"Tweet tweet": evaluating applied social care student opinions of engaging with contemporary research and debate through Twitter

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Abstract

When developing engaging pedagogical approaches underpinned by the effective use of technology, having students engage with academic material while on social media presents itself as a worthwhile area of investigation. This study predominantly evaluates the effective development and use of a Twitter account specific to concepts and ideas of psychology on a degree in Applied Social Care. Student engagement via Twitter with current research and contemporary debate is assessed, with an exploration of how to effectively use Twitter with undergraduate students and concluding with a reflection on developing a 'resident' presence online.

The @*psycarlow* Twitter account was set up in September 2018, to use with groups of students from year 3 and year 4. Following one full academic year, one group of students was surveyed on its usefulness; a second group was surveyed following a year and a half of interacting with the account. Feedback and suggestions from the first group, together with experience gained and reflection by the lecturer, were extremely beneficial in moderating the approach with the second group. Findings indicate that both sets of students identified a number of positive benefits including helping them understand topics discussed in class and giving them a societal view of relevant issues through current research, debates and conversations. The second group had a much stronger identification with positive benefits,

the reasons for which are discussed. Students also identified a number of ways in which engagement could be improved, for example by more clearly identifying to students which tweets were relevant to them. Getting to grips with managing the account and directing students to content is initially time consuming but using Twitter has proven a useful and effective way of engaging students, with positive impacts on their learning and digital literacy.

1. Introduction

In the provision of human services, particularly in the applied social sciences, alignment with evidence-based practice (EBP) is of the utmost importance (Hall, 2008; Paynter, 2009). The Sicily Statement identifies that "decisions about health care are based on the best available, current, valid and relevant evidence…all health care professionals need to understand the principles of EBP, recognise it in action, implement evidence based policies, and have a critical attitude to their own practice and to evidence" (Dawes et al., 2005, p4). As a psychology lecturer on an applied social care degree, an important responsibility is to ensure students understand EBP relevant to mental health for the clients they will work with and for themselves in a professional area with high burnout rates (Gray-Stanley & Muramatsu, 2011).

The challenge begins by ensuring students engage critically with current relevant research, in a bid to foster enhanced learning. In the interests of exposure one must move to where students are: online! Not only is this increasing exposure to appropriate content but it can provide educators with a social presence in a virtual world, as aspects of our teaching practice are based on Vygotsky's (1978) theories on the importance of social interaction for cognitive development.

In 2017, mobile learning was identified as an important development for international higher education with a time-to-adoption of one year or less (Adams Becker et al., 2017). Students increasingly bring mobile devices to class and want to use them (Kelly, 2017). 93% of Irish consumers have access to a smartphone and look at it on average 55 times a day (Deloitte, 2018). Checking social media was ranked as the third most common activity for mobile phone usage at 72% (CSO, 2017). While students have a large online presence, only 28% of adult social media use in Ireland is through Twitter (IPSOS MBRI, 2017). This statistic also needs to be considered in terms of the lecturers' approach to social media, as O' Keeffe (2016) found, higher education professionals can be hesitant to have an online presence. This presence can also vary dependent on interaction, as White and Le Cornu (2011) identify, it can range from visitors (who go online to use tools to accomplish goals) to residents (who share, participate and communicate online with personal presence), something that was apparent in the O' Keeffe (2016) study. However, some academics have embraced the move to social media and are making use of online platforms, particularly Twitter, to highlight their current research (Veletsianos, 2012). Twitter has been found to be an effective supplementary classroom tool (Rinaldo, Tapp & Laverie, 2011) and to have a positive effect on engagement and grades (Junco, Heiberger & Loken, 2010). In a review of research looking at Twitter use as a learning tool, it was found that it had a positive effect not only on student learning but also on class dynamics (Dhir, Burgagga & Booreqqah, 2013). Therefore, to move online but in a context specific to teaching research, an *@psycarlow* Twitter account was set up.

However, there is a note of caution with regard to getting students to engage initially. In line with the visitor topology as devised by White and Le Cornu (2011), previous research has

found that students can find engaging on Twitter in an academic lens daunting at first (Bista, 2015) and they often use it more as a passive tool (Knight & Kaye, 2014). Research tells us that the key to using it is overcoming student barriers by developing novel ways to have them interact with it at the beginning (Rinaldo, Tapp & Laverie, 2011).

