A Librarian and a Hashtag: Embedded Virtually in a Classroom via Twitter

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In May 2009, the graduate assistant of Dr. Monica Rankin, a history professor at the University of Texas at Dallas, posted a video to YouTube (Smith, 2009) outlining her class’s experiment using Twitter for their discussion. Dr. Rankin followed up with a post to her website, stating, “…the Twitter experiment was successful primarily because it encouraged students to engage who otherwise would not” (Rankin, 2009). Cole Camplese, the director of education-technology services at Penn State University, had tried a similar experiment with a class the previous spring and had found that his students used Twitter to build connections with classmates as well as to point to related resources for the class discussion, which formed a rich back channel of information (Camplese, 2008; Young, 2009a).

In the summer of 2009, with these and other experiments buzzing in my mind, I approached Dr. W. Gardner Campbell, the director of Baylor University’s Academy for Teaching and Learning and Associate Professor of Literature and Media in the Honors College, and asked him not only whether he wanted to try out a similar experiment, but whether he wanted to also invite a librarian to participate in the class’ Twitter conversation. Dr. Campbell responded affirmatively and we began to plan my virtual participation in the course as the Twitter-based reference librarian.

The First Year Seminar Class

The course I joined was a first-year seminar titled “From Memex to YouTube: An Introduction to New Media Studies”. The focus of the class was to understand the field of New Media Studies by exploring the “digital medium” in all of its various technological, historical, cultural and educational expressions. Two of Dr. Campbell’s learning objectives for the class were to understand “the past and future of computers and how they affect how we think and what we do” (Campbell, n.d.). Integral to the class learning experience, Dr. Campbell wanted the students not just to examine but to use new media technologies and applications. As such, the students were required to blog before every class, comment substantively on another classmate’s blog, contribute to the class wiki, tag links of interest using Delicious.com, and participate in a class discussion using Twitter (using a designated class hashtag). All of these elements were then aggregated into what Dr. Campbell called “the motherblog” – the dashboard of the class’s digital participation. As the class’s librarian, I also blogged and tagged links in Delicious, and my offerings were included in the motherblog.

Figure 1: The “motherblog”

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GETTING SET UP

However, participation via Twitter was the original reason for my inclusion in the class, and it was via Twitter that my main interaction with the students took place. As the students met in a classroom across campus, I would launch the popular Twitter application called TweetDeck to follow along from my office in the library. Unlike the Twitter web interface, TweetDeck allowed me to group the students together to monitor their tweets. I grouped them both by a hashtag search (#nmsf09 was our class hashtag) and also by a group created by collecting their Twitter usernames.

![Figure 2: TweetDeck Setup](image)

Then, as the class started and students began to tweet their comments, observations and questions, I would interact with them via Twitter, commenting, sending links to resources and answering questions. To remind the students of my virtual presence in the class, Dr. Campbell would instruct the students at the start of the class to take out their laptops, login to Twitter and to “greet our librarian” – alerting me to the imminent discussion and focusing the class’ attention to the task at hand and reminding them of my virtual presence.

![Figure 3: Greeting the Librarian](image)

WHAT I LINKED

My contributions via Twitter during class took a wide variety of forms. I linked to everything from articles in our library’s subscription databases to Wikipedia articles and YouTube videos. Often I explored the author of the reading they were assigned, looking up biographies, other articles or books they had written or other sources which cited or referenced the author. If a student tweeted something that seemed to veer off of the topic at hand, I often tried to link to something along those lines as well, as I wanted to encourage any connections the student might be making between the reading, the class discussion and their own personal knowledge.

It took a while for the students to fully figure out the “art” of tweeting. It was not until the fifth week of the semester, when during their class time the students attended an online academic conference focused on “collaborative learning environments” being hosted by the library, that they began to understand the value of tweeting in the classroom. During this class field trip, the students watched the presentations and joined in the type of “conference tweeting” that is becoming a new standard of conference virtual discussion. The students readily adapted the online conference’s hashtag and began tweeting their thoughts about what was being presented. They quickly found themselves being “re-tweeted” and replied to by people from around the country. For many of the students the experience was a catalyst for the quality of their class discussion tweets to increase exponentially.

Because I was only a virtual participant in the class discussion, I relied upon quality tweets to fuel my own contributions. Often I would not know the direction that the discussion was taking until I saw a post about it. By the time the tweets alerted me to a topic, and I quickly searched for a relevant link and posted it in response, the discussion could have taken a completely different turn. I found myself being stretched professionally; I had to use all the research tools at my disposal and to pull out any and all Google search tricks I knew. I had to be good at multitasking, thinking quickly and typing swiftly.

“LIBRARIAN JAZZ”

Reflecting upon the kind of reference I was providing to the students, I began to refer to it as “Librarian Jazz.” The class discussion was the music and the melody was happening in another classroom across campus. Every once in a while, the students would throw out a note or two, or a stray chord, which I would pick up through Twitter. I had to improvise, tossing out my own chords and riffs back into the Twitter stream, hoping that they would add to the music being made.

