

Finding and sharing educational resources using Twitter, Hashtags and Storify

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This paper reports on the use of Twitter, hashtags and Storify to connect with individuals inside and outside the university who have a shared interest in the future of libraries. The objective was to discover and share educational resources that were applicable to a class project, by engaging with experts through social media, rather than by searching for the resources directly. A related aim was to discover how even limited social contact with others could result in a more collaborative, networked approach to problem solving, in keeping with contemporary design practice. Over the 13-week course, 250 Twitter messages were collected, narrated and archived by the course Lecturer (and author), using Storify. During class discussions, students reported that the resources were useful, and they commented on the effectiveness of reaching out beyond the classroom in this way. This trial also provided insights into how such collaborations could be taken further.

Keywords: OER, Twitter, hashtags, Storify, social media, libraries

Introduction

Educational resources are often discussed in relation to the growing practice of creating and sharing Open Educational Resources (OER), a term that was defined at UNESCO's 2002 Forum on Open Courseware as

teaching, learning and research materials in any medium, digital or otherwise, that reside in the public domain or have been released under an open license that permits no-cost access, use, adaptation and redistribution by others with no or limited restrictions (UNESCO 2012).

However, as Stephen Downes points out, "any resource that supports education" should be considered an OER (Downes, 2007). This can include people, who might be repositories of expert knowledge, or guides who can point to a specific resource or help to navigate information repositories. Librarians have traditionally performed the role of expert navigators, and their role is changing, along with the role libraries. Digital networked practices have moved much of the work of creating and accessing information to the electronic domain, and libraries and librarians are currently straddling the physical/digital divide. Social networks are supplementing, and in some cases replacing, our place-based search for information and educational resources.

Ferguson and Buckingham Shum (2012) explain how changes in social values, technological innovations and the complex nature of emergent problems in a fast-changing world have encouraged a shift away from traditional models of education towards social learning online. They describe the design concepts behind SocialLearn, a prototype developed by the UK-based Open University that leverages existing social web learning applications and adds a social media space, learning paths, gadget dashboard and a backpack. Okada et al. report on the use of social media and personal learning networks by 200 members of an open learning community who collaborated on the creation, use and reuse of OER to support language learning. They found that the advantages of using social media include low cost, ease of accessibility over the web without specialist skills, global reach and near instantaneous responses (Okada et al., 2012). Weller describes three levels of lightweight sharing that have been made possible by digital networks and social media. Frictionless sharing is a byproduct of everyday activity and may involve nothing more than making social messages and online media public. Quick sharing can be accomplished by adding a link or uploading a presentation but requires minimal additional effort. Content creation, like writing a blog post or producing a YouTube video, takes more time and expertise but is still relatively easy and quick to do with commonly available digital tools (Weller, 2011). Weller encourages us to think about an "economy of reciprocity" in which "the more you give online *that is of value* to those in your network then the more 'credit' you establish" (p. 103).

In *The Wealth of Networks* (2006), Yochai Benkler explains how social production

can allow creative people to work on information projects more efficiently than would traditional market mechanisms and corporations. The result is a flourishing nonmarket sector of information, knowledge, and cultural production, based in the networked environment, and applied to anything that the many individuals connected to it can imagine (p. 6-7).

Similarly, in *The Future of the Internet* (2010), Jonathan Zittrain describes how the internet has enabled a leap from “generative tools” to “generative systems”. He points out that “[p]eople with complementary talents who otherwise would not have known or met each other, much less found a way to collaborate without much logistical friction, can be brought together to work on a project” (p. 95).

The #LibraryFutures Project

Twitter was launched in July 2006 and quickly became a popular social platform for individuals, including educators, who discovered that it was a near frictionless way of sharing comments and links to resources with others who shared their interests. Users quickly developed a shared etiquette and set of practices that enabled them to turn the limitations of its 140-character (maximum) messages to their advantage. Writing in 2009, Howard Rheingold recognized Twitter’s strengths as a communications channel, celebrating its openness, immediacy and the variety of topics discussed. As a “channel to multiple publics” and a “window on what is happening in multiple worlds,” he advocated its use as an effective way to meet people, form communities and engage in mass collaboration. He highlighted the use of hashtags to enable participants attending classes, conferences or online events to follow focused conversations in real time and to search for relevant messages later. Rheingold advised that the “successful use of Twitter comes down to tuning and feeding”:

And by successful, I mean that I gain value – useful information, answers to questions, new friends and colleagues – and that the people who follow me gain value in the form of entertainment, useful information, and some kind of ongoing relationship with me (2009).

