

## Tweeting in the Classroom

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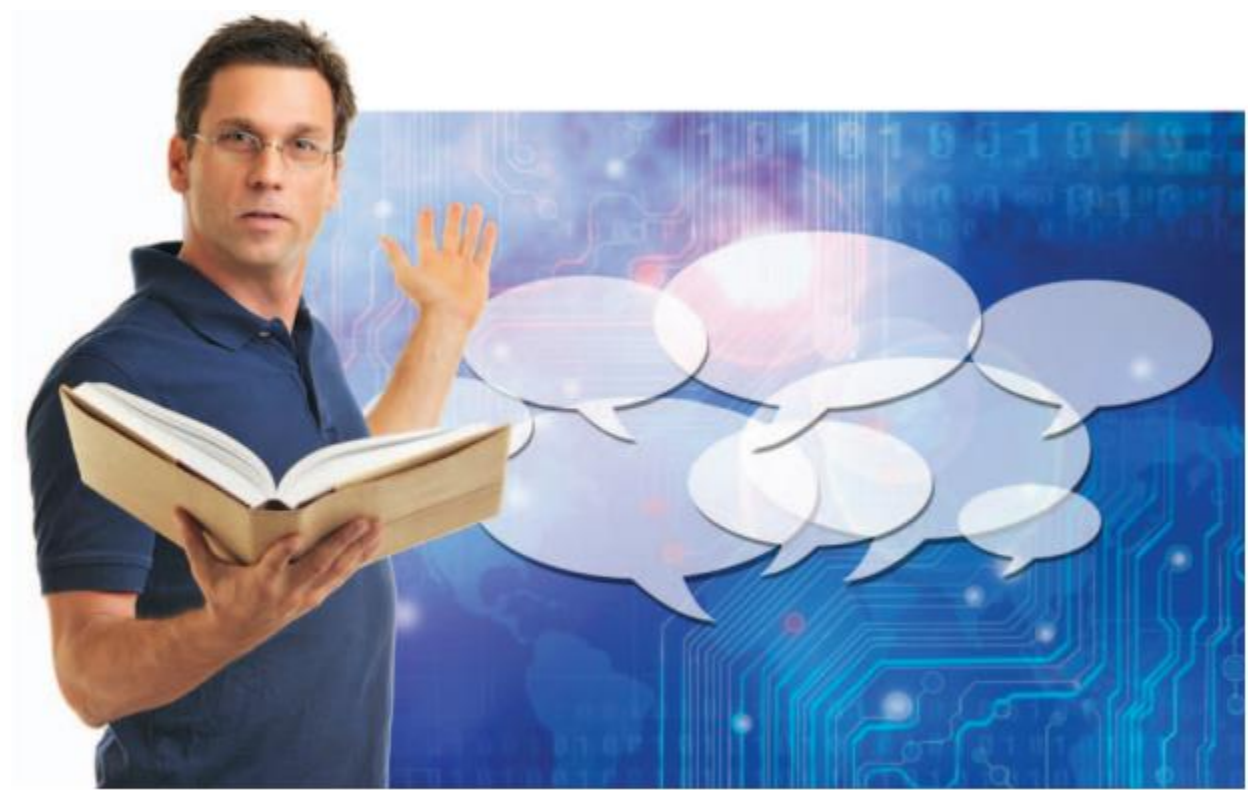
### **Abstract:**

Twitter can be a smart instructional tool that links students with real-time information and connects them to authentic discussions beyond school walls.

**Keywords:** Twitter | social media | secondary education | instructional tool | pedagogical tool | high school civics

### **Article:**

Twitter can be a smart instructional tool that links students with real-time information and connects them to authentic discussions beyond school walls.



In an era of iPhones and Internet, when adolescents are online and actively consuming social media, why aren't schools doing more to take advantage of those technologies in the classroom? Studies of middle and secondary students in the United States have found that students believe their academic experiences would be more engaging if they could use these tools at school (DeGennaro, 2008; Spires, Lee, Turner, & Johnson, 2008). Moreover, a growing literature base advocates using Internet-based networking technologies in academic contexts, with research suggesting that these tools deepen understanding of content, offer greater opportunities for diverse instruction, and provide students with needed skills (Heafner & Friedman, 2008; Journell & Dressman, 2011; Reich, Murnane, & Willett, 2012).

We believe Twitter can be a smart instructional tool, and we support our assertions with data collected during a study of a high school civics course during the 2012 presidential election. The teacher, Mr. Fillmore, had students use Twitter as a way to monitor the campaign, complete with live tweeting during debates and other major events that occurred throughout the semester.

The ways that individuals can connect via Twitter offer teachers unique opportunities to link students with real-time information and diverse ideological perspectives.

In case you're one of the uninitiated, let's start with a few basics about Twitter. Individuals can sign up for free and choose a unique handle that identifies them among Twitter's over 500

million registered users around the world. This handle is always prefaced by the @ character. (For example, @WayneJournell).

