

Reading Tweets: Increasing Student Engagement Outside of Class Time Using the Twitter Social Media Platform

John W. Anderson Jr.

Ball State University, Muncie, IN, USA

[Abstract] This article is meant to stimulate ideas for educators to increase student interaction outside of class using social media. It offers a detailed description of the “reading tweets” and the teaching rationale behind the assignment. With goals of increasing student engagement outside of class, completing assigned readings, and preparing for in class discussions; I share my reflections about the “reading tweets” from incorporating this assignment into race related sociology courses taught at Ball State University in Muncie, Indiana. Given the scheduling of the courses and the nature of the course content, strategic and creative thought was required about how to increase student interactions with each other, and their engagement with the readings for the courses.

[Keywords] Twitter, teaching and learning, social media, just-in-time teaching, reading assignment

Introduction

In the fall of 2017, I was assigned to teach a course that met face-to-face, once per week for almost three hours. Given the scheduling and the nature of the course’s content, I needed to be creative about how to motivate students to engage each other, complete assigned readings, and be prepared to participate in college seminar-style classroom discussions.

The "Reading Tweets" assignment used the social media platform Twitter with instructor established course #hashtags with the goal of getting students to post and interact with the readings, with each other, and to make connections to present day social events. The Twitter social media platform is a microblog which allows users to post short and frequent updates using 280 characters in each post [tweet]. Letters, spaces, and punctuation all count as characters. This requires users to be concise with their posts. Twitter also allows for the use of #hashtags, which permits users to organize keywords made in their posts. The hyperlinked keyword [#hashtag] can then be selected or entered in the Twitter search engine to bring the user to all tweets made using that unique #hashtag. The #hashtag allows for an organized presentation of tweets made by users tweeting on the same theme, event, or idea. Twitter offers an app that is easily downloaded on smartphones, tablets, and other mobile devices that make for easier access than Blackboard or Canvas, the learning management systems that our university has utilized during this assignment.

Reading Tweets: Assignment Description

Although many students are active on social media, not all of them prefer the same social media platform. Students were required to establish a Twitter account if they did not have one already. Students who had reservations about setting up a Twitter account, were given the option to use a pseudonym and an avatar to preserve anonymity. While several students were ok with using their personal Twitter accounts, those who were not, established an account exclusively for the course, but did not take the measures to preserve anonymity.

The students’ Twitter account served as an online notebook that was to be used for keeping a record of tweetable quotes from the assigned course readings, capture “ah-ha” moments, and share

their informed opinions from the assigned weekly readings. Students were given a 3-3-4 formula to follow. The 3-3-4 formula was a combination of three original tweets, three reply tweets to other students in the course, and four “likes” or “retweets” of other students’ posts. Students were advised that their tweets should demonstrate an understanding of the readings by being able to make historical and contemporary social connections with their original tweets. Original tweets needed to be completed ideally a day before the class meeting, the following week. Additionally, they could not duplicate, or tweet similar quotes already made as their original reading tweet. Finally, tweets where students did not express their evaluation of the readings or application to their own lives were framed to the students as trolling the course #hashtag. This assignment was worth ten points weekly for fourteen weeks, ultimately worth 140 points total. Tweets were scored on a range usually from four to ten based on the student’s adherence to the assignment description.

What Were You Thinking?

As the instructor, I had the task of trying to get students to meaningfully engage with the assigned course readings and each other. The course only met once per week for almost three hours from 4pm. to 6:45pm. The reading loads were substantial, and I felt that my undergraduate students needed a structured way to connect with each other. Our weekly class meetings were characterized much by seminar style discussion, based on the readings, which meant that my undergraduate students needed support to be prepared. By building this assignment into the course, it would encourage completing, or at least meaningfully skimming, the assigned readings before class. It also afforded students who did not have an opportunity to complete the readings to open the Twitter app, enter our course #hashtag to get highlights, quotes, and perspectives a few hours, maybe minutes, before the start of class, and have clues about some significant points from the assigned readings for the week. In this way, they could still have a chance to contribute to our weekly class discussions.

This assignment gave students an opportunity to communicate with each other outside of our regularly scheduled, once per week class meeting. Students would have the opportunity to have a running start into our weekly class discussions, and it would potentially increase their familiarity with each other, thereby adding to a greater sense of connectedness in the course.

Whereas courses that meet more than once per week can potentially facilitate the students’ familiarity with each other, in theory, my assumption, when crafting this assignment, was that building a class network through our course #hashtag could potentially fill the gap between class meetings.

What Did You Learn?

