

## In the Classroom 35

# Using the Twitter Backchannel in Your Classroom

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**Stan Skrabut:** Well, thanks for taking time to listen to this podcast. I really appreciate it. I know, as I always mention, you could be doing other things, but you're hanging out with me and I really do appreciate it. For the last two episodes, Episode 33 and 34, we were looking at Twitter in the Classroom. How to get started with Twitter in the classroom. We also looked at how you could use it for your personal learning environment. Today, we are going to extend this a little bit by talking about how to use Twitter for a backchannel.

Let's start. A backchannel, what is a backchannel? Well, according to EDUCAUSE, they had an article, *Seven Things You Should Know About Backchannel Communications*. They said, "A backchannel communication is a secondary electronic conversation that takes place at the same time as a conference session, a lecture or an instructor-led learning activity." We've been doing back channels probably ever since school started. That we'd be passing notes back and forth or whispering in the back rows. That's pretty much a backchannel.

In a conference, you can see a backchannel where people are sharing ideas, they hear something, they get excited about it or maybe they don't agree with it, and they talk to their neighbor about what's going on. Well, until recently, it was really hard for the presenter or the instructor to grab ahold of what was being said, but now, you can do that with tools like Twitter. We're going to focus on Twitter in this episode. There's other tools that you certainly can use for a backchannel, but we're going to focus on Twitter.

You would have these conversations, and these conversations are going to happen whether you approve or not, but if you can harness this, if you can tap into this, you can get a whole lot of benefit out of it and make it also more engaging for your participants. One way to start this is you need to make sure that your participants are aware of the backchannel or make them aware that you're aware that there is a backchannel. You can do this by posting a hashtag.

On the front of my presentations, when I give a presentation, I include a hashtag that I would like participants to use while I'm giving a presentation or when I'm in class, so I can capture this information at backchannel that I could review later. That is certainly one way to do it. You'll see for conferences, that a conference will go ahead and post a hashtag for their conference that they encourage people to use to share things about the conference and to generate enthusiasm for those people that had to miss the conference, but also just sharing what they're doing.

They know people want to talk about the conference and being able to be able to do, so they share a hashtag. Now, individual sessions, they may go even a step further

and have a unique hashtag just for their session, so they can follow the conversation. That's one way that you can do this. What are some benefits of a backchannel, especially for the classroom? Well, first of all, it gives a conduit for these quieter students where they can jump in and participate in the discussion.

Sometimes to go out in public, and give your answer in front of the class, there's some folks that are just a little more reserved, and they don't like to do this, but a backchannel provides another way that they can do this. This is also a great place where you can share resources. That you can provide links to photos, to videos, anything that will help with the discussion. The instructor doesn't have to be the only one that shares these resources.

You can have the students go out, you may craft periods of time in your class where you ask them to go out and find resources that are related to the topic at hand and share them in Twitter. That's a place that you can do that. You can also use it to supplement your classroom discussions. The fact that if you use Twitter, and I'm a fan of Twitter because of the public and the openness, that you can actually have people from outside your class, start participating in your class simply because they've done a search, they've found a conversation going on and they dive into the conversation.

Now, this can also be bad because you can't necessarily control the conversation that people outside of your class may contribute. Folks have to be aware of that, that sometimes, adult language will get into your conversation or there are some mean-spirited people out there, trolls, we call them, and they dive into conversations every once in a while, but honestly, I've never had this happen to me while I've used Twitter in the classroom. Not saying it couldn't, I'm just saying that it's never happened to me.

Other things that you can do is students want to use their mobile devices. This gives you an opportunity to tap into those mobile devices and use them as a tool and create engagement in your classroom. You can, like I said, post questions that students have to go to the internet to find the answer, but also use Twitter as a place where they can share with the class. That you can do things like you break them up into groups or pair-and-share, that they share their top answers out on Twitter, and then you can review them at once in your classroom. It's a way of tapping into this.

Also, if you happen to be just a presenter, this is a great way to get feedback on your presentation. You will know if your presentation is great or if it sucks. People will tell you. You'll get mostly from both extremes, but it is nice to be able to go do a search, find out what people are thinking, so you can make improvements to what you're doing. Finally, one of the other benefits is the fact that you can get different points of view on a topic that you're talking about. What are some ways that we can use the backchannel in the classroom?

Derek Bruff, he wrote a blog post and I'll share these things in the show notes. Everything that where I'm gathering some of these ideas, I'll put them in the show notes, so you can do a deep dive into this. Derek Bruff, he shared some ideas on ways that you can use Twitter as part of a backchannel in your classroom. One is community notes. You can have students taking notes using Twitter. Now, you may not have all

the students do it, but you may dedicate some folks, some of your students in order to take notes for the class on what's happening.

