

Learning in 140 Characters: English Teachers' Educational Uses of Twitter

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Abstract: *The microblogging service Twitter has played an integral role in protest movements, democratic revolutions, charity fundraising, disaster relief, and has also been adopted by some teachers for professional purposes. In order to better understand Twitter's role in education, we conducted a survey of educators regarding their use of the service. This paper delves into the data from the 109 English teachers who responded to the survey. These educators described frequent and versatile use of Twitter. Respondents provided a variety of examples of uses of Twitter to communicate with parents and students, as well as specific learning activities that incorporated the service. However, Twitter was most popular among the teachers as a tool for professional development. The respondents valued how Twitter facilitated resource and idea acquiring and sharing, and also praised the service for providing them a way to connect to other educators beyond their local schools and districts.*

Key Words: *microblogging, SNS, social media, professional development, teacher collaboration, connected educator*

Introduction

Social media such as Facebook, Instagram, and Tumblr play increasingly important roles in the lives of many students (Ito et al., 2009). Despite common unease about adolescents' potential misuse of such media, these services can also facilitate the kinds of creative and participatory interactions that are at the heart of quality learning. Young people's creative, prolific, and voluntary communication via social media, as well as these services' potential to support collaboration, self-expression, and personalization, all point to social media's potential relevance in the English classroom. Social media environments can enable forms of "social reading" (Vliege, Vandermeersche, & Soetaert, 2014), and Greenhow and Gleason (2012) contend that the use of media like Twitter constitutes a new type of literacy practice. Schools, however, often attempt to block access to these services and many educators remain ambivalent about the role such media should play in education. This paper seeks to contribute to understanding of the

possible uses of social media in education by exploring how and why 109 English teachers reported using the microblogging service Twitter for professional purposes.

Background

Created in 2006, Twitter allows users to communicate via short electronic postings, called “tweets.” Tweets may be up to 140 characters in length, and can include images, video, and hyperlinks. As of January 2015, Twitter Inc. reported over 280 million regular users, making it one of the world’s most popular social media services. By late 2013, an estimated 18% of online adults in the United States already had Twitter accounts (Duggan & Smith, 2013), and its use has been on the rise among young people (Madden, 2013). Seventy-seven percent of Twitter accounts are outside of the United States, and the service supports more than 35 languages (Twitter Inc., n.d.). Although its original prompt to users was “What are you doing?” Twitter use has evolved beyond just personal status updates to include a variety of communication activities. Sometimes dismissed as mere narcissism, Twitter has shown the potential to also serve meaningful purposes. For example, it has become one of the preferred tools of political organizers, even those battling against oppressive governments (Ghonim, 2013).

Various scholars have noted the potential learning affordances of social media sites, and Jenkins and colleagues even asserted that such online platforms can “represent ideal learning environments” (2009, p.10). Gee has noted how such media allow users to create informal “affinity spaces” in which they interact and learn around common interests (2004, p. 85). In particular, Twitter’s educational applications were noted soon after its inception, and media reports suggest educators have subsequently used Twitter to support both student (e.g., Gabriel, 2011) and teacher (e.g., Davis, 2011) learning. Twitter reduces temporal and spatial constraints on communication and facilitates collaboration. Students can discuss writing and/or literature with peers and experts beyond their classrooms, while educators can confer on professional matters and share resources with far-flung colleagues. Twitter’s concise, immediate, and open format can empower educators and students alike to interact with a variety of people and ideas in new ways.

Review of Literature

Although studies of Twitter’s use for educational purposes in higher education contexts have generally yielded positive results (e.g., Carpenter, 2014; Junco, Heiberger, & Loken, 2011; Krutka, 2014), formal research on Twitter in PK-12 education is limited. In the area of Secondary English, two case studies of Twitter’s use with students have been published. McWilliams and colleagues (2011) described a unit on *The Crucible* during which students tweeted from the perspectives of different characters. The authors found that students improved

in their ability to communicate in character-appropriate ways, and that motivation to participate increased as the students interacted with each other in character. Hunter and Caraway (2014) recently described the use of Twitter in two urban high school classes to support reading and discussion of *The Giver*. In this case, students went beyond required tasks to extend their engagement with the text in ways that transformed literacy learning and literature engagement.