After the 2017 fall semester, I learned that the idea and rationale that I had for this assignment worked. While there were kinks to be worked out, the students interacted well during the six-day gap between class meetings week to week. I recognized how beneficial it was for me to scan the #hashtag throughout the week, a day before, or even an hour before the start of class. This allowed me to see what aspects of the readings were resonating with the students, or what points needed clarification. The course #hashtag offered me intel that was instrumental in assisting me on what direction I could take with my lecture briefs, group discussion prompts, and video clips that I incorporated into the topic/theme for our class gathering. I recognize that what I was doing with the “reading tweets” was an adaptation or very similar to the idea offered by Gregor Novak and his colleagues with Just in Time Teaching (JiT) (1999). “JiT is a technique where students are expected to do a pre-class activity, submit responses to this activity, and then the instructor

uses these responses to tailor class to the specific needs of the students” (“Just-in-Time Teaching, abconnect - Harvard University” n.d.).

In the spring of 2018, I used the reading tweets assignment in another sociology course, which also met once per week for almost three hours. However, this time rather than use a 3-3-4 formula, I used a 6-6-4 formula. This required students to complete six original tweets, six replies to other students, and four likes or retweets. In the fall semester course, the 3-3-4 formula did not seem to generate the amount of engagement between the students that I expected. The adjustment that I made in the spring semester generated the amount interaction that I sought, and more camaraderie was evident at our class meetings.

Over the years, many students have communicated to me that the reading tweets made them keep up with the assigned readings. Some students communicated that they felt an added pressure to tweet their thoughts on the readings in a meaningful way because their tweets were public. This was especially true for those students who chose not to use an alias or establish another Twitter account solely for the course. Students who used their personal accounts found themselves having conversations with family and friends who follow them on their personal Twitter account. Those students had to translate and describe key ideas and concepts from the readings and the course to family and friends in ways that they could understand. This assignment required students to think about the course and the readings differently when they had outside conversations with their personal followers, not associated with the class. As a side note, students are instructed to communicate on Twitter with their classmates only, using our #hashtag.

The benefit of only having 280 characters in a single tweet is that students must be concise with their thoughts about the readings. My experience as the course instructor has been that I am able to distinguish between those students who are engaging the readings based on the demonstrated understanding, personal application, and originality of their tweets from those who are not putting forth much effort in the aforementioned criteria. Hence, using a scoring range from four to ten points helps to motivate students to meaningfully engage with the readings and make quality tweets.

This assignment works best strictly as a tool for tweets from the assigned readings. I used to allow students to post a current event article, meme or video clip closely related to the assigned readings, but eventually some students attempted to post those in place of tweets from the actual readings. When allowing this, the likelihood of the #hashtag becoming cluttered is a real risk. Students are best to stick to the tweets from the assigned readings.

Benefits And Challenges Of This Assignment For The Instructor

I have come to learn over the course of four semesters that this assignment has benefits and drawbacks for the instructor. While this assignment does help to fill the engagement gap for students enrolled in a course that meets once a week for almost three hours, it is not ideal to incorporate this assignment in a class with a large enrollment. This assignment works best for small classes, roughly twenty or fewer. My own experience has been that it was challenging to track student tweets in the courses I taught which had more than eighteen students. Scoring the reading tweets can be time consuming when you have more than two weeks' worth of tweets to score. Twitter does have advanced search features that the instructor is able to use with the course #hashtag and the student's Twitter handle (username). However, for those students who use their personal Twitter account to complete this assignment, it can be very time consuming, particularly if they tweet a lot outside of the course assignment.

Reading tweets are a form of public education, so to speak. Depending on the level of familiarity with collegiate-level race related theories and concepts, Twitter followers of students enrolled in the course can engage students in ways that challenge students to translate ideas, theories, and concepts from the course to their curious and interested followers. If nothing else, their followers on Twitter get exposure to collegiate level ideas.

Students must see the big picture for this assignment. There may be someone who attempts to troll your course #hashtag. This has never occurred while I have administered this assignment in my courses, but there is the potential that it can happen. In this case, the instructor should be in the habit of viewing the course #hashtag on a regular basis to guard against this possibility. Students should also be made aware of how to flag/report tweets from outsiders who attempt to troll the #hashtag.

Conclusion

The “Reading Tweets” assignment affords students to use a popular microblogging social media platform to capture their salient points quickly and succinctly from the assigned readings. Students were afforded the chance to connect and engage each other outside of our scheduled weekly class meeting, which met once a week. Similarly, this assignment promoted maximum participation because students who did not have an opportunity to complete the readings and tweet about it, could still use the course #hashtag to catch highlights and key points that could permit them to participate in the seminar style classroom discussion.

As the instructor, the course #hashtag offered me intel that better prepared me on what direction to take with my class meetings. While I now realize that this assignment is best for course with smaller enrollments, there is still value in using the Twitter social media platform as a strategic way to increase student engagement outside of class, complete assigned readings, and prepare for in class discussions.

References

- Harvard University. (2021, January 28). Just in Time Teaching. Harvard University ablconnect
Retrieved from <https://ablconnect.harvard.edu/just-time-teaching-research>
- Novak, G., Patterson, E. T., Gavrin, A. D., & W, C. (1999). *Just-In-Time Teaching: Blending Active Learning with Web Technology*. Prentice Hall.