four print subscriptions: the *Atlantic*, *Paste*, *Lansing State Journal* and *Wood*. I read each issue in its entirety within 24 hours of its arrival. The aforementioned article is in the most recent issue of the *Atlantic*, and it was in print that I first encountered it. Most *Atlantic* pieces appear online soon after the print publication is out in circulation, so I went there to find it and subsequently share it. Is it safe to assume that those seeing my tweet about this *Atlantic* piece figured I found it online first? I think an argument for that could be made, but it would be incorrect.

I mention all this here in the interest of that prevailing visibility, and because I just have an increasing interest in how we come to share information online and even marking the paths that lead to sharing.

Fig. 1. Author's Blog. Source: Schirmer (2010a). Available at <http://betajames.posterous.com/>.

further reflection and thought regarding a stated viewpoint" (Duffy & Bruns, 2006), it would be unfortunate to view blogs as little more than online journals. Doing so privileges "understanding of journals as private writing spaces without considering the benefits of weblogs as public writing" (Lowe & Williams, 2004). Such a limited perspective also inhibits the use of blogs in more collaborative ways and, in "Blogs and Wikis: Environments for On-Line Collaboration," Bob Godwin-Jones (2003) points to technology-related blogs as prime examples that "form what is essentially one large, loosely interwoven net of information, as blog entries are linked, referenced, and debated." What facilitates the development of such an information net is the very act of posting online, which Godwin-Jones (2003) emphasizes as the important possibility of writing for a broader, larger audience, something "not usually possible in discussion forums" (Godwin-Jones, 2003).

Related to this is the ownership and responsibility that self-publishing online encourages on the part of students, who, Godwin-Jones (2003) suggests, "may be more thoughtful (in content and structure) if they know they are writing for a real audience." As Steve Krause (2004) puts it, "blogging opens up assignments beyond the teacher-student relationship, allowing the world to grade students and provide encouragement or

feedback on their writings." I can bear witness to this as Anne Gentle, author of *Conversation and Community*, the lone required textbook for the class, once left a comment on a technical writing student's blog entry (Fig. 2). As described in a later section of this chapter, some other students also took note of this positive possibility in relation to blogging.

As Godwin-Jones (2003) notes, blogs are "very different from the rigid hierarchy to be found in [Blackboard and WebCT]," instead offering "a great deal of flexibility and the potential for creativity" on the part of both instructor and student. It is for these reasons that educational blogging can be effective for user-centered, participatory learning, contributing to "a reconceptualization of students as critical, collaborative, and creative participants in the social construction of knowledge" (Burgess, 2006, p. 105). Again, the indication here is something acknowledged by Duffy & Bruns (2006) and Gross (2009) as already taking place in non-academic contexts. The opportunities afforded by blogging should be too tempting for any educator to ignore.

QUICK BLOGGING VIA POSTEROUS TO PROMOTE COLLABORATION

Because of the relative ease in creating entries, "blogs have thus become the novice's web authoring tool" (Duffy & Bruns, 2006). With the rise of what is considered "quick blogging," online authorship is even easier to attain and

Jan 20, 2010



annegentle said...

Great post - I'm glad my book was useful to help you get your thoughts about communicating online. You might like my former co-worker's blog post on high-context and low-context communications. It's called Group decision making with mixed high- and low-context communicators and you can read it at <http://greyfit.com/?p=68>. He and I are very different communicators but we've worked collaboratively at two different companies now. It's complex, isn't it? But so important, as you recognize.

Ooo, and now I have to decide if this comment gets posted to Twitter which also means it could go to Facebook if I rewrite it so that the @ symbol doesn't come first. Considerations, considerations. Like I said, it's complicated. :)

Fig. 2. Anne Gentle's Comment on Student Kristen Bentley's Blog Entry, "Are You Mad At Me? Miscommunications in Writing." Source: Bentley (2010). Available at <http://kbentley20.posterous.com/are-you-mad-at-me-miscommunications-in-writin>. Reprinted with permission.

maintain. Identified by its creators as the “dead simple place to post everything,” Posterous is a blogging platform focused on ease-of-use. Because of its relative simplicity in comparison to more hefty platforms like Blogger and Wordpress, some consider Posterous and its main competitor Tumblr qualify as microblogging. For instance, in a 2008 review of Posterous, *ReadWriteWeb* identified it as “minimalist blogging.” A more accurate understanding of the capabilities of Posterous is evident in an *Ars Technica* side-by-side comparison with Tumblr, both of which Chris Foresman (2010) describes as “quick blogging tools ... characterized by two main features that set them apart from more traditional blogging tools.” The first concerns a content-specific focus as text, images, videos, and links appear “in a suitable format for its content type” and the second involves the relative ease and speed of posting content. Perhaps it is because of this second feature that some might be quick to declare Posterous as a microblogging service or tool, but, as its creators boast on their FAQ, “there are no limits to what you can post.”

