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DISRUPTING TRADITIONAL STUDENT-FACULTY ROLES, 140 CHARACTERS AT A TIME

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Introduction

There were two opposing views of technology that we – a new faculty member and a senior at the same college – frequently heard expressed at our liberal arts institution: the first, that technology adversely affects student-faculty interactions because it tends to endorse more distanced exchanges that further separate students from faculty, and the second, that technology can bring students and faculty together, encouraging communication and collaboration, allowing for a new and more productive student-faculty dynamic. At the start of the 2009-2010 academic year, neither of us fully agreed with either perspective. We enjoyed and used digital technologies in our personal lives and some areas of our teaching and learning, noting that such resources allowed for more social and professional connections with people around the globe, but we also thought face-to-face exchanges were the best means of developing close relationships between students and faculty. And we both acknowledged that we had not considered how or if such technologies could impact what it meant to be “faculty” or “student;” however, our experiences with Twitter that year highlighted for us ways such technologies can dramatically affect the roles of faculty and students, disrupting our initial understandings of the terms “faculty” and “student.” Neither of us began using Twitter with thoughts that it would challenge these labels themselves and the roles associated with them, and yet our experiences with Twitter, especially in our work related to education courses and content, have led us to reconsider the appropriateness of these labels and the boundaries they imply.

Positioned as “faculty” and “student,” by the institution and many of the people and groups with whom we interact, we have experienced traditional student-faculty roles in numerous exchanges. These roles involve hierarchical positionings in which faculty are the primary or sole experts in a course, leading or facilitating classes, often determining lessons, creating assignments, and evaluating student performance. Conversely, students are disempowered relative to faculty and are often told what to do, expected to meet faculty members’ expectations, and accept faculty members’ decisions about a variety of things, including assignments, grades, and what views and ideas are (most) valued in the course. Both faculty and students often accept these roles, establishing and reinforcing hierarchical structures that can create dissonance in their interactions. Traditionally, while embodying the student role, open and frequent communication between students and faculty is neither encouraged nor accepted, and those assuming the faculty role often feel pressure to interact with students solely or primarily within sanctioned and formalized academic times and spaces. It is these roles, and the constructed boundaries that define them, that were disrupted through our experiences with Twitter. We found that Twitter radically altered our roles, positioning traditionally-defined faculty and students as commensurate learners and collaborators.

Twitter is a microblogging service that allows users to send brief posts, often called “tweets,” of up to 140 characters directly to people who elect to receive those updates (i.e., their “followers”). When one person “follows” another user, it means that that individual will receive the tweets that the “followed” user sends. Many times tweets contain links to websites, pictures, polls, or other online destinations and these tweets can be part of threaded conversations around a question or topic, possibly denoted with specific hashtags (e.g., tweets marked with the hashtag “#edtech” tend to focus on issues related to educational technology).

Both co-authors joined Twitter in spring/summer 2009, for slightly similar reasons. Howard, the faculty member, joined Twitter shortly after being hired as a Postdoctoral Fellow in Science Education at his current institution. He was drawn to join Twitter because of his growing curiosity arising from the press the service had received and his developing awareness of ways Twitter could be used in teaching and learning (e.g. Smith, 2009). He was interested in exploring new resources that might help meet certain course goals, such as developing a class community and allowing for more real-time discussions outside of scheduled face-to-face class meetings. As a result, he started a Twitter account in March 2009, several months before the start of the fall term, and began tweeting and seeking additional information to explore the service and ways it could possibly be used in his course. Within two weeks of creating that initial account for himself, he created a second Twitter account that he planned to use specifically with and for his class. He thought he would keep the original account for personal use and a second one for use with his classes. This separation would enable him to more easily separate personal and professional tweets, supporting a traditional division between students and faculty.

