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Technology and Student Learning: Twitter as an Academic Tool

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At a large residential university like the University of Georgia, college students learn in a variety of spaces, both inside and outside the classroom. They learn in their academic lives, their social lives, and their professional lives. Social media websites are “learning spaces” where students are spending an ever-increasing amount of time socializing, networking, and learning.

It has been estimated that 94 percent of first year college students use social networking websites. Most faculty members are familiar with Facebook and LinkedIn, but a smaller number are familiar with Twitter. Approximately 20 percent of college students use Twitter, and this social networking tool has untapped potential as an academic resource for students and faculty.

It is difficult to explain Twitter to those who are unfamiliar with it. It has been described as an ongoing public dialogue, a micro-blogging platform, or a cross between blogging and texting. But the best way to describe it to those who are not part of the millennial generation might be to compare it to a cocktail party. When you walk into the room, you notice a wide variety of people in attendance, from politicians to celebrities to your next-door neighbor. You are at a party with all of these amazing people, and you have the opportunity to meet them, interact with them, listen to their ideas, and share your own. You also notice that there is a variety of noisy chatter going on all around you. You may find some conversations rather vapid, but, if you take the time to work your way through the room, you may find a few conversations that spark your intellectual interest. You can focus on these conversations and interact with others who are taking part in the discussion.

Twitter can enhance student learning in a variety of ways. You can use Twitter to continue a conversation that began in class. You can use it to provide students with a low-stress way to ask questions during or after class. You can use it to discuss a book, video, or reading related to a course. You can encourage students to “follow” a political figure, a news organization, or a non-governmental organization. Students can interact with these figures and organizations on Twitter and give a report on what they learn from the experience. You can use “hashtags” to follow current events unfolding in real time. Twitter can also help students connect with faculty members and with one another through online office hours, online review sessions, or online study groups.

The benefits of using Twitter in academia are numerous. Twitter can help to improve contact between students and faculty and can encourage cooperation among students. It can promote

active learning by taking course material outside the classroom. It can encourage intellectual curiosity in students' personal and social lives. Twitter can even teach students marketable skills, as employers are increasingly looking for employees who are adept at using social media.

On the other hand, using Twitter effectively can be challenging. Finding valuable content on Twitter may require some effort, as serious users must cut through the vapid chatter at the cocktail party. In addition, Twitter is a fluid medium, making it difficult to verify sources of "tweeted" information. Students may also be tempted to use social media irresponsibly. However, bringing social media into the classroom may provide unprecedented opportunities to teach students how to use social media sensibly so that they do not have to learn the dangers of the Internet the hard way.

Overall, Twitter has great potential as a tool for student learning. Its use encourages collaboration, community building, participation, and sharing. If used effectively, it can inspire students to become more engaged so that they think outside of the classroom and integrate learning into their everyday lives.