

Activity 9.1 Desktop Research: Twitter

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Research Topic: Use of Twitter in an educational context

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What is Twitter?

Twitter is a microblogging service. A microblog is a short message or statement that provides a piece of information, for example about what you are doing.

Twitter does this by sending short messages – **tweets** – of 140 characters or less to:

- Your Twitter webpage
- Your blog / Facebook – if a Twitter feed has been embedded on the page
- Anyone who is ‘following’ you – i.e. someone that has elected to receive your updates as messages.

The tweets are linked together into a **Twitter feed** – a stream of messages.

People who are following you (**followers**) are individuals who choose to receive your tweets. This can be done in several different ways including:

- Listed on their own Twitter webpage
- Via a mobile phone
- Via email
- Via a third-party service which aggregates and filters tweets, for example, Tweetdeck

Twitter is a form of social networking – it helps people to communicate with others and form groups/networks based on common interests. People can choose to follow a specific person (such as a celebrity or professional), or a friend. ‘People use Twitter to communicate, to ask questions, to ask for directions, support, advice, and to validate open-ended interpretations or ideas by discussing with the others (Grossbeck & Holotescu 2008).’

Using Twitter

An individual can choose to restrict their tweets to approved followers or leave them open to anyone who wishes to view and/or receive them. Private individuals tend to restrict tweets to friends and family; celebrities, professionals and people running interest groups tend to leave tweets open.

Tweets cannot be edited – once written and sent they cannot be changed but can be deleted. However, if the tweet has already been received by someone then that instance cannot be deleted by the originator.

Tweets can be sent to a single individual as a private message called a **direct message (DM)** – these are not displayed as part of an open Twitter feed.

@replies are messages addressed to an individual but can be seen and read by anyone who has access to the Twitter feed.

Hashtags are used to organise and find tweets:

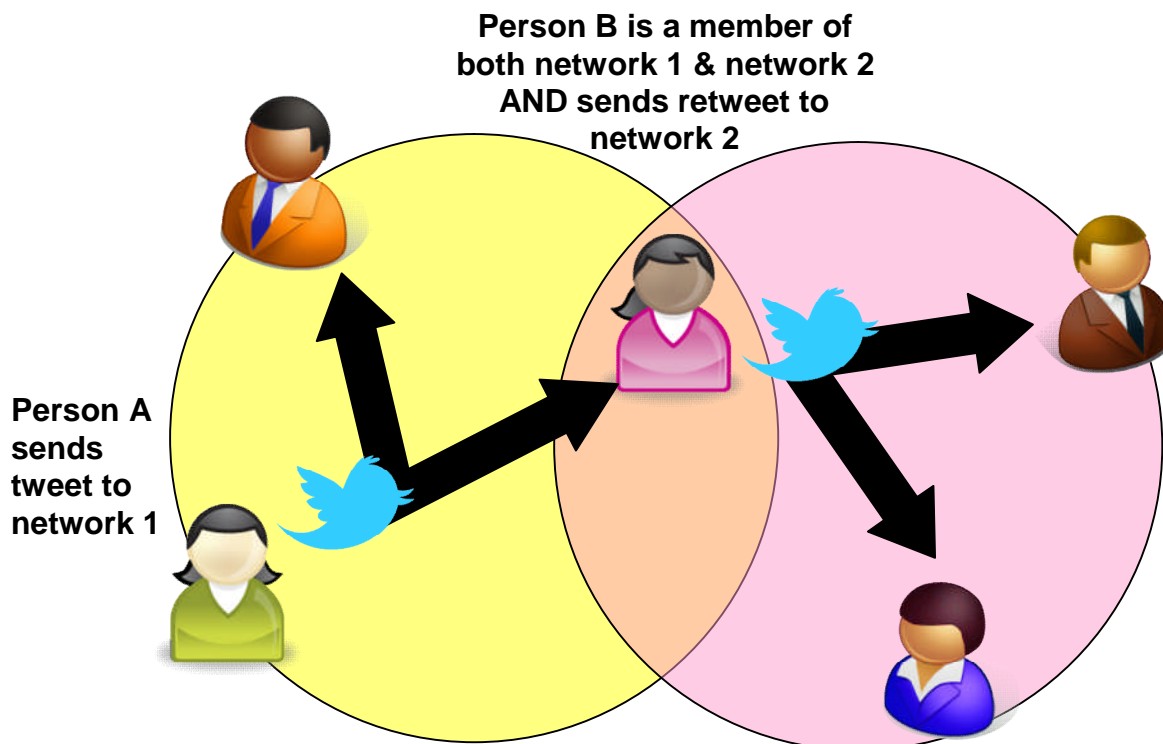
‘The # symbol, called a **hashtag**, is used to mark keywords or topics in a Tweet. It was created organically by Twitter users as a way to categorize messages.’[Emphasis added] (Twitter n.d. c)

Tweets can be filtered and searched using hashtags. They are also used to identify trends – popular topics that people are discussing via Twitter.

