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**Talking points for Session B3:
“Making Writing Socially Engaging: Asking Why New Media Draws Us In”**

The abstract to our session states the following:

We'll moderate an open conversation on using social media for creating engagement with writing. (1) Why do people find social networking sites engaging places to write? (2) How do social-networking tools facilitate dialogue and peer response among writers? (3) What are the pedagogical perils and promises of “live” audiences? (4) What's the rhetorical nature of writing in socially mediated spaces? (5) How does this interactive dialogue impact people as individual writers?

I plan to respond to question #2 with details from my “Teaching with Twitter” experiences. Since starting in as an Assistant Professor at the University of Wisconsin-Stout, a polytechnic school and laptop campus, I've required students to create Twitter accounts. Their reactions in 2008 were completely different from their reactions now in 2011, and while I think they would all prefer we use Facebook to communicate and extend discussions outside of the classroom, I stand by my choice to use Twitter as a neutral space to think critically about technology's impact upon their daily lives.

In the past, I asked ENGL 101 students to maintain their Twitter timeline in *and* out of class with the basic instruction being, “Answer the question ‘What are you doing?’ with specific reference to assigned readings (in this class and others), writing projects, & online findings.” However, no matter how often we discussed and I modeled what this meant, I was consistently asked, “What am I supposed to be writing?” As a result, in Fall of 2010, I offered the following instructions I post in my syllabus:

Twitter Journal

In addition to utilizing to the D2L website, a requirement for this course is an account on Twitter.com.

- Whenever reading is assigned, students will be **required** to post at least 2 questions or comments about that text to their timeline. Shared at the beginning of each class period, we will reference these tweets as a means to generate discussion.
- While **not required**, I encourage you to use this microblogging social network as an informal journal about technology, as a way to communicate with each other, and as a quick way to ask me questions when outside of class.
- As your teacher, I will use the site to post announcements, extra credit opportunities, and share links relevant to our course focus on social media trends, so it is important that you check in on a daily basis.

In his observation of my course, a colleague made the following remarks about how this exercise worked:

- Class transitioned to discussion of the readings, which began with everyone logging into Twitter to respond to a number of questions up on the board related to the first reading. The students were encouraged to think about the issues the article raised, especially in terms of gossip, rumors, and shaming online. Four minutes were allotted to respond to the readings. After a couple minutes, Pignetti pulled up “Tweetie,” an application that shows her instructor Twitter account [@profpignetti], which was aggregating all of the students’ tweets. She then made the window visible on the overhead projector for everyone to see. Each student’s comment with their full name was then visible on the board. While the students responded, Pignetti had time to parse the responses and pick out comments that might spark more discussion.
- Oral discussion then followed. While Pignetti’s questions to the class were not always met with responses, she was always prepared to call on students at random (and by name) to get the discussion moving. Moreover, the student posts provided a means for Pignetti to get a sense of what everyone was thinking.
- Students had many opportunities to contribute to the session’s activities, and many (if not most) of them got involved. All of the students seem to have posted comments on the readings to Twitter, and all of these comments were visible on the front screen. Discussions in small groups provided another means for student participation, especially for those who might not be comfortable talking in front of the entire class. Lastly, large group discussions also provided an outlet for participation.
- Notably, having students post comments to Twitter gave Pignetti the opportunity to highlight certain perspectives and ask contributors to elaborate on their thinking for the class. While still a form of “cold calling” students out of the crowd, a tactic students at all levels often disdain, Pignetti’s Twitter-based approach seemed more productive, since students had at least already formulated a view on the subject matter.
- Pignetti’s primary strength in this class was getting students involved in discussing the assigned readings for the day. Her multi-faceted approach—that is, large and small group discussions paired with brief posts to Twitter—seems to tap into the varied learning styles evident in most any classroom. Some students prefer to think about a text by writing about it, while others actually enjoy expressing their views orally and publicly, and Pignetti’s approach to getting students involved would appear to acknowledge these differences in how people learn. Her use of Twitter as a discussion tool seems non-arbitrary and entirely useful.
- Logistically, however, observing the Twitter responses made me wonder if having the students post to Twitter *before* arriving to class might allow Pignetti to figure out discussion points ahead of time. While she was quite good at making sense of and highlighting student contributions as they came in, it did make for a slight lull in the course discussion. Having key posts picked out ahead of time might streamline the process. Either way, I don’t see the current approach as a weakness, since it still made for an in-depth discussion with lots of participation.

