

Twitter at school: dimensions and implications

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Abstract: Twitter, the popular microblogging social network, is only one aspect of a broader phenomenon that has involved the development of the Web in the last years; new forms of communication and free or low cost sharing webtools have been growing rapidly, changing the face of the Internet. Among these innovative social webtools, Twitter has achieved a particular position because it gives the Internet users the opportunity of becoming protagonists on the Web with the publication of their own texts. In this same way, it can also improve classroom-teaching practice. The aim of this paper is to point out the achievements and the drawbacks of the use of Twitter as integration with traditional classroom teaching through the illustration of some practical examples and experiences whose aim is promoting communication, stimulating peer e-learning and giving more efficacy to teaching.

Introduction to Twitter

Starting from its definition in Wikipedia, “Twitter is a free social networking and microblogging service that enables its users to send and read messages known as tweets. Tweets are text-based posts of up to 140 characters“ (Wikipedia, 2010). The expression ‘tweet’ refers literally to the sound of a small bird; the symbol on the Twitter website is a bird on a tree singing towards the Internet sky, probably to emphasize its characteristics of simplicity, speed, immediacy, lightness. In each Twitter message, you answer one simple question: “What’s happening?” You can allow open access to your messages or restrict its visibility to the people you approve. It is possible to send and receive tweets via Twitter website, text messages or external applications. Though the use of this social network is free, the Short Message Service (SMS) is subjected to the phone service provider fees. Twitter has been translated on a voluntary basis, in true Web 2.0 spirit, recently and is now available in various languages apart from English and Japanese. It is simple, fast and, above all, free.

A further opportunity is represented by retweets (RT). If you come across a tweet that you would like to share quickly among your friends, Twitter's new retweet (RT) feature helps people doing it quickly.

Thanks to its ever-growing popularity, the Global Language Monitor declared Twitter “Top Word of 2009” after its annual global survey of the English language, followed by Obama, H1N1, Stimulus, and Vampire (The Global Language Monitor, 2009). Agreeing

with The Global Language Monitor researchers, the linguists of Ads have deemed “tweet” as top word for 2009 (CBS, 2010).

Twitter from the teaching viewpoint: light and shade

The use of Twitter for teaching purposes has been a debated and controversial topic in the area of the application of ICT to school practice. The positions range from the belief of the importance of the application of ICT to teaching as with Sir Jim Rose’s proposal that primary school children should learn to “be familiar with blogging, podcasts, Wikipedia and Twitter by secondary school” (Ross, 2009) to the denunciation of the pointlessness of its pedagogic use. For example, in Alice Thomson’s opinion, children “don’t have to be taught about mobiles or computer ... schools should be teaching children skills and habits that they won’t pick up at home - such as appreciating poetry, speaking a foreign language and learning a few facts so that they can query those Wikipedia entries” (Thomson, 2009).

Apart from these extreme positions, it is undeniable that the new technologies are compelling both teachers and students to a parallel acquisition process of new ways of expression and communication that enhance synthetic communication and the creation of highly interactive communities.

Using Twitter at school: the reasons of such a choice

There are various ways of learning approach at school, ranging from frontal lesson to heuristic lesson or group work. All these different solutions have their own roles and can be used in different learning situations, but peer education is rarely taken into consideration, at least in the Italian school system. In the last guidelines for Italian teachers, peer education is not indicated among learning strategies (ANSAS, 2007). Yet, peer education has shown its positive effects in various kinds of learning activities, from the integration of foreign students to the improvement of students’ preparation in remedial teaching, as the positive results of such experiences in a local vocational school have clearly highlighted (Maselli, 2009).

As some researchers have pointed out, in Italian schools there is the tendency to the transmission of contents from teacher to learners, based on an individualistic, sometimes even competitive, relationship among peers. This generally accepted attitude does not consider the students’ human and relational growth; on the contrary, it frustrates it (Guidotti E. & Pozzi Lolli M. L., 2005). Instead, in peer education, everybody's cooperation contributes to the positive accomplishment of a task and to individual growth, as Marcello Landi shows in his study of peer education at school (2004). “The idea behind peer education is that “weak” students can be supported by their school-mates in order to attain particular educational objectives, for example in summer remedial classes for students with not a particularly good performance in Maths, English, Business Economics with positive achievements. Tutor-students with a good school preparation are chosen instead of teachers because no funds are available to arrange supplementary courses (Negrin, 2009).