The purpose of the #LibraryFutures social media initiative was to support 35 students in a 13-week, third year university Design course that began in February 2014. They were asked to identify a problem or opportunity relating to student’s use of the University of Otago’s Central Library and online services. Working in small groups, they engaged in research, created prototype designs and prepared a final report for the library managers, who served as the clients for the class project. Designers often work in groups, and learning how to leverage different skills and experiences and to negotiate different points of view are important components of a Design education. When dealing with problems that others, in other places, are also facing, it makes sense to connect with them to share ideas, strategies and resources. The increasing use of social media and various crowdsourcing and collaboration tools have extended our ability to scale up collaboration beyond our immediate, place-based context. A social networking element was incorporated into the course as a way of exploring and demonstrating how designers and others are engaging in problem solving in a networked world.

Many courses, conferences, and other events that are partially and wholly online use Twitter as an effective communication channel. Most of these use a hashtag derived from the name of the course or conference, which signals that the messages are related to a specific event and are intended for a particular group. Rather than using the course code as the hashtag, it was decided to use one that related to the issues that the class was investigating, in order to attract a broad range of people who had some interest and expertise in libraries and their changing uses. A search for several possible hashtags in Twitter revealed a recent message from a Librarian in Columbus Ohio that included the #LibraryFutures hashtag. Since it was a good, short descriptor and did not seem to be currently in use by any conference or community, it was chosen for the project. The Lecturer ReTweeted her message using his own Twitter account, which had about 1,600 followers. The Librarian started following the Lecturer’s Twitter messages and, once she was aware of what the class was doing, she used the hashtag in fourteen future messages that she thought might be of interest to the students. Later, the Lecturer came across a synchronous TwitterChat that used the hashtag #stuvoice (Student Voice) and joined in, mentioning the #LibraryFutures experiment. The organizer was interested and started using the hashtag to pass on useful links. A Librarian at the University of Otago noticed one of the messages and asked what #LibraryFutures was about. Her message included a link to a freely downloadable version of a book, *Expect More: Demanding Better Libraries for Today’s Complex World* (Lankes 2012). She referred the Lecturer to another Librarian at the university (by mentioning both in a twitter message), suggesting that she might want to comment about a library she had recently visited at Macquarie University that had installed an automated book

storage system. When prompted, she responded with a YouTube video of the facility embedded in her Twitter message. And so it went.

Within the first two weeks of the Twitter experiment, librarians and others used the #LibraryFutures hashtag to share three freely downloadable books, several journal articles, informative blog posts, YouTube videos, recent news stories and SlideShare presentations that were relevant to the course project. Once or twice a week, the Lecturer used Storify (<https://storify.com>) to find Twitter messages that included the #LibraryFutures hashtag and added selected tweets to the growing Storify archive (https://storify.com/mark_mcguire/libraryfutures-archive-2014). Storify lets you add text between the messages, and this feature was used to include a running narrative that explained what the class was doing, provided a context for the messages and explained the strategies that were used to maximize the reach and effectiveness of the project (Fig. 1). The number of people who visited the #LibraryFutures Storify grew steadily and, by the end of the 13-week course, the archive consisted of 250 messages and had attracted over 1,600 views.

Student involvement and feedback

The Lecturer showed the Storify archive to the class every week, playing embedded videos from within the archive and following links to the resources that related closely to the projects that the students were working on. During tutorial sessions, students accessed the archive directly, finding material that helped them with their work and discussing it with their group members. In class presentations and in their group reports, they highlighted what resources they accessed and how they informed their project. The material that students selected from the archive were then used to fuel discussion in seminars. During these sessions, students often mentioned new projects and resources that they discovered as they followed links in the Storify archive. These were added to the archive as it was projected on a large screen during the class. In this way, the #LibraryFutures archive became a real-time, collaborative project that was created by the Lecturer, by the students, and by interested experts within and beyond the university campus.

