Online Technological Media in the Higher Education Classroom: An Exploratory Investigation of Varied Levels of Twitter Use

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ABSTRACT

An exploratory quasi-experiment of college-level students was used to examine the difference in a variety of course indicators among instructors when they did not use Twitter as a supplement to their courses, when they moderately used Twitter, and when they used Twitter a great deal in their courses. When instructors used Twitter in their classes, perceived learning via technological mediums, perceived classroom community with regard to technological media, perceived pedagogical affect, perceived course effectiveness, perceived learning performance, and perceived perception of learning from Twitter were all greater than when they did not use Twitter in their courses. Overall results of this study recommend further research and a continued focus on the usage of Twitter in the higher education classroom.

Keywords: Classroom Community, Learning, Learning Performance, Microblogging, Online Technologies, Pedagogical Affect, Social Media, Social Networking, Twitter

INTRODUCTION

In a recent study of the top technologies to incorporate into the classroom, Tomei (2011) recommends greater inclusion of online technologies by teachers whenever possible. Though scholars have conducted research into a variety of ways of incorporating technology into teaching, research into the use of social networking sites (SNS) has been very limited (Nemetz, Aiken, Cooney, & Pascal, 2012). Scholars have only recently begun to examine the use of online technologies such as blogging (Chang, Liu, & Chang 2011), mobile video blogging...
(Kim, 2011), and social bookmarking (Gray & Carter 2012) in an instructional context. Even less research has empirically examined the use of the microblogging SNS Twitter (Clarke & Nelson, 2012; Lowe & Laffey, 2011; Rinaldo, Tapp, & Laverie, 2011). This paper begins to address that gap in the literature by describing an exploratory study in the varying levels of use of Twitter by instructors in the college classroom, noting its impact on several dependent variables, and suggesting possible avenues of future research. Dagada and Chigona (2013) contend that the majority of academics do not fully understand the interrelationships between content, pedagogy, and technologies. Because online technologies carry potential to enrich professional growth (Isman, Gazi, & Aksal, 2012), the value of this study is greater insight into effective Web-based teaching methods for academic professionals interested in online learning.

**Twitter**

Twitter (2013) describes itself as “a real-time information network that connects users to the latest stories, ideas, opinions and news about what you find interesting.” The first short message from a user, or “tweet,” was sent in 2006 (blog.twitter.com, 2011). In its seventh year of operation, there are now over 200 million active users of Twitter, who send over 400 million “tweets” per day (Tsukayama, 2013). According to one web site, these statistics place Twitter as the second most popular social networking site, below Facebook but above LinkedIn (ebizMBA.com, 2013). Twitter may be used both by individuals and organizations, none of whom pay a fee or face a limit on the number of “tweets” they can produce per day, either from a computer or a mobile phone. Twitter effectively occupies two categories of internet sites researched by scholars, qualifying both as a weblog (specifically, microblogging) site and as an SNS.

A blog, a portmanteau of the phrase web log, is a website containing discrete data entries presented in reverse chronological order. Ebner and Schiefner (2008) attribute what they call “the amazing growth of weblogs” to three factors, which they term “usability, collaboration, and personality” (p. 156). They argue that weblogs are easy to use, encourage connection, and enable someone to assert a unique personality on the Internet. Microblogs, such as Twitter, are those weblogs which limit the content allowed in a single message – in the case of Twitter, to 140 characters often referred to as a “tweet” (Clarke & Nelson, 2012). Ebner, Lienhardt, Rohs, and Meyer (2010) noted that there is an ongoing debate as to whether “writing a 140 character statement should be understood as a form of weblog, or whether it indeed represents a new form of communication” (p. 93). Though this question remains unanswered, it is clear that the 140 character limit is an important feature of Twitter in an online instructional context, a point which will be further explored below.

Scholars define a social networking site as “web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system” (Boyd & Ellison, 2008, p. 3). Though Twitter does not allow the detailed profile construction of other social networking sites, it does allow posting of a photo and brief biographical information. Users can then view the individuals or organizations both “following” and “followed by” other users. Twitter differs from Facebook in its limited privacy settings. While Facebook has a complicated and ever-changing series of privacy settings related to different aspects of a user’s profile, Twitter accounts are simply either “protected” or “unprotected.” “Protected” Twitter accounts require permission of the user in order to see their tweets. The norm on Twitter appears to be to leave accounts unprotected; thus, individuals can easily examine tweets by others whom they are not officially “following.”
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