In my experience of using Posterous and witnessing how students use the service, Posterous is quicker to begin and easier to maintain than Blogger and WordPress. In part, this is because Posterous offers multiple methods of content production, including posting options by email, mobile, and web. It also has to do with how Posterous handles the content a user sends. Text-based content, like a Microsoft Word document for example, attached to an email to Posterous appears onsite via Scribd, a free, Flash-based document-sharing service. Posterous arranges images emailed or uploaded into a web-friendly gallery; music and video files show up on Posterous in web-based Flash players, too.

This format suitability to content is important to note because not all students coming into college-level courses possess the knowledge necessary to deem the appropriate format for a particular kind of content. For instance, I required students in previous semesters to sign up for Blogger accounts. At the time, I was most familiar with this platform and I thought students would appreciate Blogger’s options for customization, thereby allowing them to make their own unique, personal stamp on the blogs they created. The ability to post entries via Google Docs was an additional positive influence, and I hoped students would help me learn more about the platform through collaboration.

The potential complexity of blogger caused some trepidation, though. The great freedom of choice led to some students’ poor design decisions, including use of color and font size, as well as formatting issues. Many students composed blog entries in Microsoft Word and then copied and

pasted the content to blogger only to be upset by significant problems with alignment and spacing. Since the shift to Posterous, the vast majority of formatting problems have disappeared. So long as students attach their text-based efforts rather than copying and pasting direct into the body of an email, the all-important formatting of their blog entries remain intact on Posterous. As will be mentioned in a later section of this chapter, the autoposting feature of Posterous, in particular, makes for a unique success across all my courses.

While many things precipitated the move from Blogger to Posterous, the latter’s overall ease-of-use was a dominant determinant. Posterous has a sharper focus on how someone might want to provide content. Personalizing a particular blog space comes as much from the content as the format and some bloggers might be more concerned with pushing content than anything else. Part of what makes Posterous successful is its inherent acknowledgement of these factors. Embedding documents, images, and videos in Posterous happens with little to no frustration. There are also a limited number of themes to choose from to eliminate the possibility of color clash and font fiasco. Posterous features a streamlined process for blogging in my writing-centered courses; it has proven to be a better choice for students.

Part of the reason for requiring blogging has to do with a certain perspective on the nature of writing and, more specifically, authorship. Contrary to popular assumptions about the writer as isolated from others, I view the act of composing as more of a collective, collaborative process than an individual endeavor. I require blogging in my courses to better illustrate this point, the necessity of interplay between writers and readers in the work of meaning-making.

An important part of the overall success of blogging, though, concerns good practice, something that Krause (2004) admits was rather absent from his early experiment with collaborative writing online. Farmer, Yue, and Brooks (2008) conclude their chapter with a list of recommendations for implementing blog technology in a college-level course, including clarity and support regarding assessment, the important invitation for students setting their own blogging goals, encouragement for and modeling of risk-taking, and early feedback on students’ progress (p. 134).

Through the establishment of blogging guidelines (Fig. 3), I imparted to students the idea of the blog as a place to further explore ideas discussed in class, to write about related concepts of interest, and ask questions about both. I also encouraged students to blog in a way concerned with the regular examination of ideas presented in the course material and do so by way of incorporating images, links, and videos as means of support. Given the ease

Blogging in this course should be concerned with the regular examination of ideas and provide concise arguments via unique viewpoint and voice. Make clear to readers that there is substantive thought behind the ideas presented. Have specific references, including text, hyperlinks, video, images and audio, as means of support.

Find new ways of saying what you think you want to say. Incorporate a collage of images, audio clips and/or YouTube videos. Push yourself to explore the ways you can get at ideas through the use of different media. However, images, audio and video clips need explanation, too. Don't just stick them in a post and expect readers to understand why.

Your blog is a place to further explore the ideas we discuss in class, to write about related concepts of interest and ask questions about them.

When creating, designing and writing in your blog, please complete the following:

1. Choose a professional and meaningful title and subtitle.
2. Compose a detailed and relevant About page discussing who you are and the focus of your blog.
3. Choose an appropriate theme.
4. For each blog post, compose a meaningful title written for an audience beyond our class.
5. For each blog post, include 5-6 tags.

Experiment with the dashboard area, see how things work and what happens when you make changes. The more you engage with, customize and explore your blog, the more effective it will be and the more you will get out of the assignment.

