

The classroom, the campus, and beyond: Using Twitter to connect in #Latinxstudies courses

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About the Author

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Abstract

This article examines how Twitter can be used as a pedagogical tool in the Latinx studies classroom to connect students to a more expansive Latinx network beyond the local or campus community. The use of a course hashtag and careful delineation of a class Twitter project allows students to actively engage in national discussions related to Latinx studies and to critically (and virtually) curate an individual response to current events. This article includes a mixed-methods assessment of the use of Twitter in the Latinx studies classroom over a period of three semesters in an introductory-level course at a large, Midwestern, public institution.

Keywords

Twitter; Social media; Critical thinking; Digital pedagogies; Digital literacy

Bringing technology into the classroom is no longer considered novel or cutting edge in the university setting. For many instructors, utilizing digital tools and requiring students to engage virtually with their respective disciplines represents a required part of the curriculum. This article positions the use of the popular microblogging service, Twitter, in the Latinx studies classroom.¹ The central focus of the paper is to introduce a model to connect undergraduate students in the Latinx studies classroom with a national Latinx community beyond classroom or campus borders through Twitter. Before directly addressing a Twitter assignment designed for the Latinx studies classroom, I begin with a summary of scholarship focused on the use of Twitter in the university setting and, more specifically, on its use in the ethnic studies classroom. The article ends with the results of a post-course survey, given for three semesters, on the success of Twitter in engaging students with a broader national Latinx community.² I offer examples of student tweets and other ways to incorporate the Twitter assignment into the class and discuss patterns that emerged in the student survey.³

Twitter as an educational resource

Twitter is a social media application that enables users to communicate in real time through messages and shared or retweeted (RT) online content. A message on Twitter—a tweet—must adhere to a 140-character limit.⁴ The short and spontaneous messages are displayed on the author's profile and are accessible to followers. If the author chooses to unlock his or her account, any Twitter user can readily access the shared content. Twitter enables messages to be directed toward one person or account by using *@username* or to be privately viewed via a direct message (DM). My study of Twitter in the Latinx studies classroom focuses heavily on the RT function, as the project prompted students to share a previously published message with others using the RT feature with the course hashtag #LatinxStudies.

Since the emergence of the first Web 2.0 social media applications in the late 1990s, numerous empirical studies have emerged that center on the place of these technological networks in higher education. One of the most frequently cited benefits of the use of social media applications in the classroom concerns the increase in communication among students in the class with the more general public, especially when considering the microblogging service Twitter (Simon 2001; Greenhow and Robelia 2009; Jacquemin et al. 2014). Social media networks like Twitter are often preestablished modes of digital communication for students. Thus, *digitalk*—the language used in digital spaces—comes naturally to most iGeneration or Generation Z students in today’s university classrooms (Hawley Turner 2010).

In parallel with the clear focus on Twitter as a more interactive and contemporary means of communication in the higher education classroom, the use of Twitter as an alternative to more traditional composition assignments also represents an emerging topic of interest (Stommel 2012; Carlson 2016). Stommel champions the Twitter essay and its ability to restructure the way instructors have traditionally assigned compositions in the classroom. He confirms, “Composing a text message or tweet is most certainly a literate (and sometimes even literary) act” (2012, para. 7). Stommel instructs his students to condense their argument, along with evidentiary support, into the allotted 140 characters. The motivation for this assignment is to convey as much information as possible in as few words as possible. Such Twitter essay assignments build critical thinking skills by requiring students to make sense of information on the web and decide what information they find valuable, accurate, and applicable to their lives and their studies (Carlson 2016; Spelic 2016). Throughout this process, students develop critical voices within a public and unmoderated audience on Twitter.

Beyond critical-thinking skills, and of special interest to the present study, is the way the use of Twitter helps facilitate group formation, both in the classroom and within the Twittersphere. Relatedly, using Twitter in the classroom can help promote a sense of community (Garrison and Anderson 2003; Antenos-Conforti 2009; Lomicka and Lord 2012; Quirk and Young 2016). Twitter, in this sense, functions as a community-building tool capable of establishing collaborative digital communities in which students are able to “learn, share, and reflect” (Lomicka and Lord 2012, p. 48). The Twitter assignment outlined in the discussion that follows does not approach students’ social media presence as a tool to develop community solely among peers in the classroom, but instead as a tool to pinpoint specific examples of how the use of Twitter in a Latinx studies course allowed students to develop a sense of community within and beyond classroom walls.

