

TWITTER AS A TEACHING TECHNIQUE?*

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Abstract

Twitter is a popular microblogging platform that enables users to send and share posts of up to 140 characters known as “tweets”. (www.twitter.com). In this paper, I would like to discuss the use of twitter as an interesting social media to teach and generate debate with students. This experience has taken place at the Carlos III University of Madrid with students of law, business and journalism. I am describing the basic guidelines to implement this social media tool as well as the results of this implementation according to my own teaching experience.

Keywords: Twitter, social media, innovation, teaching, debate, students.

INTRODUCTION

Since 2010, I have been using twitter in my classes of human rights, political philosophy and legal theory at Carlos III University (uc3m) in Madrid. I came up with this idea quite intuitively as I have been tweeting for personal and professional purpose (my account: @duendaude). My objective in the use of twitter as a teaching technique consists in improving the quality of the debates with the students. In June 2011, this experience received the reward of “teaching innovation” by the Uc3m². In this paper I would like to share my personal methodology in order to implement this social media in the academic field and hopefully received feedbacks in order to improve it. Then, I will discuss the results and the aspects that should be enhanced in this new teaching experience.

1. TWITTER AS A TEACHING TECHNIQUE: SOME BASIC GUIDELINES

1.1 Basic requirements

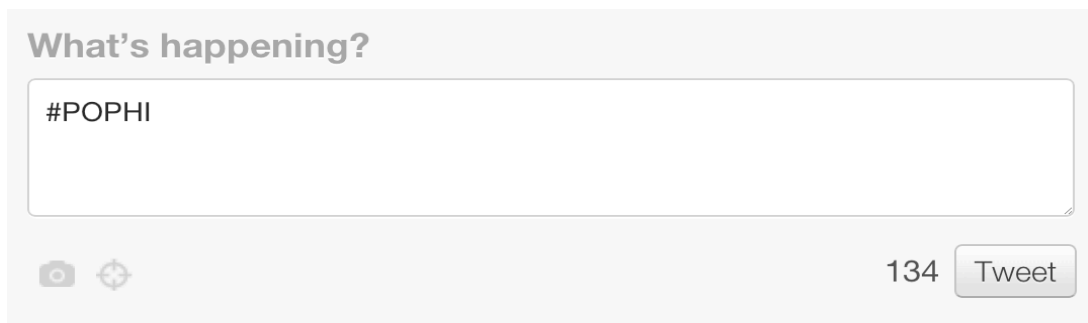
In order to use twitter, some basic organization and technical devices should be correctly setup. First, Wi-Fi should be available in the classroom. Second, each group of 2/3 students would use one laptop. In general, the vast majority of students have a personal laptop. If it is not the case, it is important to check if the library of the university has a laptop loan policy. Third, the professor should be able to connect his/her computer to a projector. Indeed, and as we will see further, he/she will display the tweets of the students on the projection screen. Fourth, the students should have acknowledged a calendar with the “twitter sessions” and if some materials must be seen previously (articles, videos, etc.). In my case, for instance, those sessions happen twice a month and each time students have to check some kind of materials.

1.2 The organization

An organized classroom is a very important condition for a good learning environment. In all my classes, and not only during the twitter sessions, I ask the students to arrange their desks in a U-Shape. It facilitates not only group discussions, but also interactions between students. The lesson is now not only focused on the teacher but it also encourages them to participate. Then, let the students form groups of 2 or 3 persons. For each session, I think it is important to change the members of the groups in order to avoid routine. Thus, and at the beginning of the class, the professor will have to write down the names of the members of each group. Then we can make the following steps:

² Please read in my blog the post “ Mis proyectos de Innovación Docente apoyados por la Uc3m”: <http://bit.ly/PELEtwitter> (Last access 21.01.12). Also, this paper takes part of the following research Project: Consolider-Ingenio 2010 “El Tiempo de los Derechos” (CSD2008-00007) - IDHBC/Ministerio de Ciencia e Innovación.

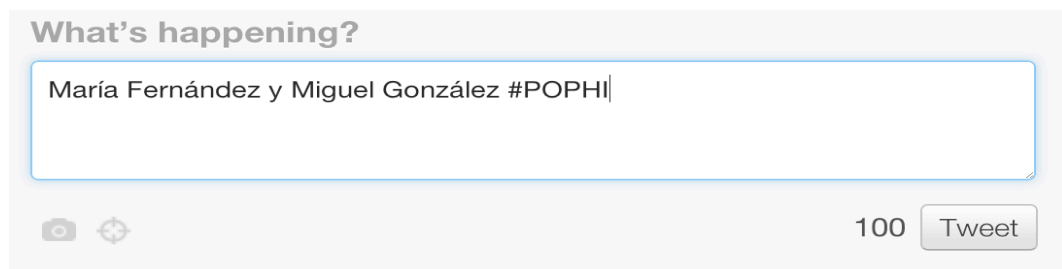
- The professor log in under his/her twitter profile
- He/she projects his/her twitter timeline on the projection screen
- At the same time, all the groups connect to twitter and log in under the account of one member of each group
- The professor writes a first tweet where a specific hashtag of the twitter session will appear (see “Fig. 1”)



