

# Exploring Twitter use in College Language Courses

2008 Technology Fellows Project Paper

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## **Topic**

The focus of this project was to explore the possibilities as well as the limits of using Twitter as a messaging/learning tool in higher education language arts classes. Twitter is a free micro-blogging tool that allows users to publish short posts (maximum length of 140 characters) to a blog page. It also includes a feature that allows entries to be made from a cell phone and posted to the blog through text messaging. Twitter users are able to subscribe, or “follow” other Twitter users and have the new posts of those they are following be sent as a text message to their own cell phone. In this way a Twitter blogger can make a single post that is instantly “broadcast” to all the Twitter members who are following that blog.

We incorporated Twitter-based assignments in the ESL Speaking and Culture sections of Columbia College’s Summer Intensive English Language Institute (SIELI) program, as well as ESL Writing and Rhetoric I and II in order to determine successful uses of Twitter as a means to conduct small group work, keep journals, edit papers, brainstorm ideas, post resources, record experiences, and to respond to prompts, lectures, or readings. We also explored Twitter as a general communication tool – both among students and among teams of teachers/administrators. For the SIELI program, we set up a class Twitter account at [www.twitter.com/sieli2008](http://www.twitter.com/sieli2008).

## **Team Members**

### Molly Ades

I have taught English and English as a Second Language classes at Columbia College Chicago and at DePaul University for the past 5 years. In all my classes, Reading, Writing, Speaking/Listening, and TOEFL Preparation, I have used blogging and podcasting as ways to respond to queries, readings, lectures, and general experiences. In 2007, Terrie Byrne and I participated in the Technology Fellows program with our project, “Using YouTube in the Classroom.”

### Terrie Byrne

I have been an ESL instructor at Columbia College since the spring of 1991, where I have always sought ways to enhance my courses through computer and internet based tools. For example, in recent classes I have taught my ESL students to create short recordings on a variety of subjects and post them on our classblog as podcasts. I also maintain a blog designed to supplement Columbia’s SIELI Speaking and Listening classes at [http://tmbhome.typepad.com/esl\\_class](http://tmbhome.typepad.com/esl_class). In addition, I maintain my own Twitter blog at [www.twitter.com/tbyrne](http://www.twitter.com/tbyrne) for writing and instructional technology topics, and at [www.twitter.com/litclass](http://www.twitter.com/litclass) for literature related posts.

## **Purpose and Description of Project**

The main purpose of this project was to develop approaches to using Twitter in the classroom to create a sense of community among students within a class as well as within the Twitter community. We will also explore Twitter as a micro journaling tool to enhance learning in ESL and Writing and Rhetoric classes. A third goal of the project was to assess the benefits of using Twitter within a small team of teachers and administrators to communicate information about students, classes, homework, or other tasks.

## **This project consisted of two phases**

The first phase took place during the 2008 summer term.

We used Twitter in Columbia's SIELI program, an 8 week intensive English as a Second Language program comprised of a Writing class, a Speaking/Listening class, a Reading Skills class and a Culture class. We used Twitter lessons in the Speaking/Listening class and in the Culture class.

The Twitter-based lessons we employed included:

- Student-student communication for small group work
- Posting of short responses to lectures/fieldtrips/readings
- Paper topic brainstorming
- Class glossary generation
- Grammar and vocabulary practice through sentence posting

Because there was a small group of teachers and staff that worked within the SIELI program, we also explored how Twitter could be used as a means to communicate among core faculty. These faculty members used Twitter posts to relay information on meeting schedules, field trip plans, and to seek and give advice on class issues.

The second phase took place during the 2008 fall term.

We used Twitter to supplement lesson in an ESL Writing and Rhetoric I and a native speaker Writing and Rhetoric II class. In the summer we found that students were less responsive to using Twitter as a social tool and more responsive to using Twitter as a journal, notebook or general writing tool. Because of this, in the fall term we focused on using Twitter for the following types of lessons:

- vocabulary and grammar practice,
- glossary generation,
- paper topic brainstorming,
- reading responses,
- collecting and sharing research data.

In addition, we used the fall term to explore several new ways of using Twitter posts specific to improving composition skills. We had students use Twitter to:

- practice MLA Works Cited entry formats,
- share research links,
- practice creating concise thesis statements,
- complete fieldwork,
- share and receive feedback on their field research.

### **How this project has advanced the integration of technology in our discipline**

Even though Twitter is a relatively new tool, students are familiar with the concept of texting and simultaneous communication. Therefore, Twitter use provides a language and/or writing class with the opportunity to constantly communicate within a network – a network which may consist of their instructor, fellow classmates, and anyone else they choose to follow or who follows them. Twitter provides an English course which traditionally uses group forums or in-class discussion to generate ideas and receive feedback an easy way to communicate with each other outside of class, while also expanding the network to people who are not even in the classroom. Because language courses teach and evaluate communication, whether it be speaking, listening, reading, or writing, Twitter is a beneficial tool simply because it increases the amount of communication students engage in. Additionally, Twitter use introduces students to an educational use of a very real-world form of communication – expanding the function of their cell phones to the accessing and sending of class information integrates a technology device that students are already using in their everyday life into the educational life of the classroom.

