

Using Twitter as a Teaching Tool in Ornithology Classes

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In large ornithology classes, laboratory time may be limited or non-existent. Engaging students in the excitement of bird biology can be very challenging when the instructor has relatively little time to interact directly with each individual student. Social networking tools have some potential for harnessing student attention outside of class. I used Twitter as a tool in my large ornithology class; below are some simple guidelines to reproduce my approach:

The Goal:

Use Twitter to give students an incentive, and an accessible medium, for engaging with bird biology outside of class

The Tool:

Twitter is a web-based social networking tool in which users are limited to posts no longer than 140 characters. It is further characterized by the ability of users to post via any device, including phones and other mobile devices, as well as via computer-based access to the web. Thus, it is a public, or semi-public, form of text-messaging. It has also been referred to as “Micro-blogging” The initial concept behind Twitter was that every post was supposed to answer the question, “What are you doing?” As for many social networking tools, users have moved beyond the initial concept and are using it for many purposes.

The Assignment:

Every student was required to:

- Post to Twitter at least 5 times
- Each post must say:
 - Where you are
 - What you are seeing among the birds around you
 - Relate what you see to course content
- I assigned 3 points to each post, as an incentive --- one could use more or fewer points, but 3 points corresponds to 1 point per element above.
- Posts ungraded, except all elements had to be present

The effect of this assignment is to make students observe birds and think about what they are seeing outside of class, all the time, and no matter where they are. Because they are often using their phones for texting, texting activities remind them of the assignment, and prompt them to look around them for birds. Students in my class reported that the assignment helped them cement conceptual material, and notice birds and bird behavior.

Mechanics:

Users sign up for an account at **Twitter.com** by picking a user name, entering an email address and password, and choosing some privacy settings. The process takes less than 10 minutes for a web-savvy user.

Users have several ways of **seeing the posts** of others. At the Twitter Home page, posts from all users that have not set their posts as “private” appear in real time. Users can also search for all posts on a given subject, or from a given other user. Finally, and most commonly, users can choose to “follow” other users. On users’ Twitter pages, all their own posts, plus the posts of anyone they are “following” appear in reverse chronological (most recent at the top) order.

When a user decides to “follow” someone else, the user being followed receives notification via email, and a link that facilitates their “following” the follower. **It will make tracking and following students much, much easier to require them to follow the instructor.** Student user names frequently do not correspond exactly to their first and last names, so requiring them to follow you helps you find them, and also **gives you an automatic archive of all the posts they have made.** Students can follow the rest of the class by visiting your Twitter profile, and choosing to follow everyone who is following you. Unfortunately, if there is a way to make a “group” Twitter page that would be accessible without these steps, I could not discover it. I now use “hash tags”, which allow anyone with a twitter account to find any post tagged for a given topic, e.g., we append #birdclass at the end of every tweet.

Advantages:

Twitter is largely user-friendly, and easy to begin using immediately

Short posts seem “easy”, and students find them unintimidating.

Short posts are easy and quick for the instructor to read, track, and assign credit for --- they don’t require “correcting”

If you require your students to follow you, and then follow all of them, the system automatically archives all their posts for you to review as convenient, or in real time.

Social aspect of the activity tends to promote synergy – a few active students tend to stimulate activity from others.

Disadvantages:

The Twitter “Help” desk is slow, and in my experience, largely of no assistance. If you want to do something complex, you need the Twitter community to provide the answer, or to figure it out on your own.

Enforcement of short posts can contribute to the tendency to report trivia, and to think only shallowly about what’s being reported.