

Faculty Use Twitter to Get Students Focused In and Out of Class

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Forget the stereotype of the long-winded professor.

At the University of Arizona, professors and instructors are embracing **Twitter** ^[1] “with its famously brief 140-character posts” to connect with their students, engage them in discussions, foster new interactions and help them leverage social media for successful careers.

"I like my students to really understand various social networking platforms like Facebook, YouTube, Reddit, Pinterest and Twitter, and how to make the most of them," said **Sudha Ram** ^[2], Anheuser-Busch Professor of Entrepreneurship and Management Information Systems in the UA's **Eller College of Management** ^[3], who teaches classes on Web and social media, analytics and business intelligence. "I want to show them that even having just 140 characters to compose a tweet can be useful."

Ram is one of a growing number of UA professors and instructors exploring how Twitter can help them enhance their classroom teaching. In Ram's case, it seemed logical to incorporate them into her classes since her own research includes several social media platforms.

"If you want to understand the various social media platforms, the first thing you have to do is use them," she said.

Keeping Students' Attention

Ram observed that students like to use their smartphones and their tablets in class, sometimes texting each other instead of paying attention. By allowing them to use those devices for the class, she found they are less distracted.

"Using social media in the classroom is a win-win situation," Ram said. "It has greatly enhanced my teaching."

Ram's students start by setting up a Twitter account specifically for the class. They then create a hashtag for the class, which allows any Twitter user to follow posts pertaining to the topic tagged with that label.

"Anything my students tweet that is relevant to the class, I require them to use that hashtag," Ram said. "When I give a lecture, I ask them to tweet what they learn, and anything that stuck with them in particular. It's fun and keeps them awake."

Her classroom has two projection screens “one for the lecture, and one right next to it displaying real-time tweets using an app called Twitterfall, which shows the latest posts as they “fall” from the top of the page.

Ram found that monitoring the twitter feed while she lectures helps both her and her students.

"Some students are too shy to ask questions, so I encourage them to tweet a question instead. Or someone might have an interesting comment or thought, and I can pick up on that once it pops up on the screen."

Ram said reviewing live tweets in class or after class also gives her a better sense of whether her students are getting the points she was trying to make in her lecture, allowing her to clarify misunderstood points.

In addition to encouraging students to connect with each other and the instructor, Ram has them use Twitter as a resource for finding information and leaders in the field who share their research in blogs and articles. She also asks them to find interesting articles on specific topics and tweet about them along with the URL of the article to share them with the rest of the class.

Helping Students Find and Connect With Experts

Building networks with the movers and shakers in a field is one of the most important goals of integrating Twitter into the classroom, said **David Moore** ^[4], an assistant professor in the **School of Natural Resources and the Environment** ^[5] in the UA **College of Agriculture and Life Sciences** ^[6].

"I go in and out of Twitter many times a day," he said. "I use it to check the news in the morning, and I use it in a professional way to post news about academic topics, studies, science news, that kind of thing."

Moore has been exploring what Twitter can do in a classroom, not just to engage students with the lecture material and with each other, but more importantly with experts in the field.

"Some experts are on Twitter all the time and are very responsive to questions," he said. "It's a great opportunity for students to connect with leaders in their field that might otherwise not be accessible."

Phyllis Brodsky ^[7], who has helped develop curricula for courses in the **College of Education** ^[8], agreed. She said she was looking for an innovative way for her students to connect globally with their interests when she started using Twitter in her class.

"Rather than looking for a new way to connect with my students, I was looking for an innovative way for them to connect globally with their field of interest," Brodsky said. "Tweeting allows them to develop a network based on their specific interest areas and, by doing so, they gather information in real time as to what people are saying and doing in that area."

Turning Students Into 'Digital Citizens'

Having students use Twitter not only helps them find information that is meaningful to them but also develops "digital citizenship" skills, Brodsky said.

"Rather than just absorbing information, I really want them to think of how they are part of it all and contribute to the community. They may already have a personal Twitter network, but they have to develop a new one on a professional level. I tell them, 'You are responsible for what you put out there.'"

Because of Twitter's increasing importance in developing career connections, students need to be aware of and careful about their social media identity, Brodsky said.

In her classes, she employs a very systematic approach to tweeting. "It is important to be set up right from the beginning to make sure tweeting doesn't become too time-consuming," she said.

"I have students start by simply following other members in the Twitter community for a while before making their first tweet. By the end of the semester, each student has to follow at least a hundred others. The minute you develop a network, other people will follow you. But you have to be selective about who you're following."

Because Twitter goes hand in hand with other social media, instructors often incorporate innovative ways of presenting information in digital form.

Ram, for example, tasks her students with developing a resume in the form of an infographic, using images to highlight whatever they want about themselves. They post their infographic resumes online and tweet about them, too.

"Some students did a fantastic job, and some ended up getting interview invitations based on their online presence," Ram said.

Ram believes some ground rules are important to make Twitter successful in a classroom setting.

"When students present their assignments in class, I ask them to tweet their feedback to each other about the presentation. That gives them an incentive to log onto Twitter and see what the rest of the class is saying."

She also offered some tips on incorporating Twitter into classroom teaching.

"Ask your students to not tweet constantly and only use it to participate in the class. That way, they are not constantly making irrelevant tweets, but only when they feel they're ready to make a point," she advised. "Also, encourage them to interact with others via Twitter, by replying to each other, retweeting interesting comments from others, or modifying a tweet to share it further. This allows them to have 'conversations' on Twitter and build relationships."

*The UA **Office of Instruction and Assessment** ^[9] offers workshops to serve instructors who want to make the most of Twitter in the classroom.*

Source URL: <https://uaatwork.arizona.edu/lqp/faculty-use-twitter-get-students-focused-and-out-class>

Links

[1] <http://www.twitter.com> [2] <http://mis.eller.arizona.edu/faculty/sram.asp> [3] <http://www.eller.arizona.edu/> [4] <http://www.snr.arizona.edu/moore> [5] <http://www.snr.arizona.edu/> [6] <http://cals.arizona.edu/main/> [7] <http://www.coe.arizona.edu/content/brodsky-phyllis-e> [8] <https://www.coe.arizona.edu/> [9] <http://oia.arizona.edu/>