



SOCIAL MEDIA IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Case Studies, Reflections and
Analysis

EDITED BY CHRIS ROWELL



© 2019 Chris Rowell. Copyright of individual chapters is maintained by the chapters' authors.



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International license (CC BY 4.0). This license allows you to share, copy, distribute and transmit the text; to adapt the text and to make commercial use of the text providing attribution is made to the authors (but not in any way that suggests that they endorse you or your use of the work). Attribution should include the following information:

Chris Rowell (ed.), *Social Media in Higher Education: Case Studies, Reflections and Analysis*. Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0162>

In order to access detailed and updated information on the license, please visit, <https://www.openbookpublishers.com/product/994#copyright>

Further details about CC BY licenses are available at, <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

All external links were active at the time of publication unless otherwise stated and have been archived via the Internet Archive Wayback Machine at <https://archive.org/web>

Updated digital material and resources associated with this volume are available at <https://www.openbookpublishers.com/product/994#resources>

Every effort has been made to identify and contact copyright holders and any omission or error will be corrected if notification is made to the publisher.

ISBN Paperback: 978-1-78374-668-2

ISBN Hardback: 978-1-78374-669-9

ISBN Digital (PDF): 978-1-78374-670-5

ISBN Digital ebook (epub): 978-1-78374-671-2

ISBN Digital ebook (mobi): 978-1-78374-672-9

ISBN XML: 978-1-78374-673-6

DOI: 10.11647/OBP.0162

Cover image: Photo by Francisco Gomes on Unsplash at <https://unsplash.com/photos/kktq8zzmPEo>.

Cover design: Anna Gatti.

All paper used by Open Book Publishers is sourced from SFI (Sustainable Forestry Initiative) accredited mills and the waste is disposed of in an environmentally friendly way.

21. Academics' Understanding of Learning Spaces: Attitudes, Practices and Outcomes Explored through the Use of Social Media

#Beginner #Twitter #Twalk

Santanu Vasant

Introduction

*It means little to have 'thick' technology in our classrooms
if our faculty and students do not have the skills and the gear
to utilise those classrooms.*

Brown and Lippincott, 1993, p. 16

Twenty-five years after this quote from the *Educause Quarterly* magazine was written, this chapter explores how academics understand Learning Spaces, specifically their attitudes, practices, and outcomes through the use of Twitter, via the contemporary continuing professional development activity commonly referenced to as a tweetchat. During the course of this chapter, a series of specific tweetchats and Twitter walks will be referred to anonymously to illustrate the main themes. Before we continue, for the purposes of understanding, let us define

social media as 'websites and applications that enable users to create and share content or to participate in social networking' (Oxford English Dictionary Online, 2018)

Next, let us turn our attention to the definition of a tweetchat. Whilst there isn't a widely agreed definition of a tweetchat, for our purposes a tweetchat is a live Twitter event, where people from across the world join by searching for a hashtag (a set of characters with a hashtag (#) symbol preceding it). The tweetchat is usually moderated and focused around a general topic, where specific questions are asked by the moderator or host at regular intervals. A set time is also established so that the moderator, guest, or host is available to engage and steer the conversation.

In contrast to a tweetchat, the Twitter walk, also referred to as a Twalk, is 'to walk while sending a tweet on Twitter' (Urban Dictionary, n.d.). Twalks have been organised that explore the topics of blended learning, where questions are asked at regular intervals, just as with a tweetchat.

Social media platforms such as Twitter have only been around since the mid-2000s; however, in this short period of time, we have seen it being used in many contexts from journalism to marketing, and increasingly in politics. Before we begin to look at some of the possible themes and its purpose in relation to academics' understanding of learning space, there needs to be an understanding of what a learning space is.

The following is a popular quoted definition of a 'Learning Space':

Learning is the central activity of colleges and universities. Sometimes that learning occurs in classrooms (formal learning); other times it results from serendipitous interactions among individuals (informal learning). Space — whether physical or virtual — can have an impact on learning. It can bring people together; it can encourage exploration, collaboration, and discussion. Or, space can carry an unspoken message of silence and disconnectedness. More and more we see the power of built pedagogy (the ability of space to define how one teaches) in colleges and universities. (Oblinger, 2005)

In the early days of the Internet, information was created by a handful of people and posted on the Internet for people to read. The interactions that people had were through chat rooms such as MSN chat, ICQ and online forums, which were all text-based communication and did not bleed into the web pages. It was not until the mid-2000s that platforms such as Facebook, YouTube and then Twitter saw the rise of what was defined as social media. These platforms allow users to create and

share content — text, images and videos and comment on each other's creations to create this notion of user-generated content. As a result, the amount of content on the web has increased enormously. These interactions often occur publicly online.