To date, there is no published literature that focuses specifically on English teachers' use of Twitter for professional development (PD). Research on K-12 teachers in general does suggest several ways that Twitter can function as a PD tool. Twitter can support grassroots professional development that boosts networking and allows teachers to import ideas from distant colleagues into their local settings (Forte, Humphreys, & Park, 2012). Risser (2013) reported on one first-year high school mathematics teacher's use of Twitter to establish an informal mentoring network to support her early career development. And focusing on nine K-12 world language teachers, Wesely described how Twitter was the genesis of a community of practice that supported "sustained and significant teacher learning" (2013, p. 305). Previous research therefore suggests that Twitter has potential to support educators' professional learning.

Research Question

Given the paucity of research on English teachers' professional uses of Twitter, this study addresses the following research question: How and why do English teachers use Twitter for professional purposes?

Methodology

We surveyed 755 educators on their professional use of Twitter, among whom were 109 secondary teachers who identified themselves with English, or English and one or more other content areas (e.g., journalism, technology, Social Studies, English as a Second/Other Language). We collected both qualitative and quantitative data through an electronic survey. The survey consisted of three parts: an informed consent section, a demographic section, and a section related to Twitter use. Most survey items involved checking boxes or selecting options from drop-down menus; there was one open-ended prompt (see Appendix A). We distributed the survey by frequently tweeting an invitation to participate during a five-week period in 2013. Carpenter and Krutka (2014b) analyzed the full sample of 755 respondents. One of the few statistically significant differences between the different groups of respondents was that the English teachers were significantly more likely to report Twitter use for in-class activities, $X^2(4, N=755) = 4.86, p < .03$. This motivated us to isolate the English teacher from the larger sample for further analysis. These data were initially coded and analytic memos written before we moved on to more focused coding as data were compared and categories refined using the constant

comparative method (Charmaz, 2006). We discussed themes and developed a tentative set of salient codes. After confirming our final coding structure, we reread and coded the data again.

Table 1 provides basic demographic information regarding the English teachers who responded to the survey.

Table 1: Respondent Demographics (N=109)

Sex: 76% Female, 24% Male
Race/Ethnicity: 93% White, 3% Black, 3% Multiracial, 1% Asian, 1% Hispanic
Age: 22-30: 22%, 30-39: 45%, 40-49: 25%, 50 and above: 8%
Country of Residence: 79% US, 10% Canada, 11% individuals residing in 12 different countries
Workplace: 93% public schools, 7% private schools

Findings and Discussion

Among our survey respondents, use of Twitter was intense and multifaceted, with 90% of English teachers reporting daily or multiple-times-per-day use (see Table 2), and on average indicating 5.1 different professional uses of Twitter (see Table 3).

Table 2. Frequency of Twitter use (N=109)

Multiple times per day	48%
Daily	42%
Weekly	7%
Monthly	0%
Frequency of use varies	3%

Table 3. Responses to: For what professional purposes do you use Twitter? (check all that apply) (N=109)

Professional Purpose	% indicating use for given purpose
Resource sharing/acquiring	97%
Collaboration with other educators	91%
Networking	85%
Participating in Twitter chats	77%
Emotional support	35%

Communication with students	35%
Backchanneling	28%
In-class activities for students	25%
Out-of-class activities for students	24%
Communication with parents	18%

Using Twitter with Students and Parents

Use of Twitter with students and parents was less common in comparison to use for professional development (PD). A handful of respondents described one-way sharing of information about course assignments and activities with parents and families, but this use of Twitter was not highlighted as a primary or most beneficial application of Twitter. Among respondents who described use of Twitter with students, several kinds of activities were described. Teachers most commonly mentioned extending different kinds of discussions: between students and teacher, among peers, and/or with others not in the classroom. For example, two teachers described facilitation of out-of-class book discussion groups by Twitter. One respondent explained how Twitter extended conversations beyond the physical classroom in ways that positively affected the face-to-face environment: "I use Twitter to connect with students. I find that they open up more on Twitter which allows me to make better connections leading to more engagement in the classroom." Teachers also highlighted how Twitter helped connect their students to peers and experts outside their schools, both nationally and internationally. One respondent explained, "We've talked to several authors on Twitter too! Exciting to see my students connect with their favorite authors!" and another added, "I love connecting with young adult authors and have all of my students following at least 3 authors." Two teachers mentioned connecting their students with classes in other states or countries, although details on what these connections entailed were not provided.

