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Curation, Connections and Creativity: Reflections on using Twitter to teach digital activism

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Abstract

Twitter's integration into Higher Education learning environments has created both challenges and opportunities for teachers. The microblogging site can facilitate backchannels enhancing the active learning of students and enabling them to ask their lecturers and peers questions. Yet, there remain concerns about context collapse, the perceived negative impact on classroom engagement, and the limitations of trying to convey complex ideas using 280 characters. There has also been relatively little empirical evidence about the impact of Twitter use on student learning outcomes, especially within Arts and Humanities and Social Sciences. In this paper, I will add to this literature by exploring the three 'C's of using Twitter, curation, connectivity and creativity, with reference to my own experience of teaching digital activism over the past decade. First, the microblogging site provides unprecedented opportunities for teachers to curate resources throughout the module, ranging from peer-reviewed journal articles to blogs and videos. Second, new horizontal and vertical connections can be made within the class, as students follow not only each other but also scholars in fields such as digital activism. Third, Twitter helps promote and highlight the creativity of students during in-class exercises such as subvertisements created to critique consumer brands. Finally, I reflect on the challenges of measuring the effectiveness of using Twitter as a 'backchannel' for Higher Education teaching. I argue that 'watching' may be an underappreciated response to the use of a class hashtag in light of the privacy concerns raised by the use of corporate social media as learning environments.

Keywords
Social media, Twitter, teaching, Higher Education

Introduction

Sociologist Mark Carrigan (2019, p.12) suggests that academics may be moving from a state "undue scepticism" about social media to one of undue naivety". While initial concerns about the time needed to develop digital profiles and the 'context collapse' experienced by users may have partly dissipated, there still remain some doubts about whether social media use significantly improves outcomes for students. Indeed, those academics who embrace the connective affordances of Twitter tend to do so in order to promote their own research activities rather than to enhance the learning experiences of their students (Knight and Kaye, 2016). In this paper, I will reflect on my own experiences of using the microblogging site to support my teaching of digital activism at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. I explore what I refer to as the three 'C's of using Twitter in Higher Education teaching. First, and perhaps most importantly, the site facilitates the *curation* of resources in real-time throughout the module. This was particularly pertinent to my digital activism modules, which took place during protest movements such as the 'Arab Spring' and the Occupy Movement. Second, Twitter creates new *connections* between students and teachers, who can use class hashtags to interact with one another outside the classroom.

Finally, the microblogging site affords lecturers opportunities to highlight the creativity demonstrated by students during in-class assignments, such as one in which they worked in groups to create subvertisements satirising corporate and political ads. I conclude this paper by considering whether academics should reconsider their expectations of what constitutes student participation on Twitter in light of the surveillance realism associated with online platforms. Watching may be characterised as a rational, albeit hard to measure, response to the use of the microblogging site to curate resources for teaching digital activism. It is also congruent with the notion that educators have a responsibility to encourage students to critically evaluate their use of online platforms, as opposed to be complicit in the datafication of their lives.

From open scholarship to pedagogical tweeting

A decade of scholarship has found that Twitter is more likely to be used by scholars to develop research collaborations and enhance their own reputations rather than integrated into their teaching practices (Carrigan, 2019; Knight and Kaye, 2016). Concerns over how university teachers negotiate the multiple audiences that access their social media profiles, otherwise known as context collapse (Marwick and boyd, 2011), have not completely disappeared; indeed, digital feminist scholars have frequently faced online harassment and abuse for their contributions to debates on the site (Ringrose, 2018). Nevertheless, online platforms have been linked to increasingly open forms of scholarship revolving around the creation of open-access digital artefacts, such as podcasts and video, to disseminate research findings to members of the public (Weller, 2011). These activities have been widely linked to higher citation rates for peer-reviewed journal articles and increased opportunities for research collaboration and support (Pearce, Weller, Scanlon, & Kinsley, 2010; Veletsianos and Kimmons, 2012). While it is beyond of the scope of this paper to fully critique the neoliberal marketisation of Higher Education that has created 'student- consumers', it should be noted that is now commonplace for academic departments and Schools to use Twitter to promote open days and research accomplishments by members of staff as part of their efforts to recruit fee-paying students. The microblogging site has also increased the accessibility and visibility of those who teach in universities since 2010, facilitating new forms of self-promotion that are increasingly important for those hoping to build a successful career in Higher Education (Carrigan, 2019). Student perceptions of instructor credibility are also shaped by the resources they provide on their profiles and whether their online and offline personae are consistent (DeGroot, Young and VanSlette, 2015).