Social presence: Students as part of a digital public

Social presence is essential to the development of a community both inside and outside the classroom (Garrison and Anderson 2003; Dunlap and Lowenthal 2009). Garrison et al. (2000) designed and implemented a model of a *community of inquiry* to assess how students establish and mediate a social presence. Social presence represents students sharing their personal characteristics with a wider community, and it can be measured by the degree to which students present themselves as authentic individuals to a digital public (Garrison et al. 2000; Rourke et al. 2001). Rourke et al. (2001) modified Garrison et al.’s (2000) model of community inquiry and understanding of social presence to further examine the ways in which social presence can be assessed. One of the modifications Rourke et al. (2001) made was the introduction of the interactive category, which addresses students’ social presence and refers specifically to an online participants’ interaction with others in the form of quoting messages of

others, responding to a thread, or directly messaging a given individual. I designed my Latinx studies Twitter assignment with digital engagement in mind, and the project, through required retweets and the use of a common course hashtag, exemplifies student interactivity as related to a social presence on Twitter. This digital interactivity is critical to Latinx studies because it can provide students in certain locations an opportunity to connect and interact with a more geographically diverse community.

Twitter in the university classroom

Finally, before addressing the methodology behind the design of my Twitter project, it is important to briefly outline existing scholarship on Twitter for specific courses within higher education and also to recognize the gap in empirical studies targeting the use of Twitter specifically in the ethnic studies or Latinx studies classroom. One area of interest in regard to the number of empirical studies relates to the use of Twitter in the foreign-language classroom. These studies often focus on how students can engage with native speakers of a foreign language via Twitter, as a means to offer opportunities for language practice across digital divides (Arnold et al. 2005; Borau et al. 2009; Junco et al. 2010; Lomicka and Lord 2012; Cacchione 2015). Publications on Twitter in the foreign-language classroom can be read alongside articles about the use of Twitter in the ethnic studies classroom because language courses teach cultural competency, tend to be interdisciplinary in scope, and often count—like ethnic studies courses—for diversity credits at large public universities. Just as Twitter serves as a bridge to engage students learning a foreign language with native speakers, it also can connect users with the Latinx community.

Two recent studies, although not focused on Twitter in the university classroom or within Latinx studies in particular (Vida 2018; Abrego 2017), center on the use of a common hashtag to

form culturally relevant communities. Vida considers the use of the hashtag #CentAmStudies to provide a “common space to share diverse cultures and political views dear to the peoples of the region. The hashtag has allowed them to assert their identities online and form a community that goes beyond Twitter” (2018, para. 1). Abrego similarly affirms that, vis-à-vis the hashtag #CentAmStudies, “Besides sharing news articles, collectively, we piece together what we think it means to be Central American. We wonder out loud in cyberspace” (2017, p. 97).

#CentAmStudies, and hashtags such as #BlackLivesMatter and #blacktwitterstorians, help raise awareness and spark discussion. These trending hashtags promote cohesiveness, with a focus on racial and/or ethnic minorities. What these examples have in common is that a virtual, online community organized around a hashtag inspired an offline community. This same connection, built and sustained through a commonly used hashtag, served to foster community in my Introduction to Latinx Studies classroom, both within the confinements of the physical class space and, more importantly, with a national Latinx community.

Designing for digital engagement: Developing community beyond the classroom

It is important to introduce the different spaces for digital student engagement that this Twitter project entailed, including using the course hashtag, engaging with discussion board posts, following Twitter users, scheduling Twitter days on the course calendar, and documenting student activity. Each of these is described in more detail below.

