Chapter 17
Brevity is the Soul of Wit:
Twitter in the Shakespeare Classroom

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ABSTRACT

In 2011, students in an introductory course on William Shakespeare used Twitter to pose questions about the texts being read. This assignment was designed to measure students' preconceptions about the material and to focus part of each classroom session on the "conceptual change model" used in science education. This model was adapted to the humanities by pursuing student inquiries, because research methods in text-based disciplines are equally important to domain-specific concepts. This chapter describes the backward-design principles used to promote student engagement, the assignment's methods to measure preconceptions, and the quantitative data about student engagement and classroom activities. It offers a model for other educators to integrate Twitter and other social networking platforms into their classrooms.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter describes my experience integrating the Twitter social networking site into an introductory class on the life and writings of William Shakespeare. English 205 at the University of Calgary is a large class of ninety first-year students, most of whom have no previous experience with university learning. I offer quantitative evidence that this experimental assignment increased student engagement with the course material, based on classroom observations made according to the Reformed Teaching Observation Protocol (RTOP), and on the students' completion of the Classroom Survey of Student Engagement (CLASSE): first in a control year (2010), and then in the year I implemented the Twitter assignment (2011).

Past studies have shown that educators can design Twitter assignments to improve learning outcomes, and more broadly to improve different measures of student engagement. Junco, Elavsky, and Heiberger (2012) have used a modified National Survey of Student Engagement

(NSSE) instrument to conclude that Twitter and other web 2.0 technologies can be instrumental to student collaborations that boost engagement. This paper is concerned instead with the ability of Twitter to improve engagement by addressing student's preconceptions that may be barriers to achieving a course's defined learning outcomes. I designed my assignment not (expressly) to foster collaborations among students, but to inform and influence the classroom activities: to gather questions from students that my lectures would directly address. The results were improved RTOP and CLASSE measurements, but this paper concludes by identifying some questions about these instruments, among other suggested avenues for further research.

BACKGROUND

As research in educational and cognitive psychology has shown, students bring their preconceptions to the classroom and use them to interpret new topics and texts (Bransford, Brown, Cocking, 2000). Educators need to assess those preconceptions to design learning activities that will address them; either by building upon accurate preconceptions, or by addressing inaccurate ones that impede the learning process. Let us define learning as the acquisition of both knowledge and of skills; and let us distinguish the humanities from the sciences as a group of disciplines whose objects of study are primarily textual, rather than the natural world. Learning outcomes in the sciences might include both knowledge of plate tectonics and skills in reading seismic charts. In the humanities, and particularly in the study of literature, they might include knowledge of a given text's major themes, its genre, its characters and their relationships, and other factual and interpretive data — and the skills necessary to posit these interpretations, including the ability to read, annotate, and write critically about texts.

A student's inaccurate preconceptions about the object of study are barriers to these learning outcomes in both disciplinary realms. To take an example from the sciences, a student who believes that the earth's seasons are caused by its distance from the sun, rather than by the tilt of its axis, will have difficulty reconciling this belief with new concepts. Correcting misconceptions is essential to learning these concepts and facilitating a student's movement from novice to expert (Engelmann and Huntoon, 2011).

Shakespeare is an author that most students have read or seen performed before they come to university, so many arrive with preconceived ideas about his texts. Many of these preconceptions are valid and constructive — for example, that Shakespeare's language is difficult for modern readers. Appreciating this difficulty enables students to isolate the features of his idiom that are different from modern usage: his syntax, diction, abbreviations, verse forms, characters' discrete registers, and so on.

Yet a range of novice preconceptions about Shakespeare are potential barriers to expert understanding. For instance, many students assume that his texts have always been part of high or élite culture, and that his seemingly inaccessible language has always signaled his superiority to common readers. In fact, his plays were part of Elizabethan popular culture, and most members of his audience were semi-literate. This preconception is a barrier to appreciating not only how popular tastes have changed in four hundred years, but also how the Elizabethan theatres affected the plays written for them. It prevents students from understanding how these texts functioned in their culture – like the influence they had over popular knowledge of historical figures (e.g., Henry V), or the imaginative exposure they granted to those outside the ordinary experience of late-16th-century London (from aristocrats to hermits, magicians to fairies, and Amazons to Bohemians).

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