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#Twitter:

A Pedagogical Tool in the High School Classroom

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Abstract: Technology evolves at a lightning pace in the 21st century. Not only does technology change, but the online spaces begin, morph, and disappear quickly, requiring teachers to be creative and flexible as they work to incorporate technology use into their pedagogy. Today's Tumblr may well be tomorrow's Myspace. As a high school teacher of many years, I enjoyed experimenting with new ideas, including using social media in my classes. I found Twitter to be one of the more useful and easy ways to implement popular social media tools into my English Language Arts classrooms. Using the affordances of smartphones and Twitter, I was able to increase student participation, provide individualized help, and include students in cooperative learning by letting the class experts help other students in a non-intimidating way. With appropriate boundaries for usage and intent, Twitter may offer a new twist for improved student engagement in high school classes that may, over time, lead to greater student achievement.

Keywords: Twitter, technology, English Language Arts, high school, pedagogy



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#Changeisgood¹

As a high school English teacher of 20 years, I understood the challenges of what academia commonly calls student engagement. I was always keenly aware of when I lost my audience and I tried to make regular changes that would keep students involved in class reading, composition, and discussion. Although studying literature and composition were the essential elements in the English Language Arts (ELA) classroom, I believed that content delivery and interaction systems must be ever-evolving to keep student minds connected to the material and the conversation.

In my first decade as a teacher, I chiefly addressed the connection challenge by moving around the classroom, asking questions, engaging students in Socratic debate, and incorporating what one principal called “unorthodox methods.” I incorporated art projects as prewriting exercises and changed up my lesson plans on the fly when student needs didn’t fit my plan. Sometimes that meant taking the class outside; other times it was bringing current events to the class discussion. I encouraged students to use all the resources available to them, including the internet, audiobooks, and study guides like Spark Notes and Shmoop. I rarely gave tests, preferring to dialogue with students during class discussion and by requiring regular journaling about what they were reading and thinking. The element of surprise kept most students involved, and their responses kept me on my toes. In the district where I taught in the early 1990s, anything beyond reading texts, writing essays, and regular testing was out of the ordinary.

In my second decade of classroom teaching, I witnessed the evolution of personal technology, and I decided to use that technology to my advantage. Instead of allowing myself to be frustrated by another potential distraction for my students, I adapted. Students could submit papers for editing or help through email. Including video in assignments became more accessible with the advent of smartphone cameras. I embraced social media early on as another teaching opportunity. Facebook became an ally when I discovered groups that could be made private.

Over the course of several years, I adapted my teaching strategies to whatever media students were using at any given time. My best moment was using Facebook groups to conduct classes when schools closed for a major snowstorm in Atlanta. Most teachers had to play catch up, but my classes didn’t miss a beat. Additionally, the students enjoyed the idea of the Facebook classroom, and, in a one-hour meeting with 100% attendance, there were nearly 200 on-topic, relevant posts. Students participated more readily when the tools they already used outside school were acceptable in the classroom (Journell, Ayers, & Walker Beeson, 2014; Tyma, 2011). For teachers like myself, who thrive on fresh approaches and doing the unexpected, social media served as a portal to online spaces that became extensions of discussions and problem-solving that started in the classroom.

#140characters

As technology became smaller, faster, and less expensive, more and more students had access. A 2015 Pew Research Center (PRC) study found that more than 80% of all US teens between 14 and 17 had personal smartphones, and 91% of teens 13-17

¹ In accordance with *JoLLE* policy acknowledging a gender spectrum, throughout this article I use plural pronouns for continuity and ease of reading.

used phones to access the internet (Lenhart, 2015). This powerful pocket-sized computer had several affordances: smartphones allowed students to communicate faster, look up information without having to trek to the library, and access the study guides and audiobooks they used in class without having to be at home or school. Smartphones also afforded access to multiple social media platforms, including Twitter.

Twitter was created to provide short status updates for its users, who would send a message to a large number of people across time and place using a mobile phone, working in both synchronous and asynchronous communication (Carlson, 2011).

