Participatory Tweeting as a Vehicle for Course Engagement

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This paper advocates for engaging uses of Twitter (or similar clients or services) in the classroom. We cover how to use it efficaciously, and why the very notion of class participation needs to be redefined.

Nominally, “class participation” is at minimum equivocated with simple attendance in some way, either by showing-up in a physical classroom or by logging into a virtual one at regular intervals. Participation may also entail being present in a group for show-of-hands responses when prompted, partaking verbally in classroom discussions, or demonstrating the ability to answer questions pertaining to course content when called upon individually by the instructor.

With the advent of Twitter (a Web 2.0 social networking “chat” or “texting” service), its ubiquitous use, and the burgeoning “Bring Your Own Device” (BYOD) movement afoot in schools, we argue for harnessing the technology as a vehicle for enhancing teaching and learning. Maintaining a persistent Twitter “back-channel” in a class can provide the instructor with a metacognitive “narrative view” of the audience mind-set. The back-channel then allows students to elaborate on course content, exchange ideas in real-time, and queue up questions for the instructor, particularly in large lectures where airtime for Q&A is limited.

Advocating that students “text” during class seems antithetical at first--like encouraging cell phone use during a business meeting. Moreover, a minor percentage of disengaged students will always be inclined to gossip on non-course related topics. Negative predispositions against Twitter are indeed colored by non-participatory uses that present as distractors in the aforementioned situations.

The key then is to repurpose texting during class sessions by making it participatory. That includes making the number and relevancy of the tweets count as a percentage of the final grade, and monitoring of the tweet stream during class by either the instructor or a teaching assistant to address issues raised by students on-the-fly.

Prominent projection of the transcript, either on a physical screen at the front or corner of the room, a pervasive window on the students’ displays, or in an accessible archive, encourages participants to self-monitor, observe proper netiquette and contribute to a rich and parallel dialog. This establishes a culture of engagement. The transcript of that dialog is a record of student contributions to the flow of the course and provides reinforcement. The public nature of it serves as a motivator for them to stay on task with respect to course objectives.

In keeping with modern learner-center pedagogical practice, permissive tweeting may be the single most transformative innovation in the ongoing endeavor to improve learning ecologies.

Keywords: Twitter, tweet, engagement, participation, social networking.

Figure: Twitter.

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2012 ASEE Northeast Section Conference
University of Massachusetts Lowell
Extended Abstract

April 27-28, 2012