The benefit of Twitter
What can it add to your course?

I’ve been a bit skeptical about what Twitter can provide that’s better than what most instructors already do. It seem like a pretty superficial tool for academics. But after viewing a Faculty e-Commons webinar by Brian Mull, a former teacher and current education technology guru, I got the point. (I also found this article, which features his same story, and more about using Twitter.) The resonating moment about the benefit of Twitter in education came after Brian posted a rhetorical question about the uprisings in Egypt, with the hashtag, “#Egypt.” Anyone around the world who followed or searched, “#Egypt,” could then see his question. And it was immediately replied to by an Egyptian woman who was actually standing in a Cairo street with a crowd of protestors. He had not expected this.

Being a good teacher, Brian didn’t let this unlikely connection go to waste. He continued tweeting with the woman, and the next day, he brought her into a classroom via a Skype video chat, to talk with a class of Texas students who had mostly never been out of their own small town. That’s a big deal.

So what’s the point of Twitter? The benefit comes from knowing how to use ‘#’ and ‘@’. These symbols allow users to search for a specific topic or for the posts of a particular expert. Find what people are posting about Gifted Education by searching, “#gtchat.” Get automatic updates from the experts at “@TeacherCast” by searching for them and clicking the “Follow” button. The benefit of Twitter over other searches is that the most current information lands on top, unlike what may come up from a Google search, and you can weed out the junk by finding and following a reliable expert.

And, like in Brian’s case, you and your students may be able to connect with people who are part of the action, simply by sharing a serendipitous tweet with the right tag.

Visit my blog post for a list of educational hashtags to help you search Twitter, and for a video tutorial on how to use Twitter.

What I’m learning from Harvard
A MOOC story

Taking a bit of my own advice from a previous newsletter, where I recommended that instructors try out a free online course in order to “borrow” as many good teaching strategies as possible from the experience as a student, I recently started a computer programming MOOC from Harvard. Along with over 100,000 of my closest friends.

While learning what I hope are some useful job skills, I’ve been working to distill out as many teaching tips and online course ideas as I can, to share the information with everyone here at ESU.

Because it’s too much to condense into a newsletter, or even my regular blog posts, I’ve added a MOOC-y Lessons page to the blog, where I will add in the latest ground-breaking revelations, or, more likely, helpful reminders on best practices in online education. As I progress through the course, I’ll add more updates, so stay tuned.

What kind of things have I uncovered so far??? : Using student introduction videos, posting course information, creating a motivated group of students, deciding the length of online videos, and much more.

Visit the blog page to see the details.
Teaching introverts

What does engagement look like?

In our efforts to make our courses more engaging and dynamic, we add class discussions and other activities that get the students out of their seats and working with each other. We know that active learning is more powerful than passive learning, which is why we push students to get up and collaborate. Yet some students seem to put on the brakes and resist activities that require anything other than listening to you lecture while they write notes. Are these students lazy, or what?

Well, sometimes yes. But for roughly 25% of your students, a lecture is the optimal level of engagement. Being continually prompted to get up and interact with their peers seems like more of an interruption to learning than like the high-point in class. These are the introverts. They aren’t necessarily lazy, or even shy. They aren’t necessarily antisocial or lacking confidence. Their brains just work differently, and since we’re in the business of brains, we should know how to design activities in a way that works with their mental processes.

Some Science: When an extrovert’s brain processes information, it takes a shorter path, mainly through the regions of the brain tied to speech, emotions, and active movement. An introvert’s brain sends the information on a longer path, mainly through the “thinking” portion of the brain. Through the longer path, more areas of the brain are activated, meaning that more related knowledge is able to be applied to the incoming message. The results of these different chemical pathways are one group of people who think quickly, sometimes while or after speaking, and another group who ponders slowly and synthesizes deeply to tie multiple ideas together into a whole. Because of these differences in brain chemistry, requiring an introverted student to magically become more extroverted is similar to repeatedly taking the pencil out of a child’s left hand and putting it into their right. It’s not a matter of simple preference; it’s a matter of biology. It is possible for introverts to be bubbly and charming for awhile, but it can be stressful, and stressed students don’t learn as well as comfortable students.

Some Effects (realizing that there is a continuum of intro-/extro-version and that most people lie in the middle, these are generalities…): Introverted students tend to be more engaged and excited by the content, rather than by the activities in class. Forcing them into a group adds several person-shaped barriers to their learning. While the introvert takes notes, he/she is processing information, and working diligently to learn. This doesn’t mean that extroverts are not hard workers, but their efforts are naturally directed toward social aspects of learning, rather than self-reflection. While extroverts learn communally through sharing and arguing, introverts are still processing what someone said 3 minutes ago. By the time they know what to say, someone else has already made that point, or the class has moved on. As a result, classroom discussions can be taken over by extroverts, making introverts appear unengaged, which is far from the truth. With the ever-growing push toward social learning, and the idea that students always learn best in groups, we run the risk of steering too far in one direction. That can be harmful to the learning of a class, as group progress can become governed by what gets shared first and quickly becomes popular, rather than by what is the best answer. The idea that quiet students need to be “drawn out of their shells” implies that they need to be fixed in order to learn. This negative sentiment is what leads to self-doubt and lower self-confidence in many introverts. The reality is that instead of trying to fix the students, we should fix our class’s activities to allow introverts to do what they do best, allow extroverts to do what they do best, and allow the instructor to assess them both fairly. So how do you help introverts contribute to the class more meaningfully?

Some Solutions:

More time to ponder — When a topic will be discussed in class, give resources and sub-topics to students beforehand to allow time for introverts’ ideas to percolate for a couple of days. Online discussions are a great way to allow introverts to discuss with the class at their own pace, and form thoughts prior to class time. In the shorter-term, when asking a toss-up question to the class, allow several seconds of “wait time” to let everyone consider the answer before sharing.

Small groups first — Introverts prefer working in smaller groups, where fewer voices and ideas will bombard them at once. Before having a whole-class discussion, have them work in pairs or small groups. Even if the introvert doesn’t speak in front of the whole class, his/her ideas from the small discussion can still be shared by another group member.

Teach social interaction — While it is a misconception that all introverts are socially illiterate, some of them are. Throwing students into group work and saying, “it’s to teach them about the real world,” is only helpful if you are actually teaching them. If they haven’t figured it out on their own by now, another group assignment won’t help. In all areas of content, job-specific social scenarios may need to be explicitly taught, with precise behavioral outcomes and guidelines.

Explain the point — If introverts feel that you add group activities for the sole sake of variety, they will resist. They think that their way of learning is best. Why change? With any group activity, make the benefits very clear. If you want to see this in action (with potentially cheezy acting), the U. of Minnesota’s Center for Teaching and Learning has a great tutorial website for addressing specific hurdles in conducting an active classroom. Click through the menu bar on the left side of their page.