(Fig. 1)

In this case, I have chosen #POPHI for my first twitter session in political philosophy. The next sessions were, for instance, #POPHI2, #POPHI3, etc. The hashtag is commonly used to mark keywords in twitter. Thus, if you click on a hashtagged word in twitter, you will instantaneously see all the messages with this word. For that reason, during our twitter sessions, all the tweets will have to finish with a specific and common hashtag.

The first tweet of each group consists in the names of the members of the group “Fig. 2”. This is the only way for the professor to identify the students during the session.



(Fig.2)

When all the groups have written this first tweet, the professor asks a question and writes it down as a tweet message. As an example, you can see “Fig.3”:

What's happening?

Explain the different conceptions of justice in Aristotle #POPHI

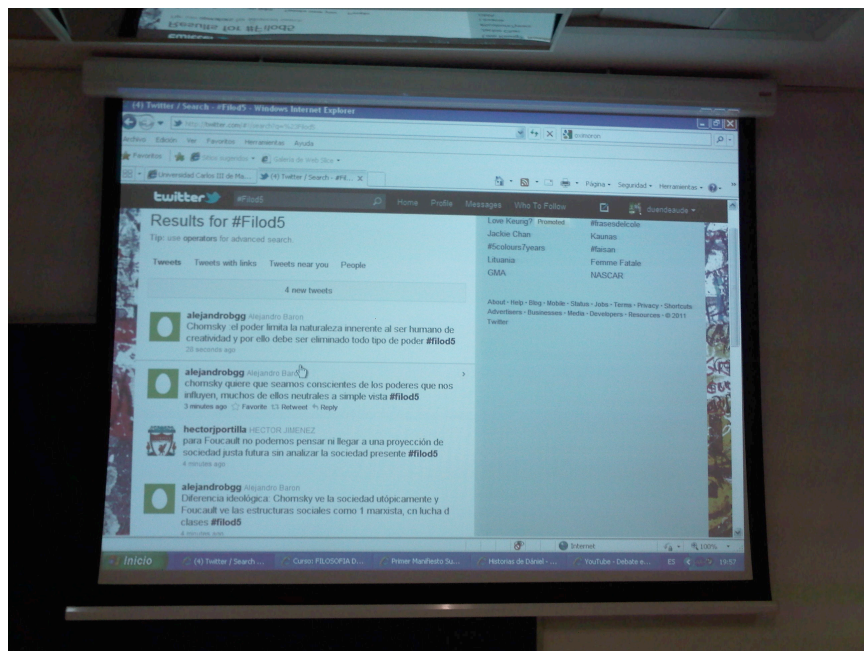


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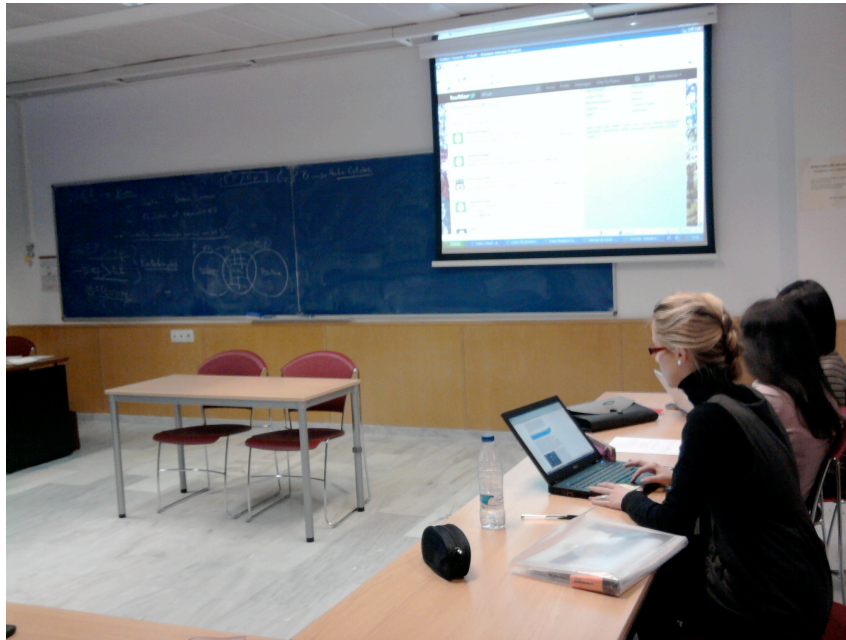
Tweet

(Fig.3)

When each group clicks on #POPHI, they will see this question on their laptop. Then, I think it is important to let 5 to 10 minutes to the students to think about their answers. One of the goals of this exercise is to facilitate dialogue and exchange between students. Each group has to come up with a single answer (of 140 characters), which implies the ability to reach a certain consensus between the members of the group. After 15 minutes, the professor and the students will be able to read their tweets in their laptops but also on the projection screen. See "Fig. 4" and "Fig.5". They do not have to reply necessarily to the account of the professor.