Tweets can also be passed on or **retweeted** as a way of spreading information:

‘**RT** is short for retweet, and indicates a re-posting of someone else's tweet. This isn't an official Twitter command or feature, but people add RT somewhere in a tweet to indicate that part of their tweet includes something they're re-posting from another person's tweet, sometimes with a comment of their own.’ [Emphasis added] (Twitter n.d. a)

In this way one social network can inform a second social network:



Adding Information to Tweets

Tweets can include URLs. As URLs are rather long in length, most users use a Web 2.0 service such as <http://bit.ly> or <http://tinyurl.com>

Twitter can work in collaboration with other Web 2.0 technologies to include images and videos in tweets, for example: Flickr, TwitPic or yfrog for images; and Twitvid or YouTube for video. Images & videos are hosted on the third party's website NOT on Twitter – the tweet includes a link to the image/video on the third party website.

Educational Uses for Twitter

As stated by Mintz (n.d.): 'Twitter is hard to describe specifically because it is a social utility with more possible uses than a Swiss Army knife.' It is these uses that are of interest from an educational perspective – how can this 'army knife' be put to use for teaching and learning.

Pedagogy

There is some suggestion (Educause 2007) that Twitter can develop metacognition – enabling learners to think about and reflect on learning, thus forming another tool in the reflective learning toolbox. Sample (2010a) offers a useful matrix for Twitter use, ranging from monologic to dialogic, and from passive to active. The matrix strongly features reflective learning suggesting that Twitter can be used as a medium to stimulate reflective thinking. However, Croxall (2010) found that learners' use of Twitter was not consistent unless it was a requirement of the course, i.e. assessed. Similarly, Fornara found that learners would tweet at the very last minute before an assessment deadline so as to meet the assessment criteria. This seems similar to research into commitment to formal reflective writing (Stephani, 2005 p4).

The use of Twitter for communication and to enhance the 'social sixth sense' within a class is one that is mentioned by a number of those using Twitter in teaching (Fornara n.d.; Thompson, 2007; Croxall, 2010; Sample, 2010a). Parish (2009) comments on how this both stimulates learning and the sense of community with chats continuing in between the formal session.

Croxall (2010) identified that learners who used Twitter found it to be a 'useful tool for corresponding with one another about assignments or work' and that they liked the facility to contact the tutor asynchronously.

Fornara (n.d.) identifies three elements of teaching interest in relation to language teaching that are equally applicable to other subjects:

- 1) Twitter is a communication tool usable in the target language which, while based in the writing, can reproduce the informality of oral interaction,
- 2) is a network that intensifies the sense of belonging to the linguistic community in which the student relates,
- 3) provides teachers with the opportunity to enter the student's everyday informality, real space of practice and learning.

[text translated from original Spanish using Google Translate]

Croxall also found that usage depended on learner uptake and that this was not easily predictable. I would postulate that this may be linked to factors such as learning style preferences as well as social usage of Web 2.0 tools amongst peers.

There appears to be more substantial use of Twitter at a professional level (Paine, 2010; Parish, 2009; Barrett, nd; Couros, 2010; C4LPT, nd; Evans 2009). #Inrchat (<http://Inrchat.com>) provides an example of how learning professionals use Twitter to discuss educational issues. However, research has shown that most people follow on Twitter and are not necessarily active tweeters – meaning that most interactions are a one-way provision of information: ‘Specifically, the top 10% of prolific Twitter users accounted for over 90% of tweets’ (Heil & Piskorski 2009). This would suggest that many professional networks are not collaborative.

Technology

One advantage with Twitter is that it can be accessed through a standard SMS-enabled mobile phone (although an account needs to have been created via Twitter.com previously). This means that for many learners, Twitter can be accessible.

