
THE ENLIGHTENMENT MEETS TWITTER: USING SOCIAL MEDIA IN THE SOCIAL STUDIES CLASSROOM

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Abstract

Social media services afford users ways to digitally interact, communicate, and collaborate that were not available just a decade ago. While citizens worldwide use these media for democratic and imaginative purposes, social studies educators, and educators in general, have been slow to explore these technologies that are increasingly a part of the daily lives of K-12 students. Even though many schools still block or filter such sites, some social studies educators have found creative ways to use services like Twitter. We explain how social studies educators can, and have, used the microblogging service Twitter. We then detail an example of a classroom-tested lesson where one of the co-authors utilized the service to craft a dynamic, participatory, and complex lesson that helped his students explore the beliefs of philosophers of the Enlightenment era.

Many of the successful online sites that survived the dot-com bubble in the early days of the 21st century went beyond providing a product to be consumed, and instead afforded users platforms for collaboration (O'Reilly, 2012). The collective intelligence and synergy of groups drove websites such as Wikipedia, Facebook, and eventually Twitter. These Web 2.0 and social media sites induced a paradigm shift in a media environment where elites had long produced information and the general public consumed it. Rosen (2012) aptly dubbed the latter group "the people formerly known as the audience" because of their ability to create media and participate in larger conversations. These new digital spaces allowed people to readily coalesce around shared interests without regard for geographic limitations. The participatory ethic inherent in these new media offered new possibilities for a wide array of fields.

Even though young people are increasingly using social media in their everyday lives (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickuhr, 2010), educational institutions in general, and the social studies in particular, have been slow to explore how these services might enrich the field. Many social studies teachers have simultaneously led class discussions concerning the democratic role social media services played in revolutions against oppressive regimes during the Arab Spring (Zuckerman, 2010), recent protests in Turkey (Barbera & Metzger, 2013), elections worldwide, or even in the crowdsourcing of a new constitution (Morris, 2012), but fail to imagine that these same services might foster democratic experiences in their classrooms and schools.

The National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) lamented that students face a "digital disconnect" as they walk into social studies classrooms and are asked to disengage from the online world in which many spend much time and energy (2009). The NCSS further challenged "social studies teachers to change both how and what we teach" so students are better able to

“shape democracy in this new millennium” (p. 187). The new digital tools that are accessible to youth today “have lowered the costs of production and circulation, decreasing the investment of skills and money required to meaningfully shape our culture, and thus have paved the way for more voices to be heard” (Clinton, Jenkins, & McWilliams, 2013). Jenkins et al. (2009) even argue that the informal online learning environments in which many young people freely join have resulted in participatory cultures that may “represent ideal learning environments” (p. 10). Using a social media service such as Twitter with students can also provide an opportunity to model valuable skills and dispositions regarding digital citizenship and social media literacies (Rheingold, 2010).

The social studies discipline has long been dominated by practices that neither speak to the democratic mission of the field nor enliven students (Evans, 2004). Traditional models of education, legitimized by much of the standardized testing movement of the last quarter century, often require students to simply regurgitate facts of the disciplines via lectures or textbooks. Curricula and methods of instruction are often determined without consideration of the interests or needs of particular students and their situations. While it is questionable whether such methods were ever appropriate, they seem indefensible in a digital age where information is more accessible, tentative, and shifting than ever before. Social media does not offer a panacea to educational problems, and these services could certainly be used for dogmatic, ineffective, and misguided activities, but put to use in pedagogically sound ways, they could afford educational experiences that were previously unfeasible.

Despite the general tendency to block, filter, or overlook the educational potential of social media, many social studies educators have employed these new media in sophisticated and creative ways. In fact, this paper is a byproduct of the Web 2.0 era as it was within a digital space on Twitter that we, the authors of this article, a social studies teacher in Massachusetts and an education professor in Texas, met. Here, we provide background to how Twitter, one of the most popular social media services, has been used in the field. We will then detail a lesson that Milton taught in his classroom that offers an illustrative example of the dynamic role this medium can play in social studies classrooms.