Entries, called "tweets" were limited to 140 characters, including spaces, so brevity was required (Cronin, 2011). In 2007, Twitter averaged 5,000 tweets per day. By 2016, Twitter volume reached 6,000 tweets per second (Baer, 2013; Smith, 2016; "Twitter usage statistics," 2016).

In my mind, Twitter was a free and available resource for educational use, tucked away in a student's pocket, handbag, or backpack. I already had different systems in place to keep students organized so that there was never a question about due dates. I provided them with paper reminders posted in the classroom, a weekly assignment list on the class website, verbal reminders, and calendars that both parents and students could reference. I wondered if Twitter could provide one extra layer of accountability to ensure that students were never confused about what was due for class. My feeling was that if I had enough regular paths for reminders, students would have to get more creative with their reasons for not being timely with their work. I started with announcements as a short trial, so parents, administrators, and students could see how

I would use Twitter, and so I could measure whether it would be useful or not. I expanded to sharing article or blog links relevant to current class discussions before launching into larger projects. By then I had the consent, if not the blessing, of parents and administrators to continue using the platform. I focused first on the functional uses of Twitter.

#Functionaluse

I was not the only teacher employing social media spaces in the first part of the 21st century, but I never personally knew any other teachers who did. I developed my ideas as I went along. I started with class reminders and helping students organize study groups after class hours. Students double checked

“Encouraging students to connect their activities and lives to what happened in the classroom made the things we studied relevant and current.”

details and due dates of assignments or asked questions to explain what I might have said in class. Using Twitter also meant I could respond to students quickly, and, if I was not available, other students often stepped in to help just as quickly and efficiently. My students shared notes from class, posted links to their blogs, and connected articles, memes, and

other sites that related to topics discussed in class.

The use of hashtags to identify subjects and themes allowed me to track conversations and create an archive of relevant tweets (Lin, Hoffman, & Borengasser, 2013; Tyma, 2011). I created hashtags for each class, calling them clashtags. When students had comments or questions, they included the clashtag so that the first person who saw the tweet could respond. Twitter use promoted continuity for class discussions as a space for adding commentary to the lesson after the class ended. Time outside of class gave students a chance to think about what they wanted to say without the pressure of the clock

or competing with the cacophony of voices that sometimes came from lively in-person discussion. Quiet students, English language Learners, and students who had physical constraints to being heard in a classroom benefitted from having the Twitter resource as a space for participation in discussion (Cronin, 2011; Sebastian, 2016). Adding another dimension to class participation allowed more students to contribute to the conversations when they had ideas or thoughts after class.

Encouraging students to connect their activities and lives to what happened in the classroom made the things we studied relevant and current. Some students experienced epiphanies hours after class that they could immediately share before they had a chance to forget. In turn, I could then bring the thought to the conversation the next time class met. Teacher Adam Schoenbart (2016) wrote in his blog, "I think we need to find ways to engage students on multiple levels. That's where technology can be an asset: to amplify every student's voice for an audience." I found that the use of social media did open pathways of communication for students, especially after they pondered the in-class discussion and thought through what they wanted to say.

#Howitworked

Opening the pathways of communication was important to me. I wanted my students to have every opportunity to be active participants in class discussions and projects. In order to get parents, administrators, and the students on board, I planned my integration strategy with possible objections in mind.

#Toolnottoy

New classroom practices always required careful consideration, including being relevant to the course, purposeful in intent, and structured to

promote both self-direction and collaboration. Communicating these elements clearly to students, parents, and administrators allowed them to recognize the change, especially when it came to social media, as new tools, not simply new toys (Lin et al., 2013). I found the organization and accountability features of Twitter the most effortless and effective, because I could be sure to include specific classtags with pertinent information. At the same time, parents and administrators could see Twitter's usefulness. Students no longer had excuses for not knowing the assignment, not understanding the expectations, or forgetting the deadline. For me, that alone made Twitter valuable. My students also earned higher scores on assignments, partly because they learned that they had access to help from a classmate or me almost all the time. Even if all I provided was a link to where I posted the

