

MUCH ADO ABOUT TWITTER: USING TWITTER FOR A FINAL-YEAR SHAKESPEARE COURSE

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Abstract

This paper considers a case study of the use of Twitter to support learning, and the development of a learning community, on a final-year module on Shakespeare and Popular Culture at Kingston University (UK). Its focus is on Twitter not simply as a one-to-many or broadcast technology, but, rather, as a many-to-many or participatory technology that supports the creation and development of personal learning networks and a range of dialogic interactions. Analysis of student tweets and feedback via a survey and individual semi-structured interviews, however, reveals that Twitter is perceived by students to fall between educationally useful virtual learning environments (Blackboard) and personally meaningful social networking sites like Facebook. Occupying an awkward space between the 'school tools' of Blackboard and the 'cool tools' of Facebook, Twitter's relevance to Higher Education is at best problematic.

Keywords - Twitter, Facebook, microblogging, social networking sites.

1 INTRODUCTION

The focus of this study is the trial use of Twitter on an undergraduate module on Shakespeare. It's a study of the failure of a technology that many, especially in the blogosphere, have touted as offering great potential [1-5]. It's therefore partly about a technology that has been constructed, in the discourses or narratives around learning technologies, as offering both 'promise and threat' [6], although more the former than the latter. However, it is mainly a reflection on particular forms of socially situated digital cultural practices and the implications such practices have to the kinds of technologies higher education practitioners use, or recommend to use, to support student learning and the development of learning communities. It's a reflection on the discrepancy between academic staff enthusiasm for a technology and student resistance to it. Think of it as a digital culture clash. It's therefore also about how we - as academics and researchers - misconstrue students' willingness to engage with new digital tools and environments. We construct an 'otherised' or 'exoticised' student whose 'tech savviness' make him/her always ready to explore new technologies [7]. The reality, however, as a number of research studies in the UK [8-11], Australia [12] and the USA [13] have shown is more complex.

2 OUR TWITTER EXPERIMENT

At the start of the 2009/10 academic year I secured a small amount of funding from LearnHigher (<http://www.learnhigher.ac.uk/>) to trial the use of Twitter in higher education. My hunch was that the bid was successful, at least in part, because of Twitter's new-found status as education's most 'on trend' technology in a year when the service frequently made the headlines. I too was caught up in the enthusiasm for it based on my own positive experiences of Twitter for conference backchannels and for professional networking. Could the benefits I found in Twitter transfer from one context (i.e. my professional networking) to another (e.g. student learning)?

Certainly, Twitter suggested great promise, located as it is, at the intersection of three trends of growing importance: social networking, mobile technology and what Bryan Alexander [14] has described as 'microcontent'. Moreover, it's a lightweight tool that's well suited to what Sherry Turkle [15] calls the 'always on/always-on-you' techno-literate practices of young people mediated by mobile phones and other portable devices.

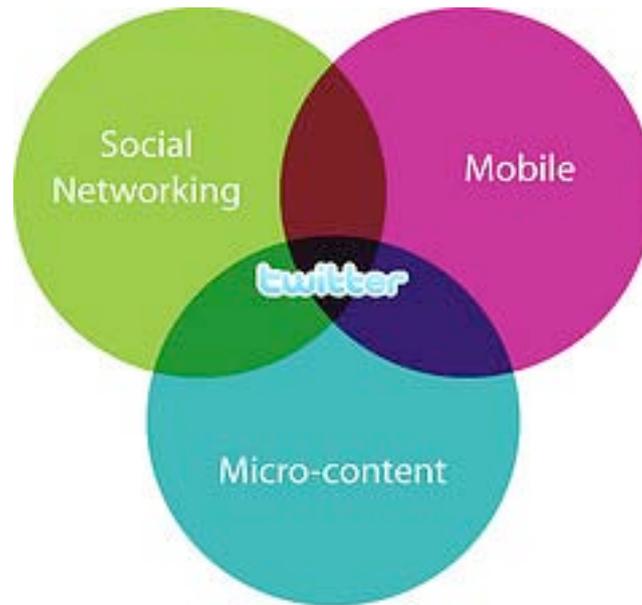


Fig. 1
Twitter at the intersection of key trends in technology

I was able to persuade a small number of colleagues to pilot the use of Twitter in their teaching in Semester 1 2009. One of the pilots was a final-year, special subject module on Shakespeare and Popular Culture taken by 18 students who were mainly female and in their early twenties. Following discussions with the module leader, we created a module-specific Twitter account and agreed a hashtag that staff and students would include in their tweets.

The module leader created a weekly schedule of Twitter-based activities (15 activities in total) that mixed discussion board forum/essay-type discursive questions (e.g. 'Is Isabella justified in her decision not to sleep with Angelo?') with more playful or creative activities (e.g. 'Tweet as a minor character from any Shakespeare play other than Hamlet'). Other Twitter-based activities included mid-point module review comments and discussion of assessment issues. Twitter was therefore seen as having a role to play in student support and in gathering student feedback for module review as well as reflective activities.