During the course of the chapter, we will be examining a series of ideas around the tweetchat and Twalk and how they relate to the development of an academic understanding of learning spaces. Through greater access, many people can be connected on these social media platforms at different physical and virtual locations and devices at the same time. This connectedness provides an opportunity for academic staff developers and academics to engage in a discourse via the tweetchat or Twalk on a given topic, in a way that was not possible even a decade ago.

We will look at how these interactions often allow for richer communication than a face to face classroom, as they are not only captured on the Twitter platform, but can be revisited after the tweetchat has finished — a concept that many social media platforms allow participants to do (Mason and Rennie, 2008). Ideas discussed on these platforms in different contexts have informed changes in policy, created communities of practice, and have seen collaborations between people who would not have met otherwise. Finally, we will look at the idea of educational democracy, the identity of the university teacher and the ways their beliefs interact with this democracy.

As the higher education sector searches for a new identity, it will be argued that using platforms such as Twitter for tweetchat and Twitter walks, strengthens these communities of practice — only if we see the value in them for developing staff and if we know how to use them sparingly at the right stage of teacher education and development.

Main Issues

For centuries, teaching spaces have been structured around didactic teaching from the front of the classroom and students sitting in rows listening to the lecturer drone on about one concept or another. With the widening participation and natural changes in the traditional and non-traditional student body (i.e. those with A-Levels and those transitioning through other routes, for example BTEC etc.), and as universities move from lecturing to teaching, this model of curriculum

delivery is no longer effective. There has been a postgraduate certificate in higher education for new staff for a number of years, but due to time constraints the topic of physical learning spaces has not featured in many postgraduate certificates.

As a result, the academics' learning space literacy (i.e. their awareness and application of learning space to planning and delivery) has not been explored to its full potential (Temple, 2007, 2008). It was not until May 2017 that Andrew Middleton at Sheffield Hallam University (Middleton, 2017), introduced participants to the concept of a Twalk to explore issues of staff understanding what they could do in a physical space and how this relates to the pedagogy and the technology. The Twalk has followed almost ten years after seminal work on the concept of pedagogy, space, and technology (Radcliffe et al, 2008), which is one of the key frameworks in understand the interplay between these key areas that any teacher must navigate, whether new or experienced. The illustration of pedagogy, space and technology below, visually represents this connection.

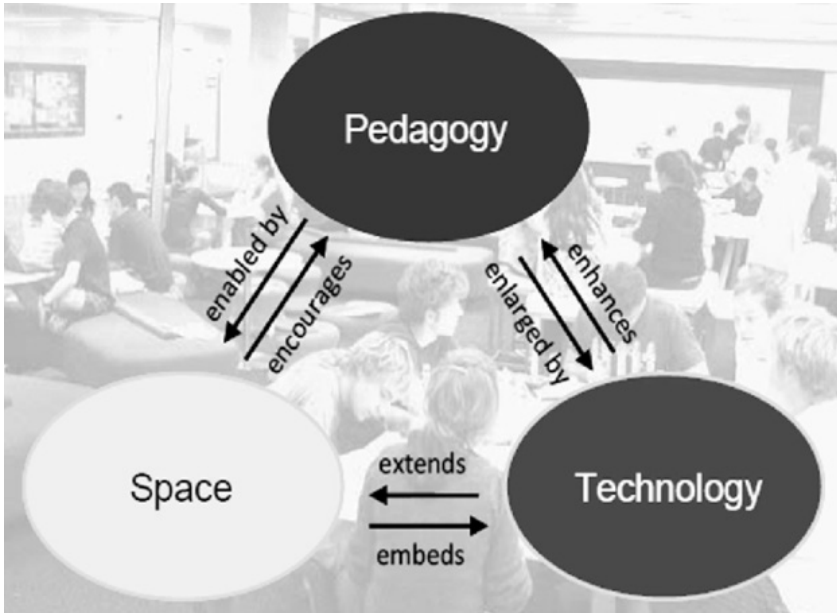


Fig. 21.1 Radcliffe, A Pedagogy-Space-Technology framework for designing and evaluating learning spaces (2008), <http://openarc.co.za/sites/default/files/Attachments/UQ%20Next%20Generation%20Book.pdf>

This lack of discussion and awareness about learning spaces as a tool, during the planning of a module or programme and during a taught session, was explored during a Twalk in May 2017 through a series of topics and locations. The main points that arose were the sense of connectedness across different institutions from as far away as Toronto, as well as UK cities such as London and Sheffield. Also, answers to the topics from different contexts enriched understanding by presenting ideas of different learning spaces through the use of photographs and short video clips of physical spaces, which in a traditional classroom setting would not be possible. Furthermore, this type of interaction 'overlaps formal, non-formal and informal education' Megele (2014) as participants weave their various learning experience into tweets.

