

Connecting with Twitter for Learning and Teaching: A personal perspective

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Twitter has become part of my university life, and is the main social networking platform I use for my learning and teaching. I've been teaching in HE for twenty-five years, and Twitter is a fairly recent addition to my repertoire. My Twitter experience began at an HEA conference in 2013, when a friendly co-speaker enthused to me about her use of Twitter with her students. I duly signed up and then did nothing with it for the next 18 months.

Initially, my engagement with Twitter was a slow-burning process. I was very cautious, lacking confidence in my technological abilities and wary of all the downsides of digital visibility. Before another conference, I tentatively followed the conference hashtag and started following people, and gradually it dawned on me just how much Twitter added to my conference experience, as I made connections beforehand and got a lot more out of attending. I was able, for example, to seek out particular people to meet in person. I slowly built up the number of people I followed and observed what academics, university support staff, and teachers were saying.

Early on I decided to keep my personal Twitter account focussed on language, as that is one of my teaching areas and research interests, tweeting on topics such as everyday language usage, language change, etymology, and discourse. Now when I come across an interesting language-related news item, I tweet a link to it. It's part of my enthusiasm for the subjects I teach, and I encourage students to read and notice examples around them of language usage and change. One of the things I like about Twitter is that students don't necessarily have to sign up to it in order to access tweets. I also run a course Twitter account for the BA Sociology at the University of

Worcester, and make use of hashtags to point students to useful resources for specific modules.

Then another turning-point in my use of Twitter for learning and teaching came when I discovered the Learning & Teaching in Higher Education (#LTHEchat) community, an open weekly virtual discussion forum. Each Wednesday (8-9pm GMT) the 'chat' focuses on a different aspect of learning and teaching in HE, with discussion questions set by a guest. The questions are posted by @LTHEchat on Twitter, preceded by Q1, Q2 etc, and anyone can respond using A1, A2 etc., including the hashtag #LTHEchat in their answer. Many participants begin by following the hashtag and reading all the comments, but not necessarily posting anything themselves to begin with. Recent topics have included building cohort identity, using lecture capture, overcoming unconscious bias, students co-designing the curriculum, and copyright literacy.

Joining in with #LTHEchat on Wednesday evenings gives my Twitter use an additional focus, and it has a strong emotional impact to feel part of an online academic community through an organised tweetchat. It is reassuring to find others grappling with similar issues in their teaching, and sharing ideas and thoughts can be very supportive. Sometimes it's just the recognition that I'm not alone, and that some of my own doubts, worries and concerns come from a much larger scale of shifting HE priorities and perspectives.

There have been a few milestones in my use of Twitter. In terms of my subject area, I was delighted to be a Top 25 Language Twitter Account award winner in the 2017 competition, run by language portal bab.la, part of Oxford University Press. The competition received over 1,000 nominations and 35,000 votes. Later that year I got more

involved in the #LTHEchat community by being on the organising team, running the weekly tweetchats and writing the associated blog on <https://thechat.com/>. In December 2017 I attended the national 'Social Media in HE' conference at Sheffield Hallam University, and for the first time met face-to-face university staff I had worked with on #LTHEchat. It was good to extend some of the online interaction with face-to-face meeting.

I haven't lost my caution, and try to stick to some other advice I picked up early on: "If you're wondering whether or not to tweet something, then don't". My own tweets are very carefully curated and I stick to sending out content about language and sociology, so my followers know what they're getting from me. However, one of the aspects of Twitter that fascinates me is the window I get into other disciplines, and I follow (among others) historians, geographers, scientists, criminologists and statisticians.

One of the principles I've seen in action on the #LTHEchat and which I try to follow is academic kindness. I try to send praise and encouragement, and respond if people show an interest in my work. I appreciate it very much when the academic authors of books and articles respond when I get in touch with them on Twitter, and students like seeing the human being behind what they are reading.

Connecting people and interaction between people is the main advantage of Twitter for learning and teaching. It is much more than a collation of items of interest. On Twitter I connect with current students and staff at my own institution, alumni and former staff, staff and students at other institutions, teachers at schools and colleges, the local community, and wider world. I have connections on Twitter with people I know personally, and people I've never met, at a local, national and international level. I use Twitter to maintain old links and

make new ones. Twitter can be used for publicity for specific events, and some university course Twitter accounts have that as a key function. It depends on the intended audience and purpose of the Twitter account.

It's often the practical tips from #LTHEchat that help me incorporate new techniques in my teaching. If I hear lots of teachers recommending a particular technique or tool, then it can be the stimulus to get me to try something. Occasionally it can feel overwhelming to hear so many good ideas, and it's useful to remember the tip: "Just try one new thing each semester". Often it's not about the technology or tools, though, but about principles, approaches and attitudes, such as how to adapt to the needs of increasing numbers of daily commuting students.

In conclusion, there isn't one way to use Twitter or to begin to engage with it. My starting-point was via a conference hashtag, but it could be by following academics in the public eye or personal contacts. Some links happen by accident in what can be a messy place. Twitter can be a place to explore and be excited by some new connections which happen by serendipity. Whilst some of my wariness about social media remains, I recommend focussed use of Twitter as an inspirational space for learning and teaching.

Biography

Jenny Lewin-Jones is a University Lecturer, currently teaching on the BA English Language and BA Sociology courses at the University of Worcester whilst studying part-time for a professional doctorate (EdD) at the University of Birmingham. She has a professional interest in social media use, especially Twitter, tweeting on language, linguistics, and Higher Education @JennyLewinJones.