

Chapter 12

Learning and Teaching as Communicative Actions: Cases of Twitter as an Educational Tool

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This chapter explains how Twitter was implemented into three higher education course modality designs: two face-to-face courses in Digital Textuality, one fully online course in Global Policy, and two hybrid courses in Instructional Design II and Theory of Educational Technology Implementation, respectively. Learning and teaching as communicative actions (LTCA) theory guided the designs expanded on here. The authors sought to understand how instructors in their natural educational settings would use social media, specifically Twitter, as a pedagogical tool and aid to support their existing curriculum. Thus, the intent is to report the experiences of instructors using this tool in higher education in order to provide a clear narrative of their experiences, engage readers in critical thinking about the use and implementation of such a tool in the educational setting, and foster discussion, while also allowing the reader to draw appropriate parallels to their own contexts.

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BACKDROP

The cases included in this chapter describe how Twitter implementation took place at two universities in the southern United States using three different course modalities (face-to-face instruction, online instruction, and hybrid instruction). One of the universities has a population of approximately 19,000 students and the other approximately 34,000 students. Both universities support a large number of undergraduate students. The Carnegie Foundation classifies each as a research university with high research activity.

SETTING THE STAGE

At the opening of class, the Professor told his twelve doctoral students that supporting student learning through communication is an integral part of learning and teaching in a connected 21st century where communication is an important life skill. To accomplish this in his own courses, he had employed Twitter as a backchannel between classes to keep the conversation going even after class finished for the week. He also liked the way Twitter enabled him to stay connected with his students and to find related learning materials to share through this real-time information network (Twitter, 2011). The tool, he knew, could be used to support communication, discourse, and the building of social presence (Wakefield, Warren, & Alsobrook, 2011). Social presence and rapport, or closeness, are unconscious human interactions, and each helps build trust among community participants or individuals (Jones, Warren, & Robertson, 2009). These have been shown to be important factors in learning (Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976). In addition, social presence had been positively correlated with perceived learning (Richardson & Swan, 2003; Lowenthal, 2009) and course satisfaction (Richardson & Swan, 2003; Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997; Lowenthal, 2009). From his past research, the Professor knew that another beneficial factor associated with social presence is perceived interaction (Gunawardena, 1995; Kim, Kwon, & Cho, 2011), which contributes to the sense of being together in a connected way. He told his students that any tool that would enhance social presence should be considered a valuable addition to the classroom.

The Professor then made the claim that incorporating communication, social experience, and learning is in no way new. For example, by the 1920's, Russian theorist Lev Vygotsky (1978) had found influential links among speech, social experience, scaffolding, learning, and teaching. However, learning and teaching as communicative actions (LTCA) theory (Warren & Stein, 2008; Wakefield, et al., 2011) may be used as a guiding framework and together with ardent inquiry and critical thinking this may further encourage learning through communication and

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