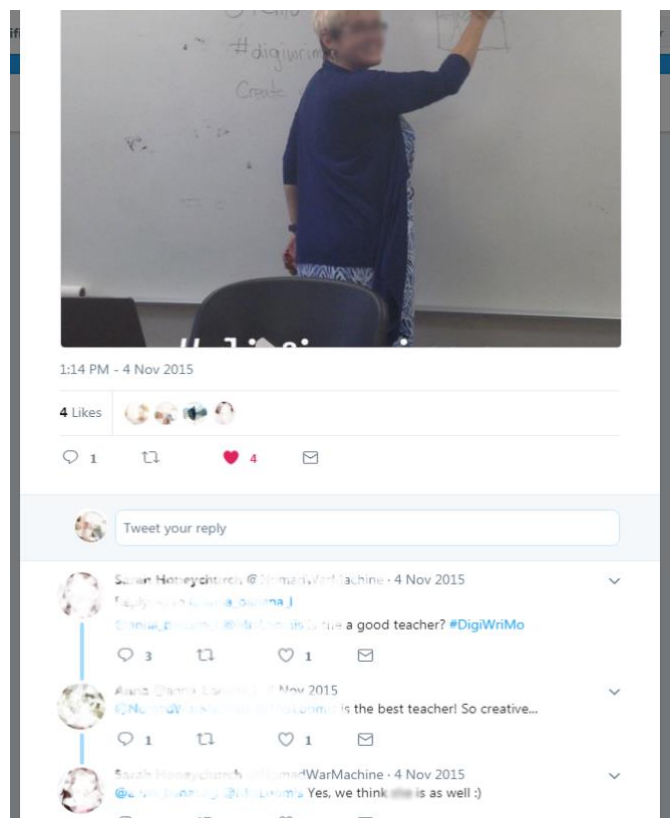


Figure 1. Students photographed notes from the whiteboard and posted the photo to Twitter with the proper classtag.

assignment, it was often sufficient to motivate them to turn in work on time. Students sometimes posted ideas from class discussions that came to them after school was over, extending the conversation and sometimes giving me ways to open the conversation during the next class period. I enjoyed the tweets that started off, “hey guys” because I knew that preceded a new thought or a new twist on something we had talked about. The salutation started with one student and evolved into a signal many students used when they found something to add to a given discussion.

#Learningtheskill

When I first began, I needed to provide some kind of scaffolding so students knew what I expected of their Twitter use. One way I helped students navigate Twitter was to allow them to photograph my notes from the whiteboard and then post it with the proper classtag (see Figure 1). There was something renegade about openly using a cell phone in class and posting to social media that students

liked. I made sure rules, expectations, and consequences were specific and clear. My expectations included responsible language, family-friendly links, and respect for every other participant in the class and on Twitter. In my experience, unclear rules or consequences for any new educational approach sometimes caused frustration with the tools, spilling over into frustration with me or the course. Parents appreciated knowing that my use of Twitter was not a free-for-all and that their students would engage with others respectfully. Students learned to discuss hot topics like politics, religion, and even sports in ways that were clear and without personal offense (Tyma, 2011). I was diligent in creating and enforcing rules of civility, just as I had done in the face-to-face classroom (Journell et al., 2014). Rules were simple: be polite, be accurate, be kind, and be respectful. With so many teens participating in cyberbullying and adults engaging in ad hominem attacks on social media, classroom use of Twitter offered an opportunity to teach students how to engage in civil discourse. I monitored every tweet that came from my students. Twitter allows users to follow each other and bring those comments to the front of their feeds. By keeping an eye on all comments, I could quickly see who may be falling into the trap of sharing false information or name calling. I only recall one incident that required intervention, and I used Twitter's direct message feature to interrupt a student who commented on something in a way that could have been misconstrued. Direct messaging is private, so I spoke to the student without creating an uncomfortable situation.