From our summer experience we found that not all teachers were comfortable with using Twitter as a social interaction tool, and some were in fact very uncomfortable with this type of constant connection. As a result, we dropped this aspect of our project and focused on the ways Twitter connected students with each other's writing while in the class. In addition, we found that the class Twitter blog site created during the summer began to develop a following outside of the class among other Twitter bloggers. This enhanced the students' sense that their posts were reaching a real world audience outside the classroom walls.

While Twitter use required basic internet knowledge and an internet connection, we were able to set up all our students with accounts relatively quickly and, as long as we set aside time within class for Twitter posting, all students were receptive to using Twitter as an extension to their English lessons. We found that a cell phone with texting capabilities was useful for Twitter use, but not an absolute requirement since we always gave students class time to make their posts through their computers. Students were able to join each other's Twitter accounts as "followers," and both followed and were followed by a main class Twitter blog ([www.twitter.com/sielistudents](http://www.twitter.com/sielistudents)). We found that having a single class blog that followed all of the students' blogs in this way allowed us to show to the class all the students' posts as a collective blog. This gave the students a strong sense of community, and made up for the fact that, because of the expense of receiving cell phone texts, the majority of them were not connected to their own or to each others' Twitter blogs through their cell phones.

## **Timeline for Our Project**

### May 2008

Terrie and Molly both set up Twitter accounts and began “twittering” with friends and colleagues. A Twitter account was set up for the Summer Intensive English Language Institute (SIELI) at Columbia College, at [www.twitter.com/sieli2008](http://www.twitter.com/sieli2008).

### June-July 2008

Used Twitter for lessons in the SIELI Reading and Speaking/Listening courses. All instructors and students set up Twitter accounts, linked their accounts both with each other and with the new sieli2008 Twitter class account. We created and implemented lesson plans, and used Twitter for general communication such as where to meet to fieldtrips and special events. Twitter lessons focused on English language use and practice with vocabulary, grammar and idea-sharing. In addition, the class used Twitter to announce updates on their class blog and link to each new podcast that they created during the summer class. Class Twitter account began collecting followers outside the classroom, reaching a total of 30 by the end of the summer.

### August 2008

Assessed the information gathered during the summer term and revised lesson plans for Twitter supplemented lessons. We found that Twitter worked very well for vocabulary and grammar practice, but for the summer group the social communication aspect did not work as well. Decided to create short instructional videos for using Twitter in the classroom.

### Fall Semester 2008

Implemented new lesson plans based on what we learned during the summer. Our new lesson plans included individual, small group, and class activities using Twitter. We analyzed Twitter as a communication tool in Writing and Rhetoric I & II classes and compared it with forums and blogs. Experimented with Camtasia in order to make instructional videos for teachers using screen shots of Twitter pages. Finished the first video on the basics of Twitter using Camtasia software. Also, began using our Twitter accounts to keep a record of future lesson ideas and links to sites useful for web-enhanced writing instruction. The class Twitter account now had more than 50 followers.

### December 2008 and January 2009

Complete the instructional videos on using Twitter in the classroom, focusing on two topics:

- 1) How to set up Twitter accounts for yourself, your students, and your class.
- 2) Demonstrations of samples of successful Twitter lessons.

## **Long-Term Expectations**

Our long-term expectations are to develop better ways to incorporate Twitter into everyday classroom life. Many of our pitfalls with Twitter over the past two semesters have been because students have never heard of Twitter before this. They are not used to the idea that they can communicate instantly with everyone in their following, and that they can receive automatic feedback from their followers. Throughout this project, it was clear that Twitter has the potential

to work as a very successful communication tool – our goal now is to achieve the same enthusiasm and success with various Twitter assignments in the classroom.

By analyzing our data in terms of pedagogy, we can determine which types of lessons work well using Twitter, and which are better formatted for other media, such as forums. At this point the data indicates that the writing assignments associated with more thoughtful, detailed work is better performed in forums, wikis and blogs. Twitter can be used to publish links to these works, thus combining the larger writing space of these other formats with the instant communication power of Twitter with its ability to collect followers. We will continue experimenting with and documenting the success of Twitter-based and Twitter-enhanced assignments.

### **Project Assessment**

We assessed the success of the techniques we developed in this project according to whether they:

1. added value to the classroom experience,
2. were user-friendly to instructors and students,
3. generated a positive response from students, and
4. achieved the learning objective.

