

Twitter in the teaching methods course: Foreign language graduate teaching assistants perspectives

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This article reports on the experimental implementation of Twitter in a foreign language teaching methods course. The goal of incorporating social networking into the course was to promote future teachers' understanding of the collaborative nature of learning and the teaching profession. Twitter contributed to a sense of community, lowered students' anxiety, promoted engagement and facilitated more in-depth discussions in the classroom. However, the discussions tended to remain an artificial academic exercise and the full collaborative potential of Twitter was not achieved because of the implementation methods. Based on the experience in this course, it was concluded that Twitter can be best used for teachers' professional development to assist in the formation of their own teaching resource community, practicing collaboration and making connections on a global and local level, while building their identities as teachers.

Introduction

In pedagogical approaches based on socio-cultural principles, learning is viewed as a social practice facilitated by exchanges (Deppeler, 2007). In this perspective, fostering dialogic interactions to promote a supportive learning community and the exchange of ideas have been recognized as key components for the professional preparation of teachers. A collaborative setting allows participants to further develop their knowledge, as they propose ideas and discuss them with other members of the community (Lord & Lomicka, 2008; So & Brush, 2008). Thus, engaging teachers-in-training in collaborative practice, to create a sense of community, is consistent with a socially

situated pedagogical approach. In his study on students' perceptions regarding the relationship between a sense of community and cognitive learning, Rovai (2002) found that the students with the deepest understanding of topics were the ones who had perceived a strong sense of community. The link between the development of community and perception of increased learning was additionally supported by studies conducted by Rovai and Barnum (2003), Ertmer and Stepich (2005) and Top (2012).

Researchers (Dunlap & Lowenthal, 2009; Lord & Lomicka, 2008; Silver, 2011) have observed that the increasing presence of technology in the classroom results in the expansion of communities beyond the traditional four walls of the classroom. Online forums have become platforms for learners to exchange and discuss ideas, and also to evaluate and solve challenges (Pawan, Paulus, Yalcin, & Chang, 2003). This article describes how Twitter, a social networking tool, was implemented in a foreign language teaching methods course and reports on the students' perspectives of their experience. One of the learning outcomes defined for the course was to have teachers-in-training understand that teaching is a collaborative endeavor where interaction with peers and colleagues can lead to improved teaching practices because the "collaborative construction of meaning is enhanced via different perspectives on shared experiences" (Dede, 2000, p. 281). This report uses the students' opinions to discuss the experimental implementation of Twitter in this specific course, but does not seek to provide evidence of the effectiveness of Twitter as a teaching tool across all teaching contexts. The intended purpose is to make recommendations on the application of Twitter as a pedagogical tool in a teaching methods course based on the students' reactions and feedback on their engagement in collaboration through Twitter.

Purposes in adding a CMC component to the face-to-face foreign language teaching methods course

As the growing body of research shows, developing skills and knowledge in technology for instructional use has become an essential element in teachers' professional development (Blake, 2001; Hsu, 2004; Khoo, Johnson, & Zahra, 2012; Lord & Lomicka, 2004, 2008; McLoughlin & Lee, 2011). In teaching methods courses, examples of foreign language activities using computer-mediated communication (CMC) or research reports describing research on the use of technology for foreign language learning is certainly part of the expert or disciplinary knowledge (Johnson, 2009) teachers should be exposed to. However, giving pre-service teachers opportunities to use CMC tools as students before they set out to incorporate them in their teaching, is also highly relevant to their preparation (Lord & Lomicka, 2004) because interacting with technology enables them to assess the tools from a user's point of view (Arnold & Ducate, 2006). And as a result, as Lam (2000) pointed out, teachers will then be more inclined to include technology in their teaching.

As I designed my foreign language teaching methods course, I looked for ways to engage students in intellectually stimulating and meaningful discussions, encourage collaboration inside and outside of the classroom, demonstrate student-centered instruction and socio-cultural principles of learning based on Vygotsky (1978), while at the same time integrating the use of technology for dialogic purposes. This course was face-to-face, meeting twice a week. Nevertheless, I wanted to facilitate discussions outside of the regular meeting times as well as provide opportunities to share resources (Silver, 2011), to foster a sense of community and collaboration in the class, and to promote learning (Lord & Lomicka, 2008).