There is no set requirement for the length of a blog post. One of the features of the blogging medium and the characteristics of individual posts is that length is determined by content and goals. Each post you make, though, should be thorough in discussing the subject at hand.

During the weeks regular blogging is required, be sure to post 1) an entry that extends the class discussion and 2) one that explores an area of interest particular to you. Posts that extend class discussion should take what we have discussed in class about a subject or text and continue the discussion. For example, a post might address one of the questions raised in a class discussion. Posts that explore an area of interest particular to you are just that. Ideally, these posts should serve as introductory writing toward larger, later assignments.

Fig. 3. Blogging Guidelines for Author's Courses. Source: <http://eng112.posterous.com/pages/materials-1>.

in which Posterous handles various kinds of online content, there was something of an unstated expectation and even optimism that students would go beyond text in putting forth their thoughts on the course. That many students stuck with textual production on their blogs should come as no surprise.

Still, by semester's end, many students' blogs contained an extensive record of intellectual expertise for the course. The most common entries

engaged on the required readings as students latched onto particular passages that were resonant or troublesome and asked their peers for clarification. Other entries contained evaluations of in-class engagements led by fellow classmates (Fig. 4). While positive for the most part, I think these evaluations were helpful to class facilitators; knowing that peers might blog about their performance may have inspired them to put more effort into leading class discussions.

Such entries focused on in-course happenings further reveal collaborative aspects to blogging as students used their Posterous spaces to not only evaluate and reflect on the performances of their peers but to also plan toward the execution of their own. This mirrored much of what happened on a week-by-week basis regarding required readings as students responded to texts and each other's entries. These observations, though, invite the critique Steven Krause (2004) placed upon blogs in "When Blogging Goes Bad," namely that they do not have the same interactive potential of an electronic mailing list. While blogs "have the distinct advantage of allowing individuals to easily publish texts that can be responded to by others" (2004), Krause views them as no more "collaborative" than conventional print texts. There is a measure of truth to Krause's criticism, but, as Lowe & Williams (2004) note, "blogging represents the interaction of a community in the sense that all posts are subject to concerns about audience." Collaboration via blogging does not happen so much at the ground level of writing, but more in terms of furthering communication about ideas. This can be augmented to an even greater degree when blogging is coupled with microblogging, to which our attention now turns.

AN INTRODUCTION TO MICROBLOGGING

As the word implies, microblogging is a shorter, simpler variant of blogging "that people use to provide updates on their activities, observations and interesting content, directly or indirectly to others" (Ehrlich & Shami, 2010) (Fig. 5). Similar to regular blogging, microblogging can be exclusive, restricted to some, and/or available to all. There is a significant limitation to microblogging though, as updates can be no longer than 140 characters. However, this particular form of online communication has increased in popularity over the last three years. Most all of this is due to Twitter, which launched in 2006, the perhaps best-known microblogging service. Other similar microblogging services include Ident.ica, Jaiku (purchased by Google in October 2007) and Plurk, all of which share the 140-character

Group 2 Facilitation

I found the facilitation done by Group 2 to be very interesting and informative. Even after reading the text and seeing other's definitions of these various social media tools I was still not exactly clear on how they all worked and what they were used for, so I enjoyed listening to each of the presentations about various social media tools.

The information on Wikis was really helpful to me. Our group was thinking about trying to go more in depth about wikis for our facilitation and it is much easier to visualize now that I have a good idea of what exactly a wiki is. Although the video demonstration was very basic and simple it did a great job of portraying how and why one would use a wiki. I almost feel as though it would be beneficial to start one to use for our group, in order to share our ideas for the group project and class facilitation. It is nice right now being able to blog about it, since everyone can comment and leave their input in the same place. This way is better than sending a bunch of e-mails to each other but it seems that a wiki would be even more useful so that we could each edit one document rather than having pieces of it all over a blog post.

I consider my digital camera's importance to be the equivalent of one of my limbs. I love to take pictures and so I tend to have y camera in my hand ready to snap a photo most of the time. The information that Savannah gave about photo sharing was very intriguing to me. I have a lot of friends and family out of state and even more photos that I would love to be able to easily share with them and so it was nice to be given more information regarding the aspects of different photo sharing sites. I had previously heard of one of them, photobucket, but the other two were new to me and they seem to be the ones that can offer more to the user, such as editing options and a means of feedback and interaction with other users.

The part of the class that I found most interesting was the presentation about Skype. I had no idea that this technology even existed. When first hearing about it, it seems like it would be a really difficult thing to do, however, after the demonstration was given it is actually just as easy, if not easier than dialing a number on a telephone. I definitely believe that this presentation will inspire me to research skype a little more. Although at the moment I don't really have any major use for it, if one happens to come up in the future I will be familiar with using this technology.