Once an account is created, users can choose to “follow” people or organizations, which means they will see every “tweet” posted by those individuals or groups. Similarly, users can tweet, and that tweet will be seen by everyone who has chosen to follow them. Each tweet can be no longer than 140 characters, although users can attach pictures, links, and other information to tweets. Users can also retweet posts made by others or respond specifically to others' tweets by prefacing their own tweet with that individual's handle.

What separates Twitter from other social networking applications, such as Facebook, is its hashtag function. At the end of each tweet, users can type in a hashtag, which is a word or phrase prefaced by a pound sign, such as #PDK. If users perform a search for a specific hashtag, they will see all tweets that contain that hashtag regardless of whether they are following those individuals. It is this hashtag function that makes Twitter a social media application defined not only by following individuals, but also by linking common interests and ideology. This combination of tweets and hashtags creates a unique form of communication that has become a new literacy practice (Greenhow & Gleason, 2012).

Nearly every prominent individual around the world — politicians, celebrities, athletes, even the Pope — has a Twitter account. Twitter has become an essential way to distribute information and offers a free way to extend a message that will reach the public in the quickest way possible. Tweets from President Obama's official Twitter account (@BarackObama), for example, are sent to each of his over 28 million followers, and it is not uncommon for those tweets to be retweeted by thousands of users.

### **Twitter as a pedagogical tool**

At first glance, Twitter seems like a great way to learn what one's old college roommate or favorite celebrity had for breakfast. Instructional implications may not be as apparent. However, the ways that individuals can connect via Twitter offer teachers unique opportunities to link students with real-time information and diverse ideological perspectives. We were able to observe several examples of this type of instructional potential during Fillmore's coverage of the presidential election.

At the most basic level, teachers could use Twitter to provide students instant access to news and information. In our study, Fillmore's students created Twitter accounts at the beginning of the semester and followed both Obama and Mitt Romney, as well as a third-party candidate of their choice. Throughout the semester, students would receive tweets from the candidates, often with links to news articles. Twitter offered students a quick way to stay abreast of the campaign, and since Fillmore required them to follow both major party candidates, students were receiving a more balanced coverage of the election than they typically would have found on most cable news networks.

Research suggests that authentic instruction is exceedingly rare in American public education (Newmann, Marks, & Gamoran, 1996; Saye & The SSIRC, 2013). A tenet of authentic

instruction is the ability to connect one's curriculum to the world beyond the classroom (Newmann & Wehlage, 1993), and Twitter offers teachers a way to incorporate current events and real-world perspectives into instruction on a regular basis. More important, students' ability to access Twitter outside school allows these lessons to continue at home.

### **Linking students, fostering ideological diversity**

Facilitating student discussions is challenging for many teachers. Today's middle and high school students, however, have grown up in an age where many people are as comfortable interacting with others online as they are face-to-face. Research has even shown that some students, especially those who are shy, are more likely to contribute to academic discussions if they're held electronically (Larson, 2005). Twitter provides a forum in which students can discuss issues with each other in a way that ensures everyone's comments are heard.



During each of the debates and the two national conventions, Fillmore created a unique hashtag (#chscivics) for students to use while they tweeted during each event. As long as students used the #chscivics hashtag, their comments would be seen by their classmates who were participating on Twitter. During each of these live-tweeting exercises, students provided lively commentary, as in this example from the first presidential debate:

**Trisha:** Obama's hitting independent economic patriotism, Romney's going for small-medium business layoffs #chscivics

**Crystal:** #chscivics #debate 2012 Exactly, Obama, just how does Romney plan on saving America? #beenwonderingthat

**Trisha:** “I heard a study today that said ... “ Figure things out for yourself Romney, not everything you read is correct. #debates #chscivics

**Trisha:** Mormon jokes LOLLOLOL #debates #chscivics

**Paige:** #chscivics #debates Yes, please don't burden the middle class. We don't need any more of that.

The conversation that occurred on the #chscivics hashtag provided an alternative venue for comments that could have been shared in a regular face-to-face setting the following day. But using Twitter allowed Fillmore's students to express themselves in real-time and in a way that is typical of communication they use outside school. In this brief excerpt, one can see how students used literary devices unique to digital communication, such as popular acronyms (e.g., LOL) and fictional hashtags used to convey thoughts or opinions (e.g., #beenwonderingthat). Since students are generally more likely to participate in academic discussions when they're allowed to do so in a format with which they're familiar and comfortable (Whitney, Ridgeman, & Masquelier, 2011), Twitter may actually invite more student communication than a traditional face-to-face discussion, despite being limited to 140 characters in tweets.

Twitter hashtags also enabled Fillmore to connect students' comments with larger conversations that were occurring simultaneously. In addition to requiring that students post their tweets on the #chscivics hashtag, Fillmore also instructed students to use the official hashtags of each event (e.g., #debates, #GOP 2012). The dual hashtags allowed each tweet to be posted twice, once on a forum exclusive to Fillmore's classes and again on a larger forum that was being used by individuals throughout the world.