One example of this type of interaction was during a class discussion of the Clifford D. Simak short science fiction story called “The Immigrant.” I had not been given the handout with the story before the class, so had no idea what the reading was about. The tweets from the students were ambiguous, so I decided to research the author.
First, I found that the University of Minnesota library has a collection of Simak’s papers, so I sent a link to the collection finding aid. A few minutes later, after searching a bit more, I came across an interesting collection of the covers of Astounding Science Fiction, where “The Immigrant” was originally published in 1954. Thinking that the original cover art might be of interest to the class, I tweeted that link as well. Two minutes later, I got a direct response from a student: “Do you know of anything like that for Rilke?” Confused, and wondering if there was some 50s-era science fiction writer named Rilke that I didn’t know about, I conducted a reference interview via Twitter: “What do you mean?” and then a minute later, realizing that the student was referring to my previous tweet, “Oh you mean his archive? Letters and papers and such?” And off I went on my search: a few more minutes and I uncovered a couple of libraries who hold collections of the poet and critic Rainer Maria Rilke’s papers and sent those links back to the student, who responded later with clarification and thanks. While this exchange might not have had much to do with the discussion taking place in the class, it does show the power that improvisational, free-association resource sharing can have in opening up a student’s academic worldview. The student in this case learned about archives in general as well as the location of the archives of a favorite writer.

During another class discussion, the class had watched a clip of the movie Waking Life and began to discuss the concept of “lucid dreaming.” I found the Wikipedia entry on the concept and tweeted it. In the meantime, Dr. Campbell had mentioned the term “oneirology,” or the scientific study of dreams, which struck a chord with one student, who hadn’t known about the field, but immediately declared her intent to be an oneirologist on Twitter. While other classmates chimed in with encouragement, I went to the library’s catalog, did a quick search and found a three volume introductory work on the new science of dreams and sent the link to the student. She immediately tweeted back “I want that book!” and I later learned that she had been so excited about it during class that she had almost jumped out of her chair.

While the Twitter interactions were at the core of my being embedded into the classroom, I was also able to participate more fully with the class on several occasions. Twice, we met virtually in Second Life (http://secondlife.com/), where I was able to interact with the students through their avatars and voice chat. At the end of the semester, Dr. Campbell broadcast their final project presentations on Ustream.tv so I was able to watch and listen and post links to Twitter with a little more context. Throughout the semester, the students also contacted me for help with their research projects. Most of this research assistance took place over email or through Facebook; however, a few students sought me out in person, including one time for a research problem for a different class entirely.

**Student Blogging**

One unexpected benefit from participating in this class was interacting with the students on their class blogs. I subscribed to the motherblog RSS feed and read the students’ blogs faithfully, commenting on the posts when appropriate. As the semester went on, and the students began to blog more about their final research project, I was able to comment with...
links and resources to assist them. This was a new experience for me, as I was interacting with the students much earlier in the research process than I would normally have. When I assist undergraduate students at the reference desk, the students have usually already chosen their research topic and are in need of help finding a good database to search, or help finding “three more scholarly articles.” However, when I read and commented on Dr. Campbell’s students’ blog posts, they were still exploring interests, mulling over research topics, and doing good preparatory thinking about their final projects. To be able to help guide the research process at this early stage was an unexpected treat.

**Best Practices**

From our experience with this class, Dr. Campbell and I have discussed a few best practices for other teachers and librarians who might want to undertake a similar project.

- **Use a Hashtag.** It helps collect the conversation into one place, and focuses the students’ tweets around a class identity.

- **Archive your Tweets.** Twitter’s search capability only reaches back a few weeks. Make sure to archive the Twitter discussion using either one of the many third-party Twitter applications, such as TwapperKeeper (which archives based on a search or hashtag), or grab screenshots of the Twitter stream.

- **Use a URL Shortener which Provides Statistics.** Using a shortener such as [http://bit.ly](http://bit.ly), you will be able to track the number of click-throughs on the links that are sent to the students in order to better assess their usefulness.

A number of educators have written in more detail about the best practices for using Twitter in the classroom in general (Rankin, 2009; Winiski, 2009); however, I would like to briefly mention one. Using Twitter as an educational tool in the classroom works best where there is an atmosphere of trust between the teacher and the students. There are several examples of what is being called “tweckling” or ganging up on a conference presenter via a Twitter backchannel (boyd, 2009; Parry, 2009), and the fear of disruption as well as the fear of student distraction has some educators seeing the use of Twitter in the classroom only for the educational “daredevils” (Young, 2009b). I am not convinced that Twitter in the classroom should just be left to the technologically or pedagogically adventurous, but instead, what is important is an understanding that the professor and the students can use new technologies to work and learn together.

**Student Responses**

From a very informal survey conducted after the semester was over, it was clear that the students had an overwhelmingly positive experience both using Twitter in class and interacting with a librarian through Twitter. They related that they often clicked on the links that I sent via Twitter to help them better understand the topic of discussion. One student stated, “The librarian’s participation was, I think, a critical part of the class because the librarian was able to provide outside resources and spend time looking for those resources that proved relevant to the class, a task which students would be unlikely to do at all, much less during a class.” All the students who took the survey indicated that they felt more knowledgeable about library resources after this class experience, including resources such as “chat, online resources and the librarians themselves.”

**Future Directions**

As the semester progressed and our Twitter experiment was discussed around campus, a few other professors indicated their interest in setting up a similar arrangement for their classes. This posed the problem of scalability, as the class was a significant investment of my time. While I don’t think that using Twitter is for every professor or classroom, most academic libraries do not employ enough librarians to monitor the tweets of as many classes as could possibly benefit. I am not sure how this problem will be solved.

I will, however, be embedded in next fall’s First Year Seminar in New Media Studies taught again by Dr. Campbell. With the new students, I hope to do more assessment of their information literacy and knowledge of the library as well as build on the effective program of embedded Twitter librarianship we’ve already started.


