

TRENDS //

Twitter As a Learning Tool. Really.

Savvy trainers are using micro-blogging to foster informal learning and meet like-minded peers.

By Pat Galagan

Here's a scenario to give trainers pause. You're presenting at a conference. Minutes into your session, a number of people are tapping furiously on their phones or reading incoming messages. Most of these people get up and leave the room, while another bunch trickles in. At least a third of the audience continues tapping out short bursts of text throughout your presentation. It's as if you aren't there.

Though it may not be apparent to someone unfamiliar with Web 2.0 behavior, these people aren't simply multitasking while you teach. They're twittering—or as they would put it, “twittering out” information about you, your session, and what they are thinking and doing in real time. It's like getting the scoop on sessions that might be better than yours. And their fellow Twitterers are talking back in the staccato bursts of the 140 characters or fewer that Twitter requires.

Twitter is a free micro-blogging service. Users sign up, create a profile, and begin sending short messages, known as tweets, about what they are doing and thinking. All other users may read their updates unless the sender gives access only to specific people.

You may ask other users for permission to “follow” them (meaning that you will receive all of their updates), and other people may ask to follow you. More than 100,000 people

followed President Barack Obama on Twitter throughout his campaign.

As a user, you can send and receive updates through the Twitter website, or by SMS, RSS, email, and a host of other applications with too-cute names such as Tweetie and Twinkle. By some estimates, Twitter receives more than 5 million visitors every month. More than 700 learning professionals have Twitter accounts.

Working the back channel

While some instructors may not relish real-time reviews of their classes that cause people to leave, others know how to benefit from a roomful of people on Twitter. Whether at conferences or in companies where micro-blogging while learning is encouraged, informal information exchange is an adjunct to structured learning events.

Jane Hart, a social media and learning consultant, classifies Twitter and other micro-blogs as tools for personal and informal learning. “The point of social

media is to turn learning into a more participatory activity," she says. Learners use social media tools to ask and answer each other's questions, and as Hart maintains, "Micro-blogs can support collaboration and understanding."

Many educators already use micro-blogs to create community around a class or an activity. Instructors who've used Twitter say it is a useful back channel during and after class. "As an instructor, you can have immediate feedback on the relevance of your class," Hart says.

After class, instructors can encourage micro-blogging to support relationships among the people from the class and to further their learning. Teachers post tips of the day, questions, writing assignments, and other prompts to keep learning going.

Some believe that Twitter is even more powerful as a social learning tool



outside the context of the classroom. "In a corporation, micro-blogging can be a way to augment behavior modeling," says Sarah Millstein, author of the O'Reilly Radar Report, "Twitter and the Micro-Messaging Revolution: Communication, Connection, and Immediacy—140 Characters at a Time."

To model good workflow, for example, a person who excels at it would send out frequent updates about what they are doing. The company might formalize the process to the extent that it would select exemplary performers to post regularly, and pick those who should follow their

Social Networking Resources



www.twitter.com - Twitter's home page.

www.pistachioconsulting.com/services/research/ - A comparison of enterprise micro-sharing tools.

c4lpt.co.uk - Jane Hart's website, which includes a directory of learning professionals registered on Twitter.

search.twitter.com - Search engine that shows who is tweeting about what.

www.edmodo.com - A private micro-blogging platform for teachers and students.

www.twitter.com/SouthwestAir - The airline's Twitter posts.

www.twitter.com/WholeFoods - Whole Foods micro-blog for customers.

www.tweetdeck.com - One of many third party applications for Twitter. This one is an Adobe AIR desktop application that increases the functionality of Twitter.

www.yammer.com - A private information-sharing network service for organizations.

@WriteTechnology - Michelle Lentz's Twitter address.

@TweetReport - A list of Twitter resources compiled and maintained by Sarah Milstein.

posts. "This is an easy way to prompt conversation and questions with role models," says Milstein.

Another popular use of Twitter and other micro-blogging sites is the building of professional networks. Michele Lentz, a technical writer and professional blogger, began using Twitter to get to know other learning professionals. Within months, she was posting regular updates about her work, getting help from experts, and attracting followers of her own.

Currently, Lentz has 1,000 followers on Twitter and teaches courses on how to use micro-blogging as a learning tool.



She recently polled her followers via a Twitter polling application, about why they like Twitter. The top reasons were

- It accelerated my learning curve.
- It helped me with personal learning.
- It expanded my circle.

The corporate tweet

A growing number of companies use Twitter to foster communication among employees and customers. Southwest Airlines tweets first-time customers with the message, "Hope you enjoyed your first-ever Southwest flight! Can't wait to see you onboard again."

Employees and customers of Zappos, the online shoe seller with an intentionally unstuffy culture, use Twitter extensively at the urging of the CEO, Tony Hsieh. In a public directory of Zappos employees using Twitter, ranked by numbers of followers, Hsieh is first.

As a public site, Twitter is not for every company, but there are micro-blogging services that will set up internal corporate sites. Laura Fitton of Pistachio Consulting has created a list of internal micro-blogging services (pistachioconsulting.com/services/research).

Compared to instant messaging, which requires you to address people individually, Twitter broadcasts to a person's entire group of followers. People who use it to get expert advice on the fly say it usually returns results immediately.

Sarah Milstein predicts that micro-messaging will be as common as email in a few years and may replace email for certain kinds of information, such as client and customer relations.

Photo by iStockphoto.com

A first visit to Twitter may not convince you of its potential as a professional networking and learning tool. Many of the tweets are not only personal but trivial—what someone is having for breakfast, or where they're headed next. It's not unusual for a new user to post an update and be completely ignored. Michelle Lentz likens Twitter to a large party.

"At first, you'll be talking to yourself until you get involved," she says. She advises following as many people as possible. For example, a search on e-learning will show who's talking about it. Or use Jane Hart's list of learning professionals on Twitter.

Lentz recommends that you follow your choice of interesting people for a while, and then send a direct message to a few of them, using the @username format, to introduce yourself and join a conversation. Before long, you can begin building a support group.

Twitter is not for everyone, says Lentz. "It's good for mobile, on-the-go people who can learn anywhere," she says.

The future

Micro-blogging is only one kind of social media tool with the potential to support learning. Those that offer collaborative file sharing, mindmapping, writing, and editing capabilities can support more complex collaborative learning than Twitter. But for the moment, nothing else is as immediate or growing as fast.

As Milstein points out, micro-blogging is taking off because it fits how people work and think. But, cautions Lentz, "Think before you tweet. Each tweet is a webpage. It can be Googled. It's forever."

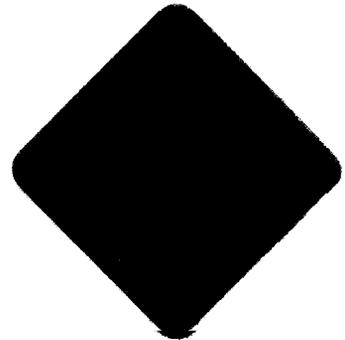
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