

Twittering Away - Is twitter an appropriate adjunctive tool to enhance learning and engagement in Higher Education?

Elizabeth Boath, Katy Vigurs, Juliette Frangos

Staffordshire University

Corresponding author: E.Boath@staffs.ac.uk

Abstract

Twitter is a social media platform that has been used in teaching and learning. The aim was to explore students' views of using Twitter as an adjunctive learning tool to provide access to contemporary information, to enhance learning and to generate wider discussion via Twitter backchannel communication. A 17-item Qualtrics questionnaire consisting of open and closed questions was devised specifically for the study. Qualitative data was analysed using descriptive statistics. Qualitative data via thematic analysis. Participants were a convenience sample of 44 Level 4 Social Welfare Law students who were invited to engage online with the academic and professional community via Twitter. Eleven (25%) students responded to the questionnaire. Four key themes emerged from the qualitative data: Enhancing knowledge; Building academic and professional networks; Time for twitter and the Need for Twitter training. Despite the limitations, the results suggest that if supported by institutional digital scaffolding and training, twitter may be a useful adjunct to traditional physical learning spaces. Further research is r however required to explore the future pedagogic potential of Twitter.

Keywords: Twitter, Teaching, Student Engagement.

Introduction

Twitter is a social media platform where the account holder has a Twitter Handle with the symbol @ in front of a name (e.g. @DrLizBoath), sends out messages and links up to 140-characters. Messages can include a hashtag (#), which makes them 'searchable' (e.g #MidWeekMile). The messages can then be seen by those searching for a specific # and by the account holder's followers. Those who view the message can then cascade it by 'retweeting' the message and their followers can in turn retweet – often causing a message to 'go viral' within a very short period of time (Carrigan, 2015).

Twitter therefore appeals to celebrities, professionals and politicians, but Twitter can also be used as a '*participatory academic sphere*' to create networks, to encourage openness around the process of learning, to share information and to provide support (Stewart, 2015).

Lupton's (2014) study of 711 academics using social media found that 90% were using Twitter for academic purposes: both for research and for teaching and learning. Stewart (2015) suggests that academics using Twitter are engaged in '*curating and contributing resources to a broader "conversation" in their field... rather than merely promoting themselves and their work*'. This suggests that Twitter is not simply an '*echo chamber*' of retweets, but rather facilitates the opportunity for conversations (Mewburn and Thomson, 2013).

Twitter can be employed to assist students in organising and shaping virtual peer support groups (Mollet et al., 2010). Furthermore, Twitter can be used to develop interactive academic networks, share knowledge and to create social relations via 'Twitter Chats' (Minocha and Petre, 2012; Carrigan, 2016).

Twitter has the potential to open up access, through the building of social networks and informal learning processes (Stewart, 2015). Twitter can also be beneficial for building networks of academics and students, locally, nationally and globally, '*enhancing information flows, inspiring thinking, and motivating academic practice*' (McPherson et al., 2015). Twitter can also develop into a collegial space where '*we are allowed to show the way we work and see how others work*' suggesting that this openness '*becomes a way of seeing patterns of practice and patterns of dialogue, conversations and references*' (McPherson et al., 2015). Twitter thus allows learning conversations to take place both virtually and publicly, thus removing them from the isolation of classrooms and academic ivory towers (McPherson et al., 2015).

Twitter may have the potential to re-conceptualise the learning space and promote asynchronous learning; generate an online learning community; facilitate the provision of immediate formative feedback to learners; and enhance learner attainment of graduate attributes (Frangos, 2014). A reflective evaluation of teaching practice in the area of Social Welfare Law identified a lack of engagement and absence of contemporary social media tools in teaching (Frangos, 2014). The evaluation identified recommendations for research into the use of social media in Higher Education and Twitter was selected based on its focus

on social interaction and its potential to open-up access to learning and to make '*some of the invisible work of academia, visible*' (Frangos, 2014; McPherson et al., 2015).