Fig. 4. Student Kendell Davenport's Evaluation of Another Group's Class Facilitation. Source: Davenport (2010). Available at <http://kendell.d.posterous.com/group-2-facilitation>. Reprinted with permission.

limit with Twitter. While this limit forces brevity on the part of users, there is freedom within such restriction.

Status updates on Twitter are commonly known as "tweets," which often feature certain established conventions unique to microblogging, if not

The image shows a screenshot of a Twitter profile for James Schirmer (@betajames). The profile header includes a circular profile picture, the name "James Schirmer", the handle "@betajames", and a bio: "Assistant Professor of English, University of Michigan-Flint. Courses: 1st-yr & adv writing, rhetoric, tech comm, college/univ studies. http://betajames.posterous.com". Below the header are navigation tabs for "Timeline", "Favorites", "Following", "Followers", and "Lists". The main content area displays a list of tweets, each with a small profile picture, the name "betajames James Schirmer", and the text of the tweet. The tweets include: "I liked a YouTube video -- Beyond Black Mesa http://youtu.be/0A7f1GfW0g?n 2 hours ago", "@Sunny_Jade Silly's fine. Can be step-by-step instructions, but doesn't have to be. Depends on the product/service you pick. 3 hours ago", "On page 343 of 617 of Daemon, by Daniel Suarez http://bit.ly/9D8k 7 hours ago", "@nonacademic Equivalent to the gamer in the basement? 20 hours ago", and "I'm tired of tired arguments." Each tweet has a small icon for retweets or replies.

Fig. 5. Author's Twitter Feed. Source: <http://twitter.com/betajames>.

Twitter itself. To group-related posts together and make them more searchable, users often incorporate hashtags (#) into their updates, following the symbol with a word or an abbreviation, for example, #edchat or #twittrhet. Some hashtags appear on a weekly basis, as with #MusicMonday in which Twitter users recommend new artists/bands and share songs. Other hashtags like #ladiespleasestop are part of the micro-meme phenomenon described by Huang, Thornton and Efthimiadis (2010) in which "clever short-lived tags catch on and then die out quickly." Still other hashtags are connected to television shows (#AmericanIdol, #glee) or news and political events (#IranElection, #obama). As observed by Reinhardt, Ebner, Beham, & Costa (2009), hashtags not only "generate a resource

based on that specific thematic ... but also bridge knowledge, and knowing, across networks of interest." An important, related aspect of Twitter is the option to save searches by hashtag. Current saved searches by this writer include #cw2010, #MLA09, and #thatcamp, all discipline-specific, conference-related hashtags.

Perhaps more common than the # symbol on Twitter is employment of the @ symbol. Placed right before a username, the @, known as a "reply" or "mention," directs a tweet to that particular user. This allows Twitter users to reference each other in their own individual updates and replies/mentions appear in the accounts of referenced users for easy tracking and responding. In other words, the addition of @ to a tweet allows for threaded conversations between users on Twitter.

"Retweeting" and sharing links are two other established conventions on Twitter. The former occurs by copying a post and username and placing "RT" before it as a status update of one's own. Retweeting happens on Twitter for any number of reasons, from a poignant post by a popular user to an announcement of important news. Many announcements come in the form of links and, given the length of website addresses, users employ a URL shortening service like bit.ly or tiny.url to stay within the 140-character limit and still have room to say something original. These two conventions have been adopted and modified somewhat by Twitter itself. There now exists the option to retweet any status update by clicking a button instead of typing "RT @username." Twitter also announced in April 2010 their intention to add a URL shortening service of their own.

A less recent, but still significant change happened in November 2009 as Twitter replaced the original status update prompt of "What are you doing?" with "What's happening?" in recognition of how the microblogging service was being used. A fuller explanation of this move was detailed on the official Twitter blog, acknowledging that it has "outgrown the concept of personal status updates" (Stone, 2009). As mentioned earlier, Twitter can be and is perhaps predominantly used for various communicative actions, from breaking news and sharing links to discussing issues and organizing events. Twitter is not just about what someone had for breakfast; Twitter is a user-driven and user-rated exchange of shared information (Reinhardt, et al., 2009).