This paper focuses specifically on the integration of Twitter into the learning environments within universities. The empirical evidence to date suggests that the use of the microblogging site has a broadly positive impact on student learning (see Adams, Raes, Montrieux, & Schellens, 2018). An early systematic review found that microblogging broadened participation in learning activities beyond the classroom, expanded the content available for students, and created spaces in which learning could occur both inside and outside the classroom (Gao, Luo & Zhang, 2012). Subsequent research has indicated that 'pedagogical tweeting' facilitates active learning and digital literacy amongst student cohorts, with those using the site for educational purposes achieving higher grades than their peers (Kassen-Noor, 2012; Malik, Heyman-Schrum &Johri, 2019). Backchanneling, the use of hashtags to enable the 'live tweeting' of lectures and virtual participation outside of the classroom, enables students to give feedback to their peers and ask their lecturers questions (Evans, 2014; Luo and Xie, 2019). In addition to perennial concerns about 'information overload' on social media (Carrigan, 2019), there are several caveats in the literature that should be acknowledged. First, there remain concerns about the quality of student contributions and whether critical thinking and self-reflection is possible within the 280 -character limit (Kassen-Noor, 2012; Luo & Xie 2019).

Second, Twitter appears to have a more pronounced impact upon the grades achieved by students who are predisposed to engage with course content or have prior experience of using the site. For example, one study involving an undergraduate politics cohort concluded that it did not have an 'independent effect' on their levels of political knowledge, which were already high because the students were more politically oriented (Caliendo, Chod and Muck, 2016). Finally, much of the empirical evidence to date suggesting Twitter has a positive impact on student learning outcomes was based on courses where use of the site was mandatory. A sizeable minority of a student cohort typically choose not to contribute to a class hashtag when it is not compulsory to do so (Deaves, Grant, Trainor & Jarvis, 2019). While incentivising its use through assessment is generally recommended in the literature, it may prove "counterproductive by stimulating extrinsically instead of intrinsically motivation" (Adams et al, 2018, p.14). Twitter use by instructors may also fail to engage students who favour a transmissive mode of teaching that revolves around listening to lectures rather than participating in group tasks (DeGroot, Young, and VanSlette, 2015). This raises questions about the efficacy of pedagogical tweeting in enhancing the learning of international students who are sceptical about the value of active learning approaches.

The three 'Cs' of using Twitter to support Digital activism

My own teaching philosophy is congruent with the 'digital and networked' approach towards Higher Education advocated by scholars such as Weller (2011). I believe that digital media has the potential to enhance student learning experiences by reducing the barriers to participation faced by international students and those with disabilities and encouraging critical thinking about key issues relating to digital media, advocacy and protest (my own research area). While I remain highly sceptical about individualistic notions of learning that reductively categorise students according to learning styles, I am also aware of the barriers that my predominantly Chinese student cohorts face when asked to participate in group tasks. Factors such as a perceived lack of English language proficiency and a lack of prior experience using Twitter may disadvantage them should they be required to 'live tweet' classes for module credits. Therefore, in a similar vein to Carrigan (2019), I do not expect 'big wins' in terms of my use of Twitter within digital activism modules. Hashtags such as #actandprotest, used during my third-year undergraduate module Activism and Protest in the Information Age between 2010 and 2015, and #digiadvocates, used during my postgraduate module Digital Advocacy between 2016 and the present, are promoted via module handbooks, Virtual Learning Environments and in lecture materials.

While students are encouraged to share resources via these hashtags and provided with instructions on how to setup their own Twitter accounts in their handbooks, it is not a mandatory, assessed

component of the module. Below I will outline what I believe are the key advantages of using Twitter to teach digital activism, namely the curation of resources, increased connectivity between participants inside and outside the classroom, and the ability to highlight the creativity of students during in-class tasks.

Curation of resources

Perhaps the most important benefit of Twitter to support the teaching of digital activism is the ability to curate resources for students during appropriate points during the course. I have used the site to provide students with links to news items, blogs and research papers that refer to events unfolding in real-time during the semester. This has helped students apply theoretical frameworks about digital activism to real-world case studies. For example, in January 2011, I used #actandprotest to highlight the role of Facebook and Twitter as a news stream during the popular uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa dubbed the 'Arab Spring'. More recently, #digiadvocates was used to direct students towards hashtags such as #NotMyPresident, which were used to articulate opposition against US President Donald Trump in the run up to his inauguration in January 2017. Students are encouraged to follow digital activism scholars on Twitter, ask me questions about theories and case studies introduced in the lectures, and share content related to advocacy campaigns using the hashtag. Visible participation has tended to be low, perhaps due to language issues and unfamiliarity with the microblogging site, as well as the fact that tweeting was voluntary rather than a mandatory component of these modules. Cognisant that not all students are comfortable using the site, I have used platforms such as Storify and Wakelet to archive hashtagged tweets and make them publicly available. As is often the case with live tweeting (Carrigan, 2019), researchers who are not enrolled in these classes have reported that they have used these curated resource lists too.

