

Beth Phillips

Lit Review

Social Media in the Classroom

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Some feel that 140 characters is not a lot of space, but can it be enough space to help communicate with and engage students? I think so.

Whether you like it or not, social media is a part of our society. Every day millions of people check their Facebook or Twitter stream. People use LinkedIn to network for careers. I don't see social media going anywhere, so we might as well utilize it to the best of our abilities, but can social media be an educational tool as well? Some educators are incorporating the media into the classroom. In my experience, I think the incorporation of social media in the classroom is necessary. It may be scary to some educators, but social media is where the students are. It is important for an educator to connect with his/her students. Sometime that requires the educator to meet the students where they are.

I am fortunate enough to teach students social media in a few courses of journalism. From my own experiences, even though students are familiar with the technology, they only know how to use it as a way to keep up with friends, so I must teach them how to use it as a tool for education. I also interact with students on Twitter. If they follow me, I follow them back. I have found that this helps students feel comfortable with me as a teacher and see me as a person and not just some teacher spouting out directions at them. They find that we have interests in common whether it be a TV show,

a band, or a favorite restaurant. I find this helps to bridge connections and form relationships, which then turn into a more engaged and successful classroom. I have had students ask me a homework question through social media. Dunlap & Lowenthal (2009) were also of the opinion that when students had out of class interactions through social media there is an instructional value not to mention it strengthens the relationships between faculty and students, leading to an enhanced community in the classroom.

I believe most teachers feel like their job does not stop when they walk out of the school. Social media makes a teacher more accessible to students. In today's society when both parents work and a student may not always have someone at home to help them, social media can help ease that problem. In order for social media use in the classroom to be effective, social media must be taught to the class and the teacher must be engaged with the social media, which will lead to building relationships and creating student engagement.

Social media must be introduced and taught

As more and more technology is introduced into the classroom, the more that an instructor must introduce the technology to the class. In order to be used effectively, students must be introduced to how the social media can and will be used in the classroom. In Junco, Heiberger, & Loken's (2010) study, Twitter was taught to the experimental group prior to using it for a class session and then addressed questions in subsequent class sessions. Similarly, Elavsky, M., Elavsky, S., & Mislán, C. (2011) encouraged Twitter use everyday in class. The incorporation of teaching Twitter at the start of the experiment was essential to the students understanding how the social media works, and what the expectations were when using Twitter. In addition, Junco et al.'s

(2010) study introduced the technology as well at the beginning of the semester. Leaver also introduced the technology with notes and a ten-minute explanation in class (2011). Each of these studies taught students how to use Twitter before starting; if they hadn't taught Twitter before starting, likely the results would be different. From personal experience, I have found that students don't like Twitter at first, but once I teach them the basics and benefits, they are more inclined to use it.

For example, at a recent journalism camp I asked about 75 students on the first day to indicate by a raise of hands how many were on Twitter, and .75 of students raised their hands. When asked why students weren't on Twitter, most said they thought it is stupid or didn't understand the point. The following day I gave a lesson on Twitter. The lesson went over how to use it, different people who are on Twitter, and I gave a chance for students who are already on Twitter to talk about it. Students who weren't on Twitter could ask questions. The last day of the camp, I asked students to indicate by raise of hands who was on Twitter. All but three raised their hands. When students are taught something, they are more inclined to use it. According to Howard Rheingold, students must be trained to become literate in social media because we are not born with the skills to use it (Blankship, 2011).

Expectations need to be set as well. Junco et al.'s (2010) study set up optional and required assignments for the Twitter experimental group. The required assignment did produce a spike in tweet activity (Junco et al., 2010, p. 124). However, Leaver (2011) did not set clear expectations from the beginning, and using the media was optional. At the end of the Leaver study, it was pointed out that next time boundaries need to be established. If the technology is going to be incorporated into the classroom then it

should be treated as such with required posts. With the required participation, hopefully more natural and voluntary usage would occur. Similar to Leaver, Elavsky et al.'s (2011) study did not give instruction on how to use the technology, but the difference was that Twitter was encouraged everyday in class, and at least one day a week the Twitter feed was projected onto the overhead in the class. The media needs to be incorporated into the traditional classroom setting if it is going to be effective. Another difference in the Elavsky et al. (2011) study was that specific tweets would be brought up in class to discuss. This plays well into Rheingold's (in Blankship, 2011) assertion that students should be trained on what deserves attention in social media and when to avoid distractions. Through having a Twitter feed going in class and bringing up tweets in class discussion helped bridge the gap between social media as an educational tool and just a distraction. In addition to using social media in the classroom, not only is the teacher building discussion, but they are also modeling how to use social media for educational purposes.