Student responses to the following final exam question offered the following insights:

A recent article published by the *Journal of Computer Assisted Learning* found “Analyses of Twitter communications showed that students and faculty were both highly engaged in the learning process in ways that transcended traditional classroom activities” (Junco, Heiberger, & Loken, 2010). Reflecting upon your Twitter experience, what did you see to be the advantages of using it to begin discussions of the assigned readings? Disadvantages? Would you like future courses, writing-based or otherwise, to implement this tool?

- Twitter has really been a great tool in the classroom. Unfortunately, I have only used this method in one class. This social networking site has given the “quiet ones” an opportunity to stay connected in classroom discussions and ask questions without raising their hand. When 20 students have questions or comments it would usually take a while to run through the list one by one. By using Twitter, it has been very easy to look through students questions in a short amount of time. That has been a great advantage. A disadvantage that I have noticed is that it takes away from public speaking skills. Although asking a question in class takes a matter of seconds, these are seconds of confidence that a student could gain for public speaking. Besides that one disadvantage, the pros definitely outweigh the cons. A tool such as Twitter, if used correctly, is a great way to run a discussion. This kind of technology should be used more, but it is important to keep students involved beyond their laptops. No matter how far technology takes our society in the future, ‘people skills’ will always be a must when finding success in the work area.
- I use Twitter on a regular basis (2 to 3 times a day) in my personal life. I do think it was good for discussion in the classroom because it got every ones ideas out, when some people might never talk in class. I do think it can be useful in a classroom if more students used twitter. If people would check twitter often enough to have a real time discussion on something out side of class, but I don’t know that it has caught on that much at Stout. I have noticed that if some one uses Facebook a lot that they typically don’t use twitter. I think that most traditional students are more into face book and that Twitter has caught on more out side of students, mainly in working adults from ages 20 and up. I think that if it were to catch on more in the “Facebook crowd” that it might be a more successful tool.
- Reflecting upon my Twitter experience, I feel that Twitter was not a good device to use for class discussions. There was an advantage that I saw in class but mostly I believe Twitter to be quite pointless. The one advantage I did see by using this social networking program is simply that everybody can get their point of view to the teacher and up on the whiteboard very quickly. If we were to talk individually about everyone’s point of view in class it would take forever. I do not however think faster is necessarily better. I think it would be more valuable to sit in a circle and discuss one thing at a time. This way everyone that has an idea can talk and add upon others thoughts. It also offers for more of a discussion rather than just reading points on

the board and touching on one or two. I would like to know why people think what they think or what was the reason for their statements. In future courses I would maybe like to see twitter once or twice but if you use it sit down and have a thought out discussion so that people are forced to actually think about what other people are saying. When you have points on the board not as many people read them.

- I was very intrigued by the idea of utilizing Twitter in the classroom setting, at the beginning of the semester. Firstly, because I had never previously used Twitter, so this was my opportunity to become familiar with the site. Secondly, I felt it was Dr. Pignetti's way of keeping her students connected to the constantly changing world we live in, as opposed to using old texts and assigning writing projects of which we had no interest. The advantages and disadvantages seem to even out for me, though. It could have been a very useful tool for a student who missed a class meeting, signing on to Twitter after a class discussion, they would have all the information right there in front of them. It also was far more efficient than taking notes from a lecture or a discussion in class, but at the same time, I thought it would have been easier to just talk about the topics rather than have all of us sitting on our computers typing it into a Tweet. As a person that learns best from having material in front of me, the Twitter discussions were helpful in remembering discussions and topics, but if a student learns best from what they listen to, Twitter could have been very counterproductive.

I think for classes that physically meet in a classroom, Twitter shouldn't be used as frequently as we used it. Occasionally, it can be helpful, especially during the time we had the Twitter writing assignment. Where it could be implemented most beneficially, though, would probably be with an online class, in which students are already committed to reading material and learning it on their own. This could also turn an online class into something more interactive than most.

- Using twitter to post comments and questions about readings was interesting and sort of weird at first. However after a few comments and questions, I think it worked pretty well and it was nice having a wall of comments and questions about the readings we were doing. I was skeptical at first but twitter gained on me and I think it's a good idea for posting questions and comments. It also helped start many different discussions. Somebody might post something and it causes someone else in the class to react and put in their own input on the conversation. Overall I liked it, but one thing that would improve it would be for the class to be "followers" of each other so we could see the other comments and questions. I know we could do this on our own, but we really didn't. I think that could be very handy out of class as well if someone has a question or comment about a reading or assignment; they could go onto twitter and find the information they need from classmates. I think that it would be a nice thing for future classes to have. It worked smoothly, was handy, and helped start the fire for discussions which I feel are all good reasons to implement twitter to courses in the future.