Maggie, the recent graduate, minored in Education and spent much of her undergraduate career discussing issues of education and educational technology. She began exploring Twitter after she became intrigued by the contrasting reports she was receiving from undergraduate peers about how Twitter was “useless,” compared to the more positive stories she was reading (e.g. Ambinder, 2009; Huppke, 2009; Jayson, 2009) regarding the potential for networking and interpersonal exchange through the service. As someone interested in discovering innovative modes of education and comfortable investigating new technologies, she independently created a Twitter account in July 2009 to better understand the possible merits or drawbacks of microblogging. Initially, she expected (and therefore experienced) Twitter to be just another social media space (similar to Facebook) in which to share personal updates with a select group of friends. The site did not immediately appear to have significant pedagogical merit or to encourage multi-directional dialogue with other users.

As the academic year continued, both of us, faculty and student, were introduced to various ways Twitter was used and we experimented with ways it could be applied in our courses and lives to meet academic and personal interests. It was through these explorations that we began to experience what we termed “productive disruptions” to our “faculty” and “student” roles. These disruptions challenged the hierarchical divide between these traditionally-defined roles and led us to both witness and experience more collegial and reciprocal interactions between “faculty” and “students,” which allowed us to engage as equal partners with faculty and students alike in various exchanges of knowledge, skills, and ideas, at times taking on or sharing a role that was not traditionally “ours.” Twitter allowed for, and encouraged, practices that supported students

in finding more people outside academic classes who had knowledge and experience about specific topics and the service pushed students to initiate and join dialogues with these people expanding class interactions far beyond the traditional realm. We found that these practices disrupted traditional roles for faculty and students, leading them to become fellow collaborators and learners with each other and members of a wider community.

The sections below will discuss our experiences with Twitter in greater depth. We decided to have Howard present his reflections first because he joined Twitter first (i.e., before Maggie) and not because he, as a “faculty” member, assumes an institutionally higher role than Maggie, a recent college “student.” The “Discussion” that follows will focus on an experience Howard and Maggie shared through Twitter to highlight how we, as two people who assumed separate traditional roles as “faculty” and “student,” experienced more collegial and egalitarian roles that we have labeled “learner” and “contributor” through this service. More details about these roles and our experiences will be provided below.

Our Experiences

Howard’s Reflections as a “Faculty” Member

As indicated above, I started the academic year as a faculty member who was fairly new to Twitter, although I had experimented briefly with it the spring and summer beforehand. Although none of my colleagues in my program actively used Twitter for personal or professional ends, I thought it had the potential to meet some course goals and decided to introduce it in a fall course that concentrated on issues in math and science education. The course examined perspectives related to teaching and learning math and science and as stated in the syllabus, I thought Twitter could help “[1] Further develop ourselves as a community...[2] Continue (or start) conversations outside the times allotted for class meetings...[3] Maximize teachable moments...[4] Enhance certain writing skills...and [5] Enhance reflective thinking and metacognition.” Each of these goals was accompanied with a more detailed explanation of my reasoning such as “[3] Maximize teachable moments. Typically, it is difficult to teach in context because courses often seem to happen “outside” many other events that have relevance to course discussions. Twitter has the opportunity for us to engage in more teachable moments in context.” These explanations were accompanied with in-class discussions of how Twitter could provide opportunities for addressing each goal. My syllabus similarly explained,

I do not want Twitter to simply be another tool in promoting a teacher-centered class...It’s another opportunity for everyone to get more experience talking about these issues and connecting with things outside our classroom space...Twitter is an experiment for me as an instructor, and it can serve as a model encouraging you to consider using novel approaches in your classrooms. Some things will be more successful than other things, but you should be able to learn something from each experience. Oftentimes, things need tweaking more than total junking. I debated mandating a certain number of tweets per week or establishing some rotation for people to assume responsibility for keeping things active through Twitter...I’ve decided to primarily see how things develop through our use of Twitter. I do not want you to feel compelled to tweet obsessively, but would like everyone to give it a try, as part of your participation in this class. This plan might be revisited later in the term, but please post things

about readings, placements, and more as we consider what form our Twittering takes in this course.