I think Blankship (2011) summed it up well "...the most inescapable truth about social media in education: No matter what we think of them, they aren't going away" (p. 42). This technology is not going to go away. If teachers are going to use it effectively as a tool in the classroom, the teacher can't assume because students know about social media that they know how to use it in an educational way. In order to successfully use the media, it is important for the teacher take time to explain the technology and set up boundaries and guidelines for use.

Faculty engagement

Since technology has been incorporated more and more in the classroom, the question of how much a teacher should be involved comes into play. To use the tool effectively, Junco et al.'s (2010) found that after examining the content of tweets, students and faculty engaged in a vibrant learning community. In an example from Junco et al. (2010) a student asked a very candid question via Twitter for the teacher that may not have been asked in a large group setting. The teacher took on a more active role in with students through the use of Twitter compared to other technologies like Ning; even though students received the same information, the Twitter students were able to have more of a conversation with their students rather than just a one way street (Juncos et al's., 2010) In Elavsky et al. (2011), through the teacher's involvement in the Twitter discussion, they were able to bring up a topic in class that lead to a robust debate in and out of class. By the teacher being involved, the teacher can better facilitate discussion on and offline. When the discussion got off topic, the teacher was able to bring it back to the class topic (Elavsky et al., 2011). Another positive that came through Junco et al.'s (2010) study was faculty responding immediately to students, and this generated even more response from students. A middle school teacher, Enrique Legaspi (in Simon, 2011), said, "I get feedback on the spot. Not only that, all the students can see what they're sharing. This is powerful." Through this computer based communication, teachers can communicate more frequently with students that the allotted class time, which can lead to students perceiving the teacher as more caring (Johnson, 2011).

Through participation on Twitter a faculty member was able to help facilitate a study group that eventually did not need the teacher to facilitate once it got going (Junco et al., 2010). Some implications of the Junco et al. (2010) study were that contact was

improved between students and faculty because students were able to communicate in a way that already fit in with the students' lifestyle.

This is exactly why a high school principal, Eric Scheninger, from New Jersey has over 12,000 followers on his Twitter account (Toppo, 2011). Social media is the principal's main source of communication with students and parents (Toppo, 2011). Social media can be a two way street. I teach Twitter and let students follow me. There have been several occasions where a student will ask me a question and I can immediately respond to them. I have also had experiences where a student will find and tweet me the link to an interesting site or tool they think I can use in the classroom.

This shows a little of what Johnson (2011) found in her study of students perception of a teacher's credibility through tweets. In her experiment students evaluated a teacher based on a twitter account. One was devoted only to scholarly tweets and another devoted to social tweets that weren't school related (Johnson, 2011). In Johnson's (2011) study students reported finding the more social profile more credible, and having a more credible teacher has been found to create a more productive and effective learning environment. Much like the student in Junco et al.'s (2010) study who was not afraid to ask a more candid question, research in Johnson's (2011) study showed that, "Teachers who participate in social media may come across to their students as more accessible and responsive to technological changes" (p. 24). This idea follows along with what Dunlap & Lowenthal (2009) found that contact between students and teacher outside of class is critical for student engagement. When faculty can be engaged with students outside of the classroom with formal and informal conversations, the students can get the help they need when they struggle and knowing the teacher's commitment keeps the student

motivated (Dunlap & Lowenthal, 2009). This motivation showed through the study group that was arranged with the help from the teacher, but then continued through the organization of the students (Junco et al., 2010).

