The Value of Microblogging in Education

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Summary

In this article, Terry Freedman looks at how microblogging services such as Twitter, Edmodo and Cirip are being used in education, both in the classroom and for professional development. Although microblogging does not, at first glance, look particularly useful for teaching and learning, the opposite turns out to be the case.

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Microblogging is a form of blogging in which the length of each post is limited to a certain number of characters. Usually this is set at 140, but in some cases it is 160, the same as text messages.

But, as a great statistician once said, a difference is only a difference if it makes a difference: 140 characters? How could something like that be useful in an educational context?

The answer, perhaps surprisingly, is: quite a lot. There is plenty of evidence for this in the Amazing Web 2.0 Project Book[1]. Of the 87 projects detailed in those pages, 8 of them – almost 10% – involve Twitter[2], perhaps the most well-known of microblogging applications.

In one of the projects, Dan Bowen[3], an ICT advisor in the UK, used Twitter as means of engaging ICT secondary school subject leaders, who were encouraged to «tweet» about their experience of courses. The tweets were displayed on a screen at the front of the room, and then formed the basis for reflection and discussion. This was used to highlight practically how this could be applied within a classroom context.

As a result of this experience, the teachers said that they would try to use Twitter in their classrooms to gauge the students' understanding. In other words, they had decided to incorporate Twitter into their assessment for learning toolkit.

A project run by teacher Jeff Horwitz[4] involves one student in his class tweeting what is going on during the day in order to update the children's families. He says that it also helps them to communicate with the people and schools they have connected with across the world. It's another way of helping to ensure parental – perhaps even community – engagement. As Horwitz says, «I recommend this to anyone who would like to share all of the goings on in their classroom with family, friends and collaborators».

In another project, teacher Chris Leach[5] used Twitter to help his class of school children understand the Gunpowder Plot[6]. Having taken place in 1605, this attempt to blow up the English Houses of Parliament must seem like ancient history to youngsters. In order to bring it to life in a modern way, Leach created a Twitter account for Robert Catesby, who was the leader of the Gunpowder Plot. The children tweeted in Catesby's name, using their research as the basis for their communications.

Leach chose the Gunpowder Plot because it was topical at the time (early November) and found that it worked well with his group of 10 year old children.

Was the project a success? According to one of the children taking part:

I enjoyed the gunpowder plot as it was very interesting and very fun. I especially enjoyed using the site twitter. I enjoyed it because we weren't just finding out information we

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[1] http://www.ictineducation.org/free-stuff

[2] http://twitter.com

[3] http://uk.linkedin.com/in/danbowen1

[4] http://twitter.com/#!/globalrams

[5] http://chrisleach78.wordpress.com

[6] http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/STUgunpowderP.htm

were recording it in a twitter account. We recorded it all by pretending to be Robert Catesby, one of the evil plotters. By sending messages to all our followers saying stuff like «We have now approached the pub. Everyone is waiting calmly for the rest of us. And also what is great is that we got to set times for when we sent the messages, like one was at 3.00 in the morning».

Another way in which people use Twitter is to make notes on what conference speakers say, which can be useful to colleagues and other people who are unable to attend. In this respect it is a form of so-called «live blogging».

It can also be used as what is known as a «backchannel», which is a conversation between members of the audience about what the speaker is saying. Sometimes this can be quite useful, with people dropping in useful links and their own insights.

Interestingly, when people tweet their notes during a conference presentation, the backchannel comprises both attendees and those who are not at the conference. Although there have been some unfortunate instances in which the audience «conspired» to insult the speaker, for the most part it leads to some very rich conversations which enhance, rather than detract from, the presentation itself.

One of the most common uses of Twitter is to share information. For example, the tweeted notes during a conference, referred to a moment ago, or a newly-discovered website.

Twitter is not the only microblogging service. Indeed, it is arguably not the best for educational purposes, as it was not designed with education in mind. Other services have more useful features.

In particular, Edmodo[7] and Cirip[8] are especially suited to education. Each of these lets you create groups, which could be very useful for classroom or school use. You can make your groups private too, an obvious answer to those who may be concerned with the e-safety aspects of any form of blogging. Kevin Mc Laughlin has described[9] how he uses Edmodo for posting homework and details of forthcoming school events. His class also employs it for collaborative project work and sharing ideas and links to resources. He also answers their questions through the service.

Finally, there is clearly a value in «forcing» students to express themselves in not more than 140 or 160 characters. Anyone can ramble and give long-winded explanations: that's easy. Much more difficult is to focus right down to the essence of an issue or definition or story line.

In conclusion, microblogging seems at first glance to be little more than a solution seeking a problem. However, in the hands of a good teacher, it can be a vehicle for profound educational understanding and success.

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[7] http://www.edmodo.com/home

[8] http://www.cirip.ro

[9]http://www.ictineducation.org/home-page/2009/12/8/using-new-technologies-to-enhance-learning-experiences.html

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