LETTERS
Twitter as an In-Class Backchannel Tool in a Large Required Pharmacy Course

Twitter is a social networking site or microblog that delivers small bursts of information (140 characters per post), known as tweets, instantaneously in real time. Although Twitter is mostly used personally, it has potential to be a valuable in-class educational tool (eg, backchannel). Backchannel is an electronic discussion that occurs simultaneously in real time during a lecture or conference where students may post questions, comments, or respond to other posts. Instructors can utilize backchannel to increase participation, clarify information, foster discussion, evaluate students’ understanding of topics, administer quizzes, and more. Backchannel posts may be visible only to the instructor or to the entire class. Proper backchannel etiquette is essential as some instructors have reported disruptive, inappropriate comments posted by students. The use of backchannel in academia has been found effective for both instructors and students and can shift the control over learning to students, helping more introverted students increase their participation.

The research on the use of backchannel in pharmacy and healthcare education is limited. Researchers examined the use of Twitter in a first-year pharmacy law course comparing the frequency of questions either through Twitter or hand-raising. Of 200 students, only 8 asked questions using Twitter vs 30 questions with hand-raising. Despite the authors’ feelings that the use of Twitter was a failure, students reported that backchannel allowed those students to express themselves who otherwise might not have. In a critical care course, 12 students utilized Twitter as a backchannel to respond to videos and questions posted by tutors, and both instructors and students found the experience to be a positive one. When Twitter was used in a pharmacy management course to increase students’ engagement and interaction with faculty during lectures, students reported that the tool facilitated participation but prevented effective note-taking. Authors recommended implementing a balanced approach when using Twitter in regards to participation and distraction.

In our large required, lecture-based, team-taught non-prescription drugs/self-care products course, students were given specific instructions on how to create and use Twitter accounts for an optional in-class backchannel. All student Twitter user ID’s were added to a course Twitter list to access their tweets during each session. Course coordinators reminded students at the beginning of each lecture that backchannel was being utilized. Instructors and course coordinators monitored the feed for students’ real-time questions and comments related to the lecture content. After class, responses to unanswered questions were posted on the course learning-management system discussion board.

Following the last class of the semester, 266 students completed an anonymous voluntary institutional review board-approved survey, with 69% feeling that backchannel was not distracting during the sessions and 75% reporting it was relatively easy to follow tweets/questions. Fifty-five percent (and 31% neutral) appreciated the opportunity to use backchannel for questions during the live sessions and 93% liked that backchannel was not mandatory. Fifty-one percent (and 28% neutral) agreed that backchannel should be used in other large classes. Thirty-nine percent (and 40% neutral) felt that being anonymous to their classmates was important to them. In their written comments, a number of students commented positively about not needing to raise their hand to ask a question in front of the entire class, while some reported that the backchannel disrupted the lecture flow.

Twitter is still a relatively new tool utilized in education. Based on our experience, students seemed more engaged, commenting and asking a greater number of questions than in the previous years. It is unknown if the increased engagement was due to the novelty and the active-behavior element of tweeting. Because of initial concern that students would be uncomfortable tweeting using their actual names, they were invited to post anonymously to classmates to enhance participation. To discourage inappropriate behavior, course coordinators collected student name and Twitter user ID pairs and shared tweeting etiquette with students. In our course, based on the literature recommendation, all students were manually enrolled into a Twitter course list. However, to decrease faculty workload, students should be taught the importance of hashtags (#) in tweet retrieval and be encouraged to use a course-specific hashtag to link their tweets to the course.

For a mandatory backchannel to be successful, each student must have a mobile device or a computer in the classroom, and at the start of the course instructors must evaluate if students have the necessary technology. To effectively incorporate Twitter as a backchannel in a team-taught course, it is important to have all faculty members’ buy-in. To decrease disruption in the lecture content flow, faculty members need to logically chunk their lectures to allow for periodic consistent backchannel check-in, which is also supported by best pedagogical practices. At least initially, it is also wise to have another faculty member or teaching assistant follow the Twitter
feed during the session to assist with question management and to provide technological support to faculty members who are new to the use of Twitter.

Our overall experience with the use of Twitter as a backchannel was a positive one. As Twitter gains popularity as an educational resource, students and instructors will become more comfortable and accepting with its use.

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REFERENCES