Course hashtag

The assignment, introduced during the first week of class, required students to use a previously created or new Twitter account from which they tweeted or retweeted self-selected content a minimum of nine times throughout the semester. Each tweet or retweet had to contain the unique course-selected hashtag; the hashtag contained an abbreviation of the course name

and semester. Using this common hashtag allowed for all tweets to be searchable, given the Twitter profile of the user was made public.

Discussion boards

In addition to the nine tweets or retweets, students needed to post a minimum of three times in the class discussion forum on the university-supported learning management system. The discussion board posts gave students an opportunity to expand on a retweeted message on Twitter, sharing with classmates why they were interested in the content and, if applicable, how it connected to course concepts. Furthermore, the discussion board provided a space for students to reflect on the content they tweeted (without word limits) and offered them an opportunity to reflect on what using this technology meant in terms of their own social media literacy.

Following users

Another integral requirement of the Twitter project was simply for students to follow a minimum of fifteen Latinx with a presence on Twitter. Who they chose to follow was left up to the students' discretion. I made it clear to students during the introduction to the project that they could follow musicians, artists, writers, athletes, journalists, and so on, as long as the individual identified as Latinx and had an active presence on Twitter. As an alternative, students could follow Latinx-based news sources or organizations. During each semester, the list of followers grew and broadened as the semester continued and as students added individuals or groups we talked about in class (authors we read, scholars and artists who visited campus, etc.). Some students in my past courses have even sent messages tagged to a specific Twitter user (these types of messages are also known as replies) to authors, scholars, or activists studied in class. In this way, the students authentically engaged in real time with the Latinx individuals or groups that they followed on Twitter. In relation to an assigned reading on the Blackicans of LA project,

Latino Studies
REFLEXIONES PEDAGÓGICAS

one student tweeted at the project's founder, Walter Thompson Hernández, "Skyped with Walter Hernandez, the creator of @blaxicansofla in class and asked questions about the project! Super interesting." Another student, unprompted by class readings, tweeted a reply to actor George Lopez, who had expressed his interest in learning more about his culture: "@georgelopez I know that feeling! In my #LatinxStudies class right now & learning everything about my Latina culture!"

Twitter days

Although the minimum requirements for the Twitter project included requiring students to post nine tweets or retweets, participate in three discussion board posts, and follow fifteen Latinx on Twitter, I graded the assignment based solely on participation. To boost students' use of the course hashtag, I planned for three "Twitter days" throughout the semester. On each of these days, I allotted fifteen minutes at the beginning or end of class for students to browse Twitter, find new accounts to follow, tweet or RT content, and participate in the course's discussion board. To ensure all students could participate and had access to internet, I reserved university wireless tablets for these three days. During the fifteen minutes that students worked in-class toward completing the minimum requirements for the assignment, I also perused Twitter—displaying my computer's screen on the projector—and retweeted student tweets from my own account. I made links and sparked conversations among students in the course by using the reply feature (For example: "Hey @student1, check out what @student2 said about...").

Documenting activity

During the final week of the class, I asked students to use a handout that I provided them to document their Twitter activity and confirm their participation in the virtual assignment. At this time, students turned in their count of tweets and retweets as well as their Twitter handle

(username). I held students accountable to confirm they met the project's requirements.

Additionally, on the final day of class, I used Storify, a content-creation software, to create a social media timeline that referenced all appearances of our course hashtag (on Twitter or other digital platforms).⁵ Storify allowed me to chronicle a semester in tweets and collect, arrange, and present information from social media, as well as insert my own text and images. Figure 1 is a screenshot from Storify that recognized a pattern in student tweets centered on current events. You can see that both students retweeted articles on two influential moments that took place during the fall of 2017 and affected Latinx communities. During the final day of class, I also included on the Storify timeline discussion questions that guided the students in a reflection of content covered during the semester.

See Figure 1 Below

Connections beyond the hashtag: Conversing with a national Latinx community

Although I reserved a small amount of class time for students to work on the Twitter project, the use of the course hashtag expanded well beyond the minimum requirements. The level of digital student engagement, during each of three semesters considered, exceeded the initial assignment, as most students used the hashtag to share information about events they attended on or off campus related to Latinx studies and also frequently shared articles, photos, and other images taken with their personal devices or found on the web that related to course concepts.

