Using micro-blogging (Twitter) in your teaching and learning: An introductory guide

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Information Sheet

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Introduction

In this paper I intend to describe micro-blogging and how it differs from other types of blogging. Then I'll show how it might be used in an educational context and give a pointer to how you might get started.

I'd like to thank various people at the University of Bath for contributing ideas to this paper, including, Mr Aurel Diamond (Student Intern, LTEO), Dr Sabah Abdullah (Department of Economics), and Alan Hayes (Director of Studies, Department of Computer Science).

What is micro-blogging?

Wikipedia describes micro-blogging as;

"Micro blogging is a form of multimedia blogging that allows users to send brief text updates or micromedia such as photos or audio clips and publish them, either to be viewed by anyone or by a restricted group which can be chosen by the user. These messages can be submitted by a variety of means, including text messaging, instant messaging, email, digital audio or the web.
The content of a micro-blog differs from a traditional blog in that it is typically smaller in actual size and aggregate file size. A single entry could consist of a single sentence or fragment or an image or a brief, ten second video. But, still, its purpose is similar to that of a traditional blog ... Many micro-blogs provide short commentary on a person-to-person level, … or provide logs of the events of one's life."
(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Microblogging, accessed: 3rd August, 2009)

Clearly micro-blogging is different to blogging; blogging is associated with longer, more reflective pieces often developed away from the spatial/temporal location where the initial thoughts occurred, while, micro-blogging is restricted to short pieces which are captured and immediately posted.

Within a learning context it is very obvious to see a symbiotic relationship between the two. For example, an individual may capture material, thoughts or evidence, store this in their micro-blog, and later develop it through a longer, more thoughtful piece on their blog. Clearly, this approach implies micro-blogging has an obvious application within ePortfolio based learning. 'An e-portfolio is a purposeful aggregation of digital items - ideas, evidence, reflections, feedback etc. which 'presents' a selected audience with evidence of a person's learning and/or ability' (JISC e-Portfolios: An Overview - http://www.jisc.ac.uk/whatwedo/themes/elearning/eportfolios.aspx, accessed 6th August, 2009). A key question is, *outside of the very obvious ePortfolio applications how else might it be used in teaching and learning*?

How might micro-blogging be used in an educational context?

There are a growing large number of technologies and services being used for micro-blogging. At the time of writing, one of the most popular is Twitter (http://www.twitter.com). This offers a very interesting variation to traditional micro-blogging services. Twitter is primarily a social networking tool. Therefore, within the educational context discussed previously it will allow the individual to discuss their emerging ideas rapidly with others to assist in their construction of knowledge and understanding.

The following suggests micro-blogging can be effectively embedded within a more orthodox teaching situation. The next section discusses two scenarios within face to face teaching. However, a cautionary note when reading these ideas is to consider the thoughts of Tom Barrett concerning Twitter, "it is one of many tools that we have at our disposal. I do not see it replacing any of the others we use nor do I see the positive impact upon learning being exclusive to Twitter" (http://tbarrett.edublogs.org/2008/03/29/twitter-a-teaching-and-learning-tool/, accessed: 6th August, 2009). In other words, a similar outcome could be achieved using different tools.

Scenario 1. Disseminating suggested class readings

This is a teacher (academic) centred activity. The teacher is the micro-blogger, and they publish information which they perceive the student might need, for instance, links to online news items applying the curriculum to current affairs.

To achieve this in a traditional model would involve either uploading the information to a Virtual Learning Environment (such as Moodle) or emailing the students. However, the Twitter model (read the item online and then post) reduces the number of steps in the process and the information disseminates quicker.

The following example was implemented by Dr Sabah Abdullah when she lectured an Economics course at the University of Bath. Her intention was to supplement the recommended reading list with news items during the course.

Sabah created a new account on Twitter which followed the course code (ec10160). She provided instructions for students on how to create a Twitter account, and follow the EC10160 account. She encouraged the use of Twitter through referring to listed news items during her lectures. Overall, the process was very straightforward; she would be reading an online newspaper, and when she found an appropriate article she'd post a TinyURL of the article through Twitter. For illustrative purposes I've included three posts from EC10160.

Post 1: Japan's current account deficits http://tinyurl.com/awph2s
Post 2: reading the FT news on UK output http://tinyurl.com/bbm39q
Post 3: fancy a political-econ article? Read http://go.bath.ac.uk/njlv

These illustrate how short the posts are and how effectively they link the news item to the curriculum. The third post is particularly appealing to me as it's more intriguing and motivates me to click on the link. Sabah suggested as she progressed with the pilot she favoured the more informal style. Overall she posted 19 updates. Interestingly, when asked, 5 out of 8 students responded they thought Twitter could be used to improve the learning experience. So although Twitter is still very new to students (only 2 out of the 8 had used Twitter before), in this scenario students are seeing an educational application.