Connectivity between students and teachers inside and outside the classroom

Twitter has also provided further opportunities for peer-to-peer learning about Digital activism outside the confines of my classes. Connections are fostered through Twitter lists which I create based on the students who follow my Twitter account. This allows me to send them informational tweets under the class hashtag, such as key readings that we will discuss in future seminars. It also enables students to follow their peers on the microblogging site, as well as the accounts of scholars that feature on the module reading list. While it would be misleading to characterise students contributing to #actandprotest and #digiadvocates as a community given how infrequently they tweeted, they did occasionally share information with their peers and tutors. For example, several completed a questionnaire that I had shared via the class hashtag in the days following our first lecture, which assessed how quickly their physical location could be identified based on their digital footprint. These students voluntarily tweeted the time it would take for someone to track them down based on factors such as their use of Automated Teller Machines (ATMs) and whether they used public wifi networks. This provided yet further evidence of the importance of instructors developing strategies, such as individual tasks to be completed as homework, in order to ensure students fully engage with class hashtags (Adams et al, 2018; Caliendo, Chod and Muck, 2016). It also demonstrated how extrinsic motivation may still be integral to students use of Twitter to support their learning in Higher Education.

Highlighting the creativity of students during in-class tasks

While acknowledging that Twitter can often be overused for academic self-promotion, I do not have the same reservations about promoting the work of my students on the microblogging site. Since 2015, I have used #digiadvocates to share the digital artefacts created by my students during in-class exercises. For example, in February 2017, I created a task asking students to use Festisite Logo Maker (https://www.festisite.com/logo/maker/) to create their own subvertisements, remixed logos of corporations that critique their practices and satirise consumerism. Groups were asked to send me their 'ads' via email, along with the names of each member so I could give an appropriate attribution to the images posted under the class hashtag. Feedback from students, via email, in-person and formal module evaluation, indicated that this task had given them ideas for the digital advocacy campaign they had to design as part of the summative assessment for the module. There was also positive feedback from academics outside my institution for the creativity demonstrated by my students, with several asking me for further details on the task itself. I have used similar approaches in terms of other in-class tasks, such as one asking students to create 'Protest Selfies' using caption cards which were tweeted under #digiadvocates. Again, it could be argued that this shows how instructors have the primary responsibility for posting content on hashtags when students participation is not mandatory or assessed.

Watching as a rational student response to pedagogical tweeting?

A recurring theme in my use of Twitter to support the teaching of digital activism has been the relative absence of *visible* student engagement with the class hashtag. I have had few interactions with students on the microblogging site and only a small minority have proactively used #actandprotest or #digiadvocates to share resources with their peers. Much of the engagement with Twitter has been driven by me as the module instructor, whether it be subvertisements that I have posted on the site or tasks for which students had to tweet their answers. Yet, module evaluations and feedback via email suggested they were engaging with content posted on the hashtag in ways that were less visible and harder to measure; students with Twitter accounts chose not to leave a digital footprint through tweeting or retweeting, whereas others accessed content via the archives created on Storify or Wakelet. This might be characterised by some as a 'failure' of pedagogical tweeting, which could only be addressed by assessing Twitter use or making it compulsory for all students. However, I want to finish this paper by positing an alternative interpretation, namely that 'watching' (often dismissed pejoratively as lurking) hashtags is a perfectly rational response by students to the use of corporate online platforms like Twitter in Higher Education teaching. Perhaps optimistically, I hope that this is due to the discussion of surveillance realism, whereby citizens continue to use these platforms but are resigned to having them use their data without their consent (Hintz, Dencik and Wahl-Jorgensen, 2018) in these modules. Some students also might be wary of leaving digital footprints on these platforms in light of the evidence from case studies such as the 'Arab Spring' showing how they are used to identify and arrest protesters. A more plausible explanation though is that my predominantly Chinese student cohorts are unlikely to have much experience of using the microblogging site, preferring instead to monitor class hashtags or access the archive of tweets.

Whether students are consciously deciding not to leave digital trace data or not, educators should be encouraging them to critically evaluate their use of corporate social media. Leaving aside existing concerns about the limits of extrinsic motivation, courses requiring students to tweet for module credits provide these platforms with yet more user data that can be exploited for profit. The use of commercial online platforms within Higher Education learning environments contributes to the datafication of the lives of both students and their teachers.

This creates a tension between, on the one hand, the need to protect students from exploitation and educate them about the political economy of social media, and, on the other, the clear pedagogical benefits of integrating Twitter into Higher Education teaching. It is inconceivable that university teachers will turn away from the microblogging site and find a non-commercial alternative in the near future. Therefore, I fully endorse the notion that academics should curate their own information environments so that we can "use platforms rather than be used by them" (Carrigan, 2019, p.84). Teachers should continue to use Twitter to curate resource lists, highlight creativity during in-class tasks, and provide opportunities for students to ask them questions. However, they should recognise the pedagogical value of less visible forms of participation and conceptualise watching as a rational response to the surveillance realism associated with the use of online platforms.

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