The main current source of contemporary information in many Universities is a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), such as BlackBoard. This research therefore explored the use of Twitter as an adjunctive learning tool to provide learners with access to contemporary discussion relevant to their subject, which they were invited to identify, understand and disseminate to the wider group. The use of Twitter therefore aimed to enhance the student experience through enhancing motivation, communication skills, understanding of personal and professional boundaries and knowledge-sharing and participation. It sought to increase learner motivation and engagement, both within and external to, taught sessions, by using Twitter for backchannel communication. The aim of this study was to evaluate student's views of Twitter as an adjunctive learning tool in a Social Welfare Law Policy and Advice Practice module.

Methodology

Participants were a cohort of 44 Level 4 students studying a Welfare Benefits and Money Advice Module of the BA Social Welfare Law, Policy and Advice Practice. As part of their course, all members of the cohort were encouraged to engage with the online academic and professional community via the use of 'twitter lists', twitter chats and direct engagement via twitter with lecturing staff, each other, experts in the field and relevant communities and organisations. They were invited to identify contemporary information relevant to their programme of study and to share it using a dedicated # for questions and comments.

A Qualtrics survey was designed specifically for the study. The 17-item questionnaire used closed and open questions to generate data exploring students' views of the use of twitter and the impact that twitter had on their learning experience. All students in the cohort were invited to take part in the research and to complete the Qualtrics questionnaire. The Qualtrics responses were analysed using descriptive statistics and qualitative responses were analysed using Thematic Analysis to identify patterns and themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Qualitative data was analysed independently by two of the authors and discussion was carried out until emergent themes were agreed.

Ethical approval was obtained from the University Research Ethics Committee.

Results

The Qualtrics Questionnaire was completed by 11 of the 44 students (25%). The socio-demographic characteristics of the students who responded is shown in Table 1.

Table 1 socio-demographic (n=11)

Age	
25-34	3 (27%)
35-44	3 (27%)
45-54	3 (27%)
Over 55	2 (19%)
Gender	
Male	2 (19%)
Female	9 (81%)
Course	
Full-time (on campus)	5 (45%)
Part-time (Distance Learning)	6 (54%)
Ethnicity	
White British	10 (90%)
Black	1 (10%)

Three (27%) of students who responded reported that they were previously 'regular' users of twitter, and two reported that they were 'very knowledgeable' about twitter before this project started. Five (45%) who had not used twitter before said they were now 'active' twitter users. With the remaining 3 (27%) respondents reporting, they were infrequent users prior to the project and also now. Eight (73%) students reported that they were 'regular users of Facebook'. Only two (18%) used Pinterest or Instagram.

The following four key themes emerged: enhancing knowledge, building academic and professional networks, time for twitter and the need for twitter training. Quotes were selected to highlight emergent themes.

Findings and Discussion

Theme 1: Enhancing knowledge

Although Carrigan (2016) suggested that Twitter, can be used to develop interactive academic networks and share knowledge, Henderson and colleagues (2015) found that only 14.5% of students found Twitter to be 'useful' or 'very useful' for their university studies. The opposite was found in this cohort and 6 (54%) students found the tweets 'really valuable' and 9 (82%) students said using twitter had enhanced their knowledge of the subject area and made them aware of relevant news and policy and that Twitter had been key to keeping them up to date. Quotes such as the following were typical and students reported that Twitter provided:

Instant access to information, articles and reports can be saved and read at a later date...Allowed me to keep up to date with new developments and access reports that have just been published,(Student 4)

Current reports, opinions, gives a clear understanding of issues happening currently...Tutors could instantly signpost updates in case law. (Student 6)

However, students also questioned the reliability and validity of some Twitter sources and one student made the comment:

Not always sure if sources are reliable (Student 10)

Despite the ongoing commitment to using twitter that many of the students showed throughout this module, only two (18%) students agreed that twitter had added to their enjoyment of the module. This is supported by Pilbeam and colleagues (2013) who found that students perceived face-to-face communication and networking to be most valuable. Thus, the question of how twitter impacts on module evaluation requires further exploration.

