

Using Social Networking in an Educational Setting

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Abstract

St Mark's is a Catholic systemic school in Stanhope Gardens, NSW. It opened in 2007, and currently has 300 students in Years 7-9. St Mark's has 1:1 laptop provision, an interdisciplinary curriculum and makes use of state of the art flexible learning spaces. Recently, St Mark's has adopted Twitter in a variety of educational settings. This report analyses the research behind the use of Twitter for educational purposes, examines the applications of Twitter at St Mark's, and examines some of the advantages and disadvantages of such an approach. Finally, this report suggests possible alternatives to Twitter, as a means of generating discussion about the role of social networking in schools.

Context of St Mark's

From the beginning, St Mark's was intended to put into practice the most recent educational theory. In a sense, it was envisioned as a 'community of thinking' rather than a traditional school, and the work of Harpaz and Beare was adopted as a pedagogical and structural model. In order to realize this vision, St Mark's adopted a threefold approach to learning; firstly, students would all have a laptop, and access to the CENET virtual learning environment via the wireless network. Secondly, learning would take place in flexible or agile learning spaces – spaces the size of 6 normal classrooms, equipped with breakout areas, science and art sections and a number of breakout rooms. Finally, learning would take place through the application of interdisciplinary programs of study, where students would be encouraged to develop connections between skills and subjects. Thus, rather than Year 8 mathematics, students might take part in 'FORC35' or 'iCafe' where a number of different KLAs are mixed together, according to thematic or content similarities. (In these cases, FORC35 is a mixture of Science and Mathematics, while iCafe combines Food Technology and Health Education.)

The staff at St Mark's have tried a variety of different pedagogical models in their efforts to get the most from their students. These have included a project-based learning approach, as well as more traditional methods. Recently, St Mark's staff have adopted the IIAC learning framework across the whole school, which is based on their observations on best practice, as well as their own professional reading. In this framework, each 100 minute session is broken into 4 sections: firstly, there is the initiation section, where learning is reviewed and previewed, often via audio-visual material. Secondly, there is the investigation, where small group learning takes place in tutorial or lecture groups. Thirdly, there is the analysis phase, in which students undertake self-directed learning from a range of different tasks. Finally, there is the critique phase, where students consider their learning, and how they might improve it, or where the questions might lead them to, in future sessions.

It is important for the reader to understand this framework, as, later in this piece, I make explicit reference to sections of this framework when I elaborate on how Twitter was used in the classroom.

Research Basis for Social Networking

Twitter itself is less than 5 years old, and therefore there is only a limited amount of research available. Having said that, there is a growing interest in the educational value of twitter, and a number of newspaper articles have discussed twitter itself, in general, and also its applications to technology.

Furthermore, a number of academics have begun to approach the issue. In particular, the work of Carmen Holotescu and Gabrielle Grosseck are worthy of mention, analyzing as they do the way Twitter has been used in both schools and higher education settings. Holotescu and Grosseck both provide favourable evaluations of Twitter, highlighting both its ability to create community and generate discussion, but both researchers also make a point of examining the possible negative aspects of social networking as well.

Holotescu (2007) writes, 'Twitter proved to be an effective tool for professional development and student interaction.' In addition, Grosseck and Holotescu (2008) write, 'Furthermore, as a social networking tool, we have found valuable the interactions Twitter affords us in educational contexts.'

Freedman (2007) goes even further when he suggests a possible structure to a lesson using this kind of technology: 'Imagine a 20 minute lecture where all your students back channel about what you're saying. Outside guests or experts are invited in. Someone acts as a "rudder" to keep the conversation on track. The discussion is displayed on a SMARTboard or with a projector. The chatcast is immediately dumped into a wiki. The rest of the class is devoted to reorganizing the wiki clarifying what was said, answering questions (student to student as well as teacher to student; and don't forget the people, students, teachers, mentors or parents beyond the glass walls of the room) summarizing the big ideas, reframing the discussion in terms of what needs to be explained again and where we're going next. Imagine the possibilities ...'

Bearing in mind this research, and the fact that St Mark's students are already so conversant with technology, St Mark's began to examine ways that Twitter might be utilized within the school environment for educational purposes.

The St Mark's Experience

Twitter was adopted in an effort to engender discussion between students and ease the communication issues that had been noticed. When one is addressing large groups of students (up to 180 at one time), one cannot adopt the same model as one would when addressing 25-30 students. Even relatively simple things, like question and answer sessions at the start and end of the lesson become cumbersome and impractical with such a large number. Therefore, Twitter was envisioned as an opportunity to move lesson activities like this from a real world format to a virtual one.