Scenario 2. Facilitating (informal) academic discussion between students in lectures: A class back channel route

This is a student centred activity. The role of the teacher is to encourage its use, monitor discussions and respond in the class if appropriate. The scenario has not yet been implemented at the University of Bath (although variations have at other institutions). However, it has been discussed with various parties in conjunction with their current teaching methods. The approach is illustrated through the evolving Design Brief (A blank e-learning Design Brief is available from the JISC web site: http://www.jisc.ac.uk/media/documents/programmes/elearningpedagogy/planner.doc, accessed 5th August, 2009).

Design Brief: Using Twitter to promote informal academic discourse during face to face teaching

Issues to consider	Details of your planned learning activity
1. Learners (their needs, motives for learning, prior experience of learning, social and interpersonal skills, preferred learning styles and ICT competence.)	Final year computer science students. The class size is about 80 students. They use to Moodle and other ICT. But I can't assume they use Twitter.
2. Intended learning	Currently using an Audience Response System (ARS) to

outcomes (acquisition of knowledge, academic and social skills, increased motivation and ability to progress.)	gather feedback during the lecture. However, the focus is on the lecturer. We need to create an opportunity for students to lead academic discourse. This will enable them to expose their ideas to their peers, and construct knowledge and understanding. These ideas have been influenced by the thoughts around self regulated learning (Nicol & MacFarlane-Dick (2006).
3. Learning environment (face-to-face or virtual) – available resources, tools, facilities and services and their match with the learners' needs.	**Where does the activity take place?** Primarily within the lecture, however, the discourse can continue outside the classroom **What resources are available?** Will use Twitter. Also being used in the sessions will be ARS technologies. We'll create a getting started guide, suggested models of participation, and recommend a hash tag convention. **What technologies are available?** **What features of established practice will be important?**
4. The learning activity (the means by which the practitioner brings about learning and seeks to influence the development of the learners.)	**Describe the learning activity** Students will be able to update their twitter status using an agreed (recommended) hash tag convention in response to their peers or based on their thoughts as the lectures progress.
5. The approach taken (related to learners' needs, preferred learning styles, the nature of the learning environment and the intended outcomes.)	**Associative, constructive (individual focus), constructive (social focus), or situative** Constructive (social focus) **Learning styles** **Inclusion** The hash tag will be RSS'd into the Moodle course. Therefore, people can follow the discussion if they so wish without creating a Twitter account. However, the success will depend on the size of the network. Students will be encouraged to participate.

	Assessment Itwill not be assessed. However, it will be monitored by the lecturer to see if themes emerge which they might need to respond to, i.e., a misunderstanding, need to re-visit previous content. Also to monitor if the level of discretion becomes to great and starts to have an adverse impact (a concern of some lecturers). The discourse will be reflected on over the longer period to provide additional insight into the curriculum design (triangulated with end of unit evaluations).

The final example I'll discuss is a different take on micro-blogging. This is where we learn through constructing knowledge and ideas through interactions within our expanding personal learning networks. The expectation would be the student's personal network is larger than simply their peers on the course. The proposal is interactions with their personal network would enable learning through facilitating effective and timely communication, introducing people to new ideas, and opening up opportunities for discourse. To investigate this proposal I surveyed my Twitter followers (225 people) to try to identify the importance of micro-blogging on their continuing professional development? When asked to what extent would they agree with the following statement, "Twitter is one of my primary tools to connect me with my peers and ideas", 45% (9 people) strongly agreed, 30% (6 people) agreed and only 15% (3 people) disagreed (total of 19 responses). This implies the sample group viewed Twitter (micro-blogging) as very important for their learning. The following are some extracts from the respondents on why it is important. Please note, the caveat on being a small sample size will hold, and these people are self selecting.

Extract 1: "It's where I can ask questions of fellow professionals and get quick responses/ideas and suggestions"

Extract 2: "I use Twitter to connect with others involved in using technology in teaching in learning in higher education and in medical education. Twitter connects me with people and also links me to helpful sources of information on the web, new ideas, research, blogs etc."

Extract 3: "It's widened my network of people interested in similar subjects, alerted me to new ideas and materials and allows me to ask questions openly and receive speedy responses."

Hence as educators we need to encourage our students to micro-blog and use social networks to develop their own personal learning networks, so they can share, develop and challenge their ideas.

The next steps for you?

As a learning technology, micro-blogging is still evolving therefore, I'd recommend the following three steps to help you get started.

Step 1: Read the following blog post.

- Rankin, M., (2009),Some general comments on the "Twitter Experiment" http://www.utdallas.edu/~mar046000/usweb/twitterconclusions.htm (accessed 6th August, 2009). These are some of the personal reflections from the lecturer who used Twitter at U.T. Dallas. She attempted to use Twitter in large group teaching to make it more student centred, and enhance feedback loops.
- Diamon, A., (2009), Twitter http://blogs.bath.ac.uk/ahd22/2009/08/11/twitter/ (accessed 10th August, 2009). An introduction to Twitter written by Aurel Diamond, Student Intern, LTEO, University of Bath

Step 2: Search Google Scholar using the terms micro-blogging and Twitter

Step 3: Create a Twitter account, start micro-blogging and reflect on what it offers you in your teaching and learning.