How to use Twitter in the classroom

Twitter can be used both in a passive way, to access information, and in an active way, to share communication.

You can start using Twitter to remind students “about homework, trips and such things, especially as they can enter their mobile phone number to be alerted when one of their ‘friends’ updates their account. The advantage is that you don’t need to know the phone numbers of students to get messages onto their device: they are the ones who authorize their mobile phone from the website and they subscribe to your Twitter feed.” (Belshaw, 2007).

Another expert edublogger, Evan McIntosh, underlines various opportunities to use Twitter in the communication between school and families. “Parents could subscribe to different Twitter channels created by a school: Head Teacher’s news, pupil of the week, announcements of meetings, sports news...” (McIntosh, 2007).

However, it is when this social network is used in an active way that it is particularly effective. As Thomas Barrett suggests in “29 interesting ways to use Twitter in the classroom” (Barrett, 2009), the most interesting of these could be:

- gather real-world data, historical or geographical facts, scientific events to revise and rework in reports or papers,
- collate classroom views,
- summarize a topic / concept / viewpoint as a tweet; each student should be given a different one to focus on,
- pretend to be famous people and summarize their ideas / experiences / viewpoints,
- produce a Tweet dialogue between two opposing characters (e.g. King Harold and William the Conqueror) about a key issue,
- write a story for each student starting from a common sentence,
- ask people using Twitter to give their location and then locate them on an atlas or on Google maps,
- play word games,
- collect useful links about particular topics.

Teachers and students can also use a private social platform “to share ideas, files, events and assignments” (www.edmodo.com) that can be accessed both at school and outside school with the advantage of monitoring the visitors’ logs.

I have been using Twitter during a cultural exchange to foster reciprocal knowledge and socialization while, of course, improving the use of the vehicular language between the two classes involved, made up of twenty Italian students and twenty German students (<http://twitter.com/4DT>). Another channel has been created with the objective of sharing information about cultural activities of didactic interest and communicating among colleagues (<http://twitter.com/elspad>).

The students have been using the information technology laboratory for 10 hours, followed by 10 hours of distance work from home with a frequency of about a session every two weeks. They have showed interest and no difficulty in learning to use Twitter, sometimes they have been too lively in their attitude but, in general, there have been neither problems of behavior nor spam episodes.

The evaluation of the project has been positive, some students have pointed out the democratic value of the twitter technology that allows learning without the necessity of economic investments or pirate programs, others have highlighted the positive sides of cooperative learning in their growth. However, apart from a high level of involvement in the students' use of the technology, curiosity and active participation to the activities, as regards their linguistic competence, there is no evidence that the students have learnt the language quicker or better. Comparing learning outcomes obtained with different media can be misleading (Salomon, 2000).

The learning environment

The notion of learning environment changes considerably from a traditional learning situation where there is a strong vertical interaction between teacher and learners. The teacher becomes a facilitator, an assistant on demand who is always available and sensitive to the students' needs, who is learning to use the technological resources and webtools in a parallel developing process together with them. The position of the learners changes as well. In this learning context, the students use an environment that is generally congenial to them and contribute actively to it also in a cooperative way. Each learner can organize his/her own learning times, spaces, modalities with great flexibility. If students are shy in a traditional classroom activity, the mediation of a computer and the Web 2.0 participative tools can help them have fewer inhibitions and decrease the factors that create psychological barriers. Horizontal scaffolding is another advantage for the learners because it cuts down anxiety and helps develop self-confidence.

Conclusion

Without pretending to offer a universally valid answer to the problem of the effectiveness of the use of the web 2.0 tools in teaching practice, the examples and experiences described in this paper point out that their progressive introduction can represent a further learning opportunity in both teaching and learning. This does not imply that being able to use Twitter and the Web 2.0 tools leads automatically to the acquisition of an effective digital competence as the one recommended among the key competences for life-long learning by the European Parliament (EEC, 2006), but the use of ICT can offer some opportunities that can be seized just in the same way as a rich semantic-lexical competence can favor deeper thinking abilities. The challenge is now to keep the users' interest towards this learning experience alive, perpetuating it in time and adapting it to their educational needs.

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