Thus, adding a virtual component, to get students to connect outside the regular classroom, would fulfill my vision for the course.

Rationale for the choice of Twitter as a virtual component in the course

To inform my decision on which CMC tool to use for my purposes, I consulted recent research reports documenting the use of synchronous and asynchronous online tools to promote interactive learning and collaboration inside and outside of the classroom (Arnold & Ducate, 2006; Borau, Ullrich, Feng, & Shen, 2009; Cole, 2009; Dunlap, & Lowenthal, 2009; Hoadley & Kilner, 2005; Hsu, 2004; Johnson & Johnson, 2004; Khoo et al., 2012; Lomicka & Lord, 2007; McLoughlin & Lee, 2011; Miyazoe & Anderson, 2010; Palloff & Pratt, 1999; Pawan et al., 2003; Silver, 2011; Warshauer, 1997). Lord and Lomicka (2008) warned that while one of the goals of teachers' professional preparation should be to encourage a sense of community, just providing an online forum is not sufficient. They recommended considering "the quantity, quality, and frequency of interaction such a forum is likely to generate" (p. 170). In their study that examined the engagement of teachers-in-training in online collaborative discussion boards, Pawan et al. (2003) also found that the possibility of accessing online tools at anytime from anywhere did not guarantee that interaction or collaboration would occur.

With this information in mind, I first considered the issue of synchronicity vs. asynchronicity. I quickly opted for an asynchronous tool to allow access to the ongoing discussions when it was most convenient for students, with the hope that the flexibility of access would foster their engagement. Next, I had to decide what tool would be most conducive to my objectives of facilitating the continuity of the in-class interactions to promote collaboration and a sense of community. Microblogging and more precisely Twitter seemed appropriate because of Borau et al.'s (2009) comment on using Twitter as a blended learning tool, which was, in essence, what I was trying to accomplish by extending the regularly scheduled in-class meetings to an online forum.

In their report on their use of Twitter, Dunlap and Lowenthal (2009) mentioned Kuh's (1995) comment regarding the importance of discussions that happen before, after or in between face-to-face class meetings. Kuh considered that these encounters foster the sense of community by facilitating the development of interpersonal relationships. Dunlap and Lowenthal found that Twitter was an appropriate tool to support informal learning outside the classroom and foster relationships, an opinion supported by Parry (2008) and Silver (2011), as they reported on their own experimental use of Twitter for pedagogical purposes. Silver talked about a "networked classroom" where resources and problem solving can occur outside of regular class time. Parry saw Twitter as a medium to extend and continue discussions outside of the four walls the classroom, which encouraged students to apply course material to the world outside the class. He also witnessed in his course, that the use of Twitter contributed to an enhanced sense of community amongst his students, resulting in more dynamic and constructive in-class exchanges.

One possible issue with using Twitter, underlined by Borau et al. (2009), is that Twitter is not intended for conversations, but to provide individuals with a forum to display updates to their status: what they are doing. However, their study demonstrated actual engagement of their participants in the art of conversing. Dunlap and Lowenthal (2009) noted that people use Twitter beyond its original intended function of providing updates. They may use it to share ideas or to ask and answer questions, both markers of interactions. Gulliver

(2012) compared it to a CB radio and recommended academic users go beyond self-broadcast, to actually engage in exchanges by commenting and responding to Tweets.

Another potential concern is the shortness of turns, which are limited to 140 characters. Although Borau et al. (2009) saw this limitation remarkably beneficial for language learners, I was concerned that it might have a negative effect on the depth and content of the exchanges as well as lead to bad grammar usage as pointed out by Grosseck and Holotescu (2008, cited in Dunlap & Lowenthal, 2009). However, Dunlap and Lowenthal viewed the 140-character limit as conducive to professional development, because it drove students to learn how to express themselves in a clear and concise manner, which, they pointed out, is a valuable professional skill. Although Facebook would allow carrying out longer conversation, Twitter offers the possibility to follow experienced teachers and professional organizations, thus providing more opportunities to find teaching resources and develop a network. Facebook would be a mere extension of the classroom, whereas Twitter is an open door.

Despite inherent shortcomings, incorporating Twitter in the course appeared to serve its learning outcomes. It provided a forum to expand and build on the face-to-face discussions, foster learning outside of the classroom, share teaching experiences or issues as well as a support community accessible from any computing or mobile device at any time.