Various respondents described uses of Twitter during in-class activities, such as using mock accounts to tweet from literary characters' perspectives. As previously mentioned, English teachers were significantly more likely to report Twitter use for in-class activities in comparison to other content area educators from the larger survey sample. For example, one English teacher explained a particular class activity: "Just today they all 'Tweeted from Rome' for Act 1 of *Julius Caesar*." Similar to the aforementioned tweeting in character described by McWilliams and colleagues, such use of Twitter was seen by several respondents as a way for students to develop and demonstrate their understanding of character, plot, and/or context. Multiple teachers explained ways in which they used Twitter in class to gauge their students' thinking or progress.

For example, one respondent commented, “I love to use Twitter for formative assessment/exit tickets. I frequently assign an ‘exit tweet’ or make a hashtag for that day/that class period for everybody to use.” Another teacher similarly commented, “I use [tweets] as reflection with assignments. It’s great to use as pre and post assessments!” In particular, several respondents prized Twitter’s capacity to enable non-verbal participation from a wider variety of students than is typical of classroom discussions. These comments are consistent with findings from previous research that suggest Twitter can support the participation of more introverted learners (Hunter & Carraway, 2014).

Twitter was noted as a way to expand access to content and the audience for students’ ideas and writing. A handful of respondents mentioned using materials found via Twitter with their students. In these cases, the content was typically the articles and resources linked in the tweets. For example, one teacher described sharing readings and videos from Twitter with his classes. Those resources were sometimes supplementary in nature, but also at times “become topics for assignments, and discussions.” One teacher gave a specific example of asking a question via Twitter and using the response with his students: “My students wanted to create video content one day. They needed resources for multiple platforms ... I tweeted a request for recommendations and we had tons within 5 minutes.” Finally, teachers commented on how Twitter allowed for “sharing what my students are doing in the classroom” and for “writing with authentic audiences.” One teacher reported that she found her students to be more engaged in the craft of writing when they knew that their tweets were going to be published for others to see.

Professional Development via Twitter

Although some of the applications of Twitter described above are intriguing, a minority of teachers reported use of Twitter with student and parents. Our respondents more commonly used Twitter for professional development (PD) activities (see Figure 3). A number of different themes were apparent in comments on Twitter PD. Given the many demands on their time, teachers appreciated Twitter’s concise format, its accessibility on a number of platforms, and the ability to use the service both synchronously and asynchronously. A veteran of more than twenty years of teaching from Ohio commented, “I have found that Twitter gives me access to new thoughts and ideas in a quick and convenient way.” Other respondents described Twitter as providing “24 hour support” and “Ongoing, differentiated learning that is available 365/24/7.” And teachers mentioned valuing “the filtering aspect that takes you immediately to items of interest and direct relevance;” and the “ability to gain instant fresh ideas from a constant stream of exceptional educators.” Several respondents also highlighted how Twitter allowed them a degree of autonomy that was uncommon in other PD they experienced. One respondent called Twitter PD “personalized professional development” and another wrote, “It’s like attending a conference but I’m free to choose what I delve further into when I am ready to.”

An additional theme in respondent comments was valuation of the ideas and resources shared via Twitter. For example, several respondents felt Twitter kept them “up-to-date,” “on the forefront of ed tech,” and “informed of current research and trends.” A teacher with more than 30 years of experience found Twitter to be a consistent source of new ideas that have helped keep her out of a teaching rut: “Not only do I get resources I might not discover, but people's questions/comments provoke rethinking of my positions and practices.” Two teachers with less than ten years of experience also mentioned that they enjoyed not just the resource acquiring element, but also the sharing aspect of Twitter. One commented, “I get a great sense of satisfaction out of sharing ideas” and the other wrote, “It's a nice chance to share resources and feel useful.” Twitter may, therefore, provide a way for more educators to be active both in their professional development and the development of their profession.

