



It All Started with a Tweet...Thoughts on Incorporating Twitter into Field Education

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Abstract

The author, an assistant professor at the University of Alabama at Birmingham's Department of Social Work, shares her experience of assigning social media projects to her social work students, including the use of micro-blogging site Twitter. She shares resources and stories of Twitter in her classroom and seeks to continue the conversation about Twitter in social work through the social media platform.

This article started with a tweet. Or, if you don't know what a "tweet" is, this article started with a question consisting of 140 characters sent to me via Twitter, a micro-blogging platform, from the editors at the *Field Educator*, asking how students respond to my tweets. I teach in the Department of Social Work at the University of Alabama at Birmingham and am a daily Twitter user. My response was that students respond well to my tweets and even send their own tweets, because it is part of a class assignment: one I have been using for over three years in an effort to teach social work students about professional skills and ethical social work practice related to social media.

As I don't teach field practicum courses, I became curious if and how social work field educators are using Twitter in field education, and I tweeted back to the *Field Educator* to ask. Not only did I get a tweet back from them, but a few other social work educators posted their thoughts. Some suggested that field educators are reluctant to include social media projects with field placements because of social media's public nature or a lack of access to it in field agencies. While these tweets don't represent all of the reasons why social work field educators may or may not use Twitter with students, this exchange of tweets demonstrates the power of Twitter as a tool for real-time, public (and professional), networked conversation.

David Carr (2010), a journalist with the *New York Times*, best described this as "listening to a wired collective voice" (para. 11). Through Twitter, I was able to communicate publicly and directly with the *Field Educator* on a topic that I think matters to the profession, and in just minutes, other social

workers from around the world were able to join the conversation. Further, the conversation is archived for others to review later or even add to the public discourse by tweeting their own comments. This is why I use Twitter in the classroom; so future social workers have the knowledge and skills to listen to and contribute to public conversations that affect our clients, communities, and profession.

I have written about my Twitter assignments on my blog (<http://www.laureliversonhitchcock.org>) and in an article published in the *Journal of Baccalaureate Social Work* (Hitchcock & Battista, 2013). Other educators and social workers have also shared a lot of great ideas about Twitter in education. Briefly, I practice an active approach to learning social media. This means students actually create and use a free Twitter account, learning all the features of the media platform, such as following other Twitter users, posting tweets, and creating public lists of users who tweet about current social problems. Social work students can also learn about Twitter and other types of social media in more passive ways, such as reading about the services, observing different posts, and reviewing case studies based on ethical dilemmas or client situations. Either way, it is important to discuss the role and influence of social media in the classroom with the students. By our engaging in conversations in the classroom, students learn more than just the mechanics of social media. They learn to think critically about digital technology and social media, including how it affects our clients, agencies, and communities; how to assess the quality of information available on Twitter; and when it is appropriate and not appropriate for social workers to use social media in professional practice. Self-reflection writing opportunities can also help students to think about and articulate their own use of social media both professionally and personally.

In my experience, most students respond well to using Twitter as part of a course. Some are very honest that they don't like social media or Twitter, but everyone has been willing to try the assignment, even if they delete their account at the end of the course. Over the semester, they learn about the effects of social media on the workplace or with their clients, and I hope they develop a willingness to engage in public conversations about the role of social media in professional practice. Here are some examples of how students have gone on to use Twitter during their field placements after learning about social media in my courses:

- One student helped her practicum agency create a Twitter account and obtain 500 followers in one semester to raise awareness about the health education workshops sponsored by the agency.
- Another student worked with her supervisor to write a social media policy for her agency, creating a comprehensive plan for how the organization would begin using social media to inform their clients and community about their services.
- One semester, several field students continued to use Twitter as a professional communication/networking tool by tweeting with students in my course and offering advice on how to best prepare for their own practicum semester.

- Working at an advocacy agency, one student was assigned the task of writing and posting a daily tweet for his agency about how to stop homelessness and raise awareness of the problem in his community.

For me, one of the benefits of this assignment is that I now have a strong professional network of social workers and educators on Twitter from all over the world. This network includes former students, colleagues, and new people I meet from online interactions. I can follow their conversations about social work practice and education through their tweets and live Twitter chats, and I can actively engage in the public discourse. Of course, Twitter is not the only social media platform that promotes networking and dialogue among professionals. The same results can be achieved with LinkedIn, Facebook, Google Plus and even the comment features of blogs. Regardless of the platform, I would like to hear from field educators who are using social media and digital technologies with their students and from those who are not. Either way, this is an essential conversation for the profession and for our students, who will be working on the front lines in the 21st century. Please send a tweet to me ([@laurelhitchcock](https://twitter.com/laurelhitchcock)) or the *Field Educator* ([@FieldEducator](https://twitter.com/FieldEducator)) with your thoughts about social work field education and social media.

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