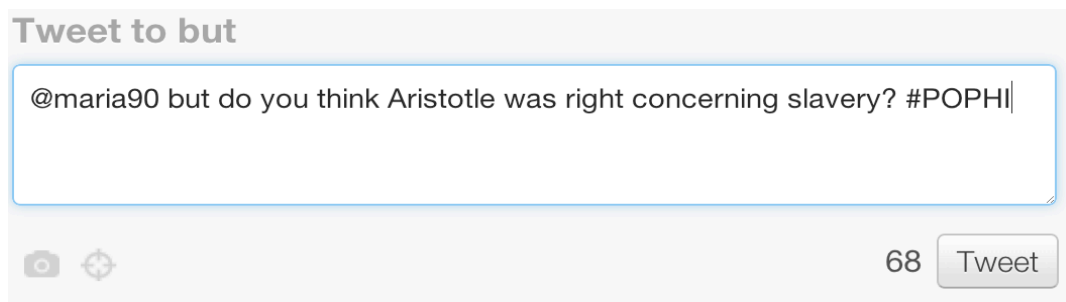
(Fig.4)



(Fig. 5)

The professor should identify which groups are comfortable with the exercise, and which groups have some difficulties in order to help them. Also, I suggest - at least at the beginning of the session - that each group has a limited number of two tweets in order to avoid the monopolisation of the debate by some of them. After this first round of tweets, the professor should ask some groups to clarify and explain orally their tweets. It will help them to deepen their thinking and broaden the debate. This is precisely in this moment when the professor should be able to connect the different ideas, find some similar or discordant opinions, and incites the debate.

Afterwards, other questions might be raised in twitter by the professor and the different groups may communicate with one another. The student is not only a participant but also a collaborator³. For instance, see “Fig.6” below:



(Fig.6)

One of the most important aspects of this teaching technique consists in alternating the twitter participation with the oral debate during the same session. Indeed, letting the students tweeting without any oral intervention, neither from them, nor from the professor would generate eventually a cold environment. The professor should be able to ask orally the correct questions to the targeted groups in order to create an innovative intellectual environment.

³ Wicks, D., *Teaching with twitter*, youtube video: <http://bit.ly/WicksTwitterEDU> (last access: 20.01.12).

2. TWITTER AS A TEACHING TECHNIQUE: SOME RESULTS

Thanks to this methodology, the quality of the debates has considerably improved. Indeed, students are learning how to sum up their ideas in a proper way and to explain them orally in front of the class. There is a synthesis of an idea (the tweet) and then the thesis (when a group is asked to explain it). The role of the professor is also changing, as he/she is becoming also a moderator. He/she has to be able to raise the correct questions, to lead the debate, and to identify who is participating and who is not. It is very important to find a balance between the basic ideas that the professor wants to transmit to the students and the very own dynamic of the twitter session. If correctly used, Twitter enables to create scenarios that do not yet exist, instead of looking at absolute truth based on the past⁴. Also, this exercise is suitable to check *how* students express their understanding of a material. It is focused on the expression, and develops their sense of analysis and team working.

There are of course some difficulties. This experience relies on Wi-Fi and it has happened that some groups were not able to check their tweets in the general timeline displayed on the projection screen. Also, some groups are more interested in the debate, than others. For this very reason, it is important to change to composition of the groups during each session. Finally, the students might change the perspective of the debate (which can be good) and start trivial conversations. For that reason, it is important for the professor to lead the debate and keep on enhancing new insights.

I would like to conclude this paper, with a picture - "Fig. 7" - of last year (April 2011) in a class of human rights. In this case, the students were connected to twitter and I asked them to find and debate around some specific diplomatic cables (after the wikileaks revelations).



(Fig.7)

As Wi-Fi is usually available everywhere in campuses, twitter sessions can also be done outside the classroom. Of course, there is no projection screen, and the professor should check the timeline on his/her own laptop. Twitter sessions (inside or outside the classrooms), are just part of a more

⁴ Verhart, B., "Education is failing the future-makers" in *Wired* (US edition), January 2012, pp. 53-54.

human approach of teaching: ideas and opinions are not solely imposed by the professor, but commonly constructed by the professor and the students. In other words, the objective is to overcome the classic teacher-centered classes. Thus, nowadays and to some extent, the Socratic ideal of maieutics can be put into practice through a new approach of social media.

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