An Instructional Module on the Importance of Twitter as a Communication Tool for University Students

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Abstract: This project seeks to implement an instructional module that will act as an orientation for new users of Twitter. With such a useful communication tool at your disposal why are many people leaving the service after only one month of use? The module will educate new users on the important aspects of Twitter that allow users to stay connected in many different ways. Once the module is completed it will be tested by participants and its effectiveness evaluated in a survey to be completed once participants have finished the module. The data collected should answer the question: do people leave Twitter because they do not understand it?

Introduction

“The one thing you can say for certain about Twitter is that it makes a terrible first impression” (Johnson, 2009, p. 32). Twitter is a microblogging web application where users are prompted to answer the question, “What are you doing,” in 140 characters or less. With 60% of new users not returning after first month, the quote from Johnson sums up the basic problem that this project seeks to answer: How can new users take better advantage of Twitter when using it for the first time?

The project will hope to answer this question with the creation of an instructional module for users to go through before they use the service. The purpose of this instructional module will be to educate university students and young professionals on the value and usefulness of Twitter to provide them with a better understanding of microblogging and its use as a communication
tool. The hope is that with a better understanding of Twitter before users start using it, this will better acclimate them to its use and make adoption possible.

**Review of the Literature**

It has grown in popularity since its creation in 2006 and today is utilized by news media, businesses, organizations, government, celebrities, and millions of people around the world which makes understanding of this application so critical. By utilizing cell phones and the mobile web, users can send and receive tweets almost anywhere (*7 Things*, 2007). What makes Twitter intriguing is that it builds an online community between friends and colleagues who follow one another and update frequently (*7 Things*, 2009).

While some may see 140 characters as limiting, some argue that it is the best thing about Twitter as it forces people to get to the point, be concise, and focus on the message (Jacques, 2009). At face value there’s something to be said about brevity. Often times constraints provide creative solutions for users. In this case some of the direct benefits of limiting yourself to 140 characters is that you need to take your time when you craft posts so as to not have any typos. It also demands that you be efficient and use keywords, while not bogging the message down with unnecessary words (Jacques, 2009).

Twitter has seen tremendous growth since it was created as a result of widespread use by mainstream media, businesses, and various organizations (Farhi, 2009). What is drawing people to Twitter? What are they utilizing it for? Is it useful and worthwhile? These are all questions a user should think about before they get started. In the end, it all depends on how the user “uses” it (Farhi, 2009).

What is important to realize about Twitter is that it connects people in many unique ways. For personal users it can let their followers know what they are working on, what they are
reading, or what they had for breakfast. Companies and businesses see it as a way to generate awareness about their products, create media opportunities, foster customer loyalty, launch marketing campaigns, manage reputations, hear about trends, and in recruiting new employees (Fathi, 2008). In the medical and health care field doctors and health organizations can pass on medical and health related information to their followers via Twitter, while some chronically ill patients gain support from their Twitter followers (Hawn, 2009). In the news arena the use of Twitter has been obvious, news breaks on Twitter with both China’s Sichuan earthquake in May 2008 (Emmett, 2009) and the US Airways Hudson River crash in January 2009 being first reported via the online service (Sangani, 2009).

While a number of people, groups, and organizations are utilizing Twitter in many different and unique ways, what is important to realize is how it is connecting people. An important aspect to Twitter is the ambient awareness that the application gives users. As short pointed status updates pour in, it paints a picture of those that you follow (Johnson, 2009). Another intriguing aspect to Twitter is that you do not need to have an existing connection with someone to form a relationship with them (Pinkston, 2009). A common practice on Twitter is to share interesting, fun, or informative information from the web. This important practice points people to possible new information and resources as a user’s followers post links to stories, articles, blogs, images, video, or anything that is posted on the online. By understanding some of these aspects, the hope is that a new user can make Twitter work for them sooner.

**Instructional Analysis**

As previously stated the goal of the instructional module will be to educate university students and young professionals on the value and usefulness of Twitter to provide them with a better understanding of microblogging and its use as a communication tool. As part of the
instructional analysis for reaching this goal several factors will be looked at to properly formulate a methodology.

After reviewing the literature, performance objectives were developed in order to meet the goal of the instructional module.

• Intellectual:
Identify five important aspects of Twitter that allow users to stay connected.
Identify what followers are currently engaged in.
Contribute images, video, and links.
Be able to reply to people.
Create and use hashtags.
Create shortened URLs.

• Cognitive:
Find new individuals to follow.
Ask pointed and relevant questions.

Looking at learner characteristics will determine what skills learners should already have before instruction as well as what instruction should not be needed in the module.

Physiological characteristics - all learners should be physically able to use a computer and in good health with ages ranging from late teens to early forties.

Cognitive characteristics - learners should possess a high school level education if not a few more years of college education. Learners read and write fairly well and are able to operate a computer in basic ways (power on, check email, use the Internet, word process, etc). The learner will also need to be able to follow instructional guidelines, both written and verbal.
Affective characteristics - learners will bring their own preconceived notions with them as a result of who they are. For the purpose of this instructional module it is the hope that learners will keep an open mind and be willing to try and use a new technology that they might not be familiar with.

Social characteristics - a learner’s family, friends, co-workers, and colleagues will all contribute to their perception of Twitter and its use. The more people that the learner is in contact with that use the software will give them more background experience with it. On the other hand if the learner does not know many that use the software they will have little background experience with the application.