As a result, there were few specific requirements surrounding the use of Twitter in this class. I was still relatively new to the service and hoped and expected students, as “digital natives” – people born after widespread implementation of digital technology and therefore presumed to be “native speakers” of the digital language of computers and the Internet (Prensky, 2001) – to experiment along with me in exploring ways Twitter could be used. While some students quickly expressed unhappiness with Twitter and discomfort with the service, often claiming it was unnecessary, not “cool,” and redundant (i.e., did the same things as Facebook but had less functionality), other students spoke more positively about the service and began using it to interact with me, other members of the class, and members of a larger community of people and organizations who shared some of their personal and academic interests. These students began finding ways Twitter differed from other social media, such as Facebook, in that it allowed for more communication with people who need not be their “friends” but who merely shared related interests. The community with which they dialogued shifted from a geographically close community of people who were on the same campus or in the same class to affinity groups that formed around shared interests.

In the section below, Maggie will discuss her experiences with Twitter from her initial position as a “student” and how those experiences impacted her role in a variety of interactions. As for me, I started the term with two Twitter accounts and split my attention between them. My original account was for personal use and I used it to tweet with friends, colleagues, or other people on Twitter; these messages included ones that did not consistently relate to the exact focus of the course (e.g., I sent tweets to columnists or friends about sports) and the second account was primarily for tweeting with and to students and for sending general messages about information related to the course, such as links that overlapped with course content. I thought this division would be good for me and my students but I soon found that separation unnecessary and in conflict with my stated goals.

I would occasionally send the same tweets to both accounts and some tweets only to one account. But I found that I wanted to share the education-related messages with members from my personal network, including my friends (some of whom were professionally and personally interested in these topics), and I felt that tweeting about some personal interests or links was appropriate for members of the class too. While including members of the class in long emails to friends would obviously have been inappropriate, these were 140-character blasts that provided more insight into who I was as a person (including who I was as an academic) and further humanized me to the other members of the class. Such messages seemed to bridge gaps between us (i.e., me and “them”) as they began responding to these messages and interests, and they similarly posted more tweets about their interests and ideas, including academic perspectives relating to course content. As a result, these exchanges further opened up academic (and personal) dialogues among members of the class.

Over time, I noticed that my identity as represented through Twitter changed as elements of once separated professional and personal identities and accounts became blended. I slowly shifted to using the second account – the one initially created for my class – to send all tweets, and I asked

the current followers of my now-defunct “personal” account to follow me at what had now become one blended, unified account that merged multiple communities and Twitter lists. These changes arose as my identity through this service became more blended and the traditional student-faculty dynamic was disrupted by a more radical view of student-faculty roles, rendering the artificial barrier of a separate account “just for students” unnecessary. As a result, the service provided a forum for more egalitarian exchanges in which all members of the class (and other people) began to converse about a variety of topics as equals. We started to learn and share more about each other around multiple issues and interests, and these digital exchanges carried over into face-to-face exchanges. These face-to-face conversations often included and built upon messages, polls, and links sent through Twitter, and in turn, these conversations were often continued through subsequent dialogues through the service.

I began to find that Twitter provided a space for me and other members of the class to speak more as equals with diverse interests and thoughts, and within this space I found myself transitioning from faculty member to colleague and co-learner as class members participated in new and different learning communities and dialogues. These experiences shifted my understanding of what it meant to facilitate or lead a course, as I saw students take on new, authoritative empowered roles in this online space and subsequently assume more empowered roles in exchanges with me and other people. For example, students had great freedom in proposing projects they wished to pursue and they continued pursuing conversations and topics that interested them after the course ended. So when one student was asked to design a new health curriculum with people at a school, she used Twitter as a space to converse with current practitioners, as well as other followers, about what they thought teenagers should know about the human body in a health course. While health education is part of science education and is an area I supported among members of the course, I do not consider myself very knowledgeable of this field nor have I explicitly taught health education before. Twitter enabled this student to easily pursue this work even when I, the traditionally-defined “expert” in this course on math and science education, could not supply first-hand experiences or resources. She used the service to seek other people with personal and professional backgrounds in this field and I contributed to these conversations when I felt I had ideas, questions, or comments to share but felt less of a need to start or lead the developing discussions. As a result, Twitter helped shift my role from that of a traditionally-defined faculty member in a number of ways and Maggie’s section below, explaining her experiences and reflections on her use of the service, will further discuss ways she saw Twitter impacting her understanding of her initial “student” role.

