

Academics tweeting to le

Camille Rutherford

comment

In the past year the popularity of the social networking site Twitter has exploded. Once the media grabbed hold of this relatively obscure site, it was launched into the stratosphere and anointed as the place to be for techies, politicians, news junkies and Hollywood stars.

Unlike traditional blogging sites, Twitter requires users to limit their messages to a maximum of 140 characters. On the surface, this might seem unappealing to academics in general, but less-than-laconic writers can include links to lengthier treatises if they combine Twitter with URL shortening services such as TinyURL or <http://bit.ly>.

Tweet example: RT BusinessWeek: Researchers find that social patterns at work correlate with higher revenue production <http://bit.ly/M4uu8>.

As Twitter's popularity grew, reports of university professors using it to enhance their teaching practice began to appear.

The anecdotal evidence revealed that professors were using Twitter as a novel way to engage students in large lecture halls.

While some professors have used it to extend discussions after class, others have used Twitter to support real-time discussions that complemented their lectures.

Instead of raising their hand or interrupting the lecture by calling out questions, students could post their questions or comments to the Twitter feed for the class. With a quick glance the lecturer could view the questions and provide a response during the lecture.

Furthermore, whereas most course management system programmes (that is, Blackboard, Sakai or WebCT) operate as walled communities and block contributions from outside the university community, Twitter is a transparent tool that allows these previously private interactions to take place in a public forum.

By enabling interaction with companies and individuals related to the course content, Twitter

increases the authenticity of the learning experience.

This may be a truly innovative and possibly disruptive use of it in the lecture hall.

The term “disruptive innovation”, coined by Harvard University professor Clayton Christensen, describes innovations that have the potential to disrupt or alter significantly established practices.

Using Twitter to replicate or even improve an existing function that was previously fulfilled by the established course management system programmes represents a new way of fulfilling an old function.

By contrast, providing students with a means to interact frequently with professionals and companies outside the university community — something that was not possible in the closed course management system environment — may be a new way of performing a new function. Thus, Twitter may disrupt classroom learning by inviting the outside community into the ivory tower.

Although the classroom use of Twitter has so far dominated campus discussions, little has been said about using Twitter as a means of professional development for academics.

In exploring this possibility, you begin to push the technological envelope, as such novel uses have the potential to be disruptive innovations.

One way for academics to engage in professional development is to attend conferences.

Unfortunately, limited funds can curtail travel schedules. Following tweets posted by academics attending conferences may allow those with smaller travel accounts to follow from afar.

Although it is not unusual for conference sessions to be recorded and made available for those unable to attend, or to be relayed through simulcasts, Twitter allows active participation in real time. Twitter users in the room can share comments or questions with the presenter, allowing homebound participants to interact with the presenter and the



Disruptive innovation: More professors are using Twitter to engage students during lectures. Above, Twitter founders Evan Williams, left, and Biz Stone at their office in San Francisco. Photo: AP

on-site audience in a new way.

Some conference attendees have even started organising “tweet-ups”, which are opportunities to meet up with Twitter users or “tweeps” who are attending the conference in person. Professors can transform their distant, virtual connections into a viable professional network.

Like blogging, Twitter has become a way to share ideas, collaborate, pose questions and invite interaction and feedback.

All this information comes directly to your Twitter feed, making it easier to review and comment on these posts from one place.

Depending on your discipline and the size of your campus community, the ability to interact with others on campus who have similar research interests may be limited. Using tools such as

Twitter search allows academics to sift for posts and discussions related to their research interests.

Because these exchanges take place in a public venue, you can choose to join the discussion by posting your own tweets, or simply follow along.

Twitter resources such as We Follow, a directory of Twitter users that can be searched by areas of interest, make it even easier to find like-minded academics or informed practitioners.

Once you have found others with similar research interests to follow, and have some followers of your own, your Twitter network may develop into an effective idea incubator.

Twitter has also begun to disrupt research dissemination.

Traditionally, scholarly impact was determined by examining where an academic had her or his work published.