The learning space is an important topic within educational development, not least because a lot of teaching in universities is still face to face and in a physical environment. By understanding learning spaces, the higher education teacher is better able to prepare the learner for life outside academia through better interactions in the physical learning space (setting up spaces for debates; the 'jigsaw classroom' where tasks are split into groups and only by coming together do the students solve the bigger problem; group work and discussions etc.). By understanding the physical learning space, the university teacher is able to set up a safe environment to try out ideas, concepts, and ways of thinking that will ultimately be useful to a student in employment.

In the changing higher education landscape, where variables including the key metrics of Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) and a desire of many universities to look at blended and distance learning, academics and academic developers are re-examining the role of learning space in the delivery of instruction or teaching in the physical space. Questions regarding how, when, and where we teach are being debated. What is asked less frequently is how academics are to be developed to meet these new challenges. It is with this in mind that a growing number of academic developers are seeking alternative, flexible, and innovative approaches to staff development and embracing social media in optional sessions. The most recognised of these is the Learning and Teaching in Higher Education chat (LTHEchat) in the United Kingdom, which began in 2014 (LTHEchat, 2014).

Walk the Walk, Tweet the Twalk

In many PGCert in higher education courses, there is little or no time devoted to understanding physical learning spaces, although *A-Z Creative Teaching in HE* (Ashton and Stone 2018) has a chapter for on how to facilitate spaces for learning in a classroom. Indeed, during the several tweetchats I ran on the topic, I found the understanding to be patchy at best and absent at worst. This is in part due to the ways in which these courses are structured, but also to the importance placed on theories of education (i.e. Bruner, Vygotsky, Piaget, etc.), over practical examples of effective higher education practice.

With the advent of a myriad of technologies at the academic developer's disposal, now discussions need not solely be in the physical learning space. They can be asynchronous or synchronous with tools such as forums and webinar platforms, or increasingly with a social media platform such as Twitter. This is where the idea of a tweetchat or Twalk can be unique. It not only brings together people synchronously, but also allows people from outside the institution to join in to the discussion, which is very powerful to widening perspectives and the experiences of teachers who are undergoing initial teacher training in higher education. It can provide a true networked learning approach and a possible solution to the problem of understanding learning spaces and the complex issues that this encompasses.

The use of tweetchats and Twalks give staff the opportunity not only to learn digital skills in context, especially with the use of images and short video clips which is so important to motivation, adopted and conversion to practice (Blackwell and Blackmore, 2003), and to experience the issues that their students could encounter if they decide to embed the platforms in their teaching. With social media platforms, text and images (including images of drawing and the use of vector drawing applications, where participants can draw the layout of learning spaces to explain their points), can be posted at the same time, aiding informal learning (Mayer, 2002). This can include visiting classrooms that you could not visit before social media, while vector drawing tools allow staff to visually represent their ideas and exchange feedback in real time.

Organising your own tweetchat or Twalk in your institution or beyond is easier than you might think, but there are some things

to consider. Let us first look at the tweetchat. The central idea of a tweetchat, as discussed earlier, is a topic, followed by five to six questions at regular intervals during an hour. Once these have been agreed, you can either tweet these via Twitter or use a scheduling application such as TweetDeck or Hootsuite, which frees you up to respond and facilitate the tweetchat if you don't have another person helping you. Remember to include a hashtag in your tweets and ask those who join to use the same hashtag, so the tweets can be followed during the chat and displayed after the chat. You should ideally have a minimum of two facilitators of the tweetchat, so they can steer the debate and ask follow-up questions etc. The facilitators can choose to use the direct message private chat as a discussion space before and during the tweetchat. In established tweetchats, it is not uncommon to generate 500 tweets within the tweetchat, so participation is cognitively demanding but allows for freer discourse, though sometimes shorter due to the character limit. Participants answer with A1, A2 at the start of their reply.