In addition to its facilitation of resource and idea acquiring and sharing, many teachers praised Twitter for providing access to other educators. Respondents commented on valuing “collaborating/connecting with other educators around the world” and indicated it was “inspiring to hear what other teachers are doing around the world.” One teacher wrote, “It's reassuring after a long day of doing what I love, to check in with others who are equally as engaged!” Another educator commented, “I think having a network of professionals in my field I can turn to with questions is undoubtedly the best part of being on Twitter. I can discuss ideas without fear of being judged or analyzed by my colleagues in my building.” In addition to access to peers, respondents mentioned how Twitter provided them opportunities “to talk with others who are experts at a variety of instructional strategies or pedagogical models.” One teacher commented, “I like being able to follow people at my level and above me in my field, even very famous people in my field, even if we don't know each other,” and another respondent similarly explained that,

I can even have small, targeted conversations with major authorities in the field without being annoying to them or overstaying my welcome. Twitter is a legitimate place to communicate with people in my field all over the world, even total strangers.

Although many relationships among Twitter users may be limited to occasional exchanges of tweets, several respondents referenced Twitter relationships that they considered to be significant. Representative comments included the following:

“I have met my close collaborators on Twitter, and they have now become my closest friends.”

“I have friends there that ‘get me’ as an educator. I find people to collaborate with, some very closely; I find co-sponsors and inspiration.”

“I have developed many strong professional relationships on Twitter.”

As well as feeling that Twitter facilitated meaningful professional relationships, a number of respondents also valued the types of educators they encountered on Twitter. For example, one teacher wrote, “Educators who are really into Twitter are fairly forward-thinking anyway, so it is

a nice forum for learning from those kinds of people.” Other teachers described valuing how Twitter helped them find “similar teachers who are DRIVEN and passionate and constant risk takers and get things DONE,” and “a community that loves teaching and sharing that joy.”

More than three-quarters of respondents indicated regular participation in one or more Twitter chats, and these chats were cited several times as how teachers became connected with other educators they initially did not know outside of the medium. Chats are one-hour, live, weekly Twitter conversations focused on a particular topic and are often more interactive than traditional asynchronous tweeting (see Carpenter & Krutka, 2014a for more about chats). For example, #engchat is an English-teaching-focused chat that occurs on Mondays from 7-8 p.m. U.S. Eastern Standard Time. One teacher wrote of chats, “What is most valuable for me is being able to have a continuous stream of relevant professional conversations that I can tweet my way into.” Respondents described chats as featuring “the positive, change agents of education,” and as “a great chance to talk to other active, like-minded professionals about areas of teaching/education that I have less experience with.”

Historically, teaching has often been an isolating profession (Lortie, 1975), and several teachers directly commented on how professional Twitter activity such as chats served as an antidote to isolation. For example, one respondent explained that Twitter “allowed me to communicate with other practitioners, which in itself is rare due to the isolating nature of teaching.” In explaining the benefits of Twitter, other teachers wrote, “It feels like you are part of a network of like-minded people, rather than shouting into the wind,” and “It's also nice to know that I'm just not alone sometimes.” Respondents also commented on how Twitter enabled them to combat specific kinds of isolation, such as the absence of innovative and/or tech savvy teachers in a school building, making comments such as the following:

“Twitter provides connections with educators around my state and across the country, especially those who have access to and are using more technology than I have access to in a rural setting.”

“We have a small staff, and an even smaller pool of educators who are pushing the boundaries of the traditional schooling system. I need engaged, confident, and optimistic educators who have tested their lesson plans on students and are willing to share.”

The participatory, personalized nature of Twitter thus allowed respondents to meet a variety of PD needs.

In general, the enthusiasm apparent in many respondent comments was noteworthy, particularly given all-to-common negativity about traditional professional development (Smylie, 1989). A number of teachers offered high praise, making comments such as “I feel [Twitter] keeps my teaching practice current and keeps me motivated to continue to put my best effort into my practice.” Several teachers wrote that PD via Twitter was the best they had experienced in their careers. A teacher from Wisconsin explained, “I have gotten more useful professional

development in the past year of using Twitter than I have in the entire previous decade of district-provided PD. Thanks, Twitter!” Two other respondents commented, “I have learned so much from other teachers, it has transformed my teaching, and this is my 18th year,” and “I have learned more from my friends/colleagues on Twitter in the past 8 months than I did in my entire university based ed program and the first 9 years of teaching combined.” In sum, it was apparent that Twitter PD was highly valued among our respondents.