The ranking of peer-reviewed journals is based on a number of factors, including the frequency of citation a

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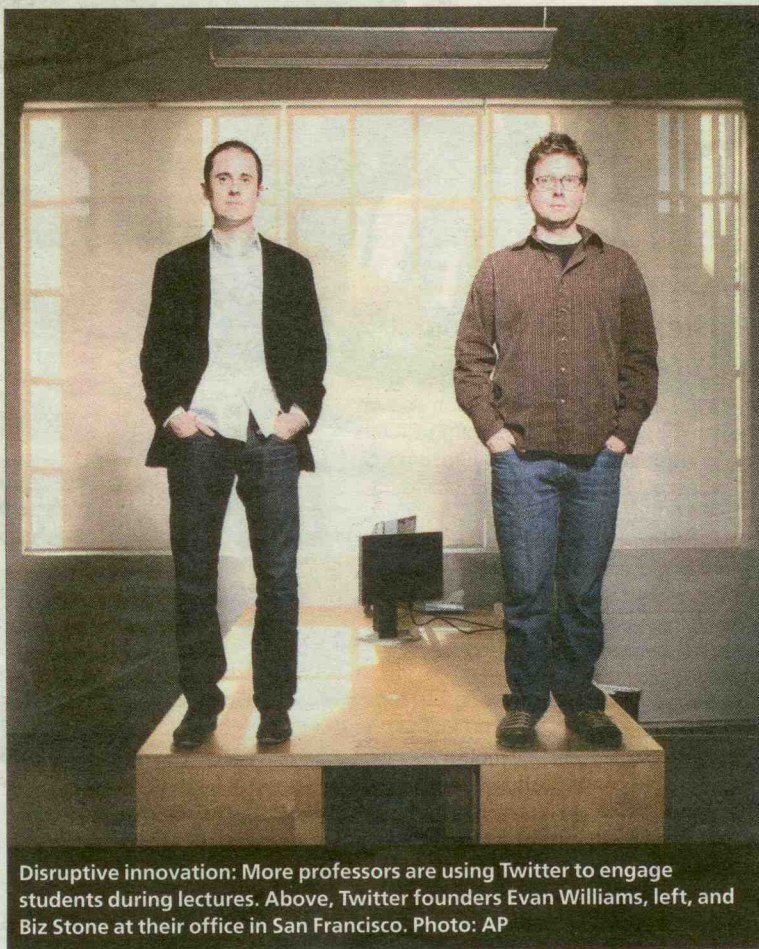
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The ranking of peer-reviewed journals is based on a number of factors, including the frequency of citation a

journal may receive.

Consequently, journal ranking determines academic authority and prestige, which in turn influence the tenure and promotion process for most academics.

The focus on frequency means Twitter can be used to demonstrate impact.

Academics can use Twitter to disseminate their latest work by including a link to their paper. By adding a URL tracking service, such as <http://bit.ly>, users can also track how often the paper was downloaded, the date and time of the download and even the country where the download occurred.

Even if a tweet does not include a link to a specific paper, the impact of the statements you make on Twitter can also be determined. When users like a tweet they have read, they can share it with their followers by “retweeting” the original. This creates a form of citation called “@ mentions”.

Each retweet is automatically amended with the @ symbol and the Twitter name of the original author. Thus, all the tweets referring to the user can be accessed from the user’s Twitter homepage or by performing a search.

This may serve as an innovative way to demonstrate an academic’s role in knowledge development and dissemination.

Engaging in discussions is an important way to enhance understanding and disseminate information. They serve to generate new ideas, forge interdisciplinary connections and test emerging hypothesis.

If you consider knowledge dissemination to be a key factor in determining impact, Twitter may be a unique way to capture these contributions.

Consequently, there may be a day when academics cite their number of Twitter followers, retweets or @ mentions as part of a promotion and tenure application.

Camille Rutherford is assistant professor in Brock University’s faculty of education in Ontario, Canada. This is an edited version of an article that first appeared in *Academic Matters*, the Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations Journal of Higher Education. For the full article go to www.academicmatters.ca

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