The study

Implementation of Twitter in the course

As part of their course requirements, students were asked during the first week of classes to set up an account on Twitter under their name. They were also instructed to check the "Protect my Tweets" box in their account settings, because of the concerns expressed by the Institutional Review Board at the university where this study took place, regarding the protection of the students' privacy, once the study's results would be disseminated. By checking this box, only people whom students approved could follow their Tweets, making the students' Tweets not available publicly. Thus, students were required to allow me, their instructor, as well as all the students enrolled in the course to follow them. In the event that students already had a Twitter account, they were asked to check the "Protect my Tweets" box for the semester, or to set up an alternate account (with the requirement that they create a recognizable user name) for the purpose of the course. Although the discussion amongst the students would remain private for the duration of the semester, they could follow whomever they wished on Twitter and were encouraged to share on Twitter or in class this networking experience.

At the beginning of the third week of classes, students began using Twitter. For 11 weeks (of a 15-week semester), they were required to tweet a minimum of 15 times each week. They had to post at least five original Tweets, which were defined as questions, thoughts, status, or comments. The remaining Tweets could be Retweets where they could share a posting found on the page of an individual they followed, or respond and comment on the other students' Tweets. Students were instructed that their Tweets should focus on topics discussed in class, their understanding of teaching practices, and their beliefs about teaching. They could share classroom teaching experiences or problems they were having, as well as offering support, and solutions to issues discussed. Twitter participation accounted for 10% of the final grade. As the instructor, I decided not to participate because my objective

the students. I felt that my presence and comments would make the setting too similar to the twice-weekly meeting in the face-to-face classroom.

The students

At a large university in the southeastern part of the United States, nine graduate students (seven females, two males) were enrolled in a foreign language teaching methods course, which met twice a week face-to-face for 75 minutes. Six students were pursuing a Masters Degree in French (three with a linguistics concentration, three with a literature concentration), one a Masters Degree in Spanish with a linguistics concentration, and two were doctoral students with a concentration in French literature. Six of the nine students were teaching, five an introductory French course, one an introductory Spanish course. Three were in their first semester teaching at the university, and the other three were in their second semester teaching. The Spanish teacher was a returning student who had taught high school for two decades. Three of the nine students were not teaching because they had not quite completed the university required graduate credit hours necessary to be allowed to teach. They were assisting faculty in advanced level French courses, and tutoring for students enrolled in beginning and intermediate French courses.

Survey of students' opinions and data analysis

During the last class of the semester, the nine students completed in 20 minutes a questionnaire regarding their perspectives on using Twitter in the course. The questionnaire was composed of five open-ended questions that consisted of asking (1) their thoughts and opinions regarding how Twitter was used in the course, (2) for an explanation on whether or not Twitter had helped them connect with their colleagues in the class, (3) what they thought were the advantages of using Twitter, (4) what they thought were the disadvantages, and (5) to explain whether or not they would recommend using Twitter for teachers' professional training.

To analyze the students' responses, I opted for an interpretive qualitative approach based on Adams, Fijii, and Mackey (2005) and Maxwell (2005). Following Travers' (2001) recommendation to begin coding without preset themes or categories, I looked across all participants' responses to each open-ended question, searching for similar words or phrases with the objective of letting themes emerged from the data. There was a clear divide in the responses around the positive and negative aspects. Thus, two main categories were derived: (1) the benefits of Twitter and (2) drawbacks and criticisms. The most recurrent comments were then grouped under themes (collaboration, connections, relationship development, learning and engagement, issues with course requirements, issues with Twitter), as well as classified into the most relevant category based on content. I considered the relative importance of a theme based on how many times it was cited, and possible connections between themes while searching for consistent patterns of occurrences of two themes together. Finally, based on Maxwell, I cross-referenced the students' responses to the questionnaire with the Twitter discussions to contextualize the data.

Students' perspectives

In response to the first question on the survey regarding their opinions, six students admitted that when they learned about the Twitter component, they were not enthralled by the prospect. Three of them explained that they did not have an account and did not really want to add another networking tool they would have to check in addition to Facebook and email. Two thought that blogs or Facebook would be better suited because longer posts were possible and ideas could be more developed. Twitter was just "a status thing." They did not realize how Twitter could give them access to a large network of experienced teachers. Finally, one was not convinced that Twitter should be used in an academic setting. However, all nine students found that they enjoyed the experience. Their comments revealed that although the learning outcome was in essence met, there were some drawbacks.

