Tips for Teaching

To Tweet or Not To Tweet? Social Media in the Classroom

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In our digital age, the typical humanities student encounters an ever-increasing array of new classroom technologies. I have given lectures that move seamlessly between video clips from YouTube, online news articles, and animated PowerPoint. Courses regularly require students to blog, create class-wide wikis, or even exchange work through online discussion groups.

Although these tools do make learning more efficient, I fear that too often we, as teachers, uncritically accept these new technologies in order to “keep up” with the digital acumen of our students, lest we fade into obsolescence.

I see this most explicitly in our attempts to incorporate social media like Facebook and Twitter into the classroom. A few of my peers, much braver than I, have attempted these experiments, with varying degrees of success. Still, I want to suggest in this article that we need to be more cautious in the way we approach new technologies in our teaching. Thinking through two questions, I believe, can help us assess the utility of these tools.

**Does the Technology Fundamentally Improve the Learning Process?**

I cut my teeth as a teacher in the business world, an experience that has stayed with me as a point of contrast to the university setting, particularly on the matter of technology.

On one hand, our corporate training centers had all the tools of the typical university classroom (whiteboards, video, Internet, etc.). On the other hand, however, we only made use of technologies if they substantively improved the learning process.

For example, we almost never employed PowerPoint, choosing instead to rely on prepared flipcharts and vigorous use of the whiteboard. PowerPoint, we were taught, fails to engage students. It is a flat experience for participants, who either mindlessly copy its contents or ask for copies of the presentation later (do you post your PowerPoint documents online for your students?). Whiteboards and flipcharts call the instructor into action, and students in turn are urged to follow along, to engage. Certainly, PowerPoint is more efficient, but efficiency does not equate to effectiveness.

The same might be said of social media such as Twitter. Admittedly, Twitter offers a way for students to share ideas easily with the class, and it equips the instructor with aggregate data with which progress can be tracked. However, at what cost?

Two goals for any humanities course, in my view, are (1) to refine the ability of students to think critically and (2) to enhance their ability to express these thoughts with clarity and concision. Tweets limited to 140 characters curtail a student’s ability to exhibit the nuance required for scholarly discourse. This is not to say that Twitter has no role in any course design, but it should not be viewed as a tool for advancing critical thought. A technical familiarity with Twitter might be advantageous for undergraduate majors in journalism or mass communication who might very well be using these services in their future endeavors, but it seems somehow contradictory to encourage tweeting in a course on world literature. While social media are not going away any time soon, educators do have a responsibility to consider the kinds of subjectivities they are encouraging in their classroom. Technologies, after all, shape the way all of us perceive our worlds.

**How Is the Technology Situated in the Broader Socio-Economic Context? And How Does This Impact the Learning Process?**

Technologies not only affect subjectivities; they are, themselves, effects of a particular set of social relations. As Raymond Williams suggests in his classic work *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*, tech-
nologies are cultural, and bare the markings of prevailing norms, values, and social structure. Social media, in other words, are embedded within a socio-economic context that has implications for education broadly.

In the 1995 film *Mr. Holland’s Opus* the music teacher (Richard Dreyfus) sparks controversy when he plays a rock ‘n’ roll record during class in order to engage his students. Parents and administrators were concerned that pop music threatened the virtues of a traditional education. Yet for Mr. Hollan, rock ‘n’ roll served as a way to connect with the younger generation, and in the end he wins the struggle.

Many of us in education understand social media similarly. Our students regularly use Facebook and Twitter, and, therefore, we must reach them in a way they can appreciate. But social media differ from more conventional technologies in one respect: they operate through a remarkably different regime of ownership. When an instructor includes a rock record, a video, or a text in a lecture, it is the class that constitutes the end user of the product. Presumably, either the university or the instructor has purchased or borrowed the product for its exclusive use in teaching.

However, students and teachers using Facebook or Twitter do not “own” the content they contribute. In fact, *the content is the product*, which is sold in various forms to interested parties, market researchers or advertisers. Social media, therefore, commoditize the content of the classroom, and demote the learning process to an instrument of profit-seeking activities.

This fact, I believe, raises important concerns about the ethics of incorporating these tools into course designs, particularly for the humanities where students are challenged to interrogate the assumptions that authorize particular social practices, not tacitly advance them. Should teachers be requiring their students to effectively become commodities for enterprises in which they have no stake?

I am not calling for a wholesale rejection of social media. They undoubtedly hold value for educators, but I suspect their value as empirical data outweighs their potential as pedagogical devices. Social media are, after all, a prevalent form of social discourse today (like newspapers, television, etc.), the analysis of which would certainly enliven classroom discussion.

My point is that educators must approach new technologies with an awareness of their larger implications. Technology both enables and transforms teaching; with each gain, something is lost. Even Plato, one of the earliest literate philosophers in the Western imagination, expressed ambivalence towards the “new” technology of writing: “It will implant forgetfulness in their souls; they will cease to exercise memory because they rely on that which is written, calling things to remembrance no longer from within themselves, but by means of external marks” (*Phaedrus*, 275a-b).