2. Methods

To move towards engaging with students through social media, the *@psycarlow* Twitter account was set up in September 2018. This was then embedding in the VLE through the use of widgets on Twitter. Not all students had Twitter accounts therefore it was important to consider embedding it in the VLE as all students need access to the content. At the beginning of this academic year (2018/2019) the widgets which had been used to embed Twitter no longer worked. The following steps were needed to ensure Twitter remained embedded in the VLE:

- Go to https://publish.twitter.com
- Paste your Twitter account URL in the box
- Choose *Embedded Timeline*
- Set customisation options if the default isn't what you want
- Click on *Copy Code*
- Then go to Blackboard where you want the Twitter feed and paste the embed code using the HTML button

Ethical approval for this research was granted through the IT Carlow ethics committee in March 2018. Student feedback on the use of the Twitter account was assessed through an online questionnaire developed through Qualtrics. The questionnaire consisted of nine questions focused on capturing both students' use and attitude toward the use of Twitter as a teaching and learning approach. Question design included mostly closed questions to allow for easy tabulation and summary of answers, however these were complemented by open ended questions to allow for students' personal comments.

The questionnaire was sent to students through a link in the VLE. Students across two different academic years, 2017/2018 and 2018/2019 were involved in the survey. To ensure consistency the same questionnaire was used.

The link for the first survey was sent to 2017/2018 year 4 students in April 2018. 31 out of 53 students from year 4 completed the questionnaire (response rate of 58%); this group had access to the Twitter account for one full academic year. The link for the second survey was sent to 2018/2019 year 4 students in December 2018, with 33 out of 56 students completing the questionnaire (response rate of 59%). This second group had access to the Twitter account for one full academic year and the first term in the next academic year when the survey was administered.

3. Findings

First Survey: Group 1 (April 2018)

There was substantial previous use of Twitter by students, with 58% (n=18) of those students who responded had Twitter accounts; two further students joined Twitter specifically to follow the account. Regarding Twitter usage, students who had Twitter accounts were given four options to identify common practice, of which they could select multiple answers. All students used their account to read other tweets, with 85% (n=17, out of the 20 Twitter users) explicitly selecting this answer option, and the other three respondents implicitly reading tweets by either liking other tweets or retweeting. 40% (n=8) explicitly use Twitter just to read other tweets. 45% (n=9) engage by liking other tweets. 40% (n=8) used Twitter to tweet personal opinion, with 40% also retweeting (n=8 including one who only retweets). This is in line with the research mentioned above by Knight & Kaye (2014) where Twitter is often used passively by students. Of the non-Twitter users, 64% (n=7, out of 11) of respondents have looked at the class Twitter feed through the VLE but not regularly; note that 65% (n=13) of Twitters users also viewed via the VLE. Overall, 35% (n=11) of respondents agreed (selecting somewhat agree, agree or strongly agree) that they look at posts on the Twitter feed regularly, with 55% (n=17) disagreeing (selecting somewhat disagree, disagree or strongly disagree).

Strongly Agree	Agree	Somewhat agree	Neutral	Somewhat disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
10%	39%	23%	13%	3%	3%	10%
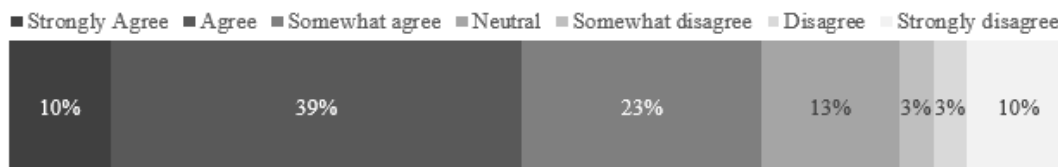
Figure 1: Group 1 student ratings of information on Twitter feed interesting

Students positively engaged with the content of the tweets. As can be seen it Figure 1, 71% (n=22) of respondents agreed that the information being retweeted was interesting. 48% (n=15) of students agreed that the information presented through the newsfeed was helpful in their understanding of a particular topic. Similarly, 48% (n=15) of respondents agreed that they have followed suggested links to additional research.

When asked about use of Twitter during class time, 45% (n=14) responded that they would like to see it increase with 48% (n=15) indicating a desire for more interaction between lecturer and students on Twitter, such as retweets of student posts. Students also indicated that they would like to see Twitter accounts for other modules (58%, n=18). More generally, there was substantial student agreement about the broad benefits of using technology on the module with 68% (n=21) agreed that the use of technology on their course was helpful.

