Tweetchat experience - what’s in a ‘140 character tweet’

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I work as a research assistant at the Teaching and Learning Institute at the University of Huddersfield where I support and connect colleagues to develop inspiring and innovative teaching and learning. In effect this means I spend a lot of my time trying to tap into ongoing work by my colleagues and develop ways for people to make connections across the University with colleagues who are doing similar or interesting work. Therefore I am always very interested in learning about and trying out different ways of creating networks and connections as well as sharing teaching and learning practices. I had also recently been to a SEDA conference and attended a workshop by Colin Gray (2013) where he showcased his design for bite-sized staff development which included making use of an online environment as a way to encourage busy and time-limited staff to engage with continuous professional development. This bite-sized approach was also used by Chrissi Nerantzi (2011) in the teaching and learning conversations (TLC). There is, I think, a convincing case for the benefits of social networking technologies for educational and scholarly purposes (Weller, 2011 and Veletsianos, 2012).

So when Chrissi Nerantzi and Sue Beckingham put out a call for people to volunteer as facilitators in an online learning experiment called Bring Your Own Device for Learning (BYOD4L), I thought this would be an excellent opportunity to try out participating in such a ‘course’ and also gain some experience as a facilitator. The BYOD4L course was a five day ‘learning experiment’ that focused on using mobile devices for learning. It was developed by Chrissi Nerantzi and Sue Beckingham - the main site was hosted on the WordPress platform and centred around five topics:

- Connecting
- Communicating
- Curating
• Collaborating
• Creating

A key element was the evening tweetchats and two facilitators had the responsibility of running one of them each day.

Let the tweeting begin

After the five days were over, I found myself coming back to the tweetchats and what a really great activity and experience they were. I think I was surprised how much useful sharing and conversation there was even with participants answering different questions or getting lost at times.

It was Day 2 of the #BYOD4L course with the topic ‘communicating’ when I co-facilitated the evening tweetchat with David Hopkins. I was not sure what to expect as I had not done this before but I must say that despite my newbie apprehensions about ‘being in charge’ of a tweetchat for the first time, it was a great experience and the hour flew by. Our more experienced colleagues were also very supportive and encouraging so that helped. My anxiety that the responses to our prepared questions would be a tweetchat full of virtual tumbleweeds happily didn’t come true.

I know that tweetchats can seem superficial and can be read as people just tweeting about, linking to or listing what they have done or found interesting and can appear to be a one way stream of communication. But I disagree with this on the basis of the following three points, which I see as “outcomes” from the #BYOD4Lchat:

1. When participants tweeted about their practice you could see from the responses and the retweets (RTs) that others were reassured about their own experiences and practices as well as also interested in others using different approach that they could try out. I think this was evidenced by follow up questions/conversations and acknowledgment RTs. So when I responded to Q4 Do you use your device more for giving instructions (broadcast) or dialogue (conversation) with “I think I started out with mostly broadcasting but am now using them more and more for dialogue” and instantly got a RT saying “me too” this felt like a real positive affirmation of my experience, I was not alone.
2. It was obviously a networking opportunity to find like-minded people that you could contact later on and apps/tools you wanted to try out. So I would argue that the potential for long term impact cannot be denied. In fact I ended up collaborating on editing a Flipboard magazine as a result of a suggestion from a fellow facilitator Anne Hole and this has turned out to be a really useful tool and will soon be my news reader alternative to Zite.

3. Because it is synchronous, it is useful to build a sense of ‘togetherness’ that Google+ and Facebook and commenting on blog posts can’t quite do. I find this quite hard to articulate but it was the sense that you knew these people were there, online at the same time as you and investing their time and sharing the experience. It allows for jokes and asides which makes it fun and personal.

Saying a lot with a little? Tweetchats as junctions

Another critique of tweets and by extension tweetchats are based on the limitation of 140 characters but of course the reality is that you are not limited to one tweet and this is exactly why the chats can seem chaotic and feel overwhelming because there are so many tweet threads going on. People were also posting links that you could follow up later so in this sense the tweetchat worked as a sort of connective junction or a hub from which you could travel in many directions.

It is a challenge with the tweetchats that there is a lot going on at the same time and that you are aware that you are missing out on a lot of tweets and ideas. As a facilitator, I think you just need to accept that it is ok that you are not on top of what everyone is responding to in a tweetchat. After the event you can then ensure that the tweetchat is saved by using Storify or another curating tool in order to be able to revisit anything you might have missed. I think for the facilitators (and the participants) there can also be a pressure to respond to others with answers of some sort but I am not sure this is the best way to view the activity/engagement that is happening as it is more about sharing and developing ideas/views than finding answers. I found it particularly useful to try out a technique suggested by Chrissi that we respond to questions posed in the tweetchat with other questions. This was a great strategy that took the pressure off in relation to
providing answers and allowed greater exploration of some of the assumptions inherent in the statements and questions people posed.

For me the tweetchats were a great bit of glue and momentum builder for #BYOD4L. You could perhaps also argue that it is a way to maximise (or force?) those moments of serendipity, when you come across a person or a resource at just the right time in an online or in face-to-face environment.

Benefits of engaging in online collaboration

I really enjoyed being part of a small but enthusiastic group of people from all over the world that pulled together to support what I think you can only call an 'experiment in learning'. Being part of this meant I pushed myself to try new things. For example I created and edited a youtube video introducing myself (I am not fond of seeing myself on screen so this was a huge deal for me to actually get done). This also meant I downloaded and used an app called Capture on my iPad and used a simple youtube editor tool. I also participated in a Google Hangout with other facilitators and this was also a first for me, so all very useful tools to get more experience of.

As I consider myself to be quite keen on structure and possibly ‘over-preparing’, being a facilitator on an experimental 'course' with a flexible, multi channel design in a topic that I was not at all an expert in was a challenge for me. But for me it has become increasingly important to work on moving outside my comfort zone(s) and saying yes to being a facilitator was a way to continue engaging with ‘what learning is’ within evolving contexts and outside traditional structures.

I don’t think I am ever going to stop feeling that I am slightly underprepared but from this experience I think I have become more comfortable with not having answers and that sometimes asking more questions is a better way to progress ideas and thinking.

However, I think it is important to point out that I was concerned that my lack of experience in supporting learners and lack of expertise in using some of the suggested tools would impact negatively on the learners as perhaps I wouldn’t be able to suggest appropriate ideas etc. Of course I can’t be sure that this didn’t happen but I think that the ethos of ‘co-learning’ meant that there was an understanding that we were all learning from each other and there were of course also more experienced facilitators who could step in and offer their expertise which was a great support for me. The outline of the role
and responsibilities of facilitators created by Chrissi and Sue was really useful guidance but if there hadn’t been such a big pool of facilitators with varied experiences I would not have felt as comfortable being part of BYOD4L.

**Tips for tweetchat facilitators**

- Get together with your co-facilitator to plan the questions
- Five questions seemed about right for a one hour chat but it could be worth having a few extra questions as back up
- Consider promoting a pre-chat activity that can form the basis for some of the discussion
- Make sure you demonstrate how the chat will work by tweeting, before it starts, the ‘rules of engagement’. eg. Q1 respond with A1
- Have two facilitators, one for posting questions and one that keeps reinforcing ‘the chat rules’ or guidelines in order to help out people who missed the questions and generally support the flow of the chat.
- Be prepared to be flexible and go with the flow in terms of skipping or changing questions depending on how the conversation is flowing
- Have a way to capture the chat so that it can be revisited. We used Storify

**References**


Veletsianos, G. (2012). Higher education scholars' participation and