Here is an example from my own Twitter account employing the conventions mentioned above (Fig. 6): Twitter users consume messages like this one "by viewing a core page showing a stream of the latest messages ... listed in reverse chronological order" (Naaman, Boase, & Lai, 2010). What appears in that information stream or "feed" depends on who the user



RT @DelaneyKirk "Tweeting, blogging or posting online could soon become part of your job" <http://bit.ly/dmiovsw> #eng111 #345tw

10 Mar via @eonic ☆ Favorite ↻ Reply ✕ Delete

Fig. 6. One of the Author's Twitter Updates. Source: Schirmer (2010b). <http://twitter.com/betajames/statuses/10283042638>.

chooses to follow. While there might be an expectation by some users, there is no requirement to follow back the person making the initial request. Unlike Facebook (whose user population still dwarfs Twitter's count by a couple hundred million), a signal of interest on Twitter need not be reciprocated.

Because of this as well as the range of third-party applications and multiple avenues of access available, Twitter users are witness to an incredible variety of messages in desktop, mobile and web-based forms. In this way, microblogging functions the way a particular user desires: "as a source of news, to listen to what people in certain groups are talking about, or to communicate with experts or leaders in certain fields" (Perez, 2009). The difference in information acquisition between a Google search and a Twitter question can be significant. Replies to the latter range from "shortened URLs containing answers ... to more intelligent responses" (Cann, Badge, Johnson, & Mosely, 2009) instead of just a list of suggested links containing the search term. Even Google is aware of this difference, having implemented tweets into their regular search results.

I mention all these to reinforce a point made by Brian McNely (2009): because Twitter is public and visible, persistent and searchable, "microblogging as a platform for backchannel communication has led to increased affordances for collaboration." Phil Beadle (2010) provides an accurate rundown of Twitter's collaborative potential, emphasizing that "having access to a ready network of peers means you have the ability to run ideas by people, get them peer-reviewed ... you can ask for and get immediate

feedback as to where the best research has been done.” Because of all that it is and is not, Twitter gives “a guiding hand on your shoulder within seconds of asking for it” (Beadle, 2010). This observation in particular relates to earlier observations offered by Godwin-Jones (2003) and others regarding the collaborative potential of blogging. What is possible via Posterous is also possible via Twitter; it just takes a smaller, more succinct form.

Opening such a collaborative channel in a classroom situation, though, observes Jeffrey R. Young (2009), “alters classroom power dynamics and signals to students that they’re in control.” Online communicative technologies can often be great equalizers, but, as described in the next section of this chapter, setting clear guidelines for their use are of near-equal importance. Further support for this observation is evident in how students approached the requirement of using Twitter in courses I guide.

MICROBLOGGING VIA TWITTER TO PROMOTE COMMUNITY

Some academics and educators on Twitter have, and often advocate for, separate accounts, maintaining personal/professional identities on Twitter in addition to accounts for each course taught in a given semester. Reasons for this separation are myriad. For instance, if there is a great diversity of subject matter and focus in a semester, a Twitter account for each course can prevent miscommunication and misunderstanding. Such an account can provide an initial focus for students as well, acting as a kind of localizing agent and guide for others in the course and those they should follow. Holding separate Twitter accounts can also be helpful when performing special course-related projects, such as Twitter user oline73’s *Animal Farm* project (2010) that requires students to perform as one of the characters in George Orwell’s novel (Fig. 7). Furthermore, some educators have a strong desire for some degree of anonymity online, to keep personal and professional interests apart. Maintaining a private personal account and a public professional account on Twitter is one way to exercise that anonymity.

There are also third-party applications, like Seismic and TweetDeck, that make it easier to manage multiple Twitter accounts for multiple purposes, but I remain resistant to such differentiation. The accessibility and openness of Twitter make it difficult to keep alternate facets of one’s identity hidden, even if maintaining an invitation-only account. Furthermore, I have a



Fig. 7. Twitter Feed of *Animal Farm* Project. Source: <http://twitter.com/oline73/animal-farm-project>. Reprinted with permission.

sustained interest in my Twitter use fostering an identity that serves as a model for students of what is possible in terms of appropriate academic engagement within the 140-character limit. Rather than Shaquille O’Neal or Kim Kardashian being the first examples that students encounter, I want

students to be witness to the ways in which I take advantage of Twitter. I want students to see the diversity in my status updates as well as in those I choose to follow. I enable students to use Twitter to, as Gross (2009) puts it, “learn from their peers, converse around issues that matter to them, and follow people they admire – [building] on students’ experience rather than [encouraging] it to develop black market-style.” So, in addition to @betajames, contextual hashtags, and Twitter lists are localizing agents for students in the courses I guide.

The common use requirement for Twitter in the most recent semester of courses was very simple, yet specific: five course-related “tweets” a week. This was but one of the marked changes from the rather nebulous “maintain presence” requirement in the previous semester’s courses. Blog entries and comments autoposted from Posterous to Twitter counted toward the “tweet” requirement. With the two required blog entries and three required blog comments every week, a student could complete blogging and tweeting at the same time. I also encouraged the posting of original thoughts, the “retweeting” of and @ replying to classmates’ updates, and the sharing of links relevant to the focus of the course. I thought this range of options might allow for a low-stakes introduction to Twitter, that once students understood how it worked they would engage in microblogging to a greater degree.