The positive potential of the use of Twitter as a pedagogical tool was affirmed through feedback provided by students. Alongside positive feedback there were constructive and helpful comments on the future development of the account. Positive student responses on what students found good about the Twitter account included:

- Helped me understand the topic we were doing in class
- Promotes awareness of issues such as suicide and mental health
- Really informative, great way of alternative learning
- I liked how it linked in to real life examples and stories surrounding mental health experiences and research

Students identified the practical benefits to the account, information disseminated through the Twitter feed was used to guide reading and research necessary for exams and assignments. A number of comments fell into the very practical use of the information being tweeted:

- More access to relevant information on a number of topics
- Links to research which can be used for exam purposes
- Providing links to research studies

Students were also asked for suggestions to develop the Twitter account. Feedback included:

- Make people join in at the beginning of the year and ask them to check it regularly
- Maybe to use the 'add poll' section on Twitter (when creating a tweet) to have as mini 'pop' quiz which has multiple choice options to questions related to psychology. This could keep students updated and interact more with the Twitter page, in a fun way?
- Keep it going, I find it a great help in continuing evidence based learning and applying it to topics
- Ask students to retweet more
- When retweeting stuff [you] should RT & leave a comment with it to grab students' attention, I tend to scroll past a lot of the posts as I didn't realise it is this account RT'ing it and just think it's an irrelevant article

However not all students had positive comments to make regarding the Twitter account. Comments from students that were not positive about the account related to lack of use rather than criticism. These comments suggest that a more directive and interactive use of the Twitter account during class time may be beneficial to engage a larger number of students with it in order for them to gain value from its use and content. These comments included:

- I never used it so it doesn't apply to me
- Never used it

Second Survey: Group 2 (December 2018)

64% (n=21) of the respondents had a Twitter account; as for group 1, a further two students joined Twitter specifically to follow the @*psycarlow* account. Similar to the group 1 findings, all students who had Twitter accounts (n=23) expressed that they used their account to read other tweets. 48% (n=11, of the 23 Twitter users) explicitly use Twitter just to read other tweets. 48% (n=11, out of the 23 Twitter users) use Twitter for liking others tweets. In contrast to group 1, only 17% (n=4) use Twitter for tweeting personal opinion and 26% (n=6) using Twitter to retweet. This seems to indicate more passive use of Twitter by group 2, although with the caveat that numbers are small. Of the non-Twitter users (n=10), 90% (n=9) of respondents have looked at the class Twitter feed through the VLE but only 20% (n=2) viewing numerous times; note that 78% (n=18) of Twitter users also viewed via the VLE, with 35% (n=8) viewing numerous times.

Overall, 73% (n=24) of respondents agreed (selecting somewhat agree, agree or strongly agree) that they look at posts on the Twitter feed regularly, with 19% (n=6) disagreeing

(selecting somewhat disagree, disagree or strongly disagree). This is substantially higher when compared to how often group 1 looked at posts.
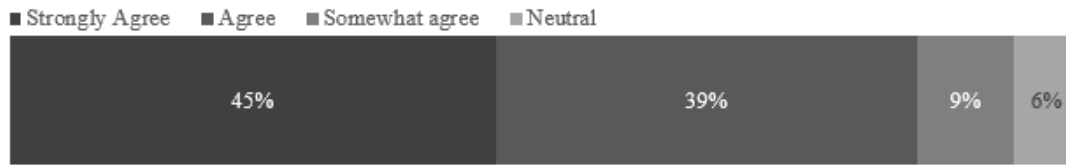
Figure 2: Group 2 student ratings of information on Twitter feed interesting

While group 1 engaged positively with the content of the tweets, this was even more evident in group 2. As can be seen in Figure 2, 94% (n=31) of respondents agreed that the information being retweeted was interesting. 88% (n=29) agreed that the information on the newsfeed helped in their understanding of topics. When asked about following research links to original articles, 79% (n=26) indicated that they had.

73% (n=24) of students agreed, that they would like to see more interaction with the Twitter feed during class time. When asked about Twitter use on other modules, 91% (n=30) indicated that they would like to see it used across more modules. Overall, there was overwhelming support for the benefits of using technology on the module with all who responded to the question (n=31) agreeing that the use of technology was useful on their course, with over half strongly agreeing (n=16).