Maggie’s Reflections as a Recent College “Student”

When I first began using Twitter, I started as just another “student,” someone interested in exploring this new service for the communication and networking potential that everyone seemed to be talking about. I joined Twitter with a personal interest in exploring the service more deeply and thinking about the potentialities for collaboration and networking with a new, virtual community but I did not expect to be breaking down any traditional student-faculty dynamics. Instead, as described earlier, I mostly viewed Twitter as simply one more social media space where I could send out personal status updates, similar to Facebook. The main differences I initially saw with Twitter, compared with other social media I had explored, included the extensive amount of information I was receiving from reading other tweets and the

subtle shift in how I expressed myself in 140 characters. I initially used Twitter for shortened Facebook status updates; however, unlike other social networks, as I began establishing connections to more people beyond just my friends and also began to follow strangers – primarily educators – who had interests that overlapped with my own, Twitter increasingly became a source of current events and knowledge for me. It became a reliable service for seeing an aggregated list of not only general news topics but of topics I had personally selected as relevant and meaningful to my own learning goals.

This unique difference was what pushed me to continue exploring the service, and I increased both the number and the types of people and organizations I was following. More importantly, I began to enter into discussions and dialogue with these people. As I started communicating with Howard and other faculty who were using Twitter in a more dialogical fashion, and who were modeling a more interactive type of conversation (i.e., asking questions or tweeting links to thought-provoking articles), I began to notice changes in the way I engaged with others and expressed myself through Twitter. I started to realize that I could be both an engaged and engaging user of Twitter in the same way other educators who embodied the traditional faculty role were and that I was not limited to actions that might have seemed more appropriate to my student role. With this realization, my use of Twitter expanded and my learning community was redefined to include a wider range of people in educational institutions around the globe. This learning community grew as I found additional accounts that had profiles and tweets that related to my interests. To find these accounts, I tried a variety of approaches, including reviewing the accounts that the people I followed were currently following. Similarly, when people I followed, or conversations in which I engaged in, included contributions by, or mentions of, other accounts I would review them and often follow them if their interests related to my own. As I began following more accounts, more people (probably through similar actions) began following me and my learning community grew. Within their unique educational settings, these new people in my community assumed a variety of institutionally-defined roles such as teachers, administrators, and students. Some of them were basic informants for what was going on in the world and the fields that interested me, such as early childhood education and educational technology, and some became colleagues, friends, or both-but they all became people in my “personal learning network,” a term I found many Twitter users employ to describe the network of people with whom they interacted to seek advice, collaboratively develop ideas, and learn about new resources.

Expanding my Twitter followers meant that my community extended beyond my campus to include people and organizations who approached concepts and conversations from a larger array of geographic, professional, and experiential positionings. Prior to this experience, my formal educational experiences primarily consisted of exchanges among people in my classes and the occasional guest speaker. As I spoke more regularly with my ever-growing Twitter community, including college faculty who used the service, I developed deeper connections with them through blending personal and academic exchanges. I found that I was not bound by traditional “student” or “faculty” roles and instead discovered that both I and the people I was dialoging with took on student or faculty roles in the virtual space. This redefinition occurred, in part, through the acknowledgement I received as an equal contributor to discussions and these interactions established me as a co-collaborator and an equal, someone who had valuable thoughts and experiences to contribute and with whom information could be shared and ideas

discussed. Assuming this new collegial role was different for me and further motivated me to use these experiences as occasions to discuss and reflect on how a service like Twitter could open up opportunities to break down traditional student-faculty roles.

