Forget E-Mail: New Messaging Service Has Students and Professors Atwitter

By JEFFREY R. YOUNG

Anyone who feels overloaded with information from e-mail, blogs, and Web sites probably won't want to read this. But some professors, librarians, and administrators have begun using Twitter, a service that can blast very short notes (up to 140 characters) to select users' cellphones or computer screens.

The practice is often called microblogging because people use it to send out pithy updates about their daily lives. No need to wait until you are back at your computer to let friends know that you loved the latest Paul Thomas Anderson film or that you thought of a new idea for an academic article while waiting in line at the grocery store. Twitter lets you send a text message from your cellphone to a set list of contacts, called followers, who can set the system to receive messages via their cellphones, their instant-message software, or a Web-based program.

As iPhones and other "smart phones" become more popular on campuses, and as computing becomes even more mobile, it seems that some form of Twitter-like service may become part of student and faculty life. But the technology has potential costs in terms of money and privacy. Some observers, essentially arguing that there is such a thing as too much information, say that Twittering will never catch on the way blogs and e-mail have.

David Parry, an assistant professor of emerging media and communications at the University of Texas at Dallas, says he was reluctant to try the technology. Mr. Parry's first instinct was that Twittering would encourage students to speak in sound bites and self-obsess. But now he calls it "the single thing that changed the classroom dynamics more than anything I've ever done teaching."

Last semester he required the 20 students in his "Introduction to Computer-Mediated Communication" course to sign up for Twitter and to send a few messages each week as part of a writing assignment. He also invited his students to follow his own Twitter feed, in which he sometimes writes several short thoughts — not necessarily profound ones — each day. One morning, for instance, he sent out a message that read: "Reading, prepping for grad class, putting off running until it warms up a bit." The week before, one of his messages included a link to a Web site he wanted his students to check out.

The posts from students also mixed the mundane with the useful. One student Twittered that she just bought a pet rabbit. Another noted that a topic from the class was being discussed on a TV-news report.

The immediacy of the messages helped the students feel more like a community, Mr. Parry says. "It really broke down that barrier between inside the classroom walls and outside the classroom walls."

Instant Feedback

Jason B. Jones, an assistant professor of English at Central Connecticut State University, uses his iPhone to post a message to Twitter after every class session as "a way to jot down a little reflection about the class — how it went, things that were frustrating or worked really well — so that I can remember them later." Students who see the messages often give him a reality check, though. "If I thought something didn't go well, I've had people say, Actually..."
we understood that fine, we were distracted by something else or we were just tired," he says.

Blackboard plans to add a Twitter-like messaging tool to its course-management system, which is used at hundreds of colleges around the country. The company recently announced plans to acquire NTI Group, a company that sells text-message notification systems to colleges for use in emergencies. NTI's systems don't have all the features of Twitter, but they could be used in similar ways.

"We're going to incorporate that technology at the classroom level," says Michael L. Chasen, president of Blackboard. For instance, he says, "Professors could send a message to their entire class to let them know that class has been canceled this week."

After all, Mr. Chasen says, many students now communicate primarily using their cellphones. "Having the ability to do mass messaging is becoming more important on a campus," he says.

But not every student is excited to see a professor's message on his or her cellphone. It can cost money, for one thing, since many cellphone plans charge a few cents for each text message received. (Companies also offer flat rates for unlimited text messaging, and students who are frequent texters often have such plans already).

Twittering also creates a public record of every message sent — at least on the service's default settings — because all Twitter users get Web pages where archives of their messages are posted. So students and professors should be careful what thoughts they share.

Some college officials are using Twitter to keep in touch with colleagues at other universities. For Laura J. Little, the instructional technologist at Marietta College, that means following the Twitter feeds of people she knows as well as people she's never met.

"I like skydaddy," she says, referring to the Twitter nickname of Corrie Bergeron, an instructional designer at Lakeland Community College who frequently posts links and thoughts. "It's probably really relevant to folks who are isolated in their field," says Ms. Little, noting that she is the only instructional technologist at her college.

Or, as Mr. Bergeron puts it, "It's like a hallway conversation at a conference."

Twitter can be a much faster way to get help from colleagues than sending an e-mail message to a list or posting a question on a blog, says Ms. Little. Once when she was preparing a presentation, she posted a question to her contacts on Twitter and got an answer in just a few minutes. "If I had posted that on a blog post, it would have taken three hours."

Kenley E. Neufeld, library director at Santa Barbara City College, recently set up a Twitter feed for his library, and he posts announcements about closing times and encouragements to visit the library.

Other libraries and groups are also blasting out updates via Twitter. At a recent conference in Philadelphia, the American Library Association set up a conference Twitter feed, says Mr. Neufeld.

Still, Mr. Parry, of Dallas, admits that he's seen many colleagues try Twitter and drop it in frustration.

"I think people see it as too noisy," he said.
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