Twitter in the Social Studies

Twitter is a microblogging service that allows users to send “small bursts of information,” called “tweets,” to other users (Twitter, Inc.). While these brief messages are often pigeonholed as nothing more than narcissistic drivel, many educators have found dynamic ways to use the service (see <http://cybraryman.com/twitter.html> for an assortment of links concerning how to use Twitter as an educator). By creating and including a variety of education-related hashtags in their tweets, educators craft digital spaces where those interested in a particular content area (e.g., #engchat for English teachers), experience level (e.g., #ntchat for new teachers), position (e.g., #cpchat for “connected” principals), geographic location (e.g., #OHedchat for educators in Ohio), or general education issues (e.g., #edchat) can come together around their interests (Blumengarten, “Some educational hashtags,” n.d.). #sschat is the most frequently used hashtag for social studies educators from around the world, though primarily the United State and Canada, but others include #WORLDchat for world history teachers and #hsgovchat for

high school government teachers. While #sschat seems to have staying power, the use of other hashtags increases and decreases based on the preferences of users.

Twitter is primarily used by educators in three general ways: communication, professional development (PD), and class activities. Some educators use Twitter to communicate with parents, students, and other stakeholders in a variety of ways. Twitter is used most often by educators for PD as they participate in conversations about the profession, share and acquire lessons, resources, and ideas, collaborate or network, and even provide emotional support to each other. However, most educators on Twitter tend to use the service for their personal learning, but do not provide the same opportunities for their students (Carpenter & Krutka, 2013). For this reason, there are few published examples of educators' uses of Twitter for in- and out-of-class activities. For example, while Turner, Clabough, and Cole (2013) provide intriguing ideas as to how Twitter might be used to improve writing and encourage historical thinking, there are few published examples of teachers actually implementing such ideas.

Beyond the social studies, a variety of literature has considered uses of Twitter for both in- and out-of-class activities. Research has indicated that when given the opportunity most students voluntarily backchanneled via Twitter and that this activity helped expand understanding of key course concepts (Elavsky, Mislán, & Elavsky, 2011). Dunlap and Lowenthal (2009) suggest that the medium is useful for encouraging concise writing, Kurtz (2009) illustrates how it could be used with first and second grade students to practice writing for an authentic audience (i.e., their families), and Wright (2010) believes the medium effectively promotes succinct reflections. Twitter was also found to encourage informal learning that connects with a course curriculum (Ebner, Lienhardt, Rohs, & Meyer, 2010). Despite these many participatory benefits, some educators may not be prepared to deal with the altered class relationships that could result from its use. For example, one professor reported that the increased voice students had while using Twitter as a backchannel activity caused class lectures to veer off topic in unanticipated directions (Young, 2009).

Lee, Shelton, Walker, Caswell, and Jensen (2012) provide a detailed social studies account in their presentation of a framework for implementing historical reenactments in a virtual space using Twitter. After conducting detailed research on historical actors and events, students presented historical perspectives through concise "flourishes" that were deployed in a logical and chronological manner. This method was implemented in a high school history class where students composed more than 500 tweets recreating the Cuban Missile Crisis. While the teacher saw areas for improvement, she was mostly satisfied with students' ability to research and communicate from the perspective of their historical actor. A feature of a research study that Krutka (in press), a coauthor of this paper, conducted with preservice social studies teachers encourages them to develop dynamic lessons that utilize the affordances of Twitter and other social media. The students use the instantaneous and participatory nature of Twitter to encourage all their classmates, not just a few, to answer questions and engage in class activities centered on primary documents or analytical questions. Several lessons also include the potential to bring different or expert perspectives from outside the class into their lessons via Twitter. Milton's lesson (see Milton, 2012, for a lesson plan outline and additional information) builds upon these examples by using Twitter to encourage the type of historical perspective-seeking and higher level thinking characteristic of exceptional social studies pedagogy.