Throughout this project, we struggled to create lessons that filled all four of these criteria. We researched articles and websites in order to determine how other instructors were using this tool in their classroom. After brainstorming lesson ideas, we implemented them, re-assessed and revised accordingly.

#### 1 - Value Added

In general, Twitter adds value to a classroom by providing a fun, easy way to communicate, both in and outside of class. Specifically, we found Twitter enhanced our classes in the following ways:

- Students can share ideas with a large group beyond simply class or group discussion.
- Students become comfortable with one another by communicating outside of class.
- Students have an automatic network with which they can ask and respond to questions.
- Students have the option of communicating on their cell phone just like text messaging, a tool they have already popularized. School becomes “fun” and part of their everyday lives.
- Twitter adds an element of the real world to the classroom – in the same way they communicate with friends, they can communicate with teachers and fellow students.

#### 2 - Usability by instructors and students

Twitter is very user-friendly. It’s easy to set up an account and add your cell phone; it’s also easy to access Twitter from any computer and to send messages to the site via a cell phone. Anyone who is following you will instantly see your message on their computer or cell phone and can quickly respond.

However, recently, Twitter eliminated a function on their site that seems to make finding and adding followers more complicated. This just happened two weeks ago, so we have yet to determine how much this will affect its usability in terms of locating and following students as well as setting up class sites rather than individual sites.

Another issue with usability is cell phone text messaging charges – the same charges apply with Twitter as with texting. If students have unlimited texting or at the least, free incoming texts, Twitter messages will not be a problem. We did encounter several students in our language classes who could not link their cell phones to the Twitter site due to high text messaging charges. These students were constrained to the computer and had to be considered in all assignments.

### 3 - Student response

Students are very excited to learn about this new tool, Twitter, and in general like being able to “follow” their teachers and classmates. It adds something fun and social to an otherwise traditional classroom. As mentioned, students use Twitter enthusiastically in order to report running late to class, clarify a homework assignment, or simply to send a casual message to their network.

Student response to actual lessons using Twitter proved more problematic. It was as if students did not believe that Twitter could be used as a beneficial educational tool. At first, students either blew off assignments or didn’t seem to take them seriously. Twitter remained a forum for fun, everyday posts, but not for serious talk about class or a lesson. One way we handled this was to make students accountable for their Twitter posts. By displaying the web page in class after an assignment was due, students felt their work was being evaluated and shared. They put more time and thought into Twitter posts once we announced that we would look at the page in class on a given day. Not only did this improve participation, but it added pride, excitement and a bit of fun competition to the students’ approach to their posts.

Another way students began to see Twitter as a positive educational tool was by receiving constant, immediate reinforcement from the instructor. For example, if a student posted something on Twitter and the instructor responded/provided feedback right away, the student would continue to post often, knowing they would get a helpful response. One SIELI student used Twitter as a valuable tool to improve his English vocabulary – he posted vocabulary questions regularly and then used his new vocabulary in sentences to confirm the meaning. By the end of the program, his Twitter page was an extensive log of the vocabulary he learned over the summer! All of his vocabulary entries were also part of the mail class Twitter page because of the “follow” feature in Twitter, allowing all the students to benefit from his posts.

Some students respond negatively to Twitter because of the limit of characters – they can only post 140 characters at a time. While it is sometimes important to learn to be brief, we found that we needed to design our lesson plans so they reflected the purpose and constraints of Twitter. A lesson that worked well within the format was an exercise to teach proper MLA formatting – students had to post a bibliography for one source on Twitter, and they were reviewed/corrected in class by everyone. This assignment works well because a bibliography entry tends to be about

as short as a Twitter post. It matches student expectations of writing length rather than confusing them with an assignment they feel they should be a longer written piece.

#### 4 - Was the learning objective achieved?

In the beginning, Twitter was a new and fun tool that we believed could be used to teach skills and lessons that were otherwise taught in more conventional ways – instead of students sharing ideas in a small group, why not have them share via Twitter posts? Anything that was discussed or written down could be turned into a Twitter post and documented on the webpage. What we learned is that sometimes this worked and sometimes it didn't. Not all our lessons could be transferred to a Twitter assignment. We had to analyze and understand not only the nature of Twitter itself, but also the students' perceptions of Twitter and how they valued its purpose as a communication tool. Twitter is beneficial in the classroom provided that the skill being taught requires at least one of the following characteristics:

- 1) it is immediate
- 2) it is brief
- 3) students would benefit from seeing it displayed on a webpage
- 4) it requires feedback, through Twitter or face-to-face
- 5) it is social, while still providing educational support

After creating this list, it is easy to see why some lessons achieved more successful learning outcomes than others. As stated above, the MLA assignment works well because it is both brief (requiring 140 characters or less to be posted) and students benefit by seeing examples of correct bibliographies posted on a webpage. It also may require feedback, in the event that a student has posted an incorrect bibliography.