**Design Methodology**

After reviewing the literature and knowing the goal of the module, performance objectives to reach the goal were developed and learner characteristics were analyzed. These aspects will drive and affect the design methodology of the project.

**Target Population** - The target audience for the module will be new users to Twitter or those that are unfamiliar with the web application. Statistics show that a majority of Twitter users are over age 35 and this module may be of particular benefit to those under age 35 as understanding Twitter may be a possible reason that this demographic is not using the service. However, it is not limited to this group.

**Framework** - The module will be developed using the Dick & Carey instructional design model. The steps of the Dick & Carey model will be slightly modified in order to streamline the process for this particular project. At it’s core the project will conform to these steps:

1. Identify Instructional Goals (previously stated)

2. Conduct Instructional Analysis (previously stated)
3. Write Performance Objectives (previously stated)*

4. Develop Criterion Reference Tests*

5. Develop Instructional Strategy*

6. Develop & Select Instructional Materials*

7. Conduct Formative Evaluation

8. Conduct Summative Evaluation

*With the possibility of revising instruction

**Delivery** - The module will be delivered/viewed as an interactive PDF. By choosing this format it will allow for the use of any computer and possible inclusion of multimedia. Another benefit of delivery in this medium will be that learners will have the opportunity to utilize the Internet and online content if needed. With Twitter being a web application having this module in digital form as a PDF will allow the learner to work in a related environment.

**Instructional Strategy** - The content of the module will be structured so that topics covered later in the module will build on previously discussed information. Content and flow of the module will appear in this order:

- Twitter Basics & Mechanics (what to say, posting, share content, twitterfeed, etc)
- Following on Twitter (followers, following, finding people to follow, who to follow)
- How to communicate (replying, asking questions, conversations)
- Twitter Etiquette (How users stay connected)

The presentation/instruction of the content will involve explanation and demonstration in the form of diagrams, graphics, scenarios, and examples. This will be followed up with multiple choice questions to test the knowledge of the user at the end of each section or content area.
**Software and Hardware** - Software that will be utilized to create the module will be Adobe InDesign, Adobe Photoshop, and Adobe Acrobat Pro. InDesign will be used for the physical layout and pagination of the module. Photoshop will be utilized for editing and incorporating graphics. While Acrobat Pro will allow for the inputing of answers and responses into the module. Secondary applications such as screen capture software and other web tools may be utilized in the process of developing and generating the module.

For participants, they will need to use a computer in order to access the module as well as Adobe Acrobat reader which should be present on many computers, but can also be downloaded for free. If participants do not have a computer, one may be provided during testing.

**Formative Evaluation Methodology**

**Testing Site** - Testing shall be conducted at the University of Hawaii at Manoa’s College of Education in Wist Hall. Classroom use and scheduling will have to be attained from the department.

**Sample Population** - The proposed test subjects for the module will be ETEC students. The goal will be to have at least ten students to participate, while more will be welcome. Ideal conditions would be to have an even mix of male to females and varying ages. Selection will be based on the number wanting to participate, those having at least basic computer skills, and are able to follow instructional directions both written and verbal. The capacity of the testing environment will also affect the upper limit of the sample population.

**Evaluation Procedures** - To gauge the effectiveness of the project two things will be looked at: 1) How well did learners perform on the questions and problems presented to them in the module itself, and 2) feedback from learners on their thoughts, feelings, as well as their own assessment of the module’s effectiveness. This second part will be conducted through a post
module survey given once a participant has completed the module. During use of the module, learners will also be observed to see if any physical reactions are given. These will be noted and added to the findings if necessary.

**Instruments** - Within the module itself there will be 5-6 multiple choice questions at the end of each section to test the learner on the information that was presented to them in that section. Should incorrect answers be given, the correct answer will be highlighted with reasoning why the answer they chose was incorrect.

For the post module survey participants will be asked 5-10 introductory yes/no type of questions, then 25-30 likert scale questions and 2-3 open ended questions on their attitudes towards the module. Specifically, learners will be asked about the effectiveness of the module, difficulty, appearance, length, relevant content, and any related feelings.

**Data Analysis Plan** - Once data from the module and surveys has been collected they will be broken up and quantified and coded into different groups. Statistics will be generated from the multiple choice questions in the module itself and be used as a gauge to see if by itself the module was effective in achieving its goal. Information such as the percentages of how many users completed the module successfully or if users all got a particular question wrong will provide possible insight into identifying the module’s effectiveness and ineffectiveness. However, these multiple choice answers alone will not determine module effectiveness which is why the post module survey is important.

With the survey, the focus will be from the information given by participants in the likert scale questions. This data can be translated into statistics as well and created into graphs if necessary and will paint a picture of how the participants felt about the module. It will be this portion that my affirm, refute, or expand upon data collected from the module itself. Finally, the
opened ended questions serve to add some context to the data. Responses will be coded and grouped into similar categories to determine if themes emerge and if so what they are. These open ended responses may also serve to explain likert scale data.

**Implications of Research**

There is a saying that states, “You never get a second chance to make a first impression.” This proposal started off with a quote about how Twitter makes a bad first impression. If this is truly the case with Twitter, that is not a good thing for a communication tool with a lot of usefulness and potential.

While no one really knows why 60% of new users do not return to Twitter after one month this project hopes to provide one—or at least provide a better picture for understanding. Is it because new users don’t understand Twitter that they decide to leave? This module seeks to answer that question by orienting users and preparing them to utilize this communication tool. Whether or not users leave the service due to do personal feelings or attitudes will have to be saved for another study.
References


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