In order to support students' use of Twitter, we adopted a number of approaches:

- the module leader briefed students on the rationale for the use of Twitter on the module in the introductory session in teaching week 1;
- I developed short guide to Twitter for students accessible via the module's Blackboard site and sent, as a url to an online PDF, via a tweet;
- we both modelled the use of Twitter in early tweets and made sure to reply with encouraging comments to students' posts, to summarise student input and respond promptly to queries – an approach loosely based on Salmon's 5-stage e-moderation model [16];
- We created a group using TweepML (<http://tweepml.org/>) enabling all students to follow one another and form a network quickly and easily;
- we integrated Twitter as best we could with the Blackboard site for the module as we were aware that we were adopting a hybrid approach in which Twitter was being used alongside the institutional VLE that remained the primary delivery mechanism for course-related documents and reception point for student coursework.

3 ANALYSIS OF STUDENT TWEETS

There is certainly evidence, in the student activity of the first three to four weeks, that Twitter can play a role in building community, sharing information and offering an opportunity for students to share reflections and insights as the typology of student tweets and examples below shows.

Getting to grips with Twitter	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Getting to grips with Twitter and Measure for Measure, i'm not sure which is more confusing! • just trying to bloody find my way round this tweeting malarkey
Socialising	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Heya, my lovely! Looking forward to the lecture tommorrow? :) • http://www.othellowestend.com/tickets/ - anyone fancy coming with me to see this?
Resource sharing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • http://bit.ly/18Cxn5 Awsome version of Hamlet by McLars feat. Brett from the Donnas & Gabe CobraStarship • Funny Measure For Measure video http://bit.ly/1vfXe6
Peer acknowledgement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • @[username]. Love your poem :D • @[username] Totally love the skit :D Ah my dear Beatles
Coursework progress reports	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • project idea: a cartoon strip updating one of Shakespeares plays / characters in the modern world. • project idea- choosing 3 female characters, writing 3 monologues in modern lang...and hopefully some photo arty thing to match!
Creative voice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • i do love Petruchio, but i will turn the chains of marrage to my own purpose in the future. • Whilst Petruchio loves me and respects me, I will honour him. However, I will never allow him to make a fool of me. <Katarina>
Reflective tweets	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Isabella was right as her brother could go to heaven, whereas if she committed the proposed sin she would spend eternity in hell. • Isabella's decision is logical, moral and justified. Her reason being, 'natural guiltiness'; can one crime be corrected by another?
Questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • does anyone know if we can use texts from the module for our creative project • hi can anyone outline the broad topic areas that were suggested in friday's seminar: e.g. Romeo & Juliet?

Fig. 2
Typology of student tweets

After a positive start at the beginning of the semester in October 2009 during which period 17 out of the 18 students on the module created a Twitter account and posted tweets, Twitter activity declined dramatically (see Fig. 3) from 81 tweets in October to only 3 in December. Moreover, only four students in total might be said to have used Twitter consistently over the course of the semester and to have fully engaged with the Twitter-based activities.

