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To: ["TEACHING-TOOLBOX@LISTSERV.JMU.EDU"](mailto:TEACHING-TOOLBOX@LISTSERV.JMU.EDU)
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Teaching Toolbox: Teaching with Twitter

by Emily O. Gravett and Elaine Kaye

The end of the semester is almost upon us. As you begin to think about your spring courses, consider that many instructional activities can tap into students' interest in social media, such as [Twitter](#). Twitter is an online social networking tool that allows users to post and read 140-character messages called "tweets." Faculty at a variety of institutions (e.g., [a Davidson biology professor](#)) have experimented with using Twitter in their teaching: to extend conversations beyond the classroom, to integrate information literacy into a course, to make diverse interpretations of a text visible, to connect to professional communities of practice, or to help students practice the skill of close reading.

In [Educause's "Tweeting in Higher Education: Best Practices" \(2015\)](#), Amy L. Chapman reports that "a survey of literature regarding Twitter use in the higher education classroom finds substantial support and good advice regarding its usefulness in pedagogy." According to her literature survey, Twitter can:

- help to connect students to the content of the class (students spend more time on their coursework and are more engaged with the material)
- encourage the formation of a community of learners (students connect and build relationships with one another)
- promote student engagement (and enjoyment!) in courses
- allow instructors to respond to student issues in a timely manner (quickly disseminate current topical information or feedback on learning)

Based upon the available literature, Chapman also offers several recommendations for instructors who might be interested in using Twitter to teach, including the following (lightly adapted):

- **Provide a short overview of Twitter** to introduce what might otherwise be a new learning tool to students. Don't assume they will be proficient.
- **Clearly communicate the pedagogical rationale**, regardless of any objective benefits, of using Twitter.
- **Require use of the platform.** A number of students in a study by [Lin, Hoffman, and Borengasser \(2013\)](#) advised integrating the Twitter activity into the class requirements. [Junco, Heiberger, and Loken \(2010\)](#) found it necessary to require students to use the platform in order to reap its benefits, rather than simply encouraging it.

- **Participate on Twitter regularly** along with the students. Studies by [Junco, Elavsky, and Heiberger \(2013\)](#) as well as [Prestridge \(2014\)](#) concluded that instructor engagement with Twitter is essential for it to have an effect on student outcomes.
- **Refer to and reinforce the tweets in class.** For example, questions can be tweeted to the students and then discussed during class time to encourage everyone's involvement.

[Innovation Services](#) also provides support for the great number of faculty at JMU who integrate social media such as Twitter into their teaching. This support includes programming like the Teaching with Social Media in Higher Ed. Series (check the [website](#) for offerings) as well as individual consultations to help faculty develop social media activities or assignments. Faculty members often use social media as part of a larger digital assignment too. If you are interested in digital assignments, in general, the [Art of the Digital Assignment](#) is a foundational program that will be offered in the spring. [Elaine Kaye](#), an instructional designer with Innovation Services, would be happy to speak with you further about how to integrate social media into your teaching.

About the authors: Emily O. Gravett is an assistant director in the Center for Faculty Innovation and a faculty member in the Philosophy & Religion department. Elaine Kaye is an instructional designer with Innovation Services. Some of the material found in this Toolbox email has been adapted from original content Emily generated during her time at Trinity University. Emily can be reached at graveteo@jmu.edu and Elaine can be reached at robertef@jmu.edu.