The Enlightenment Meets Twitter

When Michael Milton, coauthor of this article, faced teaching his high school students about Enlightenment philosophers in his first few years in the profession, he assigned them to create static Facebook pages on poster board. This assignment was intended to help students learn about several philosophers by emulating a medium that was an indispensable part of many of their social lives. Students researched biographical information using a shared text as well as primary documents. They then determined their philosopher's beliefs on both the role of government and the individual in society. As a second step, students wrote "wall posts" from the perspective of their philosopher on each of their classmates' pages. They were encouraged to highlight areas of agreement and disagreement so as to engender a deeper understanding of the viewpoints of the philosophers. While Milton appreciated some aspects of the lesson, and their decorations for his classroom walls, it seemed that his students rarely went beyond summarizing the content provided to them.

When Milton's school went 1:1 (each student was provided with an iPad tablet), he was inspired to update his lesson so his students could have more dynamic learning experiences. He wanted them not only to summarize their philosopher's beliefs, but apply their philosophies to other historical events and ideas from the 20th and 21st centuries. He also believed that these new technologies might allow his students to interact with a more authentic and interactive audience than was previously possible. Twitter, a tool he had previously used only for his personal PD via the #sschat community, seemed a natural fit for the task, but he was unsure how effectively it could be employed in the classroom.

The activity began with students being "hired" by a consulting firm to bring the ideas of the Enlightenment to a modern tech-savvy audience. In small groups, they assumed the identities of various philosophers including Voltaire, Baron De Montesquieu, John Locke, Mary Wollstonecraft, and Jean Jacques Rousseau by writing a blog post with Blogger. In their posts they were to reintroduce themselves to the world and describe how their ideas influenced the culture and government of the United States of America. These posts were shared through Twitter using a common hashtag created for the class and students began interacting with one another from the perspective of their designated philosophers. Students were encouraged to highlight areas of general agreement and disagreement concerning the views of the philosophers. Initially, some students had to be reminded that their posts would be read by a larger audience. This inspired several groups to hastily revise posts to improve the quality.

Milton then urged his students to mull over these ideas more intensely by asking them to extrapolate the ideas of their philosophers into other historical situations. For instance, a student representing Rousseau was asked, "What are your general views on communism and on how it worked in Russia during the reign of Stalin?" To answer this question, students not only had to research communism, more specifically communism under Stalin, but they also had to figure out how Rousseau would view the concept. Milton could have simply asked the students these questions himself, but he felt that they would find the questions and research more meaningful if they answered to an audience that extended beyond his classroom walls.

Because Milton's students were reintroducing these thinkers to the modern world, he sought out an authentic audience so the lesson seemed more than just an academic exercise. He reached out not only to colleagues in his building but also to other social studies teachers on Twitter.

It helped that Milton had grown a robust personal learning network (PLN) that consisted of more than a thousand educators who “followed” him in addition to others who also used the #sschat hashtag. These digital colleagues spread the word online and questions streamed in for his students. Milton made sure that every philosopher was asked at least two questions by adding questions when necessary. Twitter accounts with creative handles (e.g., John Locke was @LockeInItUp) were created so students could directly interact with classmates and outside participants (see Figure 1). Initially, there were not enough questions to meet the assignment requirements, but through frequent targeted twitter messages (e.g., @42thinkdeep: The Baron de Montesquieu is eager to answer a question about recent events from today! Check out his blog...) all of Milton’s students received enough questions. Students were impressed as questions streamed in locally and from distant places such as Illinois, Kansas, California, Canada, and even Australia. While students were engaged throughout the activity, this was particularly evident when they realized they were playing for a larger audience.



