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## Twitter in education: Perceptions of pre-service teachers

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### Abstract

The aim of this study is to determine the perceptions of students with regard to the use of Twitter within education. Participants of the study were 17 junior class Education Faculty students from the Computer Education and Instructional Technology Department of a private university in Turkey. At the beginning of the course, the instructor requested students to sign up for Twitter and follow her tweets. Then the instructor created a hashtag for the lesson and, over the duration of the course, shared course announcements and related papers using this hashtag. Students also tweeted about the summary course content covered during face-to-face lessons. At the end of the course, a questionnaire captured students' perceptions with regard to the use of Twitter within education through five open-ended questions. Content analysis was applied to analyse the qualitative data. By using Twitter in their courses, participants had the opportunity to engage in what they described as a different, useful, entertaining, efficient, and good activity. Students expressed that they liked writing and finding tweets by using the hashtag, facilitating the sharing of information, and that it enhanced their understanding of content through tweets, by following announcements, being aware of the tweets to others, retweeting the instructor's tweets, learning to negotiate a different social network, and that Twitter itself was interesting and motivating.

Keywords: Twitter, microblogging, perceptions, pre-service teachers.

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## 1. Introduction

In 2006, a new form of blogging - microblogging – under the heading of Twitter emerged as a new and simple form of communication. Within this environment, each communication message is limited to 140 characters. Although recognised as an important feature for mobile applications, microblogging can also be carried out through web interfaces (Gulbahar, Kalelioglu & Madran, 2010). Similarly, in a study by Ebner, Lienhardt, Rohs and Meyer (2010), it was stated that the most powerful aspect of microblogging platforms is their mobility. As a result of this feature, the ability to participate on these communication platforms from anywhere in the world supports the expression ‘A3’ (anytime, anywhere, anybody).

When studies are examined in terms of Twitter usage in general, Java, Song, Finin and Tseng (2007) reported that people use Twitter to talk about their daily activities and to search for, or share, information. Moreover, people with similar interests connect with each other. Grosbeck and Holotescu (2008) concluded that Twitter was found to be an effective platform for supporting professional development and for collaborating with students, which changes the context of courses addressing students’ learning needs. Gulbahar et al. (2010) summarised Twitter usage in educational settings as being used to share current events, learn news, share website addresses and thoughts, follow an event or a person, learn a language, and to discuss and collaborate with others.

When studies are investigated in terms of Twitter usage within education, Ebner et al. (2010) examined all posts in detail to explore the potential offered by microblogging in education. They found that microblogging should be perceived as an absolutely new method of communication that can support informal learning beyond the classroom. Moreover, Bicen and Cavus (2012) conducted a study to investigate the Twitter usage habits of undergraduate students, with results that showed that most of the participants spent much of their time on Twitter. Students mostly shared quotes, photos, videos, music, news, IT news and magazine news on Twitter, whereas they shared educational materials the least. Many studies examining the pedagogical effectiveness of integrating Twitter into teaching and learning environments suggest that Twitter supports a social presence (Dunlap and Lowenthal, 2009), and students’ informal learning (Aspden and Thorpe, 2009), motivates students through the usage of new technologies (Moody, 2010), fosters experiential learning (Rinaldo, Tapp and Laverie, 2011), and supports knowledge construction and retention (Kassens-Noor, 2012).

There have been studies on Twitter usage in education consisting of analyses of tweets, but the thoughts and perceptions of students who use Twitter in education have not been examined in detail. However, students’ thoughts and perceptions are one of the important factors that will shape the use of Twitter in education. Therefore, the aim of this study is to determine the perceptions of students about the use of Twitter within education.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

The participants of the study were 17 junior class Education Faculty students attending a compulsory “Distance Education” undergraduate course from the Computer Education and Instructional Technology Department at a private university in Turkey. Of the 17 participating students, there were ten females and seven males. The mean age of the students was 24.29 with ages ranging from 21 to 32.