The use of the course hashtag expanded without instructor prompting, but I also expanded student engagement with the Twittersphere and the course hashtag each semester. The second semester that I assigned the Twitter project, I incorporated Twitter into a homework assignment. When reading about the differences between code-switching and Spanglish, for

example, I asked students to tweet articles on this topic using the course hashtag. We used the online content students had found as a starting point for discussion in the following class. During the third semester that I assigned the project, I expanded it further by incorporating student tweets and retweets into quizzes given in class. See Figure 2 for an example of how I incorporated images tweeted by students using the common hashtag into a quiz centered on language. In particular, I used the images (screenshots from Twitter) to confirm that students understood the difference between Spanglish and code-switching.

See Figure 2 Below

Highlights of student tweets over the three-semester period include a selfie one student snapped with Lin Manuel Miranda in Washington, DC, during spring break; retweets from NPR's *Latino USA* account, when students tweeted to the podcast account after listening to an episode for class; and photos of students attending Latinx cultural events in the university community and beyond. Additionally, some students involved in Latinx clubs or student organizations on campus used the course hashtag as a virtual *evite*, encouraging classmates to attend events they were involved with on campus.

Student responses to assigned *digitalk*

Aside from observing students' engagement with the Twitter project and assigning them a final grade based on their self-reported participation, I surveyed a total of 95 students at the end of the semester across three sections of an Introduction to Latinx Studies course. The brief survey contained four questions or statements. The first three statements, on a five-point Likert-type scale (ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree), consisted of the following: (1) The Twitter project allowed me to connect virtually with the Latinx community; (2) The Twitter project helped me to see how broad and diverse the Latinx community is; and (3) I

would like to do a similar project using Twitter in another course in the future. The survey ended with a final narrative-based question that was open-ended, prompting students to summarize their overall takeaway from the Twitter project. My intent in the following paragraphs is to integrate and triangulate the open-ended question responses, the quantitative data, and my own observations as the instructor of the course in order to consider the impact of the Twitter project for students.

Looking at the survey results from the three semesters combined, 89% agreed or strongly agreed that they connected with the Latinx community through the Twitter assignment. Moreover, 95% agreed or strongly agreed that the project helped them perceive the depth and diversity of the Latinx community. An interest in keeping up with current events through a social media platform like Twitter was a factor many students referenced in the open-ended question on the student survey. One student shared that the project allowed him or her “to see current events in a more informal manner,” while another noted that the use of Twitter “helped bring the lessons from Latino/a Studies to the real world.”

Although it is worthwhile to consider the compiled data from three semesters of student surveys, the fact students had an increasingly positive response to the project each subsequent semester comes as no surprise. For example, in the first semester, 62% of students reported they were interested in doing a similar project in another course, whereas 100% of students in the third semester said the same. This trend reflects my tweaks of the assignment, both in the way I introduced it to the class and in the additions (such as the homework assignments and quiz questions) that incorporated the course hashtag and Twitter conversations into the course in different ways. Additionally, this trend that emerged from quantitative data could also reflect the increasing integration of social media into students’ lives and coursework. The Twitter

assignment capitalizes on the growing integration of social media platforms in both personal and academic settings to promote learning and engagement.

The survey results were overwhelmingly positive, confirming the majority of students thought favorably of the Twitter project, but two general patterns emerged in the student narratives that help pinpoint why the assignment, in the eyes of the students, was a success. For one, students consistently reflected that the project connected them to a national Latinx community. One student commented, “Social media allowed us to get closer or connect to the Latino/a community.” A Latinx student in the class echoed the same sentiment, “I liked connecting with other people of my culture.” Connecting the students in the course to a national Latinx community and immersing them in current events affecting the Latinx community vis-à-vis real-time and authentic Twitter dialogues reflects my initial goal at the onset of the project. One student said it best: “From social media outlets like Twitter we are able to connect with people around the world.” Not only (trans)national connections resulted from the project, however. The second pattern represented in the open-ended student responses reflected a connectivity not just among a broad Latinx public on Twitter, but also among peers in the classroom. A student shared that “it was cool to see the tweets from other students” and “seeing the opinions of my peers.” Another commented: “I liked seeing what everyone shared.” Beyond connecting individual students to a wider Latinx community, the use of a common course hashtag also served to unite the students enrolled in the course.