The benefits of Twitter

Feeling engaged, supported and connected. As shown in Table 1, connection and support were seen as the most advantageous features of Twitter, based on the number of citations in the students' responses to questions 2 and 3 on the survey.

Table 1: Advantageous features of Twitter (N=9)

Themes	Number of times mentioned	Examples from survey
Connection	9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> —It was a great way to stay in touch outside of class. —A good tool to connect because people are online more than on email. —Gave insights about what they considered to be good or bad about their classes or assignments. —We are able to connect with other language educators to borrow ideas.
Convenience and availability	5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> —Almost always got immediate feedback. —Convenient to connect with other language educators. —No time limits compared to class discussions, open 24/7.
Feeling supported	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> —It allows the professor to know what her students' concerns are. —A good place to go for questions or concerns about the classes I was taking since several of the students were in the same classes as I was. —Nice to get and receive support from colleagues and having a chance to vent about class problems. —We can get pointers from each other or on what we missed in class.
Feeling more engaged	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> —Something you did not say in class, you can say on Twitter. —I was able to see others' questions. Instead of having to come up with an answer on the spot, I could think about it for a while and then ask.

134 All nine students felt that Twitter helped them connect with their classmates and more experienced teachers, from whom they could borrow or get ideas. One student's comment

illustrates the feeling of continued support and connection that Twitter provided during the semester. She wrote: "I never felt alone." A survey of the students' Tweets supports their reported feelings. Until the 5th week (about mid-point into the semester), students divided their Tweets between asking for clarifications regarding a concept discussed in class, and seeking help and feedback on issues with the class they were teaching or with an assignment for the teaching methods class. As the semester progressed and "a more personal, informal, less structured atmosphere" developed, they vented or commented about their own students, shared complaints about courses they were enrolled in, and discussed the life and challenges of being a teaching assistant. Discussions often concerned how to balance teaching and studying, or the frustration regarding their students' lack of motivation for foreign language learning.

On the survey, five students mentioned how they appreciated the convenience of constant availability and the no-time limit on discussions afforded by Twitter. As one student noted, "we could communicate outside of class without holding formal group meetings." These students all mentioned, in their own words, how useful it was to be able to communicate with all of their classmates at once at any time (and not just in class or in quick passing in a hallway). Because "there was always somebody on," they felt a higher degree of support. If they had missed class, they were able to receive a variety of responses, solutions, or information very quickly on questions such as, "how do you define proficiency?" or "how do you get students to talk in class?"

As a result, two students explained that they felt their engagement in discussions increased because they could take their time and reflect on what had been said in class. They could develop their thoughts by asking as many questions as they wanted without feeling "on the spot" or without the pressure of time. They then felt more relaxed and confident to expose their ideas and suggestions on Twitter before expressing them in the face-to-face classroom. An examination of the Tweets of these two students revealed a gradual shift in their confidence level when expressing their thoughts and ideas, suggesting that they used Twitter as a practice forum. It might be postulated that they viewed it as a less threatening environment. During the first four weeks, the majority of their 15 Tweets (with a low point for both at week 3, with less than the 15 required Tweets) consisted of Retweets without any additional comments. In the rest of the Tweets, they asked clarifying questions about concepts or theories discussed in class, or advice regarding teaching or an assignment. Between weeks 4 and 6, both students gradually started responding to other students' Tweets and making comments on Retweets posted by their classmates in about half of their 15 posted Tweets. By week 8, they offered their own interpretation of readings, started providing advice to other students, and made comments on their own Retweets. They tweeted more and only two or three questions. Thus, based on the content of their Tweets, using Twitter enabled these two students to develop confidence and led them to further their engagement with the course.

Towards the middle of the semester, Tweets about the other courses students were taking increased. For the rest of the semester, they constituted about a third of the conversations on Twitter. Students asked each other questions about assignments, provided progress status on papers, and reminded each other about deadlines. Thus, Twitter provided them with the opportunity to develop a support system, not only as teachers in training but also as graduate students. Finally, my non-participation but implied presence appeared to contribute, for two of the students, to their feeling of support. On their survey, they noted that their instructor was constantly aware of their concerns, and felt more connections overall. **135**

Practicing collaboration, teaching resource. As shown in Table 2, the connection and support students felt on Twitter developed into a teaching and learning resource.