Research has shown that most schools are ideologically homogeneous, and diverse opinions are often marginalized (Jacobsen, Frankenberg, & Lenhoff, 2012; Journell, 2012). But exposing students to diverse viewpoints is essential to developing tolerant citizens capable of living within an American society that is growing increasingly pluralistic (Mutz, 2006). Manufacturing ideological diversity in classrooms is often challenging (Hess & Ganzler, 2007), but Twitter lets teachers link student discussions to larger conversations that will expose students to a variety of beliefs.

Even if teachers don't want students to enter a global discussion, the hashtag function of Twitter enables collaborations among classrooms across the United States and throughout the world. A perfect example of the ease by which this type of connection can be created occurred during the third presidential debate. As Fillmore's class was live-tweeting, the principal joined the conversation and linked Fillmore's students with two other high school classes, one in Alabama and one in Tennessee, that were doing a similar activity. By using common hashtags, students in all three states could share their opinions about the debate with each other in real time.



### **Limitations of Twitter as a pedagogical tool**

Since Twitter wasn't created specifically for education, teachers must be aware of potential limitations before attempting to use it in their classrooms. Although Twitter may increase communication among students, it isn't always productive dialogue. Allowing people to hide behind their computer screens can create an environment where they may be more likely to make inappropriate comments. At a minimum, these types of comments may offend people, but of greater concern is that students' online comments are often used to intimidate and bully others (Hinduja & Patchin, 2011).

Teachers must be extremely careful of this when using Twitter to discuss controversial or taboo topics. Although we didn't observe many offensive tweets during our study of Fillmore's classes, students occasionally tweeted crass comments. For example, one student wrote, "How to win votes: bring up car crash victims" during the vice presidential debate. Other students' tweets, such as the one that stated, "Romney, I think YOU'RE a moral issue," expressed nonsubstantive anger toward issues or candidates. Although such comments may not have been explicitly directed toward a particular classmate, some students who held contradicting opinions may have felt marginalized. One can easily envision the potential for inappropriate comments if teachers used Twitter to discuss controversial social issues such as abortion, evolution, or gay marriage. Teachers need to establish rules for tweeting just as they would for a face-to-face classroom discussion.

Similarly, the ability to connect students with larger national and global conversations comes at a cost. Although such exposure increases ideological diversity, it limits teachers' abilities to censor inappropriate tweets made by those residing beyond school walls. We don't believe students should be shielded from such comments as they are, unfortunately, part of the social and political discourse in this digital age. But we do recommend that teachers have frank conversations with

students about the types of intolerant tweets they are likely to see, especially as discussions veer into controversial spaces. Students need to know that these types of comments are meant to emotionally hurt others and do not substantively contribute to civil democratic discourse.

Aside from students making inappropriate comments, we also observed another potential limitation of students' Twitter conversations in our study of Fillmore's classes. Twitter, like most social networking sites, works by having individuals post their thoughts. Those thoughts are designed to be read but not necessarily responded to. Throughout the semester, there was little evidence to prove that students were actually reading their classmates' tweets. Direct responses to individual tweets were rare, and, in most cases, students seemed to be talking *at* each other rather than *with* each other. Teachers could easily remedy this problem by instituting requirements on the number of direct responses and retweets they expect of their students.

Finally, perhaps the biggest obstacle teachers would need to overcome in order to successfully use Twitter in their classes is gaining access. Teachers would have to work in schools and districts where administrators view social media as an instructional tool and are willing to let students access Twitter during the school day. Issues with access severely limited Fillmore's ability to maximize the learning potential of Twitter during the semester in which we observed him. His principal was fully committed to his use of Twitter, as evidenced by her participation during the third presidential debate, but three weeks into the start of school, the district decided to block students' access to all social media. Fillmore was then forced to make all Twitter activities extra credit assignments to be done at home, which meant he couldn't require student participation. As a result, not every student chose to take advantage of what turned out to be an engaging learning opportunity.

Social media is the new face of global communication, and, instead of blocking it, schools should be embracing it.

## **Conclusion**

As students continue to live and work in a society that's becoming increasingly more digital and interconnected, our classrooms are too often stuck in the 20th century. Social media is the new face of global communication, and, instead of blocking it, schools should be embracing it. The experience of Fillmore's classes is only a glimpse into the pedagogical potential of Twitter and other forms of social media. Twitter, specifically, offers teachers unprecedented opportunities to make connections between their curricula and real-world political and social issues, which creates a foundation for authentic pedagogy. As long as teachers establish firm guidelines regarding proper online decorum and expectations for student interaction, Twitter can be an invaluable classroom tool.

A more detailed description of the research findings discussed in this article is at: Journell, W., Ayers, C.A., & Beeson, M.W. (2013). Joining the conversation: Twitter as a tool for student political engagement. *The Educational Forum*, 77, 466-480.



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