Twitter Goes to College
Students and professors use the micro-blogging service to communicate inside and outside the classroom

By Zach Miners
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At the University of Texas-Dallas, history professor Monica Rankin needed a better way to get students involved in the classroom. The 90-person lecture hall was too big for back-and-forth conversation. So, with help from students in the school's emerging media program, she had her students set up accounts on Twitter—a micro-blogging service—and then use the technology to post messages and ask questions that were displayed on a projector screen during class. Rankin says that although the technology has its limitations, the experiment encouraged students to participate who otherwise would not have done so.

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Though Twitter might not yet be quite as popular among students as Facebook or MySpace, a growing cadre of professors and administrators are embracing it and using it to introduce their classes to a different kind of communication and networking—one that doesn’t involve "poking" friends or posting photos.

Corrected on 6/3/09: The student who covered the kidney transplant on Twitter works at the UT Southwestern Medical Center, not the Children’s Medical Center Dallas.

At Champlain College in Vermont, marketing and online business professor Elaine Young went from using Twitter—which lets people send 140-character messages, or "tweets," out for anyone to see—as a tool to help teach in the classroom to something that business and marketing students can call on to build networks and make connections in the professional world. Compared to other social networking sites, "Twitter is more about creating connections with others who may not be your real friends," she says.
The biggest challenge, Young says, is getting students who are convinced that they will never need the technology to give Twitter a try. But many of her students are jumping in and have taken on business projects with local companies and made recommendations on whether the firms should use services like Twitter, blogs, or E-mail newsletters. When the Internet-based marketing class ended in May, the Twitter accounts that were created were still active, Young says.

Young even had several of her students "tweeting" from their BlackBerrys and cellphones during the school's 2009 commencement. The result was a play-by-play of quips on the ceremony, right down to one student complaining that her "sash is falling off." And because all the tweets were uniformly tagged and updated, other members of the audience—as well as those watching online and on the local public-access TV channel—stumbled upon the Twitter feed and posted their own tweets. "It's all right in the moment," says Young.

Another educator who's leveraging that instant-access information is David Parry, a professor of emerging media at the University of Texas-Dallas. Parry uses Twitter to enhance his classes and as a means of keeping students engaged in course content beyond the classroom walls. He has them create Twitter profiles and "follow," or track, his updates along with those of friends and others outside the university. Many of his students go one step further and use the site to alert their classmates to world events or issues that are relevant to the course.

"One thing that has changed about higher education is the idea that people come and sit in a dorm and after class, they share ideas," says Parry. "A lot of that is gone now, because students work two jobs, they don't live in dorms.... But Twitter is making up for it, in a way."

Parry's students helped Rankin use Twitter in her classroom. And a former student of Parry's, who now works for the UT Southwestern Medical Center, made history when she helped provide the first Twitter log of a kidney transplant. Family members were able to view timely updates of the six-hour procedure as they were posted. (The Twitter account is "ChildrensTheOne.")

Howard Rheingold, who teaches at the University of California-Berkeley and Stanford
University, was an early adopter of Twitter and often turns to it for teaching advice. He explains to his digital journalism students how to use the site to establish a network of sources and, using tweets, how to entice those sources to follow them in return. In his social media course, he has his students employ Twitter for what he describes as "student-to-teacher-to-student ambient office hours."

Bringing sites like Twitter into an academic environment is a teaching style that has seen a fair share of criticism. Some say that restricting users to 140-character blurbs ruins students' writing skills and destroys their attention spans.

Rheingold says that how useful Twitter is depends on the individual person. "If you want to share information in small bites with a group of people who share your interest," he says, "that's what it's for."

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