Over the course of the three semesters, less than 10% of students shared that they would not like to do a similar project in another course. Nearly half of the students who disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement about repeating the Twitter project in the future also wrote on the survey that they had little to no previous experience with Twitter and/or no interest in

using the social media platform. Some students noted their not using Twitter outside the classroom as a negative factor, whereas others appreciated and benefited from using social media in a classroom setting: “I thought it was super cool, because I use Twitter everyday so it was easy and fast to follow new accounts.” One student shared, “It helped me learn to be professional on social media.” This notion of social media literacy recognizes the role of using social media in the university classroom as a means to teach and discuss digital citizenship and support students’ curation of a professional voice and profile online. Using Twitter in a pedagogical setting develops and encourages student voices within a public sphere to an authentic and unmoderated audience.⁶

Looking forward: The future of Twitter in the Latinx studies classroom

“We may have to move to another social media platform. Twitter for me is like 3+ years ago,” a student during the third semester of my Introduction to Latinx Studies course shared in the survey. Saying the platform is “like 3+ years ago” hints at the rapid shifts in popularity of social media applications, but the comment has also encouraged me to think about how social media projects in the classroom can be sustainable if students are no longer familiar with the tools. Given the nature of Web 2.0 technologies, instructors need to be aware of the need to constantly evolve and adapt the projects and tools used. At the same time, Twitter, given the nature of the forum, allows students to be exposed to a wide range of contemporary topics in real time, and I believe it represents the ideal platform for this project. The medium of communication Twitter offers also enables students to think critically about the possible feigned neutrality of news sources and to question and critique news encountered online, reflecting on the nature of how news spreads in a digital age. This is not to say, however, that an alternative social media platform might make more sense in the future for a similar project.

Latino Studies
REFLEXIONES PEDAGÓGICAS

Given the fact that this study only focuses on three semesters of a Twitter project, the enthusiastic student reaction to the assignment is encouraging. For this reason, I have continued to use a slightly modified version of the Twitter project in my Introduction to Latinx Studies courses. The results from the student surveys suggest that Twitter, and the use of a common course hashtag in the #LatinxStudies classroom, enables students to forge connections not only with their peers, but also with a more expansive, national Latinx population.

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¹ I use the term *Latinx* throughout this article for consistency purposes and also to reflect the use of the course hashtag, #LatinxStudies. Direct quotes from anonymous student responses, however, sometimes use other terms such as *Latino/a*.

² I want to thank the Iowa State SoTL Scholars Program for their support of this project during the 2017–2018 academic year, particularly Joshua Mitchell for his guidance and statistical expertise.

³ This research meets the ethical guidelines of the Institutional Review Board at Iowa State University. I do not include the names of students or their Twitter handles. I also leave this information anonymous in the References section. I have changed all references to the course hashtag to a general #LatinxStudies, although, as is clear from Figure 1, each semester the course hashtag was unique and referenced the semester and year (#USLS211_F17, for example, includes the course abbreviation, course number, F for Fall, and 17 for 2017.)

⁴ Twitter doubled its signature 140-word count limit to 280 in late November 2017 for a small group of users.

⁵ Storify was made unavailable after May 2018. Alternatives for content creation include Scoop.it and ContentGems.com.

⁶ Hawkins confirms that if we want students to be activists, they need to have social media skills (2015, p. 155) so they can spread information about events and/or organizations that are important to them. His article approaches social media as a tool for *consciousness-raising* and group formation.



CURRENT EVENTS on our radar: Puerto Rico and hurricane relief and DACA

Fig. 1 Screenshot from Storify

1. Both of these images were retweeted using our course hashtag. Circle the image that is an example of SPANGLISH and, in the lines below, define Spanglish.



Fig. 2 Example of question on in-class quiz