However, Twitter integration met with limited success. Some students witnessed immediate benefits and others were more gradual in their appreciation, but a noticeable number held a semester-long resistance to using the microblogging service. Their dissatisfaction was apparent not only on Posterous and Twitter but also in anonymous feedback I gathered near the semester’s end. Even though the minimum requirement was a mere five updates per week, students felt they did not have the time, or that Twitter constituted an annoyance, an unnecessary requirement.

Part of the reason for this lack of appreciative acquisition concerns what Twitter is. Blogging requirements make sense to many students because they are more able to view it with clarity as a form of writing, as something with which they already have a degree of familiarity. Even though Twitter is grounded in text, the 140-character limit proved to be an insurmountable barrier for some. Tweeting could not equal writing because of the strident limitations on communicating with others. Because of what Twitter does and does not allow of its users, adoption and understanding needs to be more authentic and original. Perhaps students need to be allowed to come to Twitter of their own accord and have the time necessary to do so.

Asking students to find their own way within the microblogging service could be successful for some, but not for all. Because of the structure of my

courses, there was not much affordance of time for Twitter alone. Because it was supplemental to blogging and more traditional forms of writing, because of my own view of Twitter as a relatively easy course requirement for students to fulfill, I saw little reason to address its use beyond an introductory session. Even this introductory session was limited to functionality as I expected students would take the time on their own for purposes of discovery. Allowing students to find their own way through Twitter can be detrimental in another way as well, as some students took to Twitter beyond course-related purposes, participating in “tweetathons” supporting their favorite celebrities and/or charities. As a result, the five course-related tweets were often lost in the endless streams of self-indulgent content, which is perhaps what Twitter is better known for.

There was some measure of appreciation in having their instructor as a model of engagement via Twitter, but many students needed more than this. Even though they were witness to my use of it, Twitter remained difficult for some students to grasp, and there was impatience expressed in understanding the point of Twitter. So, while the continued use of Twitter in a college-level writing course might be better if coming from students instead of the instructor, the reality of this possibility is questionable. A course requirement can often do little more than reaffirm a student’s initial dislike.

Not just a greater affordance of time to experiment is necessary; a better frame for using Twitter in higher education is essential. Students do need the time to find their own reasons and their own way when it comes to social media, but there should also be a clear, course-related context established for its use. For a better grasp of what I mean by this, I offer a brief overview of two Twitter-related assignments in two different college-level English courses.

Barbara Nixon (2008) implemented a 48-hour-long Twitter-related assignment early on in a course named *Making Connections: Facebook & Beyond*. After setting up an account and following everyone else in the class including Nixon, the assignment asks that students send at least six tweets over the next two days and respond to at least two of their classmates’ tweets. As Nixon (2008) explains, students’ tweets could concern pointing others in the class to “something interesting or funny you read online” or “pose a question that you’d like others to answer.” The assignment concludes with a 250-word minimum blog post about the experience, including one way there might be value in continuing an account on Twitter.

In *ENG 465 Reading Technology*, Brian Croxall introduces a month-long Twitter-related assignment after having already spent time with students discussing media systems. With this initial foundation in place, requirements of the actual assignment include following Croxall, the class account, and

other members of the class, posting at least once a day for a month and using the course hashtag #eng465. While there is a focus on experimental play with Twitter, Croxall (2010) also admits to his own interest in students using “an interconnected, mixed media system ... to see if it changes the culture or society of the class in any appreciable way.” This interest forms the basis for the end of the assignment as Croxall asks students to write up an evaluation of the assignment and what Twitter teaches about community and media. Emphasized by Croxall, too, is “an honest effort to play along.”

Each of these assignments is an experimental, reflective aspect as both Nixon (2008) and Croxall (2010) ask that students play with a low-entry, low-stakes form of social media. Rather than simply requiring the use of Twitter without much explanation, both instructors ask students to provide their own justification, encouraging students to take greater ownership of their performance on Twitter. In addition to considering assignments similar to those put forth by Croxall and Nixon, I am also interested in the possibility of keeping or even increasing the current Twitter use requirement while offering students the chance to opt out by composing an academic essay of equivalent length. If I might be excused for some momentary math, let us see how this would work out. Five tweets of 140 characters each leads to a total of 700 characters per week. Added up over a 14-week period, we should have around 9,800 characters total for the semester. If we can agree on an average of six characters per word, this means that a given student should produce around 1,633 words over the course of a semester. So, the requirement then becomes a question of whether a student prefers to provide a semester’s worth of tweets or an additional academic essay six pages in length. I remain curious about what students will decide to perform.

