



Twitter in Higher Education

Case studies of practice

Evaluation of Twitter's potential in Higher Education is beginning to be published and some distinct uses have emerged exemplified by four case studies below.

Case study 1. Twitter as broadcast medium (University of Bristol)

Dr Sabah Abdullah used Twitter for an undergraduate module in Economics (Ramsden 2009). Twitter was used to supplement the recommended reading list with relevant news items. A module-specific Twitter account was created using the module code and instructions were provided to students on how to create their own Twitter account, and on how to follow the module account. Use of Twitter was encouraged through references in lectures. Generally, Dr Abdullah posted the URL of relevant articles via Twitter.

Case study 2. Twitter as conversational medium (University of Texas, Dallas)

Dr Monica Rankin used Twitter as a means of encouraging greater student participation in large-group classes. Her intention was to "pull more students into a class discussion which [she] wouldn't ordinarily be able to do with that many people" (Kesmit3 2009). Her students reported that the experiment worked well and helped them, in the words of one, to "pipe up and be heard" in a large-group context that can be "a little intimidating" (Kesmit3 2009). Hashtags – e.g. #h1302w08 – were used that included both a module code as well as a reference to the week in which the discussion was taking place. This case study illustrates the deployment of Twitter as a conversational medium used to enable in-class ('backchannels') and well as post-lecture comments and reflections.

Case study 3. Twitter for learning communities (University of Colorado, Denver)

Dunlap & Lowenthal (2009) have recently published an evaluation of their use of Twitter on a module on instructional design and technology. The authors encouraged their students to use Twitter in a variety of ways: to post questions and queries to one another as well as to the course team, to send student-to-student direct messages, to tweet comments on relevant news events, to share resources, to reports on conferences that were not attended by some of their fellow students, to links to student blogs and to exchange personal information (e.g. a student tweeting they're tired and off to bed which receives two replies wishing her a good night's sleep). The authors claim that the use of Twitter can enhance students' perception of a sense of 'social presence', an important quality that helps promote student involvement, commitment and retention. They conclude that Twitter is good for "sharing, collaboration, brainstorming, problem solving, and creating within the context of our moment-to-moment experiences" (Dunlap & Lowenthal 2009).



Case study 4. Twitter as data collection tool (Sheffield Hallam University)

The Academic Innovation Team used Twitter as a means to collect student feedback on informal learning spaces. The team saw Twitter as “an innovative data generation method” (Aspden & Thorpe 2009) relevant to the life styles of the students who reflections were being sought. 15 students were recruited to take part in a two-week study in which they were required to tweet an average of three times per day about their learning activities and the spaces they were using. Most of the student volunteers chose to register their phones to allow SMS tweets and used a combination of PC- and phone-based updates. The team created a dedicated project account (<http://twitter.com/learningspaces>) which followed the student volunteers. The benefits of using Twitter over print-based data collection tools included “the ability for participants to update anytime, almost anywhere, and through a variety of devices that are integral to their lives (cell phones, laptops, desktop PCs)” (Aspden & Thorpe 2009). Use of Twitter also helped avoid “the difficulties associated with information recall and [...] the risk of not having the appropriate equipment to record key events” (Aspden & Thorpe 2009). The limited length of tweets meant that updates were tended to be concise and focused. Finally, the ‘real time’ and public nature of tweets helped inform ongoing institutional initiatives (e.g. the redevelopment of the learning centres) that would have otherwise had to have waited until data had been collated and evaluated if more traditional data collection methods had been used

References

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