Table 2: Factors contributing to Twitter being viewed as a teaching and learning resource (N=9)

Themes	Number of times mentioned	Examples from survey
Sharing with classmates	9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> —I was able to share ideas, specifically articles and websites with colleagues, which otherwise would not have been possible. —I read so many interesting articles I would have never found on my own. —Sharing information contributed to the “esprit de corps” of the group.
Teaching resource	5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> —I found a lot of lesson planning ideas from looking at other peoples post and Retweets. —I went on Twitter every time I had a question or a concern. —If I wanted an opinion about how to do something, I could just ask on Twitter and wait for the answer —I could ask my fellow teaching assistants for help or advice.

All of the students explained that the possibility to communicate outside of class made it easier to exchange teaching resources such as lesson ideas and get feedback. Within two weeks of using Twitter, all students but one (she eventually did at mid-point in the semester) started following professional organizations’ and language educators’ Tweets. They retweeted articles, comments, lesson plans and tips as they came upon them. Five of the students explained that, as a result of “following teachers all around the world,” they were able to connect, exchange or borrow ideas from more experienced educators, which led them to be more informed and better able to articulate their ideas in the class discussions. As the semester progressed, classroom discussions became increasingly populated by information based on Tweets and Retweets. One student mentioned in the survey that, for her, the use of Twitter led to developing a more global understanding about language education and language teaching. She explained that, as she followed discussions that touched on localized situations, which were not necessarily discussed in class, she could ask for clarification “directly from the source.”

On their survey, five students noted that they had used Twitter as a teaching and learning resource during the semester. A search of the Tweets revealed multiple instances during the semester when students engaged in discussions regarding teaching activities, either asking questions about a specific activity or simply continuing the in-class discussions. For example, one student tweeted “Great ideas often come from others. Would you use the history activity again? Why or why not?” Another student responded “the matching of years and events? I would not do that activity as a teacher – no context.” A third student jumped in to remark: “the activity was an example of how to “kill” a good class at the end...” A fourth tweeted “the idea is not bad, but it needs to be reorganized.” The first student responded later with a Retweet, “check this out, what do you think?” In this specific example, students had obviously more to say about what they had covered in class and Twitter provided a

Twitter also gave students the opportunity to engage themselves professionally as language educators, thus fostering learning outside of the classroom, as shown in the following survey comment: “by following **ACTFL**, **AATF**, etc., I learned a great deal of information about language teaching *outside* of class.” It is interesting to note that the student writing the comment underlined the word “outside.” It may be postulated that by encouraging her to seek information on her own terms, Twitter fostered her engagement into learning and teaching.

Developing relationships. The students’ responses to questions 1, 2 and 3 also revealed that one of the most valuable aspects of using Twitter in the course was the more personal, informal environment it fostered.

Table 3: Perceived advantages of Twitter (N=9)

Themes	Number of times mentioned	Examples from survey
Connection on a personal level	5	—Tweeting can help build a relationship that is a little more personal than just being in class together. —Tweets revealed characteristics and personality. —During class, we were very talkative and comfortable with each other.
Informal forum	4	—Twitter is a more relaxed way to communicate. —Less-structured atmosphere.
Increased confidence	3	It helped to discuss aspects of teaching when we’d had a chance to reflect on it.

The majority of the students (5 out of 9) mentioned that Twitter helped them connect on a more personal level with members of the class because “it helped to get to know people.” They felt that Twitter allowed more insights into classmates’ opinions. As a result, they got to know each other better and built more personal relationships. As one student noted, the possibility to communicate outside of class in a “less-structured atmosphere” resulted in seeing classmates as individuals and not just other students. A search of the students’ Tweets for personal messages demonstrated that, as the semester progressed, Tweets became more informal and friendlier. Students sent birthday wishes, inquired about each other sicknesses, commiserated on their level of tiredness or the sheer amount of work they had to do within a few days. They also thanked each other for providing explanations to theories about teaching or explanation about French grammar. After six weeks of tweeting, they started using Twitter to set up meetings for a class assignment or to make appointments to go observe each other teaching. As a result, three students indicated that, as the semester progressed, they felt their inhibition and anxiety about speaking in class decreased.