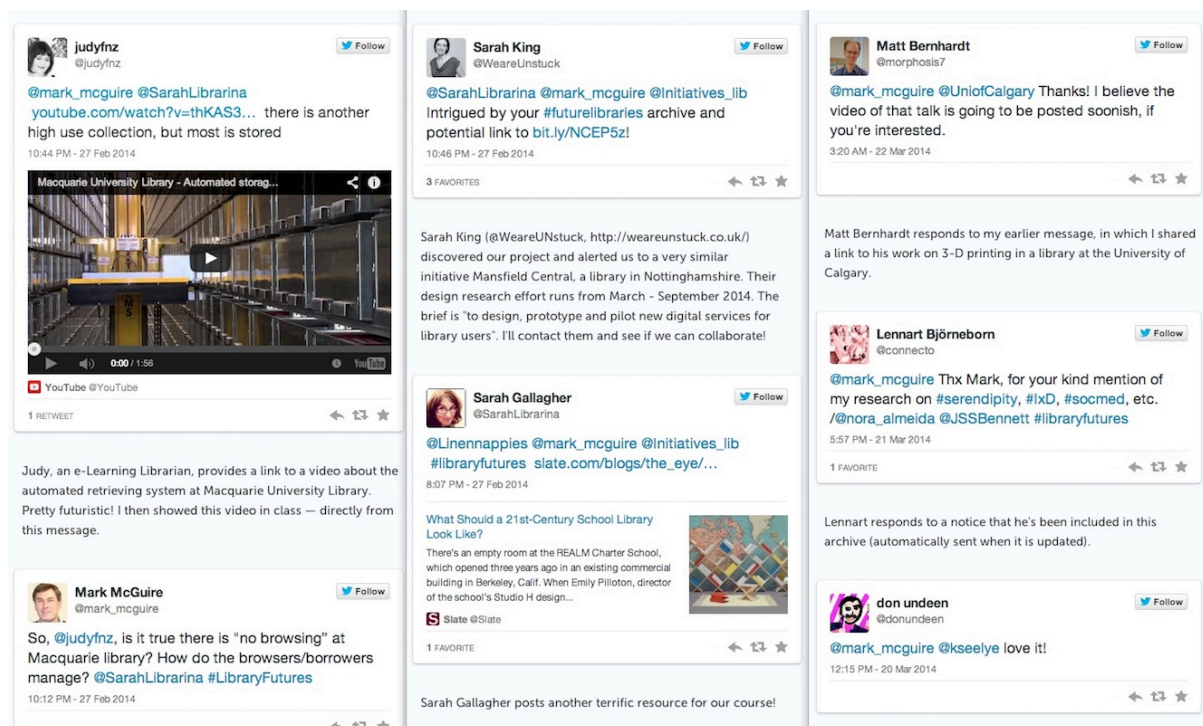


Figure 1: A selection from the 250 Twitter posts in the #LibraryFutures Storify archive

Students in the course were encouraged to use their social networks to extend their group collaboration online. Many used the opportunity to set up their own Twitter account and used it for the project. Several took photos of the university libraries, and of their own field research and design prototypes, and published them using Instagram. Almost all of the students in the class had a Facebook account, and some chose to use it to share their research and design ideas with their project group and other Facebook followers. Whatever social network they

used, as long as their post included the #LibraryFutures hashtag, their messages could be found and included in the Storify archive. The opportunity to share their research and design process online, beyond the class, provided extra incentive to communicate clearly, professionally and regularly. Public visibility provided its own reward. Although most of the students were already familiar with Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Flickr, Pinterest, Tumblr and the other social media platforms that Storify can search, they had not thought about how these communication technologies could be used in combination as part of a conscious strategy to enable them to collaborate online with people beyond their physical environment and their extended social circle.

Opportunities for extending online collaboration

Twitter is a quick and easy way to make contacts, exchange information and engage in limited conversations. However, exchanges using the #LibraryFutures and related hashtags also provided several opportunities to take limited collaborations further. The chance discovery of the #SWTOLib hashtag led to a Librarian who helped to organize the Startup Weekend Toronto Library Edition event. When asked for permission to show a related talk that he had uploaded to SlideShare to the class, he offered to send the original Keynote file, which included animations and custom fonts. This was followed by an exchange over email about shared interests and resources. An entire lecture was filled with his presentation (including a discussion of the fonts), a video of a talk he gave about libraries and startup culture, and a discussion of the recent Startup Weekend Toronto Library event using twitter messages, the event website, and videos of the teams presenting their design solutions. Twitter posts with links to all of these resources were then added to the Storify archive. The course Lecturer also had an exchange over email with a UK-based designer who was using the #librayfutures hashtag to discuss the redesign of a local library that her company was undertaking. This led to an ongoing exchange of design ideas. An academic from the University of Copenhagen with an interest in serendipity became aware of the class project when a research paper that he shared with his Twitter followers was ReTweeted with the #LibraryFutures hashtag. Discussions of possible future collaborations followed.

Conclusions

The #LibraryFutures project was a small-scale experiment in supporting a place-based course through the strategic use of Twitter to engage with experts online and Storify to archive the ongoing conversation. The feedback from students was positive. They made regular use of the archive and were exposed to a more networked form of design collaboration. In future, the existing archive could be used as a starting point for a collaboration that involved more extensive and ongoing connections with participants beyond the classroom. Students could also be more centrally involved in the online conversation and in the creation and maintenance of the archived resources. By learning to use online social networks as part of their design process at university, students will be in a better position to leverage the potential of online collaboration in the workplace.

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