When asked for a comment on what students found good about the Twitter account, positive student responses included:

- I like how it gave you different articles and different information to notes
- Articles were really relevant and gave a more societal view of content rather than been solely book content that is just black and white
- I had tweet notifications on so I got a notification each time the page tweeted or retweeted something, most of the time when I'm scrolling on Twitter I'm not doing anything else so it was a good time to do some reading relevant to my course
- It's up to date, very interesting and informative. It's a great tool while in college to have!
- It was very easy to access even if you didn't have a Twitter account

Similar to the group 1 opinion, there were positive comments in relation to the practical application of the account:

- I found information useful for assignments and exams
- Very informative for our assignments and tailored to help our development as professionals through providing us all with information on training and talks

Students were also asked for suggestions to develop the Twitter account. Feedback included:

- It would be great if possible to receive a notification linked to Blackboard every time there is a new post on the twitter account the same way we get a notification every time new class material is uploaded on Blackboard as many of us only use the Blackboard link to access Twitter and not the app and are unsure when there is new information posted
- Maybe guest tweeters to tweet on the page about specific topics
- You can create groups on Twitter so it could be a way to separate information between 3rd/4th year, however I read some posts meant for third year as it still remains relevant

Similar to group 1, responses that were not positive in relation to the Twitter account were specific to a student's lack of use of Twitter. Again, comments suggest a need to redirect more frequently to the account:

- I don't go on it regularly but when used during lectures I find it quite beneficial

4. Discussion

The findings indicate that across both groups a majority had Twitter accounts prior to the *@psycarlow* account being set up. Only a minority of students in each year group (eight in group 1 and four in group 2) used Twitter to tweet personal opinion, larger numbers in each group used Twitter in a passive way to read tweets (40% group 1; 48% group 2). Differences were noted across the two years in engagement with the Twitter material posted through the psychology account. 71% of group 1 agreed on the material posted being of interest compared to 94% of year 2. For group 1, 48% felt the information was helpful, compared to 88% in group 2. When asked about Twitter use in other modules, 58% of group 1 indicated their interest compared to 91% of group 2.

It is important to integrate Twitter naturally into your teaching strategy over the academic year, with an explicit approach that you want all students to engage rather than viewing as a supplementary add-on. The effective use of Twitter must begin in practical terms, once the account is set up, educating students on Twitter use will follow as there may be students who do not have accounts or don't understand its purpose. Therefore, it is useful to begin having the feed on display in class, show them functions around "liking" and "retweeting", who to follow, how to follow and more. Highlighting that a retweet is not an endorsement is important to facilitate critical thinking, this is stated in the account information. This all takes time but based on student comments, such as "make people join in at the beginning of the year and ask them to check it regularly," this time is well spent to ensure its use by a greater number of students on a more frequent basis.

To ensure students engage with current research and debate through the @psycarlow account, after the initial set up, time must be spent thinking about the type of content that is appropriate to be presented to students, in particular as the aim was to develop evidence-based practice in these undergraduates. Therefore, as with selection of any textbooks or additional material for course content, accounts followed online to retweet their content must be applicable and suitable. While originally the Twitter account was for dissemination of current academic research, debates and commentaries have also been found to be extremely useful in engaging students with appropriate supplementary material. For example, in class discussion around the legalisation or decriminalisation of cannabis use was fostered based on retweets of the Ana Liffey document *Safer From Harm*. Students could also follow the *#saferfromharm* for further online discussion. The use of information like this was reflected in student feedback:

- I found it was a good way to get up to date and relevant information in a way that was accessible and easily readable
- Articles were really relevant and gave a more societal view of content rather than being solely book content that is black and white

The open-ended student comments provide a particularly rich catalogue of the particular ways in which they found engaging with the contemporary research and debate appropriate to their requirements. As a student in the form of assignments and in their development as professionals through evidence based practice, the content of the tweets aided their progression and understanding.

It is encouraging that students engaged with the research suggested in the tweets for use in their assignments and tests, with positive comments from both groups. In group 1 48% followed links to original research and this increased to 79% in group 2. Comments included:

- Very informative for our assignments and tailored to help our development as professionals through providing us all with information on training and talks
- Links to research which can be used for exam purposes

As well as finding the material being helpful for assignments and exams, students' engagement with the material also helped to further develop understanding of topics discussed in class, as noted in comments above. This research began with an interest in facilitating student engagement with appropriate material outside the classroom to ensure evidence based practice was encouraged. This can be seen from a number of comments:

- Keep it going, I find it a great help in continuing evidence based learning and applying it to topics
- Promotes awareness of issues such as suicide and mental health
- I like that it was a good way to get up to date and relevant information in a way that was accessible and easily readable

While the majority of the feedback around student engagement was positive and practical, consideration must be given to students who are not engaging and why. The feedback from group 1 allowed for a more in-depth understanding of the needs of the students relative to presentation and content of the account. The time lapse between the two data collections allowed for reflection of group 1 suggestions and implementation of same with group 2. Overall the findings from group 1 and group 2 have been used to determine the effective use of Twitter as an appropriate pedagogical approach. However, there needs to be constant re-directing toward it and the content needs to be addressed in class to get students in the habit of engaging in with it. This was highlighted in feedback from both student groups. A number of students wanted more discussion of the content from Twitter in class (45% in group 1 and 73% in group 2).

