NAEP Scores Put Spotlight On Standards

Twitter Lessons in 140 Characters or Less

Incentives Alone Not Enough To Prod Teacher Effectiveness

Stimulus Reporting Advances
Educators Explore Uses for Twitter Microblogging Tools

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the classroom as an efficient way to distribute assignments and to foster collaboration among students. But as more teachers sample the uses of popular social networking tools like Twitter as part of their lessons and classwork, some observers are cautioning that the educational benefits of such tools, or the implications those quick, short-form communications may have for students' learning and writing are not known.

"It's not a research-based tool," said Daniel T. Willingham, a professor of psychology at the University of Virginia, in Charlottesville. "The most important thing to remember is that we have no idea what impact these tools have on learning, and it will take a decade to answer that question."

Fostering Collaboration

Twitter is defined as a "real-time messaging service" on the Web site of the San Francisco-based company of that name, which was founded in 2006. Users subscribe to the blog feeds of others on the site and send short messages—called "tweets"—to their "followers" within the allotted number of characters.

The site is used extensively by businesses to market products and spread messages related to their work. It has created its own celebrity class of microbloggers as well. Some famous and previously unknown users have gained thousands or even millions of followers who read their tweets and send—or re-tweet—them.

Nearly 10,000 users, for example, follow Georgia teacher Vicki Davis, who uses the login name @VickiDavis, or her co-teacher and collaborator @TheTeacherBeat.

Twitter has not caught on among school-age children as quickly or universally as other Web 2.0 tools, such as Facebook or MySpace: Only about 1 percent of the estimated 1.2 million users in the United States are between the ages of 3 and 17, although young adults are the fastest-growing group of users, according to recent reports. Still, some teachers are hoping that, given the appeal of social networking, Twitter can be used to get students interested in the content and processes of school.

"For a lot of teachers who started off using Twitter as a professional development tool, they've been building a professional learning community and using information that's been shared," said Steve Dembo, the executive director of the Discovery Education Network, or DE, which encourages collaboration among its more than 100,000 members across the country. "The more they've seen the value in making connections with each other, the more they're realizing the same process might be valuable to students as well."

In discussions on the DEN, which is hosted by the Silver Spring, Maryland-based Discovery Education, Mr. Dembo has noticed a significant uptick in questions and recommendations among teachers about using Twitter, mostly addressing how to simplify administrative tasks or encourage students to conduct research or collaborate with classmates and their peers across the country.

Mr. Ames, the history teacher, has already seen some results in classroom participation by students, who are given the choice of participating in the Twitter for connecting with another classroom, making regional questions, comparing and contrasting areas," Ms. Glyn said.

Pros and Cons Debated

With scant research on the efficacy of social-networking tools such as Twitter, and few clear insights into the best (and worst) uses for them, there is little agreement among researchers and educators about how or whether Twitter-like technologies could or should be used in schools.

"There are generally two camps on this issue: One says how terrible all this is and the other talks about all the things you can learn using social-networking tools," said Patrick McLaughlin, a professor of education at the University of Georgia, in Athens.

Few teachers, though, need definitive studies to tell them that social media can be a problem in the classroom if not carefully planned for and controlled.

"The thing about new technology that we've observed is that it's an enormous distraction, and it varies from classroom to classroom how successful teachers are in controlling usage," Mr. Willingham said.

Beyond Technology

At the Flint Hill School in Virginia, Mr. Ames has been carefully considering how he might control usage before expanding Twitter use in his class. Right now, students contribute to Twitter outside the classroom, although tweets are mostly related to conversations and content from class.

"As we prepare students for college, we tell them it's not always just about how hard you work, but how smart you work," he said. "These collaborative tools can help them become smarter students, and to use collaborative knowledge versus going through these classes on your own and never talking to anyone about them."

As with any tool, Mr. Willingham said, the medium should not be the primary concern for teachers. The way students receive information—through Twitter, via email, or in a printed handout—may not have a dramatic effect on how they use it. "The medium is not enough," he added. "People talk about the vital importance of Web 2.0 and 3.0, and that kids have got to acquire those skills. But we can't all just be contributing to wikis and tweeting each other. Somebody's got to come up with something worth tweeting."