One downside to a teacher posting personal information as well was pointed out in Leaver's (2011) study. One student was reported as seeing something non-class related that she disagreed with, so an internal conflict developed whether or not to say anything over the social media. I would say I post a combination of personal and scholarly tweets. Much like Leaver (2011) brought up how important it is for the teacher to model Twitter use, I try to model proper usage to my students. I post links that have to do with school or education, but I also have my own personality with Twitter as well. By being active participants on Twitter, students will see how being an active member of the Twitter community should be by connecting with other professionals, sharing resources, and networking (Dunlap & Lowenthal, 2009).

If a teacher were not present in the use of social media in the classroom then it would be like the teacher presenting a lecture with out being in the room. When the teacher also plays a role in the social media discussion, then the teacher can offer help when needed, redirect conversation, and give immediate feedback to students, but almost most importantly, the teacher can be a model of correct usage for students.

Promote relationships and engagement

The most dramatic finding was how much social media enabled students and teachers both to establish relationships and engage in conversations to enrich the traditional classroom-learning environment. Johnson's (2011) study found that personal communication between teacher and student helps develop trust, which can also lead to a

more productive and effective learning environment. This relationship does not end at the end of the semester or class either, through Twitter, students can maintain communication with a teacher beyond the course time limit going (Dunlap & Lowenthal, 2009). Even if students didn't post on Twitter much through the class, they could still follow the conversation and find resources to enable learning (Dunlap & Lowenthal, 2009).

Elavsky et al. (2011) found that the scope for discussion was significantly expanded beyond traditional boundaries; for example discussion were had over Twitter that were introduced in class, but not necessarily an assignment on the syllabus. Having expanded discussion was not limited to one study. Junco et al. (2010) found a book students were reading during the study was also discussed much more through Twitter than the limited class time would have allowed. Students were continuing discussion outside of the classroom. Messner (2009) brought up a good point that teachers are encouraged to be part of professional learning communities or networks (PLC, PLN), so why shouldn't students? Twitter is a way for students to continue dialogue and insights out of the classroom just like the book discussed in Junco et al.'s (2010) study. Educational discourse like that only enriches a student's experience of a class, and helps students construct meaning through the sustained communication (Elavsky et al., 2011, Junco et al., 2010, Dunlap & Lowenthal, 2009).

Through all the expanded discussion, Junco et al. (2010) found that the experimental Twitter group had significantly higher GPAs by the end of the semester. This could be in part that the teacher was engaged on Twitter with the students and recognized when the students were having trouble, so the teacher helped organize a study group. (Junco et al. (2010) However, after the first meeting, the teacher did not facilitate

any more meetings (Junco's et al., 2010), which coincides with Howard Rheingold's quote about the benefits of social media, "What are the benefits of social media to students? Plenty: greater engagement, greater interest, students taking more control and responsibility for their education" (Blankship, 2011, p. 40). The students took it upon themselves to continue and expand a study group that they may have not done had it not been for Twitter. I wish Elavsky et al. (2011) would have collected GPA information on the Twitter versus non Twitter users as well. The Twitter users were taking their education more into their own hands by setting up study groups and asking questions through Twitter that they may not have had the chance to as in the allotted class time.

Engaging students is another reason for the push of social media in the classroom. The opinion is that students are on it anyway, so why not meet them there. Middle school teacher Enrique Legaspi thought the same thing after attending a conference, "I had an aha moment there. I said to myself 'This is going to engage my students'" (Simon, 2011). In Simon's (2011) report Legaspi said that a few students tend to dominate the in class discussion, so twitter has broadened the student participate, and shy students benefit from using the media.

Because of the nature of Twitter and it being a micro-blog Elavsky et al. (2011), stated that it was easier for students to write a quick reflection. I think the use of Twitter is less intimidating than a blank piece of paper or a blog space, and students feel more comfortable posting. Young (2010) quoted a student expressing how he was not outspoken in class, and using Twitter made him feel less shy and not afraid to ask a question. Not all students feel comfortable speaking up in class. In addition, students may not connect in class discussion to out of class experience either. With Twitter as a

constant discussion students will be more likely to think about the class discussion outside of the class environment. Much like Elavsky et al. (2011) found that Twitter helped students relate course material to experiences outside of the classroom. Messner (2009) used Twitter to connect with the author of a book her students had just read. Students were able to ask the author questions and look back at the conversation when writing their own paper. This discussion would not happen in a traditional class setting without a lot of planning and luck on the teacher's part, but Twitter makes professionals more accessible to students and expands the classroom.

