

Teaching Tips

A Forum for discussion and tips for advancing teaching and learning at Mona

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Special points of interest:

- The **Teaching Tips Newsletter** is a publication of the Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL) at the UWI, Mona.
- The newsletter is published three times during each semester and a summer edition. It provides tips for improving teaching and learning in higher education and is available online (<http://myspot.mona.uwi.edu/cetl>) as well as in the office of the CETL.
- If you need additional teaching tips on specific classroom practices please contact us.

Possibilities for Facebook and Twitter



Digital literacy is important in 21st century higher education, especially as increasingly employers are looking for graduates who possess digital skills and competencies to add value to their workforce. In fact, employers are increasingly seeking to find graduates who are social media savvy. In this regard, students in colleges and universities must realise that it is important to know how to build community on Twitter, present oneself and products on Facebook, engage with public issues on YouTube and share creations on Instagram. To be social media savvy call for the development of these literacies. Educators in higher education have a role to play in sensitising students to the importance of these literacies, developing educational programmes so that students can get exposure to social media and how it can be deployed in professional contexts and of course, critically cultivating and evaluating best practices.

Whither Facebook and online discussions?



Online discussions are used extensively in higher education, especially with learning management systems (LMS). Even though online discussion provides a safe environment for students to engage each other, many times it is not well used. Students have the advantage of preparing response to questions before hand and participating in the online forum or discussion board with clarified thinking and polished writing on the discussion topic. It must be acknowledged that online discussions tend to lack spontaneity and the linear nature of these interactions suggest that they do not mirror true life approaches. It would appear that there is some reluctance to engage this approach since the anecdotal evidence

available at the UWI, Mona campus suggests less than stellar engagement in online discussions using the LMS. Elsewhere, there is some evidence that students are not very interested in online discussions. Researchers (Camus, Hurt, Larson & Prevost, 2016) in the USA have found that only 7.9 percent of students agreed that “online discussion should be a part of college courses” (p.85). Further, the students also indicated that online discussions were not advancing their learning.

There are those who proffer the view that Facebook offer a platform that might be more suitable to student participation and the fostering of student learning. In this regard, there is the possibility that Facebook could be successfully used for online discussions. Almost all students have Facebook accounts, in fact studies in the USA indicate that 95 percent of college students boast Facebook accounts (Camus, Hurt, Larson & Prevost, 2016).

Online discussion in two different courses as studied by Camus, Hurt, Larson and Prevost (2016) using Facebook and the LMS revealed interesting findings. The two courses that were studied (both having a Facebook section and a LMS section) and compared in relation to student participation in the online discussion by looking at the total number of posts, the length of the posts and the type of post (e.g., a response to the university teacher, a response to a classmate or a response to a previous discussion thread or a response that caused further discussion etc.).

Students in the courses on Facebook tended to post more often than those in the LMS. Camus, Hurt, Larson and Prevost (2016) found that 87.5 percent of the students using Facebook posted 10 or more times compared with 67.9 percent of the LMS students. The students using Facebook were also more likely to make novel posts, respond to other students and equally more likely to make posts that were unrelated to the discussion question or topic. The students in the LMS were more likely to respond to the university teacher, make longer posts and keep the posts focused on the discussion topic or question. In the Facebook posts, there was more evidence of peer engagement through dialogue. There was more evidence

of integration and application of the course content in the posts done in the LMS. However, the level of participation was higher for Facebook and the overall grades were also higher for the Facebook group.

The overall recommendation from the researchers was that Facebook might be a better forum for courses interested in stimulating discussion and building community. If the goal is to foster development, application and integration of course content, then the LMS might be a better choice.

Reference

Camus, M., Hurt, N. E., Larson, L. R. & Prevost, L. (2016). Facebook as an online teaching tool: Effects on student participation, learning and overall course performance. *College Teaching*, 64 (2), 84-94.

Whither Twitter and engagement with course content?

Faculty in many universities in the USA and Canada are using Twitter in their courses. In one example, Professor John Green and Professor Pamella Whyte at the University of Success Oriented Programmes (pseudonyms) tried out Twitter by creating an assignment in two large first year courses, the first having an enrolment of 231 students and the second having 180 students. They were seeking to make the large course environment more personal and create opportunities for more engagement. The assignment called on students to tweet 10 times for the semester using a hash-tag provided by the university teacher. At the end of the course, the students were asked to write a paper reflecting on the use of Twitter and how it impacted their learning. The entire Twitter learning activity was worth 10 percent of the course grade.

Throughout the semester, there was an average of 37 students tweeting per day in the courses mentioned. However, on the days when lectures were held, there was an average of 57 students tweeting. Some of the tweets were posted during class time.

There was also an online survey about the use of Twitter in the classes and students readily affirmed the positive impact that it had on their learning and learning-related outcomes. They felt the level of interaction between students in the class improved. Further, they also indicated that there was increased engagement with the Professor and opportunities were created for exchanges between students and guest speakers in the courses. These exchanges were helpful since students and the guest speakers were engaged in exchanges that positioned them as professionals.

Another way in which Twitter was used was also noted. In one of the courses, students were required to listen to a particular speech and tweet about it during and after listening but certainly within a 24 hour time-frame. They were also required to respond to in-class questions by tweeting.

Without doubt, a major outcome of the use of Twitter was the writing benefits. Students were challenged to refine their writing skills, in fact, engage in meaningful thinking and refine their thoughts and then write within the limits allowed by Twitter to communicate their thinking meaningfully.

The researchers recommended that faculty seeking to use Twitter in their courses should have a strong presence on Twitter. It is best to lead by example. Create opportunities for the technology to be used in your class. This might be accomplished in group assignments with the members of the group tweeting findings or other course related content to classmates in real time. An emphasis should be placed on rewarding the creation of original tweets. Retweeting of material should be allowed but this should not be rewarded when participation and learning outcomes are being evaluated. It would also be important to set ground rules for the use of Twitter in the class room since students are accustomed to using Twitter for social and not professional engagements. These ground rules should be so coined to clarify the professional expectations. Of course, assignments should count for an important contribution to the course grade since students generally will take the use of Twitter in a more serious way if the assignments contribute meaningfully to the course grade. Another approach might be to make the doing of the assignments compulsory (as a learning and assessment activity) to pass the course even if they do not contribute to the grade.

Reference

West, B., & Barry, B. (2015). Beyond the tweet: using Twitter to enhance engagement, learning and success among first-year students. *Journal of Marketing Education*, 37 (3), 160-170.



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