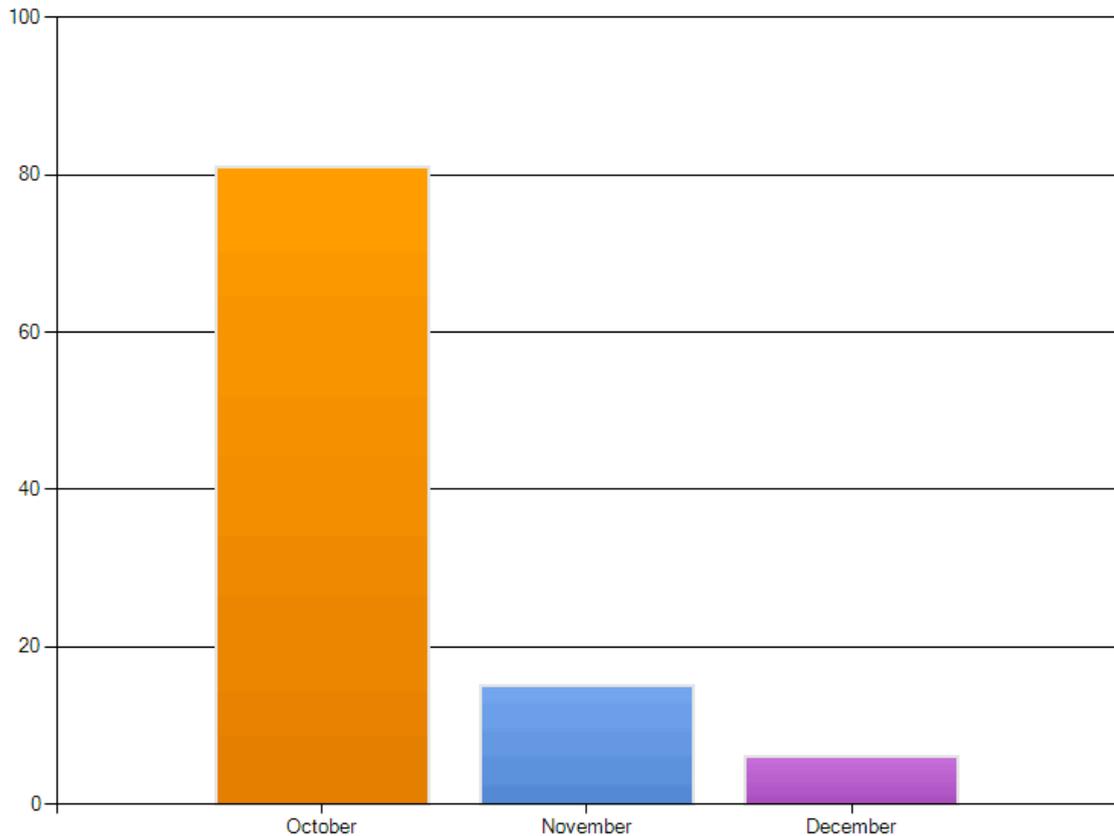


Fig. 3
Student tweets by month

4 ANALYSIS OF QUESTIONNAIRE AND INTERVIEW DATA

What was clear by the middle of the semester was that students had not taken to Twitter to the degree we had hoped. I therefore shifted the focus of the investigation away from the original concept of a thematic analysis of tweets to an analysis of student uses of technology and their resistance to Twitter. Data collection took the form of a hard-copy questionnaire distributed in the final two weeks of the semester (early December 2009) and completed by 16 of the module's 18 students and individual semi-structured interviews with six students and the module leader.

What emerges from the data is a complex picture of many students aware of the social and educational benefits of social networking sites but not engaging with the activities because Twitter is not embedded in their regular technology-mediated practices.

Only four of the sixteen students who completed the questionnaire had a Twitter account prior to the module, a result broadly consistent with data on Twitter use among young people [17-18]. Pre-module perceptions of Twitter were mixed: there were three negative comments (e.g. "seemed complicated", "slightly self indulgent"); ten expressing indifference (e.g. "just another social networking site", "a celebrity marketing tool", "not something that interested me"); and only two positive views ("already addicted to it", "good way of keeping in contact with some people").

I found the five references to Facebook in the fourteen comments made in the questionnaire significant. My respondents explained their lack of interest in Twitter by comparing it, sometimes unfavourably, with Facebook:

Didn't think about using it as I was already on Facebook

I didn't really think about it, as I already had Facebook

Much prefer Facebook as you're not restricted on the word count. And more applications.

... thought it seemed boring compared to MySpace and Facebook

As students' workload increased as the semester progressed, many claimed they found it difficult to find the time to log on to Twitter and complete the activities. As one respondent put it, "then life took over a bit" and, because Twitter was not a frequently-used technology, in the words of another student "it sort of dropped off my radar just 'cos I wasn't using it every day". As a student interviewee put it:

Because I don't go on Twitter a lot, I didn't become second nature to me just to go on it; it was something I had to think about.

A point made in all student interviews was the centrality of Facebook in micro-managing their social life. In the words of another student interviewee:

I love the idea of Twitter but I guess it's [not using it] almost entirely because my close friends and family don't use it. My close friends that I don't see very often, we've got a thread on Facebook, that's how we communicate. So we don't need that [Twitter] I guess.

Interestingly, many interview respondents claimed that using Facebook instead of Twitter would have increased levels of student participation:

I think it [Facebook] would have worked a whole lot better; I think you would have had tweeting every day ... well, not tweeting, facebooking every day, ... um ... commenting every day.

5 CONCLUSION

Questions of identity and affiliation informed my participants' use of technologies: the desire to be part of a particular social circle or join with like-minded others interested in the same things were key to adoption and use of one digital tool (Facebook) over another (Twitter). I'd argue that all technologies are, to a degree, social, that is to say, embedded in particular contexts, enabling particular activities and connecting people in different ways. For my Twitter project participants, the adoption of some technologies over others had less to do with their respective ease of use or specific affordances, but, rather, with the socially meaningful practices they enabled and the networks they supported. Technology adoption, then, is as much about culture as it is about convenience.

Twitter occupies an awkward space: neither part of the institutionally supported digital environments and toolset accepted by students and used within their 'curricular sphere of practice' [19] nor currently part of the digital services used in their 'personal sphere of practice'. As such, Twitter initiatives risk being marginalised, falling outside the repertoire - both 'imposed/top-down' and 'vernacular/bottom up' - of the technology-enabled communicative practices of the students we wish to engage.

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