FIGURE 1: Screenshot of Twitter Profile

For 83 minutes, Milton’s students were researchers, content creators, and philosophers. The consulting groups enthusiastically discussed and debated how they might answer the various questions so as to be historically accurate with the thinking of their philosopher. Students received questions such as: What would Montesquieu think about the filibuster? Would Rousseau be for the U.S. Patriot Act? How can we ensure that there is more gender balance in our Congress? Students not only answered the questions posed to them (see Figure 2), but also responded to each other and Twitter users from beyond the classroom from the point of view of their philosophers. Because of the brevity of tweets, Milton was able to follow students’ conversations and identify their depth of understanding. Milton either tweeted

questions to encourage further analysis or clarification, or did so face-to-face if he deemed it more appropriate. Students benefitted from immediate feedback that can be difficult via other mediums. While this activity was meant to last only one class period, another 20 minutes was needed the following day to debrief what took place.



FIGURE 2: Screenshot of Twitter Response with Link to Blog Post

In the end, students went well beyond memorizing facts about Enlightenment philosophers, but instead actively engaged in participatory activities appropriate for a digital age. While Milton was required by his curriculum to teach about the Enlightenment philosophers, his hidden curriculum also familiarized and modeled how to blog, tweet, and interact in meaningful and creative ways. His students displayed a deep understanding of the philosophers of the Enlightenment era, but also revealed a propensity for continued philosophical engagement as the activity was not quickly forgotten. Milton's students continued to consider how the Enlightenment philosophers might have responded to events and ideas throughout the rest of the course, including current events such as the Arab Spring. One student even continued to make imaginative connections with the modern world from the perspective of their assigned philosopher after the activity was completed (see Figure 3).

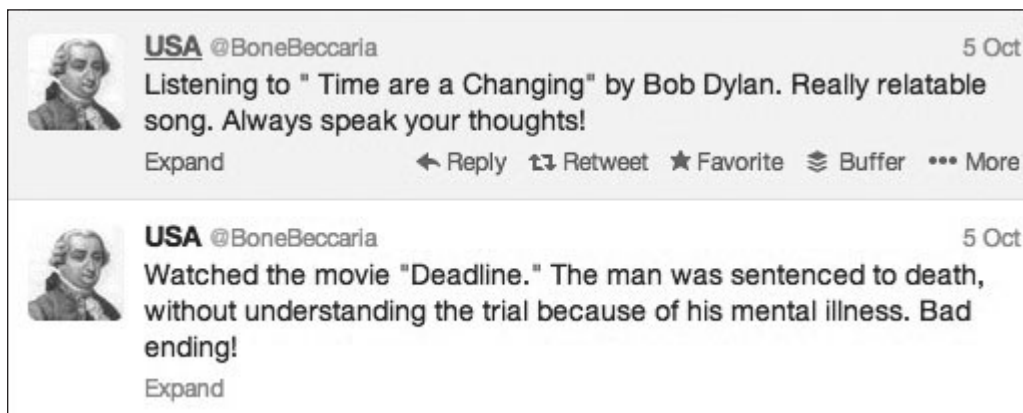


FIGURE 3: Screenshot of post-activity student tweet

Implications for the Field

Milton's Enlightenment lesson provides a rare venture into the participatory world of social media within a social studies classroom, but we believe it a path worth further exploration. Web 2.0 and social media services can help cultivate more democratic, participatory, and student-centered educational experiences while implicitly teaching digital citizenship and social media literacies. Social media in general, and Twitter in particular, seem especially conducive to such interactions. Of course, it is imperative that teachers consider the affordances of any digital services or tools so they may use them not simply for the sake of using technology, but because the medium nurtures educational experiences. Thomas and Brown (2011) insist that bounded environments where students have freedom can help nurture authentic learning environments. The inventive creations and interactions of Milton's students seem to speak to the reach, immediacy, and participatory nature that were allowed to flourish within the bounded environment that Milton established.

In many ways, the rapid change of our digital age is reminiscent of the paradigm shift that took place during the Enlightenment era. At that time, many people and institutions feared the societal changes spurred by new forms of learning because of the invention of the printing press and the subsequent spread of ideas. Even the philosophical heavyweights of the Enlightenment would likely be amazed by the participatory media available today. Instead of educational institutions and educators treating new media as a menace to be filtered or blocked they should seek out possibilities for new types of learning experiences appropriate to a digital age.

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