An unexpected function, though, concerned how successful Twitter was as an asynchronous notification system of students’ work. This happened because of a course requirement where students link their Posterous and Twitter accounts to enable autoposting, the pushing of content from one social online space to another. So, as students completed their required semiweekly blogging and commenting via Posterous, a public record of their efforts streamed through my Twitter feed (Fig. 8). I became witness to the very instances when students were not just completing coursework but also learning. This unique kind of feed was available to every student, too, required as they were to follow each other and/or the group I created for the course. This was also something for almost anyone beyond the course to see, allowing outsiders more than a peek into the course’s focus and how students worked within that framework.

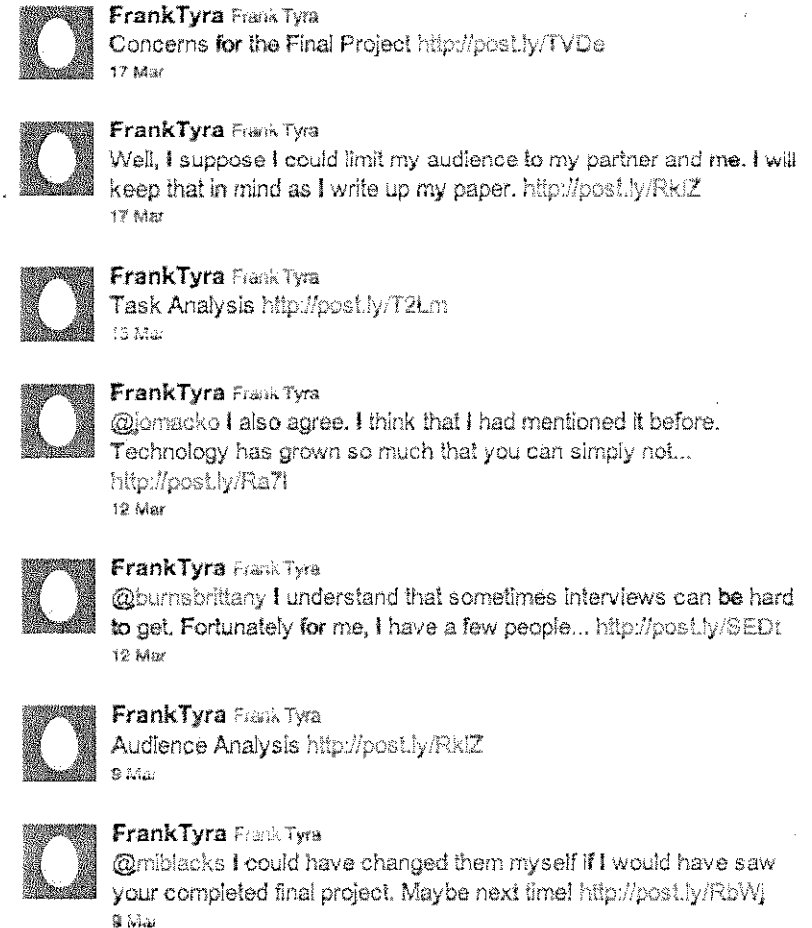


Fig. 8. Student Frank Tyra’s Twitter feed. *Source:* Tyra (2010). Available at <http://twitter.com/FrankTyra>. Reprinted with permission.

My Twitter feed became a showcase of student activity, providing me with better ideas of when students completed their work and how much time they took to perform it. I could almost see the work happening, very nearly see students learning. Requiring students to autopost content, both blog entries

and comments, from Posterous to Twitter, was an unforeseen success. It not only allowed me to see how and when students completed necessary work, but it also helped students in creating course-related identities. Posterous and Twitter represented additional frames for the course in which students were able to perform their own unique work and find another reason to engage with the material and each other.

SUMMARY OF STUDENTS' OBSERVATIONS ON BLOGGING AND TWEETING

Although the above sections are separated by blogging and collaboration, tweeting and community, I do not mean to indicate that community-building is exclusive to Twitter, nor collaboration to Posterous (or blogging in general). I also do not mean to leave students' own perspectives on these online communicative technologies out of this particular essay. In moving toward some semblance of a conclusion, then, I offer a sampling of students' observations about blogging and tweeting in college-level courses. I should note that these observations come from students whose academic institution is in a transition period; the first on-campus housing in the form of a 400-room dormitory became available in Fall 2008. Before that, it was a commuter campus serving a majority of nontraditional students. It is also a wireless campus and all classrooms are at least equipped with smart carts and digital projectors. Rare is the student attending this institution who has little to no access to technologies necessary for course completion. The university library and other campus buildings offer computer labs exclusively for students to use.