They can take these very short, simple notes. If you have three or four people doing this, you'll come up with some really pretty comprehensible notes that other students can benefit and tap into. I mentioned earlier that you can share resources, have students go online, they can look for information, then share that right back to the class. As Derek noted, if you find something that's not relevant or students find something not relevant, well, it creates a teaching moment. Why isn't this rise to the occasion to do that?

Using Twitter for commenting on whatever the topic is at hand, they can provide their feedback and provide what they are thinking as part of the discussion. You can also amplify discussion so that everybody is responding, and based on the number of retweets, you can find out what questions students really want to get the answer to right away, and you can address those first. You can have this a voting thing using Twitter. Twitter is probably not the best tool for this. Although, with retweeting, you can get a good sense of what's important to the learners in your classroom.

Now, one of the things, if you use Twitter and it happens to be very active, maybe this is for a large discussion, you could assign a student as a moderator where they keep an eye on the Twitter feed, and they post questions on a regular basis to you based on what they're seeing in the feed, like a facilitator. That's one way that you can do this. Asking questions, this is probably a common one that students can use this to ask questions. If you're aware and you're actively using Twitter in your classroom, what you can do is have Twitter break.

You can basically pull up Twitter and address questions that are happening. One of the things that I've seen when using Zoom, which is a web conferencing tool, is having that backchannel going on in the side where participants are sharing things or asking questions, and the presenter, whoever it is, is just humming along, but has opportunities to stop and look at what questions are being asked and being able to answer them without disrupting what's going on. Twitter can provide that same capability that you can have it in your classroom where there's different ways that you can do it.

You can project on one screen everything that's happening in Twitter, but that can be distracting. Sometimes, it makes presenters a little nervous or educators or you can pause, maybe in your slide deck, you have a visual that says, "Tweet Break." Give folks opportunity to input things into Twitter, but also an opportunity to go look at what's being said in Twitter and make that intentional as part of your instruction as you're moving along. Those are certainly ideas that you can do. Twitter is also, if you're using a hashtag and encouraging students to use the hashtag, as a way that they can help each other, that when they post these questions it doesn't necessarily have to be the instructor who answers this, it can also be a fellow student who happens to come up with the answer and they can help folks out. The muddiest point.

At the end of a class, some instructors have students write down one thing that they thought was important or a question. Well, you can do the same thing in Twitter, so

give five minutes at the end of the class to say, "Okay, in Twitter, go ahead and give us the muddiest point. Did you jump out at you?" Maybe ask both. "What jumped out at you that you thought was a learning moment and what question do you still have?" You can do that. For these very large classes, when we are talking hundreds of students at once, Twitter can be used for building community.

It provides an opportunity for students to get to know each other. When you do this it's really important that they create an avatar, and ideally, with the picture of themselves, so other students can recognize them in class and be able to develop this network or community that they can then continue pursuing. Just as you would end the class with Twitter asking questions, you can also start a class, that you can ask them right at the beginning of the class, "What are some things we need to address," and then you can review the Twitter feed, right in front of the class and be able to pursue those things.

I am definitely a fan of Twitter as an open discussion. I don't like where you keep it private. You can certainly find tools to do that, but I think it's also important to teach our students, our learners how to operate in this real world where these communications are out there, and the sharing of ideas, and being able to tap into that. I'm definitely a fan of that. Switching tracks here, if you happen to be giving a presentation, say at the conference, things that you want to consider is creating a system where you are keeping tabs on the Twitter feed.

This may be that you have an iPad that's running an application like TweetDeck so you can keep an eye on the conversation or you may have a colleague with you, a facilitator, who is keeping an eye on the feeds and posting questions to you that are showing up in these feeds or presenting points. Once again it's just a matter of setting up a hashtag, encouraging people to use that hashtag, but then you also have to monitor the hashtag. As I mentioned before, for these large presentations you can also interject, right in the middle of your presentation, "Time for a Twitter break," to do that or you can wait until the end and review all the questions there.

One of the tools that I use personally is called IFTTT. When I go to a conference, one of the things that I do is, I find out what the hashtag is and then using IFTTT I will set up a recipe that will track that hashtag and save all the responses using that hashtag into a spreadsheet and then I'll go back and report this out on a blog post or something like that. You can do that with your classroom also, that you can use IFTTT, have the hashtag that you're using for your classroom and collect that information into a spreadsheet where you can review it later or at the end of the class you can report out on all the great stuff that folks are learning.

That is a little bit about a hashtag. It is a conversation that's happening in the background, but you can tap into it and bring it to the foreground, that you can use it as a tool in your classroom simply by putting out a hashtag and encouraging people to use that hashtag and you can create additional engagement. Lots of good stuff. I'm going to share things in the show notes that I want you to check on, but this is a way that you can use Twitter to increase engagement into your classroom. Before I let you go, here's a plug for my book.