As previously noted, in Ireland only 28% of adult social media use is through Twitter (IPSOS MBRI, 2017) which means embedding it in the VLE alongside redirecting and encouraging them to set up their own accounts. This was addressed in student feedback "I don't have a Twitter account, however the content that was showed to us during class was useful and interesting". Interestingly, a large number of Twitter users also viewed the account through the VLE so while practical for those without accounts, it may serve as an easy link to material when students are already on the VLE. Specifically directing student groups to content by retweeting was initiated following the group 1 survey responses. Retweets now include such statements as "Year 3, this is relevant to current discussion". Comments to redirect students to the Twitter account regularly have been important in terms of being explicit and following up that people have read the posts. This has fostered a culture of engagement with the account by the students and also reinforced the 'resident' status of the lecturer in the process.

While comments on the use of Twitter were predominantly positive, overall and increasingly so in group 2, a number of comments from both data collections addressed moving to a different platform such as Facebook or Instagram:

- It could be put across more social media platforms to get a greater number of students engaged
- Not Twitter related but I would suggest maybe adding a Facebook page as well with the links, due to the fact quite a few people don't use Twitter as often as Facebook

Although there is practical merit to this suggestion, such as a greater number of students seeing the posts, Twitter appears to be the most appropriate professional platform to use for this particular modules teaching and learning aims. Based on the research around Twitter mentioned above, such as Rinaldo, Tapp & Laverie (2011), Twitter is something you have to "sell" to the students as part of professional development as much as being part of any teaching and learning strategy. Again student suggestions around novel ways to get them to interact, such as the use of Twitter polls and guest Tweeters are definitely worth considering in an effort to use the account effectively with students. The use of the VLE to embed the account will continue to allow easy access to anyone who does not wish to set up a Twitter account for digital privacy concerns or other reasons. While all feedback was carefully considered, not all suggestions could be implemented. One student suggested having notifications through the VLE when new Tweets were posted, however the VLE does not support such a function.

As noted by Kelly (2017) and Adams Becker et al., (2017), based on student interest in using mobile phones in learning, there is a movement toward engaging with this medium in an appropriate pedagogical light. When asked about the use of technology on the module, 58% from group 1 and 91% from group 2 identified that they would like to see Twitter being used in other modules. Alongside this 68% of group 1 and 100% of group 2 indicated that they found the technology use on the course beneficial. Therefore, by using tools such as Twitter within the academic environment, it moves to a medium where many are comfortable and it opens up a conversation with students about their digital literacy, specifically about having an online presence and appropriate online communication. These are particularly important in their development as professionals. It is the merging of the requirements of a practice based course alongside technology use that enables skill development that fosters overall professional development.

5. Conclusion

Based on overall survey responses, there is a clear indication that students have engaged with current research and debate through the Twitter account. Following group 1 responses, the effective use of Twitter for undergraduate Applied Social Care students has been improved and expanded. It has also allowed for the development of appropriate digital literacy skills for the students on a platform relevant to their professional practice and development. For student and lecturer alike, based on reflection, becoming resident on a platform such as Twitter is a progressive process. This process has involved thinking critically about content disseminated and taking on board feedback from students. The academic behind the account

should think about their own online presence and how active a participant they are. The explicit modelling, by the students' lecturer, of the importance of continued and sustained engagement with current research and contemporary debates implicitly conveys the important message that even those with expertise and experience continue to learn and that Twitter can be a useful tool to find relevant, valuable information and sources.

Using a social media platform is a use of technology that requires collaboration both with students and other academics to ensure its effective use. Digital skills development around using Twitter needs to be ongoing in order to facilitate student suggestions. To conclude, it takes time to get students engaged with the process, and patience is required. While students are avid social media users, there needs to be a shift in emphasis from visiting to increasingly participating. This is an evolving process for students, but it is entirely appropriate toward their professional development alongside academic support.

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