In contrast to a tweetchat, the Twalk adds the extra dimension of space (i.e. a lecture theatre), including more informal spaces (a seminar room etc.), and has topics (T1, T2 etc). A map is provided, with room location for participants to walk to. Participants also answer with A1, A2 at the start of the reply at the relevant location. Middleton (2017), aided by others, has devised a Twalk toolkit to summarise some of the key points to remember when running a Twalk. As this is done in teams, you can ask the group to assign a couple of roles similar to the concept of team roles proposed by Belbin (2003). In this case, you would need a coordinator to guide the walk, to keep everyone on the right route and a scribe or tweeter to summarise responses from the group along the way and post on Twitter. You would pause at regular intervals to allow for reflection in a learning space, which is the central idea of the Twalk, to reflect in the physical space where you might be teaching or where your students might be. Lecturers may not consider how their learners will learn a concept and where they will learn it. By positioning the academic in a room and asking them questions to elicit their behaviour and that of their students in a given space, this changes their point of view and is a partial demonstration of Kolb's Learning Cycle, as shown below.

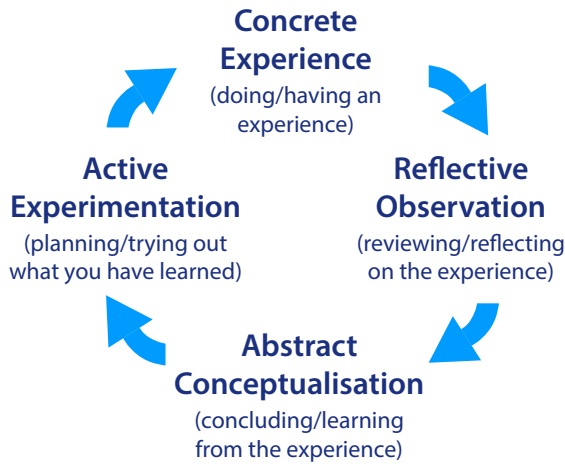


Fig. 21.2 Kolb, *Learning Cycle* (1984)

Two things these tweetchats and Twalks don't currently do is allow the participants to conclude and learn from the experiences they have with social media in a blended context.

After the tweetchat, there is the potential to have a shared online document to curate all the responses and have a 'virtual development buddy' to continue the reflection. There is great value in reflecting on practice, to see what worked well and what did not. As the Kolb diagram shows, this reflection concludes the experience and initiates the active experimentation or a tweak of practice, which is experienced again, and so on.

Conclusions

More time needs to be spent on exploring the issues around physical learning spaces, as we discuss, debate and decide the future direction of higher education teaching in the 21st century. The days of ignoring the physical space are gone, especially as external pressures such as TEF continue to impact the sector.

Seminal pieces of work focused on higher education, including Learning Spaces (Oblinger, 2005 and Radcliffe et al., 2008), have shown us the benefits of bringing an understanding of physical learning spaces understanding into the higher education curriculum. However, in the UK higher education sector, there is a barrier to changing academic

practice, which has been commented on (Blackwell and Blackmore, 2003; Pates and Sumner, 2016; and Walker et al., 2016), yet Walker et al. cite Edinburgh Napier University who reward and recognise academic innovation explicitly and link it to promotion, motivating educators to review their practice. A more open culture like this, would benefit the academic community and the sector as a whole.

It is clear that further work needs to be done to help staff to utilise these new or existing physical spaces in different ways, either with the incorporation of technology in the classroom or arranging the furniture to match the teaching activities, reminding academics of constructive alignment (Biggs and Tang, 2011). It would seem natural to use opportunities such as tweetchats as tools to facilitate this development. However, this practice is taking place in the shadows of educational development and if we are to see a shift in the quality of teaching, which has occurred in the school sector in the past 10 years, we need to bring the best of these practices into the educational development classroom, consisting of practical showcases of good practices, challenging academics' understanding of physical learning spaces and beginning with their beliefs and motivations for adopting practices. Educational developers have to bring context into the practice they discuss; as Blackmore and Blackwell (2003) say, 'most obvious is context, whether disciplinary or institutional ... this shapes individuals' motivations (affecting their willingness to engage) and also the influences the acceptability of any of these above models'. (They refer to models to develop practice i.e. formally accredited courses, institutional workshops, staff secondments and using technologist and informal learning at work). Furthermore, they add 'that teaching basic technology skills (how to use something) particularly in isolation, is insufficient'.

