

CAN WE USE TWITTER FOR EDUCATIONAL ACTIVITIES?

Gabriela GROSSECK *
Carmen HOLOTESCU **

***Abstract:** Twitter is the most popular microblogging application, with almost one million users called twitterers, who can send and receive messages via the web, SMS, instant messaging clients, and by third party applications. Posts are limited to 140 text characters in length. With a solid experience in using Web2.0 technologies in education, the authors are trying to provide arguments for using Twitter as microblogging platform / social network in education, underlining its advantages, but also possible bad points. The article presents too an application related to the Romanian Twitosphere and a Romanian microblogging platform, already used in education.*

***Keywords:** Web2.0, collaborative technologies, Twitter, microblogging, education*

I. TWITTER FACILITIES

Microblogging is a collaborative technology with a growing interest from users coming from different domains, from eLearning and education in general too.

1.1. What means microblogging ?

Microblogging is a Web2.0 technology, and a new form of blogging that let the users publish online brief text updates, usually less then 140-200 characters, sometimes images too. The posts can be edited and accessed online, or sent as SMS, e-mail or via instant messaging clients. Usually the microblog authors embed its posts as a widget on blogs or sites.

Microblogging enables a real-time interaction between users, using different devices, technologies and applications.

The best known microblogging services are Twitter, Tumblr, Pownce, and Jaiku. There are also two Romanian microblogging systems, called Logoree.ro and cirip.ro.

The paper will describe the facilities of Twitter and cirip.ro, and how they can be used in education.

1.2. Microblogging in Twitter

Twitter seems to be the most popular microblogging system. Officially launched in October 2006, Twitter was developed by Obvious Corp.,

This robust, elegant, and simple system has gained important popularity, rapidly approaching 1 million users - [TwittDir](#) reports over 940 thousand twitterers in March.

Numerous mash-ups based on the system API were developed, which can be found on Twitter Fun Wiki. There are also many blogs having Twitter usage and applications as central topics.

After creating an account in a few seconds, a user can start twittering. The users of Twitter can send and receive messages via the web, SMS, instant messaging clients, and by third party

applications. The notifies can be received in real-time as SMS, IM or RSS. Twitter is one of the few applications which deliver free SMS outside USA.

Posts are limited to 140 text characters in length. This is why Twitter was called *social networking in 140 characters*.



Figure 1. An example of Twitter account with updates talking about current work and educational experiments
source: <http://twitter.com/ggrosseck>

People use Twitter to communicate, to ask questions, to ask for directions, support, advice, and to validate open-ended interpretations or ideas by discussing with the others. Twitter has mashed up personal publishing and communication, the result being a new type of real-time publishing.

Each user is able to monitor the notes of other users, who will be listed in the profile, under Following. Thus the user becomes Follower for them.

Tops may be made according to number of monitored users, one of these applications being TwittDir. This is a mash-up based on Twitter API, which allows identifying users from different cities and countries; thus it is easy to notice that the users with the most numerous number of followers are authors of very well known blogs like Scobleizer or Jason Calacanis. Presently, Barack Obama leads the top, Twitter being an application extensively used in the American presidential election.

Not everyone who creates a Twitter account uses it often nor in an organised way. The analyses realised by the Twitter Facts conclude that only half of the users with accounts on Twitter are actually active and have at least a note in the last month.

Among the minuses in discussion are the impossibility to create users groups or to classify the notes by tags.

Wordpress has released in January a new theme called Prologue, which allows the creation of a microblog with notes similar to the ones from Twitter, but with tags, and edited in group.

Besides the educational usage which will be evaluated in the next chapter, Twitter proves to be a useful tool for:

- Promoting blogs: most of the twitterers are bloggers, complementary using the two technologies, blogging and microblogging. The tweets could be embedded as widgets on the blogs, also usually bloggers post on Twitter about the blog notes, getting new readers to the blog, and enlarging the communities created around the blogs;

- PR / marketing – there are many companies that communicate on Twitter with potential clients or collaborators;
- politics – American elections events, and news are announced on Twitter; specific applications have been developed also, such as Poliweets, an aggregator of tweets about candidates;
- news – CNN or BBC announce news and important articles through their Twitter accounts;
- for networking, as a to-do list, as a method to discuss and validate ideas, to announce projects, shows, events, to create polls;
- if the news on a site are announced through a Twitter account, the corresponding widget and RSS feed may become the news section of the site, respective the site RSS feed.

1.3. Romanian Twitosphere

The term of *Twitosphere* appears in Twitter Fan Wiki Glossary, while Twitter Facts analyses the twitterers communities from different countries..

We can say that the *Romanian Twitosphere* is the community of the Romanian twitterers.