#Managingthefeed

Keeping up with multiple students in multiple classes required me to use an app called TweetDeck. (see Figure 2). TweetDeck allows users to create columns organized by hashtags so that all the tweets with that specific tag are grouped together. I created

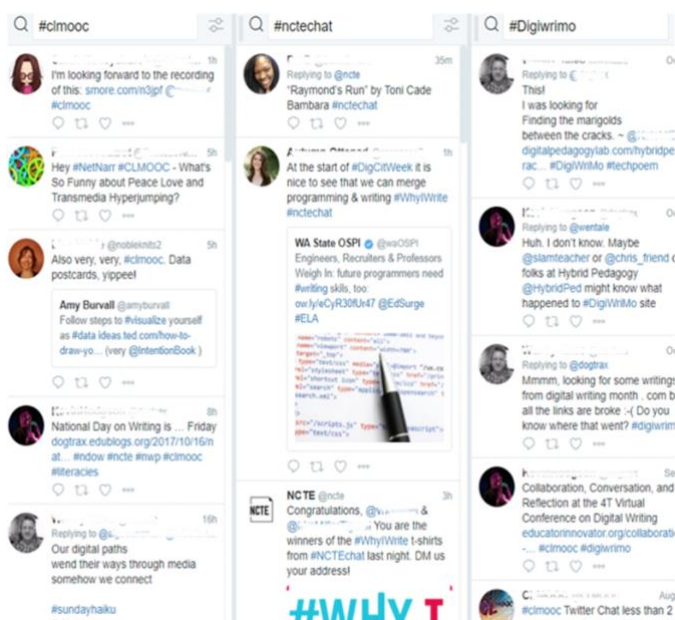


Figure 2. The use of TweetDeck allows users to organize content by hashtag.

columns for each classtag, which allowed me to see at a glance who had questions, who shared information, and who was participating according to the standards I had in place for online etiquette. I could also look across classes to determine whether I was consistent in my own teaching practice, particularly when I was creating activities that included collaboration between classes. If one group of students asked questions that another section of students did not, I knew I needed to re-address information I hadn't communicated well in class.

#Lifeline

In my classroom Twitter became the lifeline for students who needed help, reminders of deadlines, or links to pertinent information. Many of my students in the last six years of my teaching career were non-traditional students who did not always have ready access to computers or the internet. Some worked to support families; others were involved in pre-professional fields of sport or dance that required travel during the week. Twitter was the most common way students could ask questions, speak to challenges in getting to class or in printing assigned work, and share relevant ideas with either the entire class or me.

Opening access to Twitter gave me an instructional tool to help differentiate instruction. One of my students wrote, "When I'm doing school, hand writing everything and keeping up with a binder is no fun. But when I could basically text/email my homework to social media, that in general drew me in right away." This student used the online experiences to stay organized, which also helped him stay interested and on task. Using his creative skills to tweet helped him focus his thoughts, which ultimately helped his writing. Additionally, Twitter was reliable, whereas the school learning management system (LMS) and email often were not. Finally, Twitter was also immediate, which

allayed concerns some students had about time management as they juggled home, school, and extracurricular activities.

#Affordances

The primary question is whether Twitter is viable as a pedagogical tool and, if so, is it appropriate for the high school classroom? Twitter may be an asset to the high school classroom teacher, particularly in the humanities where the outside world and academic pursuits often intersect. As a public forum, students using Twitter have access to people and information they may not know any other way. During one of our Twitter-based art projects, my students met students and teachers from around the world, exchanging comments with people in Europe, Africa, and Australia who followed their work.

For students who believe in the more-is-better philosophy of writing, the idea of having to communicate an entire thought in 140 characters requires the development of sharp editing skills, along with creative uses of punctuation and emoji. It is often easier for students (and teachers) to write in loquacious paragraphs than it is to make the same point in 140 characters. The 140-character limit of tweets compels students to choose words carefully, forcing clear communication with careful word economy. This economy accomplishes two things: it develops student editing skills and encourages critical thinking. To condense an idea into a limited space, writers need to know how to be concise. The character limitation also requires creativity in combining images, letters, and signs to say as much as possible in a single tweet. Brevity also translates well to the business environment so students learning word economy will begin to master a task that will serve them well beyond the school classroom (Tyma, 2011). The 2017 change from 140 characters to 280 characters had little effect on the creative requirements for character limitations. Only

5% of tweets sent by a test group were longer than 140 characters as the novelty wore off and the 140-character habit reemerged (Larson, 2017).