Drawbacks and criticisms: What students did not like

Issues with Twitter. As they responded to questions 1, 4 and 5 on the survey, students mentioned several problems they encountered using Twitter.

Table 4: Problems encountered using Twitter (N=9)

Themes	Number of times mentioned	Examples from survey
Challenging to follow conversations	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> —Had some trouble catching up on conversation because there is no way to look at Tweets in order. —Sometimes it was hard to figure out who was responding to what. —It was overwhelming to try to keep up with the comments and threads. —140 character limit makes dialogue difficult.

One of the main issues reported by the students was the difficulty in following conversations. The limitation of characters resulted often in multiple Tweets to express one idea or thought or to share information. Because the Tweets were not “in order,” it led to many conversations happening at once and thus, made it challenging to follow a conversation or participate in one, especially if not on Twitter everyday. Although it is possible to respond to specific Tweets with the message option, three students indicated that they were not always sure it actually worked and that they responded to the person they intended to, which resulted, they admitted, in less inclination to participate.

Issues with the course requirements. As shown in Table 5, students also commented on the assignment itself.

Table 5: Comments on the Twitter assignment (N=9)

Themes	Number of times mentioned	Examples from survey
The Tweet requirement	6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> —The number of required Tweets made many Tweets artificial and forced. —I felt pressure to write just anything. —140 character limit makes dialogue difficult. —Students are forced to tweet, when one may not have anything to tweet about.

The main issue students reported having concerned the imposition of a set number of Tweets each week. Six students explained that being forced to tweet led to artificial exchanges. Each of them acknowledged that, at some point, they tweeted for the sake of tweeting, in order to get the credit and not because they had something to share or say. As a result, discussions became less interesting and tweeting more an academic exercise (which was not anticipated). A tally of the Tweets on the students’ pages revealed that five students tweeted only the required number of 15 Tweets each week (and at times less than that), while the other four tweeted on average about 25 times each week, with one outlier student who tweeted over 50 times each week. By the middle of the semester, and five weeks into the assignment, two students were using Twitter mostly as an extension of their email (as mentioned above, the other students did as well but not to such extent),

asking for information ranging from “what time do you teach?”, or “where do you teach?”, to “I left my sweater in class, anybody found it?” Because of the amount of Tweets generated by the imposed requirement, three students felt overwhelmed trying to keep up and found it too time consuming, which affected their motivation to use Twitter. Finally, one student considered that the locked account also contributed to the artificiality of the conversations because it went against the nature of social networking.

Conclusions

The students’ comments showed that Twitter did contribute to a sense of community, facilitating exchanges outside and within the classroom, thus supporting Silver’s (2011) concept of “networked classroom.” The perception that there was always someone “on” cemented the sense of community, and fostered interactions as well as collaboration. Twitter allowed the students in the course to engage in professional discussions, not only as teachers but also as students, to exchange tips and ideas and to engage on their own with other professionals. The learning outcome set up for the course was successfully met and the in-class discussions were tremendously enriched by the information discovered by the students on Twitter. Using a social networking tool also seemed to allow more shy or less confident students to develop a voice within the classroom community. As evidenced by the content of their Tweets, two students used Twitter as a platform to test thoughts and ideas before contributing in the face-to-face discussion. Gradually, their in-class participation increased. Although it is not possible to prove a direct causal relationship between use of Twitter and increased class participation, my experience in dealing, in other courses, with these two classroom anxiety-prone students points to the positive influence this experience had on their confidence level, most likely because they felt more connected on a personal level than in other courses they had taken. Thus, this experience demonstrates the benefits of providing opportunity within the curriculum for outside-the-classroom discussions, to build interpersonal relationships.