Searching for Romanian users with three alternatives: search options supplied by Twitter, TwitDir or Google, around *400 Romanian users* are found. Considering that in general, less than half of the users specify their country in their profile, we can therefore conclude that the number of Romanian users is somewhere around 1000.

Going over many of the Romanians' accounts, we have reached the conclusion that most of them are bloggers, and Twitter is a way of growing and nurturing the communities around blogs.

We can identify a series of interesting, particular usages, like for PR / marketing or for announcing various cultural events.

The authors of this article are between the few Romanian twitterers who use this microblogging platform in education.

1.4. Applications related to the Romanian Twitosphere

In February, the second author has contributed to the implementation of the application named Romanian Twitosphere on Google Maps, a *mashup* that uses Google Maps API and Twitter API. This application displays the most recent notes of the twitterers from the most important Romanian cities and also from Chisinau.

In the figure 2 you can see the messages from Iasi.

Also a new category for microblogs has been opened in "The Romanian RSS feeds / blogs Collection". Until now this contains a few Twitter and cirip.ro accounts, but accounts from other microblogging systems are expected too: Tumblr, Pownce, Jaiku or Logoree.ro. They're aimed especially for the educational zone.

The authors launched a survey from their Twitter account, inviting the Romanian twitterers to answer to the following questions: "Please let us know which of the Twitter facilities do you appreciate most". There were emphasized the advantages regarding networking, for popularizing projects, or personal blogs or for finding project partners. George Hari Popescu, journalist and teacher of journalism, with the account twitter.com/georgehari, gave the answer "It's like I'm writing haikus".

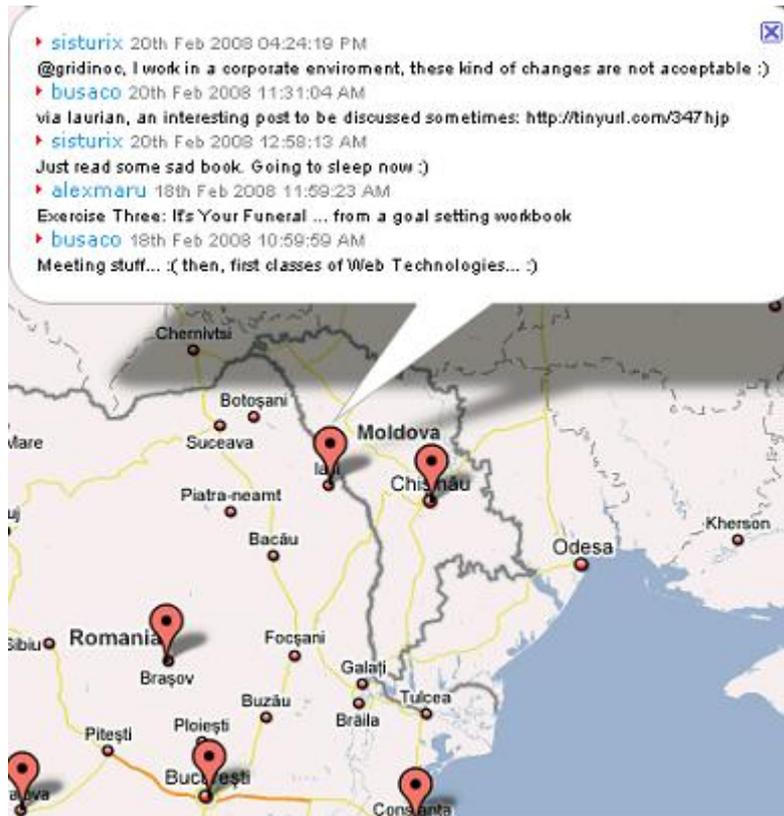


Figure 2. The Romanian Twittosphere Map
 source: http://www.timsoft.ro/ro/harta_twitter.php

1.5. A Romanian microblogging platform

During March the microblogging application cirip.ro (figure 3) was launched by Timsoft, under the coordination of the second author.

Besides the facilities that Twitter offers, cirip.ro comes with the following:

- Users have the possibility to specify the domain about they will write the notes; this makes finding microblogs from a specific domain easier, particularly the educational ones;
- Using tags to classify notes, thus making it easy to find notes from specific topics and their corresponding search feeds. For example cirip.ro/tag/university or cirip.ro/tag/conference+education;
- Creating user groups; pupils, students, teachers can create collaborative and private groups, with notes visible only for the members;
- The possibility to subscribe to RSS feeds - this offers the possibility to receive SMS notifications when corresponding blogs are updated.