Through these reflections, I realized that my involvement as a respected voice provided positive feedback and reinforcement about the value of my contributions and led me to feel further empowered to direct conversations, develop and explore ideas with a diverse array of people, and pursue interests that were self-directed as opposed to imposed externally from faculty. These experiences allowed me to envision and enact new practices of dialogue and authorship that disrupted my traditional “student” role. The ability to converse, share, and exchange ideas with fellow Twitter users/educators who were open and interested in redefining their own roles as “faculty” within the virtual space we shared and beyond was also critical to this redefinition of my “student” role. This reciprocity created a mutually reinforcing cycle of redefinition and development that encouraged participants in the exchanges to be willing to learn from the other participants and to cross new boundaries in terms of how we could interact with one another.

Discussion

Through our use of Twitter, we – Howard and Maggie – both experienced productive disruptions to traditional student-faculty roles. We felt that the service provided a space and means for us to connect with people who assumed similar or different institutionally-defined positions in new ways that challenged hierarchical divisions and led to more egalitarian exchanges. As a member of the “faculty” at this college, Howard found that Twitter enhanced his class’ community – as manifested through both digital and face-to-face exchanges – and observed the students taking more active roles in initiating or continuing discussions. Maggie’s experiences with Twitter from the role of a traditionally-defined “student” mirrored Howard’s, and she felt further empowered to start and direct conversations and investigate ideas with a variety of people who assumed a diverse array of positions in areas of education and other fields of personal interest. Additionally, she saw this service providing a more equal playing field for her to engage in these conversations as people’s responses to her were based more on the quality and integrity of her ideas, comments, and questions and less on her status as a “student.” Through Twitter, we found a flurry of ongoing and engaging conversations related to education topics and we met other Twitter users who willingly engaged with us as equals and who placed less emphasis on our stated “roles” than either of us were used to experiencing in face-to-face exchanges.

Along these lines, we want to discuss one joint experience we had through Twitter to highlight ways we, as people who were often identified as assuming traditionally-defined “faculty” and “student” roles, experienced different roles through this new service. As the spring term continued and we both further explored Twitter, Maggie became aware of regular hour-long education-related conversations that took place through Twitter, including a fairly popular one called #edchat. She told Howard that anyone interested in talking about education was free not only to participate in these conversations, but also to vote in the weekly polls that decide what topics and questions would be discussed that week. Full transcripts of the conversations were archived and people could retrieve and review them any time afterwards (More details about #edchat can be found at <http://edchat.pbworks.com/>). Maggie thought it could be an exciting, empowering, and thought-provoking way to talk with, and listen to, others interested in

education issues. Howard was interested and wanted to learn and experience this virtual dialogue and these exchanges, which were said to connect educators from a range of geographic locations and professional experiences. We decided to participate in our first #edchat together so we could assist each other if/when technical difficulties arose, and so we could collaborate beforehand, during, and afterwards about our expectations, experiences, and reflections.

When the next #edchat arose, we participated in this digital dialogue around the question, “How can professional development stimulate education reform?” Through the ensuing exchange, we engaged in conversations with people whom we had never met, or spoken with, before. We shared ideas, asked questions, and learned more about different perspectives. The other #edchat participants seemed to treat both of us similarly, as equals to each other and to themselves. As a result of these conversations, our online networks and communities grew as more people began reaching out to each of us outside of the #edchat conversations for ideas and input. Instead of acting – and being treated – as “faculty” and “student,” we found ourselves becoming valued participants in intellectual exchanges with members of a shared community, and saw ourselves assuming roles that might more appropriately be labeled as “learner” and “contributor.” As “learners,” we noticed ourselves regularly developing greater awareness and understanding of a variety of ideas and perspectives, while as “contributors” we actively facilitated exchanges and supplied comments, ideas, questions, and suggestions as empowered agents who initiated and furthered dialogues.