Theme 2: Building academic and professional networks

Research highlights that Twitter can be very effective in building academic and professional networks, both locally and globally (Carrigan, 2016; McPherson et al., 2015). Five (45%) students reported that they were now active twitter users as a result of this initiative and six (54%) students said twitter had enhanced their engagement with the module:

Instant access to information and tutor if needed... Interactive, instant information, able to make good contacts re study information (Student 4)

Tweets from other professional people were useful. Whole wide world with different views (Student 9)

Pilbeam and colleagues (2013) highlighted their concerns about the use of Twitter on the grounds of equity, as some students might fall outside the networks and conversations that evolve via twitter as engagement in twitter was encouraged, but not mandated. The students who responded were very aware that not all members of their cohort were active Twitter users and felt that this was a missed opportunity for further interaction:

*Not all students engaged with twitter. More participation and interaction by **ALL** the students. (Student 4)*

Other students not involved, it has been a missed opportunity for them as interaction with others is always good...It encourages interaction and discussion, especially useful for distance learners. (Student 6)

Only two (18%) students did not see the benefit of using twitter for their course:

I don't see why we have to use Twitter for Uni. (Student 7)

Can be a bit mundane. I sometimes feel, what is the point?. (Student 10)

Theme 3: Time for Twitter

The time demands of the '*constant connectivity*' offered by twitter and other social media has previously been highlighted (Wajcman, 2015). Pragmatic strategies to manage these time demands this have been outlined to help academics and students use their time on social media efficiently and effectively to avoid information overload (Carrigan, 2016). Some students highlighted the problem they faced of fitting twitter into the '*messy chaos*' of their busy academic, personal and social lives (Bryant, 2014) and comments such as the following were common:

Too many tweets come through and I tend to just skim through them... Time and number of tweets a barrier. (Student 7)

Spending too much time scrolling through posts that I don't really need to see...If you have lots of followers and follow others you can miss tweets that may be important. (Student 6)

Theme 4: Need for Twitter Training

Previous research suggests that the use of Twitter to support students' learning and to help them feel part of the academic university community may be limited (Henderson et al., 2015; Pilbeam et al., 2013). For example, Henderson and colleagues (2015) found that students' use of digital technology in higher education was limited by varying levels of digital competence and confidence. Only five (45%) of the students were already twitter users and six (55%) reported that they were non-users users of Twitter prior to this study and so it was not surprising that many students also highlighted the need for training in the use of Twitter

People need educating on the use of twitter. A bit more practice, or a physical demonstration may cure this (Student 7)

Some kind of homework question set...with a reply through twitter to encourage learning in action (Student 10)

The results suggest that if supported by institutional digital scaffolding such as time management strategies and training, Twitter may be a useful adjunct to traditional physical learning spaces that facilitates the enhancement of knowledge and building of professional networks. The results are however tentative due to the limitations of the study as outlined below.

Limitations of the study

Given the very small convenience sample and very low response rate to the questionnaire – only a quarter of the total cohort, it is difficult to generalise the findings. Furthermore, Social Welfare Law students tend to be more mature students, to be employed, have children and also some undertake additional caring roles, so the findings of this study may not be generalizable to younger, more traditional University students. More women than men responded to the questionnaire and the question therefore arises as to whether the findings from this small select group of mainly female students could generalise to a wider

population of students. Further research should therefore consider if there is an age or gender difference in the use of Twitter.

As this was a small prospective cohort study, there was no control group. A feasibility study would be required to assess whether a more stringent research design such as a randomised controlled trial would be feasible. Qualitative and quantitative data were gathered via an online questionnaire. Future qualitative research using focus groups or individual interviews would be required to explore in more depth students views of using Twitter.

Frangos (2014) suggested that Twitter could enhance learner attainment of graduate attributes and potentially enhance grades. However, this was not assessed in the current research and future research is required to explore whether Twitter has an impact on grades and potentially degree classification.

Traditional learning spaces are physical, constrained, spaces, but Twitter may open the door to learning spaces without boundaries and this may require a shift in thinking and a new collegiality (Carrigan, 2016). Future research is required to explore a more social model of active learning, coupled with research to explore the most appropriate platform and digital learning space.

In conclusion, despite the limitations of the study, this research suggests Twitter may be a useful adjunct to learning for students who elect to use it. Given the fast changing landscape of pedagogic social media use, Twitter may evolve a far more active role in future. However, one thing is certain, there will not be less social media in future and so further work to train academics and students in the use of social media for pedagogic purposes is currently underway.

If you have evolving educational ideas, please share them with us on Twitter @DrLizBoath @drkatyvigurs @JueFrangos

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