### 2.2. The procedure

The “Distance Education” course was designed as a blend, combining both traditional and online activities. At the beginning of the course, the instructor requested students to sign up for Twitter and

follow her tweets. Then the instructor created a hashtag for the lesson and, over the duration of the course, shared course announcements and related papers using this hashtag (Figure 1). Students also tweeted about the summary course content covered during face-to-face lessons (Figure 2).



Figure 1. Instructor's tweets about related papers



Figure 2. Students' tweets about course content

At the end of the course, a questionnaire captured the students' perceptions about the use of Twitter within education through five open-ended questions. These questions were as follows:

1. What do you think about the use of Twitter in our course?
2. What are your favourite conditions for the use of Twitter in our course?
3. What are your least favourite conditions for the use of Twitter in our course?
4. Would you like to use Twitter on other courses? If so, why?
5. What are your suggestions about the use of Twitter in education?

### 2.3. Data Analysis

Content analysis was applied to analyse the qualitative data obtained. First, the data was coded inductively, and controlled, emerging themes were then identified. The data were recoded according to the newly emerged themes, and finally, the results were interpreted (Yildirim & Simsek, 2006).

## 3. Results

The results of the analysis are presented below, based on the order of questioning. Frequencies of the statements are shown in parentheses.

### 3.1. Thoughts about the use of Twitter in the course

Students' thoughts about the use of Twitter in the course were divided into two categories: positive thoughts and negative thoughts. In terms of positive thoughts, students explained that they had the chance to engage in a different/useful/ entertaining/efficient/good activity (7), they had the opportunity to have a Twitter account (5), they wrote tweets about the presentations and summary of the course content (3), they learned to use a new social network (2), Twitter was easy to use (1), they

had a chance to learn the mood of others (1), Twitter made students active learners (1), and they had on-the-spot information about the course (1). With regard to negative thoughts, students stated that the use of Twitter was unnecessary/useless (3), the 140 character limitation also limited their ability to express themselves (3), they were unable to check tweets (3), they experienced difficulties because of first time usage (2), and they did not like Twitter (1).

### *3.2. Favourite conditions for the use of Twitter in the course*

Students' thoughts about their favourite conditions for the use of Twitter in the course were divided into two categories: favourite conditions and other thoughts. In terms of favourite conditions, students expressed that they liked writing and finding tweets by using the hashtag (4), it facilitated the sharing of information (3), tweets enhanced the understanding of content (2), they could follow announcements (2), they were aware of tweets to others (1), retweeting the instructor's tweets (1), learning a different social network (1), Twitter itself is interesting and motivating (1), and some did not like any of the conditions (5).

### *3.3. Least favourite conditions for the use of Twitter in the course*

Students' thoughts about their least favourite conditions for the use of Twitter in the course were divided into two categories: least favourite conditions and other thoughts. In terms of least favourite conditions, students explained that they did not like the limitation of 140 characters (9), they could not adequately check tweets (6), they did not realise that their tweets were not open to others because of the protected account (2), they disliked the lack of a file upload facility (1), and some did not have any least favourite conditions (3).

### *3.4. Preferences about using Twitter in other courses*

With regard to students' preferences about using Twitter on other courses, two categories emerged: Twitter should be used (5) and Twitter should not be used (12). Students who preferred to use Twitter stated that some courses (i.e. those requiring research activities) may be suitable for Twitter (2), Twitter provides opportunities for instant communication about the course (1), and the sharing of information in Twitter affects performance (1).

Students who preferred not to use Twitter in other courses stated that following tweets is difficult (5), there are other platforms for communication (2), the limitation to 140 characters is frustrating (2), and Twitter prevents focusing on the course (1).

### *3.5. Suggestions about the use of Twitter in education*

With regard to students' suggestions about the use of Twitter in education, it was stated that instructors can share announcements of the course through Twitter with their students (4), students must check tweets carefully and closely (4), students can communicate with their instructor through Twitter (1), and Twitter can be used for language learning (1), whilst some students gave no suggestions (2).