Figure 3. Cirip.ro - Romanian microblogging platform <http://www.cirip.ro>

II. POTENTIAL EDUCATIONAL USES OF TWITTER

We'll explore some pragmatic issues (the benefits, the drawbacks, the logistics) about **Twitter as an educational tool**, based on some of our own experimentation with it:

- *Classroom community.* Twittering in class or outside of it is about learning.
- *Exploring collaborative writing:* it promotes writing as a fun activity, it fosters editing skills, develop literacy skills; it can give our students a chance to record their cognitive trails and then use them to reflect on their work.
- *Reader response:* students can use tweets to send out questions and observations to the group while engaged in classroom activities.
- Explore the potential of *microblogging in formal and informal settings:* Twitter linked to a course/class blog can offer our students opportunities to discuss different kinds of asynchronous online discourse, considering voice, purpose, audience, to organize ideas, reflect, send notes, manage meet-ups, serendipitous discovery etc.
- *Collaboration* across schools, countries (for example, students leave phone-tweets as they come across real-world examples of what they are studying in class or as they conduct fieldwork).
- *Project Management:* if you set up a group working on a project the tweets can be picked up on cell phones (as can email).
- *A tool for assessing opinion,* examining consensus, looking for outlying ideas. Twitter also could be used in an academic setting to foster interaction about a given topic.
- *A viable platform for metacognition* (the practice of thinking about and reflecting on your learning) has been shown to benefit comprehension and retention.
- *Conference or* as part of a presentation or workshop. Twitter can provide a simple way for attendees at a conference to share thoughts about particular sessions and activities with others at the event and those unable to attend. Twitter works well for an undercurrent dialogues, being a way to organize, give quick updates, and rapidly point to resources.
- *For reference or research* (almost the entire edublogsphere is connecting via Twitter). Higher education (especially) is using the technology to relay important information to students in a more timely manner.

- *Facilitating virtual classroom discussion* by using **@username**. It directs the 'tweet' at the intended recipient whilst allowing every student to also see it.
- *Creating a learning experience* (Twitter can be used to impact on the student's learning).
- Twitter facilitates a *Personal Learning Network* (PLN) in the edublogosphere. In this context students can ask questions of those they only know online [Belshaw, 2007].
- *Exploring the language* that students have used in the session, that other people would naturally use to describe an event's probability.
- *Reference services* (in libraries). People could "follow" a Twitter account to learn about library events, new books, or get responses to library user questions.
Twitter can have a positive impact on educational actors due to some **good points** as follows:
 - engaging education and sharing the best practices that a teacher is using in his/her classroom
 - it changes classroom dynamics
 - very useful to get helpful information
 - it can serve both as a means of analysis and an object of analysis
 - it connects people that one would not have met otherwise
 - it keep track of a conversation students carry on a particular topic
 - it's fun and gives students more insight into what's really going on in courses
 - it's a good way of making a quick announcement
 - being limited to just 140 characters really focuses the attention, it's developed its own sort of discursive grammar set, requiring a great deal of summarizing (even synthesizing, on occasion)
 - the virtual aspects of schooling are well represented in Twitter posts
 - may be useful for our professional development and building a true educational community
 - teachers make themselves available¹
 - teachers are connecting their students to the real world
 - it gives the students a sense of what a person is like outside of the classroom (they end up being a lot more comfortable with classroom discourse)
 - make us feel nice about being human (quieter students can be heard)
 - it provide age-appropriate environments
 - students use Twitter as a tool that supports reflection
 - Twitter is microblogging which many times is much more efficient than RSS feeds [Davis, 2008]
 - Twitter is purposefulness, curriculum-centred but not curriculum-bound
 - the teacher can post lecture notes.

"Imagine a 20 minute lecture where all your students back channel about what you're saying. Outside guests or experts are invited in. Someone acts as a "rudder" to keep the conversation on track. The discussion is displayed on a SMARTboard or with a projector. The chatcast is immediately dumped into a wiki. The rest of the class is devoted to reorganizing the wiki clarifying what was said, answering questions (student to student as well as teacher to student; and don't forget the people, students, teachers, mentors or parents beyond the glass walls of the room) summarizing the big ideas, reframing the discussion in terms of what needs to be explained again and where we're going next. Imagine the possibilities ..."

Terry Friedman

Some other pedagogical applications of Twitter can be: use for dissemination of teachers' publications and materials, locating original sources of ideas, quotes, allows for very focused and concrete feedback to students to refine their thinking and improve their skills, fostering professional connections, informal research, for storytelling, class chatter, follow a professional, get feedback on ideas, programs, make appointments, event updates, live coverage of events, build trust, build a community etc.

There are also some **bad points**, too:

¹One can send messages to Twitter directly via SMS. The advantage is the mobile phone number is not shown and this could be ideal in an educational environment where teachers don't want to give out their contact details.