One area of development for tweetchats and Twalks is a follow up after a given period of time, to see if the practice has changed, which is a problem in more traditional continuing professional development (CPD) activities, 'most teaching related CPD is evaluated through post event questionnaires, sometimes called "happy sheets"' (Spowart et al., 2017). Spowart et al. advocate pre-post surveys, which involves revisiting a sample of those trained to ascertain whether practice has changed, including students, as the goal of much of academics' understanding of learning spaces is intended to improve their teaching practice, and

ultimately make an impact on student outcomes. As Spowart et al. (2017) conclude:

student awareness of staff CPD is implicit. Therefore, in order to determine an impact on student learning, even at a basic level, we need to raise student awareness of the CPD that academics engage with and the impacts it can have on their teaching and learning.

In order for practice to change, several things need to happen. Firstly, academics need to engage in meaningful reflective practice, which in order to be taken seriously, needs to have some assessment attached to it. Secondly, there needs to be an evaluation of their practice in relation to others, which is where practices such as tweetchats via social media channels come into play in making it easier to engage in bite size CPD. Thirdly, there needs to be recognition from institutional management and a nationally recognised progression route on a teaching-only contract, that promotes staff to professorship based on their teaching and scholarship in teaching research. If this were to be nationally implemented, then teaching would be on a par with research. Finally, there needs to be more openness about what works and doesn't in higher education practice, which again, tweetchats can aid, so that practitioners can learn from one another.

References

- Ashton, S. and Stone, R. (2018). *An A-Z of Creative Teaching in Higher Education*. London: Sage Publishing.
- Belbin, R. M. (2003), *Management Teams: Why they Succeed or Fail*, 2nd edn, Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann.
- Biggs, J. B. and C. Tang (2011). *Teaching for Quality Learning at University*, 4th edn, Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Blackwell, R. and Blackmore, P. (eds.) (2003). *Towards Strategic Staff Development in Higher Education*. Maidenhead, UK: SRHE and Open University Press.
- Brown, M. B, and Joan K. Lippincott, J. K. (2003). 'Learning spaces: More than meets the eye', http://www.personal.kent.edu/~tk/ocde/learning_spaces.pdf
- Ellis, R. A. and Goodyear, P. (June 2016). 'Models of learning space: Integrating research on space, place and learning in higher education'. *Review of Education*, 4:2, pp. 149–91.

- Gibbs, G. (2013). 'Reflections on the changing nature of educational development', *International Journal for Academic Development*, 18:1, pp. 4–14.
- Kolb, D. A. (1984). *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Mayer, R. E. (2002). 'Multimedia learning', *Psychology of Learning and Motivation*, 41, pp. 85–139, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0079-7421\(02\)80005-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0079-7421(02)80005-6)
- Megele, C. (2014). 'Theorising Twitter chat', *Journal of Perspectives in Applied Academic Practice*, 2:2, pp. 46–51.
- Middleton, A (2017). 'How to plan a Twalk', <https://melsig.shu.ac.uk/melsig/resources/twalk-toolkit/how-to-plan-a-twalk/>
- Mulcahy, D. (2015). 'Re/Assembling spaces of learning in Victorian government schools: policy enactments, pedagogic encounters and micropolitics', *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 36:4, pp. 500–14.
- Long, P. D. (2005). 'Learning space design in action'. *EDUCAUSE Review*, 4:4, p. 60.
- Oblinger, D. (2005). 'Learning spaces', Educause, <https://www.educause.edu/research-and-publications/books/learning-spaces>
- Oxford English Dictionary (2018). 'Social media', <http://www.oed.com>
- Pates, D. and Sumner, N. (2016). 'E-learning spaces and the digital university', *The International Journal of Information and Learning Technology*, 33:3, pp. 159–71.
- Radcliffe, D. et al. (2008), 'Learning spaces in Higher Education: Positive outcomes by design', <http://openarc.co.za/sites/default/files/Attachments/UQ%20Next%20Generation%20Book.pdf>
- Spowart, L., et al. (2017). 'Evidencing the impact of teaching-related CPD: beyond the 'Happy Sheets'', *International Journal for Academic Development*, 22:4, pp. 360–72.
- Temple, P. (2007). *Learning spaces for the 21st century: A review of the literature*. York: Higher Education Academy.
- Temple, P. (2008). 'Learning spaces in higher education: An under-researched topic', *Review of Education*, 6:3, pp. 229–41.
- Urban Dictionary (2018), 'Twalk', <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Twalk>
- Walker, R., Voce, J., Jenkins, M. (2016), 'Charting the development of technology-enhanced learning developments across the UK higher education sector: A longitudinal perspective (2001–2012)', *Interactive Learning Environments*, 24, pp. 438–55.
- Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