#### 4. Discussion and Conclusion

This study aimed to examine pre-service teachers' perceptions about the use of Twitter in education. By using Twitter on their courses, participants had the opportunity to engage in what they described as a different, useful, entertaining, efficient, and good activity. They had the chance to have a Twitter account, wrote tweets about the presentations and summary of the course content, learned to use a new social network, found Twitter to be easy to use, had the chance to learn the mood of others, found that Twitter made students active learners, and had access to on-the-spot information about the course. These results are all compatible with the study by Elavsky, Mislán and Elavsky (2011) who stated that the use of Twitter positively influenced student engagement, including participation and enthusiasm in relation to the course.

In term of students' negative thoughts, they stated that the use of Twitter was unnecessary and useless, the limitation of 140 characters also limited their ability to express themselves, they could not check tweets, and they experienced difficulties because of first time usage, or just did not like Twitter. Students might perceive Twitter to be unusable because of the limitation of 140 characters. In addition, students followed other courses using Learning Management Systems (LMS) and alternative social networks; and they stated that it was difficult to keep track of all these systems. Moreover, they stated that they learned what was going on Twitter through other students. Also, some lacked mobile opportunities. This might lead to these negative attitudes and a lack of such opportunities might mean that they are not be able to control the tweets properly.

Students expressed the opinion that tweets enhanced their understanding of content and facilitated the sharing of information, and that they liked writing and finding tweets by using the hashtag, following announcements, being aware of tweets to others, retweeting instructor's tweets, learning a different social network, and that Twitter itself was interesting and motivating. These results are all compatible with Grosseck and Holotescu's study (2008), which indicated that Twitter promotes writing as a fun activity, is a good way of making quick announcements, and is a very useful method of accessing helpful information and supporting reflection. Similarly, the overall results of the study by West, Moore and Barry (2015), suggest that Twitter has a positive impact on students' performance and perceptions of their learning experience.

As their least favourite conditions, students explained that they did not like the limitation of 140 characters, they could not adequately check tweets, they did not realise that their tweets were not open to others because of the protected account, and one student did not like the lack of a file upload facility. The limitation of 140 characters is a core feature of Twitter that allows the user to read and write quickly and easily. Twitter users should become familiar with this limitation, and therefore should learn to refine their thoughts accordingly. In that perspective, in the study of Dunlap and Lowenthal (2009), it was found that the students posed diverse problems and questions in a brief and accurate way due to the limit of 140 characters. Moreover, Cohen and Duchan (2012) stated in their study that "...in spite of the fact that tweets were limited to 140 letters, from this study it was found that Twitter is an effective learning tool" (p.149).

Students who preferred to use Twitter on other courses stated that some courses such as those involving research activities, may also be suitable for Twitter as it provides opportunities for instant communication about a course, while the sharing of information via Twitter affects performance. Similarly, many studies have reported that there is a potential for integrating Twitter in courses in such a way as to support student-student and teacher-student interaction (Jansen, Zhang, Sobel & Chowdury, 2009; Kop, 2011). Students who preferred not to use Twitter on other courses stated that following tweets is difficult, that there are other platforms for communication, the limitation to 140 characters is frustrating, and that Twitter prevents them focusing on the course.

About the use of Twitter in education in general, the students suggested that instructors can share announcements about the course through Twitter to their students, that students must check tweets

carefully and closely, students can communicate with their instructor through Twitter and that Twitter can be used for language learning.

Those instructors who want to use Twitter on their courses should consider a number of points. At the beginning of the course, the instructor should create a hashtag for the course that makes it easier for students to follow tweets related specifically to that course. Moreover, a new Twitter account with the name of the course may be created. Then, students must be informed about this type of social network: how to sign up, how to compose and write a tweet, how to retweet, how to follow the tweets of other people, etc. Then Twitter can be used for many purposes such as to communicate, to discuss, to share information, links, photos, ideas, announcements, etc. Moreover, to encourage students to follow the tweets of a course, the instructor should write tweets or design Twitter activities that attract students' interest, give assignments related to the tweets, and give a certain percentage of the final assessment to online activities. As a last important point, assessment criteria should be prepared and presented to students at the beginning of the course.

Finally, the reactions and perceptions of larger student groups should be examined within different structured Twitter activities. In addition, should content analysis of tweets sent by students within the scope of these activities be performed, the value of Twitter usage in education would be determined in terms of its contribution to learning.

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