After analyzing results of using Twitter in the Elavsky et al. (2011) study, it was found that a majority of students reported that using Twitter improved: the experience of the class, the impression of the class size (making it feel smaller), the engagement with the course, and what they got out of the class. The engagement Elavsky et al. (2011) was shown through Chapman's (2010) study, which looked into students' GPAs and found students who were tweeting had higher grade points than the counter part, and the tweeting students were more engaged. This all helps make students more active learners. They are not just passively sitting in class, but they are engaging in conversation and making connections outside the classroom. As an educator, isn't the goal to help students, in addition to sharing knowledge, learn how to use tools and critical thinking skills to help them become life-long learners?

Building relationships in class is an important part of education. It is also particularly important to any middle schooler, which can be a tough time for adolescents. A student in Legaspi's (in Simon, 2011) class reported that students used to tease him about his longer hair, but Twitter has changed that, and now they view him as an equal.

That is powerful transformation for a middle schooler. It is not just middle school student's who are capable of forming relationships through social media. Another friendship developed through Junco's et al. (2010) study between a popular athlete and an introverted student because they discovered a commonality. This connection may have not happened within the traditional classroom just like the middle schooler may not have been accepted by fellow classmates may not have happened if not for the use of Twitter in the classroom. It allows for students who may not feel comfortable talking in class, feel more comfortable sharing through writing, like the inverted student (Blankship, 2011).

Communication improvement was also found in Elavsky et al. (2011) in which Twitter allowed for a wider reach than traditional chat rooms, and expanded the reach of any post much faster. It was also found that Twitter allowed students to connect with each other and create meaning through 'sustained communication' (Elavsky et al., 2011). It was reported in anonymous evaluations that Twitter allowed for an alternative venue for students to build a rapport with other students and the instructor. Twitter allowed for these students to make connections with teachers and other students in a non-intimidating way, which carried over from social media to real life interactions just like in Junco's et al. (2010) study and Legaspi's (in Simon, 2011) class.

Summary

According to the research, to effectively incorporate a social media tool to the classroom, like Twitter, it is important to thoroughly introduce the media to the class and be an active participant to help students engage, build relationships, and enrich their learning experience.

Discussion/limitation points

A limit from Johnson's (2011) research I found was that her profiles were made up and not based on real tweets that took place by a teacher over the course of a semester. It seems that the fabricated tweets, no matter how real they seemed, may make the conclusions reach not as real.

Another questions that was brought up was age of social media users and what they find acceptable, like in Johnson's (2011) study, there was a negative correlation between age and credibility. The older a student was, the less credible they thought a teacher was who was on social media (Johnson, 2011). I wonder what makes older students think that teachers on social media make them less credible?

There is always the concern that students will find something inappropriate, or write something inappropriate using social media and the Internet more in class. One comment in Tappo's (2011) article explained this well though by pointing out that when we take students on a field trip, we point out dangers, so the same should be for social media. I think this is an important problem to address. Most of my research was focused on higher education because using social media in the classroom is unaccepted. Personally when people say that teachers and students should not communicate on social media is like a slap in the face that all teachers are not responsible or trustworthy. I would like to find more research and articles addressing secondary teachers using social media.

Elavsky et al. (2011) also point out however that there are arguments that using Twitter in the classroom as live stream, could actually decrease student classroom interaction. This also brought up an interesting aspect to social media and the current

generation. Is using all this technology decreasing students face-to-face skills? And will there be a happy medium between social media and face-to-face interaction?

Social media is still a new technology to education and society in a whole, so there is so much to learn about how using the technology is affecting education and communication skills in general.

Conclusion

There was a lot of information presented in this research, but I would like to know more first hand experiences of Twitter or other social media being used in high school classroom since that is my area of interest. I know there are a few teachers in my school who have experimented with Twitter as a teaching tool. I plan on talking to them and their students for more feedback.

Ultimately I would like to gather enough information to create and implement a plan for my classroom, and for possibly other teachers in my school to use.

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