

Twitter Lessons in 140 Characters or Less

By [Kathleen Kennedy Manzo](#)

The Twitter feed for Lucas Ames' class in American history has shown some lively exchanges of ideas and opinions among students at the Flint Hill School. One day this month, 11th graders at the private school in Oakton, Va., shared articles on the separation of church and state, pondered the persistence of racism, and commented on tobacco regulation in Virginia now and during the Colonial period—all in the required Twitter format of 140 or fewer characters.

Those are exactly the kinds of interactions Mr. Ames had hoped for when he decided to experiment with the microblogging tool in his classroom this school year.

He and other teachers first found Twitter valuable for reaching out to colleagues and locating instructional resources. Now, they're trying it out in the classroom as an efficient way to distribute assignments and to foster collaboration among students.

But as more teachers sample the uses of popular social-networking tools like Twitter as part of their lessons and classwork, some observers are cautioning that the educational effectiveness of such tools, or the implications those quick, short-form communications may have for students' thinking and learning are not known.

"It's not a research-based tool," said Daniel T. Willingham, a professor of psychology at the University of Virginia, in Charlottesville. "The most important thing to remember is that we have no idea what impact these tools have on learning, and it will take a decade to answer that question."

Fostering Collaboration

Twitter is defined as a "real-time short messaging service" on the Web site of the San Francisco-based company of that name, which was founded in 2006. Users subscribe to the blog feeds of others on the site and send out messages—called "tweets"—to their own "followers" within the allotted number of characters.

The site is used extensively by businesses to market products and spread messages related to their work.

It has created its own celebrity class of microbloggers as well. Some famous and previously not-so-famous users have gained thousands or even millions of followers who read their tweets and send—or retweet—them to others.

Nearly 10,000 users, for example, follow Georgia teacher

Classroom Connections @Twitter

teacher great job finding and sharing resources guys

7:05 PM Oct 8th from web in reply to ZachH1212

teacher From slavery 2 White House, Michelle Obama's slave roots revealed. Comments please!

7:46 PM Oct 8th from web

student 1 @fhsush this is really shocking that they traced it back that far and found a tie it really just amazing
8:07 PM Oct 8th from web

student 2 @fhsush thats AMAZING. times have really changed. that is amazing that they can trace back that far.

8:11 PM Oct 8th from web in reply to fhsush

student 1 @fhsush WOW! i would have never guessed that. its awesome to see such a connections to slavery in our own White House. amazing

8:19 PM Oct 8th from web in reply to fhsush

SOURCE: A recent string of tweets from Lucas Ames' history class at the Flint Hill School in Oakton, Va.

EDUCATION WEEK

Vicki Davis, who uses the login name [@coolcatteacher](#) to share resources and suggestions about educational technology. (*Education Week* and several of the paper's reporters send out daily tweets under names like [@educationweek](#), [@kmanzo](#), and [@Teacherbeat](#).)

Twitter has not caught on among school-age children as quickly or universally as other Web 2.0 tools, such as Facebook or MySpace: Only about 1 percent of the estimated 12 million users in the United States are between the ages of 3 and 17, although young adults are the fastest-growing group of users, according to recent reports. Still, some teachers are hoping that, given the appeal of social networking, Twitter can be used to get students engaged in the content and processes of school.

"For a lot of teachers who started off using Twitter as a professional-development tool, they've been building a professional learning community and using information that's been shared," said Steve Dembo, the online-community manager for the Discovery Educator Network, or DEN, which encourages collaboration among its more than 100,000 members across the country. "The more they've seen the value in making connections with each other, [the more] they're realizing the same process might be valuable to students as well."

In discussions on the DEN, which is hosted by the Silver Spring, Md.-based Discovery Education, Mr. Dembo has noticed a significant uptick in questions and recommendations among teachers about using Twitter, mostly addressing how to simplify administrative tasks or encourage students to conduct research or collaborate with classmates and their peers across the country.

Mr. Ames, the history teacher, has already seen some results in classroom participation by students, who are given the choice of participating in the Twitter feed or writing an extra research paper.

"These students are not always sure about how to use the Internet to find and filter information, so this is forcing them to do that," said Mr. Ames, who requires students to submit only school-related tweets. "It's getting kids who aren't necessarily engaged in class engaged in some sort of conversation."