However, Twitter was so quickly adopted by staff and students that we noticed a real profusion in its applications. I have summarized the most common uses of Twitter at

St Mark's below:

- Community creation: *It was immediately obvious that twitter could aid students in understanding both the school and wider community.*
- Question and Answer: *Used in the critique and initiation phase, twitter allowed students to take part in, and follow discussions with the whole school community.*
- Critical Reflection/ Metacognition: *Twitter could also be used as a learning journal – providing very brief snapshots of the learning undertaken during a single session, or providing discussion.*
- Surveys/ Assessing Response: *Using the new APIs, it was possible to quickly put together and organize a survey, including using it to gauge interest in electives for Stage 5 students.*
- Facilitation of Teamwork: *Teams can work together, regardless of their location – or the need for noisy meetings!*
- Reviewing and Previewing Learning: *As a simple tool to aid metacognition, Twitter allows for focused discussion and reflection.*

Twitter was also used outside the classroom

- Student voice – especially marginalized students. *Some of the students that find it harder to be involved in real discussions make use of twitter to ensure that their opinion is heard.*
- School notices *Using the #stm hash tag, we now publish school notices over twitter, advising about school carnivals or assessments, for parents to see.*
- Informal tutoring sessions *It has been fantastic to see the development of teacher-student and student-student tutoring over Twitter.*
- ‘Ask the Experts.’ *Using vetted individuals from industry, students have been able to ask real world experts questions.*
- Real world/ challenge based learning. *Twitter is in the real world, so students can immediately see the relevance of their learning to real world problems. This create more motivated students.*

Evaluation

If a school were to contemplate using Twitter, there are certain principles that are important to recognize, in the interests of getting the most out of twitter, as well as advantages and disadvantages. These advantages and disadvantages are summarized below and are followed by guidelines for the use of twitter in schools.

| Advantages | Disadvantages |
|---|---|
| Fun Aids Metacognition Quick Focussed Discussion 24/7 Availability Encourages Reflection Real World Interaction Record of Conversation | Cyber-bullying Cyber safety Tweets with no educational value 24/7 Availability Distracting Addictive |

Suggested Guidelines for schools thinking of adopting twitter:

- *Students need to be conversant in ‘twitterese’, including the functionality of @name and #hash.*

To get the most from the twitter experience, students need to be aware of the different ways of using twitter. In particular, using hash tags and search facilities allow students to follow particular lines of discussion, while filtering out less relevant material.

- *Students need to be aware of how to stay safe online.*

This aspect is vital, and one that at St Mark’s, we took very seriously. As part of our pastoral care program, Year 7 students are trained, from the very first day, in the correct way of staying safe online. This culminates in a presentation from our local police officer, to both students and parents. Of course, cyber bullying does occur, but this happens in every school; by adopting twitter, St Mark’s was able to firstly identify this, when it did occur, and then intervene and take steps to deal with it, proactively. In the single case that has taken place thus far, the students were identified, their parents spoken to, the police involved and the bullying behaviour terminated very rapidly.

- *Start with a trial group.*

At St Mark’s, we originally began with Year 7 – and Twitter spread virally from there – to the rest of the school, then to parents and the wider community.

- *Need a core group of supporters from the staff.*

Staff need to be willing to engage with students on a virtual level – and, indeed, at a time outside of normal school hours. Having said that, not all staff need to be involved. At St Mark’s, in the early trial of twitter, a core group of about 5 staff were involved, and undertook the notices and moderating duties as required.

- *Be prepared for the conversation to go in different directions.*

Twitter is not a classroom tool – hence, it allows students a lot more freedom than your usual pedagogical tools. Teachers need to be prepared for this, and willing to allow the conversation to develop along these lines.

- *Make use of the new APIs, including surveys, pictures, links to Wikis and Blogs.*

The new APIs, like PowerTwitter and TweetDeck allow for much more functionality and ease of use. They allow for quick uploading of pictures, surveys and quizzes to be taken – all over twitter. I strongly recommend schools investigate these possibilities.

- *Get parents on board.*

Although twitter was originally adopted for the student body, great efforts were made for parents to understand what we were doing, and why. This led to parents following students and teachers, and hence the development of the notice system via twitter.

- *Moderate, Moderate, Moderate*

I cannot underestimate the importance of moderation. Students need to be aware that whatever they tweet, the rest of the world can see it, and there are important rules to consider when tweeting. At St Mark’s, we’ve adopted a 3 strikes and you’re out policy with regards to inappropriate tweeting.

Other Possibilities

It would be remiss to conclude this discussion without mentioning the fact that there are many other social networking tools out there that perform in a similar way to Twitter. For example, edmodo is a completely educational based version of twitter, and other schools have begun to make use of things like Facebook and Edmodo

References

To be added shortly.