Students may also find Twitter to be advantageous for academic support. Students using clashtags to ask questions or clarify expectations may address issues other students have in a way that is non-threatening. Twitter also levels the social playing field by connecting students through the veil of internet obscurity. High school student Oscar Lozoria said of Twitter, "It's a great way to get people to notice you" (Simon, 2011, para 14). At 14, he had been teased by his classmates for his long hair, but Twitter changed how he was perceived. "They see me as somebody now -- as an equal," he said (para. 15). Marginalized voices may be recognized, heard, and appreciated behind the screen of a tweet.

Twitter also offers opportunities for students to connect with others around the country and even the world about a variety of topics. One such site, Youth Voices, allows students to participate in authentic discourse about social issues from bullying to weather. Youth Voices is an interactive blog with a Twitter feed that features open prompts to 25 relevant issues. Students may post responses to the prompts or engage in dialogue with other writers. Geared toward high school students, Youth Voices is an open forum where "students share, distribute, & discuss their work online" (Youth Voices, 2008). My students were required to participate in at least one public forum to open their eyes to a multitude of perspectives from other teens. Twitter functions to connect people to the poetry, images, and opinions written in the forums.

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#Constraints

Twitter does have its limitations. Student maturity is a factor in successful implementation of Twitter as a teaching and learning tool. For my students under 16, I encouraged parents to open accounts in their names for their students to use. Immaturity at any age may lead to misuse, vulgarity, inappropriate commentary, and even bullying (Cronin, 2011; Journell et al., 2014; Tyma, 2011), but involving parents helps mitigate that potential. Just as students who seek out assistance from teachers outside of class do better overall, students who can connect with their teachers through Twitter may obtain the same kind of help. Access without the barrier of the school clock may be beneficial for

students who have commitments after classes, including sports, performance activities, or jobs.

Opening the avenue of communication may allow those students to improve their performances in the classroom. Teachers may need to set time

boundaries that prohibit the students to have access during off hours and ensure that teachers have private time away from their mobile devices. It is not unreasonable to remind students that the teacher may not see messages sent overnight until morning, but that their classmates may have the answers they need.

Other concerns may include student preoccupation, teacher distraction, and a proclivity for improper spelling and grammar (Cronin, 2011). Tweets often require sacrificing conventional grammar and spelling to meet the character limit; I told my students that these creative maneuvers are only acceptable on Twitter. Further, Twitter shorthand may be a topic for class discussion as part of the

required scaffolding. The concerns regarding student preoccupation and teacher distraction are more challenging to address. Cronin suggested Twitter as a note-taking strategy, which would create a collaborative thread about class time that all class members could access. My experience was that students preferred Twitter as a tool for beyond the classroom. One solution to preoccupation and distraction is to put restrictions on when (or if) in-class Twitter-use could be employed.

#Finalthoughts

Technology evolves faster every year, and each generation of students has access to newer and, perhaps, more efficient ways to communicate. In my experience, Twitter has been a positive tool for classroom efficiency and student participation. Because current research focuses on higher education, there are opportunities for future

research into Twitter efficacy at the high school level. There is potential for Twitter to allow students to reach beyond the classroom and interact with the world through specific hashtags (Loomis, 2015). The strict character limit may enhance clear communication skills, and tweeting may provide equal opportunities for both dominant classroom speakers and more reserved students who rarely raise their hands in class. Teachers can personalize the learning environment, thus providing enrichment for students who need it, as well as quietly remediate weaknesses for students who need bolstering. By applying specific appropriate boundaries for usage and clear intentions for its use, Twitter offers a 21st-century addition for student participation, which may, over time, lead to improved student achievement (Loomis, 2014). At least, Twitter may be considered as a potential addition to the ELA teacher's toolbox.

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