Dorie Glynn, who teaches a bilingual 2nd grade class at Kirk Elementary School in Houston, has been preparing students for conversations of their own on Twitter. The students have started following other classes at the school, and across the country, as they get ready to share data on regional cultures, weather, and to play a virtual I Spy game, in which they will hunt for geometric shapes in maps and photos sent from Twitter followers in other places.

"I see a huge amount of potential for connecting with another classroom, asking regional questions, comparing and contrasting areas," Ms. Glynn said.

Pros and Cons Debated

With scant research on the efficacy of social-networking tools such as Twitter, and few clear insights into the best (and worst) uses for them, there is little agreement among researchers and educators about how or whether Twitter-like technologies could or should be used in schools.

"There are generally two camps on this issue: One says how terrible all this is, and the other talks about all the things you can learn using social-networking tools," said Pamela B. Rutledge, the director of the Media Psychology Research Center at Fielding Graduate University, an online degree program.

But, she added, "there are many different ways, because of those media, that you can engage students" in content.

Today's students, she added, are going to need to have highly developed critical-thinking skills, be able to digest large amounts of information, and determine what's important and what's not. Those are the very kinds of skills they tend to use with Web 2.0 tools, she argued.

Research in related areas might have some answers to questions about the usefulness of such tools, according to Mr. Willingham.

EDUCATION WEEK

A few studies have found some positive correlations between text-messaging aptitude and literacy. Research on gaming and educational multimedia programs have also shown some positive impact on learning. But few scientific experiments can show a direct link between the use of such technology and student achievement.

A recent study, however, renewed concerns about the potential negative impact of the latest technological applications. The study, published in the journal *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, found that adults who attempted multiple tasks while using a range of media simultaneously had difficulty processing the information or switching between tasks.

Few teachers, though, need definitive studies to tell them that social media can be a problem in the classroom if not carefully planned for and controlled.

"The thing about new technology that I've observed is that it's an enormous distraction, and it varies from classroom to classroom how successful teachers are in controlling usage," Mr. Willingham said. "Kids are often seen texting and carrying on a conversation at the same time, but they're almost certainly not doing them as well as they think they are."

The study on multitasking adults provides some evidence for that argument.

Even so, Mr. Willingham said, tools such as Twitter may have utility in helping students communicate, stay organized, and learn research and analytical skills.

The anecdotal evidence among Twitter fans, however, has been positive, Mr. Dembo of the Discovery Educator Network said.

"Most of the people expressing concerns are not the people who've found value in Twitter in their professional or personal lives," he said. "That's not to say their points about the potential downsides are not valid."

Those downsides include the mundane or pointless tweets that some users submit, such as what they are having for lunch, and other messages that could prove distracting if access to student or class Twitter accounts isn't controlled. Teachers, though, can choose which users to follow, or to limit access to students only, an approach many take to ensure Internet safety as well.

Beyond Technology

At the Flint Hill School in Virginia, Mr. Ames has been carefully considering how he might control usage before expanding Twitter use in his class. Right now, students contribute to Twitter outside the classroom, although tweets are mostly related to conversations and content from class.

"As we prepare students for college, we tell them it's not always just about how hard you work, but how smart you work," he said. "These collaborative tools can help them become smarter students, and to use collaborative knowledge versus going through these classes on your own and never talking to anyone about them."

As with any tool, Mr. Willingham said, the medium should not be the primary concern for teachers. The way students receive information—through Twitter, via e-mail, or in a printed handout—may not have a dramatic effect on how they use it.

"Like any other tool, the way we make it useful is to consider very carefully what this particular tool is very good at, rather than simply say, 'I like Twitter, so how can I use it?'" said Mr. Willingham, who is the author of the new book, *Why Don't Students Like School?: A Cognitive Scientist Answers Questions About How the Mind Works and What It Means for the Classroom*.

"The medium is not enough," he added. "People talk about the vital importance of Web 2.0 and 3.0, and that kids have got to acquire those skills. But we can't all just be contributing to wikis and tweeting each other. Somebody's got to create something worth tweeting."

http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2009/10/21/08twitter_ep.h29.html?r=475615742