- the twittering going on in a lesson sometimes can be too distracting (or at least too distracting for some students, like someone with autism, attention deficit disorder, chronic fatigue syndrome etc.)
- Twitter is a time-consuming task
- can be 'rude' (lack of the courtesy): students should listen to what the teacher or lecturer is saying, not be chatting to their friends
- Twitter has an issue about improving grades or increasing interesting in the subject of teaching
- the message will only be picked up by the people in your network
- your potential response rate is going to be fairly limited
- can be addictive
- (sometimes) no social / educational value
- Twitter is not to enrich and support rich learning for students
- the disadvantages for teachers who twittering is that they are being 'on-call' virtually 24-7 and students can intrude into his/her private life
- in schools also allows much faster spreading of rumors
- writing to 140 characters could leads to bad grammar skills
- distract the students from focusing on ideas that it is explore in class
- Twitter privacy: in classroom situations is better to have a private account (also students have to be warning and encouraging their anonymity and thoughtful postings otherwise)
- Twitter spam (block those "followers" that have nothing to do with your classroom activities) etc.

To really function in educational area, one should adopt **certain measures**, as follows:

- Before using Twitter in the classroom make sure to share with the students the language of Twitter and what it all means.
- Think carefully about what topic to support.
- Don't be afraid of re-tweeting a request so that people who have just logged in can pick it up.
- Learn a self-discipline.
- Be flexible and prepared for the direction that the tweets can take you.
- Teachers who advocate using such tools or approaches in their didactical activities must be very open about what worked or didn't, and why/why not.
- Teachers should consider implementing this approach on a pilot or trial basis, with a selected group of students or a selected class, or any class at a particular point in the academic year.
- There need to be a mix of the old and the new (it must be possible for students to achieve the intended learning objectives of the lesson by alternative routes).
- The students should be included in the evaluation of the approach.
- Allowing your network time to respond is very important.
- Teachers have to be motivated, enjoy their jobs and work together, not in competition.
- Shapping carefully the learning experiences: 'it's not about the nodes in the network; it's about the connections you can form between information' [Parry, 2008].
- Twitter is meaningless without a network, which must be willing to share, to engage, to provoke, to discuss etc.

III. CONCLUSIONS

For the authors of this paper, Twitter proved to be an effective tool for professional development and for collaboration with students, that can change the rules of the courses and models good pedagogy responsive to student's learning needs. Furthermore, as a social networking / microblogging platform, we have find valuable the interactions that Twitter and our Twitter network affords us in educational contexts.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- [1] Terry Friedman, *Twittering in the classroom: some issues*, 23/7/2007, http://terry-freedman.org.uk/artman/publish/printer_1122.php
- [2] Tom Barrett, Plan, Tweet, Teach, Tweet, Learn, Smile, <http://tbarrett.edublogs.org/2008/03/07/plan-tweet-teach-tweet-learn-smile>, 3/3/2008.
- [3] Linda L Briggs, *Micro Blogging with Twitter*, Campus Technology, 3/5/2008, <http://www.campustechnology.com/article.aspx?aid=59315>.
- [4] Darren Kuropatwa, *Twitter: Ephemeral Learning Tool*, 4/7/2007, <http://adifference.blogspot.com/2007/07/twitter-ephemeral-learning-tool.html>.
- [5] *7 Things You Should Know About Twitter*, <http://www.educause.edu/ir/library/pdf/ELI7027.pdf>, July 2007.
- [6] Alan A. Lew, *Twitter Tweets for Higher Education*, 19/8/2007, <http://web20teach.blogspot.com/2007/08/twitter-tweets-for-higher-education.html>.
- [7] Steve Dembo, *What I learned from Twitter Today*, 19/8/2007, <http://www.teach42.com/2007/09/28/what-i-learned-from-twitter-today/>.
- [8] Doug Belshaw, *3 scenarios for using Twitter with your students*, October 2007, <http://tinyurl.com/2lvtvf>.
- [9] David Parry, *Twitter for Academia*, January 23rd 2008, <http://academhack.outsidethetext.com/home/2008/twitter-for-academia/>.
- [10] Java et al. *Why We Twitter: Understanding Microblogging Usage and Communities*, <http://ebiquity.umbc.edu/paper/html/id/367/Why-We-Twitter-Understanding-Microblogging-Usage-and-Communities>, 12/8/ 2007.
- [11] Karen Russell, *48 Hours of Twitter class assignment*, 17/1/2008, <http://teachingpr.blogspot.com/2008/01/48-hours-of-twitter-class-assignment.html>.

* Senior lecturer Ph.D., University of the West Timisoara , Faculty of Sociology and Psychology , 4 bd. V. Parvan office 029 , 300223 Timisoara , tel: +40-256-592266 , email: ggrosseck@socio.uvt.ro , blog: grosseck.blogspot.com , twitter: www.twitter.com/ggrosseck

** Junior Lecturer Ph.D. candidate, University Politehnica Timisoara , Manager TimSoft Timisoara , site: www.timsoft.ro , blog: www.timsoft.ro/weblog , email: camit@timsoft.ro , twitter: www.twitter.com/cami13