This #edchat conversation led us to interact with each other more as equals and colleagues, both assuming “learner” and “contributor” roles in these exchanges. But these roles and experiences were not unique to #edchat. Instead, we believe these roles appropriately identify new roles we assumed through our interactions with Twitter, roles that departed from traditionally-defined “student” and “faculty” roles. While other interactions, including face-to-face interactions, can allow for the disruption of institutionally-assigned roles, we found that Twitter more easily disrupted these roles by placing emphasis on the content of our comments, ideas, and questions, allowing us to become “learners” and “contributors” regardless of our institutional positioning.

Conclusion

We can and do raise questions as to whether such outcomes we experienced are unique to Twitter, if they could happen through other interactions (including face-to-face interactions), and if they would or could generalize to any disciplines taught at K-20 schools. However, we argue that these outcomes, namely disruptions of traditional student-faculty roles, *can* occur through other interactions and in other settings, but that Twitter facilitated these outcomes in special ways that were far superior to other approaches and experiences we have had.

While other digital media could lead to similar outcomes, these digital exchanges through Twitter differed from those facilitated by email, blog posts, or other digital media in that the constrained space (i.e., 140 characters per post) did not enable people to easily convey their roles through their posts. Instead, the space constraint seemed to lead us and the other people with whom we conversed to strip comments down to essential content that conveyed the message they wished to communicate. Similarly, face-to-face exchanges can also result in similar disruptions to the roles of “faculty” and “students,” perhaps even leading some to identify as equal

“learners” and “contributors;” however, we felt that such disruptions were more quickly accomplished through Twitter than in face-to-face exchanges, and we further speculate that it can be difficult to disrupt established understandings about who is leading and evaluating exchanges in an environment (e.g., the classroom) in which students and faculty have often interacted and experienced hierarchical differences in their roles. Given that institutionally-defined students and faculty often have great familiarity interacting with each other in face-to-face exchanges, we think it can be easier for them to default to traditional roles when dialoguing face-to-face, whereas a service such as Twitter allows for new roles to more easily be cultivated and disrupted.

If our speculation is accurate, then perhaps these disruptions might be less pronounced for people who have more experiences interacting with institutionally-defined “students” or “faculty” through digital media, or perhaps those individuals will more likely approach and enter intellectual exchanges as equals. Additionally, it might mean that these outcomes could change over time as more “faculty” and “students” gain experience and familiarity interacting through Twitter or other digital technologies, possibly in ways that instead reproduce the roles and hierarchical divisions that are often experienced in face-to-face exchanges. These conjectures can be further explored through additional papers and studies that investigate other individuals’ reflections and experiences with Twitter in education.

We acknowledge that the outcomes expressed in this text might indeed arise from a multitude of factors that were unique to us, our specific institution, the discipline (education) for which Twitter was used, or a combination of these factors and other ones, but we believe the results could be realized in other settings and disciplines. We see no reason to believe that the benefits and disruptions we experienced should or would be constrained by these factors and believe that the beneficial outcomes we experienced are *possible* for all. We speculate that it would require participants who are willing to, or possibly seek to, disrupt traditional student-faculty roles as well as disciplinary and institutional circumstances that would enable (or, at least, not actively oppose) such disruption. Of course, these ideas can only be supported as more time passes, through similar reflective work by people in other educational settings and more rigorous empirical examinations of the use of Twitter in education. At present, this paper has sought to focus on our experiences, highlighting how Twitter allowed for, and encouraged, practices that supported the productive disruptions we experienced as our traditionally-defined “student” and “faculty” roles transitioned to the roles of “learner” and “contributor.” We invite and encourage others to experiment with Twitter and see if it has a similar impact for you and other people with whom you interact. We welcome people to follow us and communicate with us through Twitter at @hglasser and @mpowers3.

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