It was in one of these labs that I conducted critical incident questionnaire (CIQ), offered by Stephen Brookfield in *Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher* (1995, P. 115), within the last two weeks of the semester, before official course evaluations. All students typed their anonymous responses to the CIQ in Microsoft Word and then printed them out for me to pick up at the end of the session.

For many students across all courses, from first-year composition to graduate study in digital rhetoric, there was an element of surprise to the required use of blogs and Twitter. The very introduction of blogging as a course requirement surprised one student for "most professors I've had tend to use Blackboard if any computer-related tools." Another was impressed with their own ability "to organize the use of the technology that was required" as Posterous and Twitter were never of much interest to the

student before the course. A third student expressed surprise at how they ended up "liking the fact that we blogged every week" and a fourth was rather astounded about the content they were able to produce when "left to my own devices regarding material ... I surprised myself and was forced to think critically about stuff I could blog about that pertains to this class." Often partnered with this element of surprise was the expression of a desire to continue blogging and/or tweeting, either "so as not to lose writing for myself in my future" or because "I found them both to be beneficial this semester and may continue to use them even after I am not being graded on it." Initial surprise gave way to sustained value, which came from a sense of engagement over the course of the semester: "Twitter helped with sharing articles and blogs; blogging helped improve my writing and taught me what keeps readers interested and what they're looking for." Put in a more succinct manner by another student: "Blogging forced me to keep audience always in mind." This same student also echoes a point made earlier by Phil Beadle, that is, the importance of following "professionals that engage my interest, that there is a reason for [Twitter] beyond understanding what someone had for breakfast." In moving above such a superficial perspective of social media, in no longer seeing "all the blogs and posts to Twitter" as unnecessary, one additional student

can definitely see now that it sets up a community for the students and professor to interact immediately and not having to wait until the next class. I often times forget questions I had before and never get them answered, but not in this class due to the almost 24/7 availability of either other students or the professor.

The continual sharing of course-relevant information, the development of audience awareness, the ample opportunity to practice writing, the accessibility and availability of fellow students, and the instructor for commentary and questions, all were benefits that students found in relation to blogging and tweeting in the first-year, advanced, and technical writing courses I guide.

CONCLUSION

What makes the use of social media in higher education is connection, not only among and between participants but also with regard to the social media chosen. Autoposting, the pushing of content across multiple platforms, can be a primary method of maintaining connection as well as coherence and cohesion among users, be they students or teachers. This aids

in the construction and maintenance of a learning community as well as in the establishment and reaffirmation of a learning identity unique to each individual involved. This can, and often does, lead to more meaningful interaction and greater collaboration, allowing for the development of learning narratives that become a public record over the course of a semester.

Quick blogging via Posterous and microblogging via Twitter are but two possibilities for facilitating collaboration and community in college-level courses. Overall ease-of-use and relative simplicity make for low barriers of entry for a majority of students. The mobile accessibility of these online communicative technologies should also be of specific appeal. These characteristics should encourage student participation in ways that content management systems like Blackboard do not. The convenience of and allowance for quick and easy sharing of information via blogging and microblogging can also mean that each is often quicker than email for contacting someone. What make both better than Blackboard concerns how they, when taken together, sustain class discussion, keeping it alive, present, and continuous.

If proper affordances are made in terms of framing and timing, the appropriate use of social media can make for a successful addition to almost any college-level course. Social media tools like Posterous and Twitter, both of which are rather effortless in terms of use, allow and perhaps even encourage students to think and chart their own learning in ways that are as meaningful and unique as themselves.

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LEARNING ABOUT MEDIA EFFECTS BY BUILDING A WIKI COMMUNITY: STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES AND SATISFACTION[☆]

Jennie M. Hwang and Boris H. J. M. Brummans

ABSTRACT

Teachers have recently started to introduce wikis into their courses. However, comparatively few studies have looked at the actual experiences of students who are engaged in building a wiki community for a particular course. To address this limitation, this exploratory self-report study examined student experiences with using a wiki in an upper-level undergraduate course on media effects, their reflections on functioning as a member of this wiki community, and their overall satisfaction with taking this kind of a "hybrid" or "blended" course. Results show that students enjoyed learning about media effects by collaboratively building their wiki community, but were critical about the structure of the hybrid course.

[☆]Chapter for Charles Wankel's edited book, *Teaching Arts and Science with the New Social Media*.

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