Limitations

This study represents an initial step in building understanding of how English teachers can and do utilize social media such as Twitter for professional purposes. Our research is limited by reliance upon a self-report survey and non-random sampling. The participants’ actual Twitter behavior was not analyzed. Those who responded to the survey invitation may not fully represent the larger population of microblogging educators. Furthermore, our sampling method likely did not capture the perspectives of English teachers who tried using Twitter for professional purposes and decided it was not beneficial. Additional research should seek to clarify how the professional uses of Twitter differ from those offered by other teaching and learning technologies. It will also be important to understand what the limitations of Twitter are as an educational tool; this study did not yield data that helps identify the challenges associated with its professional use.

Conclusion

Much remains to be learned about how and why English teachers are, and are not, using social media for professional purposes. Our survey does, however, provide a temporal snapshot of professional use of Twitter that may hint at broader trends and themes in social media use by educators. Professional development activity was much more common in our sample, which displayed a high degree of enthusiasm for such PD via Twitter. Many respondents praised the medium for its capacities to connect them to novel ideas and new colleagues. While English teachers tended to utilize social media less frequently with students, they were more likely to do so than other educators in general (Carpenter & Krutka, 2014b). This might indicate that the nature of the English classroom is particularly amenable to the types of participatory expression and communication the medium enables.

Even though some English teachers used Twitter to foster positive learning for students similar to what they described themselves experiencing, many did not. There may well be sound curricular and pedagogical reasons for not including all kinds of social media as a part of school-based teaching and learning, as well as school policy barriers, but as they seek to prepare students to navigate the evolving media-saturated landscape, English teachers should consider broadening what texts and modes of communication are included in their teaching. When a

teacher proclaims, as one of our respondents did, that “Twitter has exponentially increased my effectiveness as a collaborator,” it stands to reason that students too might benefit from access to such a collaborative tool. We are not suggesting that Twitter and other social media are educational silver bullets, but these technologies appear to be part of modern life. Should students not be exposed to what learning affordances social media do offer? Although social media will have a positive impact on education if it can facilitate teacher professional learning in the ways our respondents described, it will be a missed opportunity if schools and teachers do not also help students learn to take advantage of these services’ educational applications.

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Appendix: Twitter Use Survey Items

How long have you been using Twitter?

1. Less than six months
2. Less than one year
3. Less than 2 years
4. Less than 3 years
5. 3 years or more

How long have you been using Twitter professionally?

1. Less than 6 months
2. Less than 1 years
3. Less than 2 years
4. Less than 3 years
5. 3 years or more

Typically, how frequently do you use Twitter?

1. Multiple times per day
2. Daily
3. Weekly
4. Monthly
5. Frequency of use varies

Professional vs. Personal use of Twitter

1. I use Twitter for professional purposes
2. I use Twitter for personal purposes
3. I use Twitter for professional and personal purposes

For what professional purposes do you use Twitter? *Check all of the reasons that apply.

1. Resource sharing / acquiring
2. Collaboration with other educators
3. Networking
4. Emotional support
5. Communication with students
6. Communication with parents
7. In-class activities for students
8. Out-of-class activities for students
9. Participate in Twitter Chats
10. Backchanneling
11. Other

If you teach in a school district, what is your district policy on Twitter?

1. Allowed for teachers

2. Allowed for teachers and students
3. Blocked for everyone
4. Other

Aside from Twitter, what other social media services do you use?

1. Facebook
2. Pinterest
3. Linked In
4. Scoop.It
5. Tumblr
6. Ning
7. Foursquare
8. Instagram
9. Paper.li
10. Course-management system tools (Edmodo, Gaggles, Schoology, MyBigCampus, Moodle, etc.)
11. Other

Which hashtags do you regularly use, or search for, to connect with other educators?

Please use the 'other' box to include any other hashtags that you regularly use. Include multiple hashtags in the 'other' box if appropriate.

1. #edchat
2. #sschat
3. #engchat
4. #scichat
5. #mathchat
6. #ntchat
7. #elemchat
8. #cpchat
9. #satchat
10. #21stedchat
11. #tlchat
12. #mschat
13. #edreform
14. #edpolicy
15. #ccss
16. #gtchat

Please list the hashtags (e.g., #edchat) for any moderated weekly/monthly chats in which you regularly participate:

Please explain what aspects of Twitter you find most valuable, and why.