However, the majority of students tended to consider the discussions on Twitter artificial mainly because of the rules imposed. The Tweets showed that tweeting and following the discussions remained an academic exercise that needed to be completed to get credit. The weekly set number of minimum Tweets affected the quality of the discussions and the motivation to actually post meaningful content, as students felt forced to participate. By asking students to not allow anybody else but members of the course to follow them (although they were free to follow whomever they wanted), I prevented interactions and opportunities for students to be followed. Thus, the development of their community was limited. They were not able to fully use the collaborative potential of Twitter and go beyond the artificial academic exercise they perceived it was. As a result, the students did not develop an inclination to use Twitter as a professional resource, as I had hoped. The majority (6 out of 9) abandoned use as soon as the class was over, including one who cancelled his account. Only two students (including the one who tweeted more than 50 times each week) continued being active by tweeting during the semester following the course. Two others mentioned that, although they did not tweet during the following semester, they did check once in a while the people they were following. As for their inclination to incorporate Twitter in their own teaching based on their use as a student (Arnold & Ducate, 2006; Lam, 2000), only four students indicated on the survey that they may try implementing it

in their own teaching. The following semester, none of them had attempted to use Twitter in the elementary language courses they were teaching.

Overall, all the students perceived the experience as positive, as they expressed their thoughts and views on the survey. However, based on their comments and my own observations, I would recommend a different implementation of Twitter than the one used in this course, in order to promote and facilitate the collaboration and professionalization of students in a teaching methods course.

Pedagogical suggestions

The students' opinions and perspectives on how Twitter was implemented in this course, and my own observations and experience suggest that some modifications of its application would enhance the overall design of the course, and contribute to increase students' engagement in the course and on Twitter.

One of the biggest issues the students in this course expressed, was how difficult it was, at times, to follow discussions because some students posted a lot of Tweets (up to 10) to express one thought or describe an issue, at the same time as others were trying to answer to earlier Tweets. As a result, at times, some frustrations occurred affecting the participation of some members of the course. To alleviate the issue of running thoughts over five or six Tweets, students need to be informed that one of the requirements of the Twitter assignment is that they have to formulate their thought in a concise manner. I would suggest making it part of the grade and limiting to two Tweets maximum for one contribution. On their survey, two students suggested using Twittlonger, which allows bypassing the 140 characters limitation, and expressed their frustrations that none of the other seven students used this capability during the semester. In order to read the entire Tweet, the user needs to click on it, which opens a new page where the longer Tweet is displayed. The use of Twittlonger was discussed in a face-to-face meeting about three weeks after students had started using Twitter, but most students indicated then that they found it too cumbersome to alternate between different pages. The entire semester of posts shows most comments carried over multiple Tweets.

In addition, social networking can bring the professional world to the doorstep of the classroom. As one student pointed out, she was able to get information on local issues and raised her global awareness of educational issues. Thus, Twitter becomes a resource, through which students can stay informed, not only on global initiatives regarding teaching, but also on more localized concerns. The classroom becomes plugged in, allowing a constant and current flow of information to permeate into the face-to-face discussions.

Unfortunately, this collective and social capability was not completely embraced in this course because of the set-up requirements. However, the students' perspectives and comments suggest that where Twitter can contribute the most to the foreign language teaching methodologies class is actually the capabilities it affords to reach out to the profession at large, functioning as a community of practice. Therefore, it appears essential to initially show students what a collaborative endeavor entails on Twitter and how they can build their own community of practice. A few links tweeted by experienced teachers inviting feedback and comments on proposed lessons or activities could be analyzed during class as part of a group exercise. Students could then post comments "live" using a tablet or smart phone. Researchers in the field of second language acquisition or foreign language teaching and learning often tweet regarding their research endeavors or when at conferences,

expecting their followers to comment. A group activity similar to the one described above could be implemented to demonstrate an academic collaborative discussion. In this way, students might consider Twitter more as a resource and less as an academic exercise, and be more engaged into developing their own networked community.

In addition, the required number of Tweets or Retweets per week should be lowered to no more than five. Each student should expect to present, in the face-to-face meetings in two minutes, a fact, information, lesson idea, comment that they have found, or made on Twitter and that they want to discuss further in class. It would allow a greater link between what is happening on Twitter and in the classroom. To this end, I would recommend not requiring a protected account (mandated by the IRB only for the purpose of the current study) to foster the development of discussions, and to empower students in their own professional development for lifelong practice. By broadcasting themselves as teachers to a broader network than just the face-to-face classroom, they will then have the opportunity to not only develop their own larger and more diverse collaborative environment (Silver, 2011) as they engaged into their own community of practice, but also their understanding of themselves as teachers.

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