From an accessibility perspective, text-based tweets are accessible to both those with hearing loss and those with visual impairment (talking SMS or Braille keypad for mobile phone).

In terms of diversity, figures as to who uses Twitter vary greatly. There is general agreement that Twitter users are young adults, live mostly in urban areas, and there is a higher than average use of Twitter by minority ethnic groups in relation to overall Internet use (Lenhart & Fox, 2009; Kurtz, 2010).

For complex uses of Twitter – such as using hashtags or following specific people/conversation chains, Internet access or a third-party service such as TweetDeck become almost essential. This can limit use within a learning environment such as a regular classroom.

Twitter can be used as part of a ‘mash-up’ – where Web 2.0 services are combined or work together – this extends its potential uses.

For example,

- Many blog pages can display a Twitter feed
- Twitter can be linked to Facebook, so that tweets are automatically posted to a Facebook account
- Twitter feeds can be embedded into PowerPoint as a back channel (C4LPT, n.d. b) so that responses from learners/participants can be displayed in real-time as sent.

Category	Description	Potential Educational Uses	Examples	
	Microblog	<p>Short snapshots of what you were doing / thought / found displayed on a webpage – this could be your Twitter page, or a blog, or Facebook</p> <p>Some interaction via comments from others but mostly one-way dialogue</p>	<p>Short reflections</p> <p>Persona tweets – learners take on personality of character and tweet as that individual</p> <p>Archiving / records of actions / learning journal</p> <p>Collecting tweeted statements/reflections together into a permanent record for evidence / assessment / future reflection</p>	<p>Sample (2010a) Croxall (2010)</p> <p>Marcinek (2009)</p> <p>Sample (2010b) www.twournal.com - twournal is a service that enables individuals to collect their Tweets into a collection for either saving as a pdf document or printing as a paper-based journal http://your.twapperkeeper.com/ - collect and download archive of tweets http://pongsocket.com/tweetnest/ Tweetreports</p>
Social messaging		<p>Can be used to send a message to a group of people</p>	<p>Reminding learners of deadlines / meetings; cancelled classes; IT failures</p>	<p>Sparkes (2009); Online College (nd)</p>
		<p>Can be one-way dialogue if sending information, or multi-way if used for 'conversation'</p>	<p>Communication between tutor and learner – direct tweets</p>	<p>Croxall (2010); Online College (nd)</p>
		<p>Building the team – enabling professionals/learners to interact 'the water cooler moment' 'social sixth sense'</p>	<p>Croxall (2010); Educause (2007); Parish (2009); Couros (2010); Online College (nd) Thompson (2007); Croxall (2010); Sample (2010a)</p>	
		<p>By learners to ask a questions off each other / share</p>	<p>Croxall (2010); Online College (nd); Sample (2010b)</p>	
		<p>Summative feedback on a topic / lesson – key learning points</p>	<p>Croxall (2010) – reply on 08-06-10 to comment on blog</p>	

Social marketing	News reporting	As a back channel in class – to ask questions during class and/or to add comments Embedded into PowerPoint as a back channel	Croxall (2010); C4LPT (n.d. b)
		To practice a new language	Fornara (nd); Online College (nd)
		Learners could use Twitter to monitor a news feed / politician / key author / key theoretician	@camerondirect http://twitter.com/#!/camerondirect Online College (nd)
		Collaborate with other learners – could involve third-party app such as Tweetworks	Online College (nd)
		Discussing a question/issue/topic with other professionals Can be done synchronously as part of a Twitter chat – use third party app to collect hashtag such as TweetDeck or TweetChat, or capture for reading later using Tweetreports	Stone (2009); Parish (2009) Evans (2009) http://twitter.com/lrnchat - learning group chat http://lrnchat.com/
		Personal Learning Network – exchanging information with a professional group	Paine (2010); Parish (2009); Barrett (nd); Couros (2010); C4LPT (nd) http://lrnchat.com
		Disseminate news and events	To create and distribute news and events, for example as part of a journalism course Online College (nd)
		Monitor a topic using hashtags	Online College (nd)
		To raise awareness of an issue such as higher education funding	http://twitter.com/#!/search/higher%20education%20ofunding
		Using a service such as Twitterfeed it is possible to turn an RSS feed into a Twitter stream	Advertising by college U&C (nd)

Raise profile	Build a personality	Sparkes (2009) http://twitter.com/#!/imperialcollege
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