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Twitter and Pre-Service Teachers: Overcoming Obstacles to become "Real Teachers"

by Kendal Brooks, Ciera Cornelison, Mike P. Cook, and Brandon Sams

Authorial Note: As a group, we want to endorse the process of students and faculty writing together. We found that thinking through problems of expression, organization, and argument made our thinking visible to one another, a move that makes possible collaborative thinking, timely feedback, and meaningful revision -- an invaluable process for teachers of writing at any level. Collaborative work also troubled old and persistent divisions between novice student and expert teacher. When writing with students, faculty have opportunities to intentionally model teacher thinking and critical reflection, but also to learn from and respond to student feedback. Students, likewise, contribute meaningfully to professional dialogue, and, through this process, begin seeing themselves as learning professionals in a community. In short, faculty learn and students teach. Our work below describes how we, as faculty and students, use Twitter in our English teacher education program. While our focus is on Twitter, we want to note at the outset that Twitter is merely one social media and composing tool, among many others, that helps teachers build knowledge and participate meaningfully in a professional community. Readers interested in learning more about how teachers develop identity and acquire expertise will also find this work of interest.

Introduction

In "Cultivating Novice Teachers as Teacher-Leaders," (a resource we learned about from one of Ciera's tweets) Emily Meixner notes that teacher education programs must help pre-service teachers (PSTs) develop an expansive and practical toolkit, including unit plans and classroom activities, to address a variety of pedagogical situations. Equally important,

she argues, is that TEPs help pre-service teachers develop *habits of mind* and orientations to practice, including ongoing self-reflection and a desire to improve and grow by contributing to and learning from professional communities. Meixner, like many others in the field of English Education (see, for instance, Sheridan Blau and Anne Elrod Whitney), asks that pre-service teachers and teacher educators refuse discourses of certainty and mastery that frame our profession. What does this refusal demand of pre-service teachers and teacher educators? It demands that we frame, talk about, and practice teaching as a journey instead of an arrival. One cannot "finally know" how to teach. Instead, one teaches and engages with nuance and imagination the practices of reflection, self-criticism, and ongoing professional development. Teaching is less a collection of skills or units that one *possesses* than a continued practice, something one *does*, and, in the doing, thinks through, responds to, and reflects on problems of (teaching) practice in a community. Twitter is one social media tool that can help educators reflect, ask questions, and seek guidance from other teaching professionals.

It has been widely reported that Twitter can be used to help students make connections between their world and their learning (see for example, Steven Anderson; Wayne Journell, Cheryl A. Ayers, and Melissa Walker Beeson; Christine Redman and Fiona Trapani; and Noeline Wright). Moreover, teacher educators have often suggested that it is important to use tools, such as Twitter, to introduce pre-service teachers to a range of pedagogical activities and discussions (Victoria Marn and Gemma Turn; Michael Mills; Chris Shaltry, Danah Henriksen, Min Lun Wu, and W. Patrick Dickson, among others discuss this). That said, others have also shared a variety of limitations and obstacles that accompany the incorporation of Twitter in the classroom: for example, finding time to use the tool, managing unprofessional discussions, students feeling disconnected with course content, and so forth (e.g., Jeffrey Carpenter; Wayne Journell, Cheryl A. Ayers, Melissa Walker Beeson). Similarly, a number of scholars, such as Victoria Marn and Gemma Tur have called for further discussion of PSTs and their use of Twitter as a learning tool.

We (Mike and Brandon, two English teacher educators) have worked to integrate Twitter into English education coursework and the experiences pre-service teachers have in the program. This begins by implementing Twitter as valued and required components of our courses. A sample prompt we provide students reads:

> Throughout the semester, we would like you to utilize a non-traditional space for academic discussion to engage in meaningful discourse around the powerful topics that emerge from your reading. Your goal is to extend our in-class conversations and, by connection, your learning. To do this, you will maintain a professional Twitter presence throughout the course (aim for 2-3 original tweets per week), using our course hashtag, to (1) pose questions to extend or anticipate a class discussion, (2) retweet or like resources that extend or challenge course readings, (3) find and share ways of approaching assignments, topics, and so forth. Remember, this is not a comprehensive list. It is simply meant to provide you some beginning parameters. We encourage you to use this tool and space in your own personal ways, ways that foster learning and professional growth beyond the confines of the classroom.

Yet, we have experienced a variety of barriers. One such struggle has been understanding our students' lack of engagement. It wasn't until we made it a point to sit down and talk with the students who have used Twitter to make the most of their experiences that it began to make sense. This valuing of the perspectives and voices of pre-service teachers is vital to better understanding how to implement Twitter and how to scaffold students' experiences. The goal of this article is to do just that.

Ciera and Kendal, pre-service teachers in the English education program, have benefitted from contributing to the Twitter community but their experience has not been the norm. Many English education students have struggled or refused to engage Twitter. We wanted to understand Ciera and Kendal's perspective on the benefits of using Twitter and how they could improve its integration in coursework. Ciera and Kendal used this writing opportunity to think intentionally about their evolving teacher identity and how social media would play a role in their future classrooms. During our collective conversations about this manuscript, we began to notice four major criticisms of and obstacles to using Twitter voiced by many of the English education students. Ciera and Kendal have responded to those criticisms in the following sections. Their voice and perspective also concludes the work. We continue to use their responses to revise and rethink the use of Twitter in the English education program.

Using Twitter in Teacher Education:
Two Pre-Service Teachers Respond to Obstacles and Their Peers

Obstacle 1: "I'm Not a Real Teacher"

Twitter has helped us ask and begin to answer a number of questions. What does it mean to be a pre-service teacher? What does it mean to be an actual teacher? What, if anything, separates the two terms from existing as a single entity in the minds of future teachers? The term "pre-service teacher" has been an indirect reminder during our undergraduate journey that we are not yet real teachers. There seems to be somewhat of an invisible barrier between the process of becoming a teacher and actually being one. As pre-service teachers, we tend to believe the idea that only once we obtain our undergraduate degrees in the field of education will we be responsible for truly transitioning into the role of an actual educator. Because of this, pre-service teachers might not fully engage in educational practices that have the potential to heighten their professional careers.

Transitioning into the role as an actual teacher from the role of a pre-service teacher is complex and at times uncomfortable and unfamiliar. In most circumstances, this development does not begin until after graduation, but in reality it should begin much sooner than this. Twitter has helped us transition from only thinking of ourselves as pre-service teachers to thinking of ourselves as teachers. Also, this process, we have come to realize, is never ending.

This process involves gaining a deeper understanding of our roles within the field of education on a much larger scale than just our future classrooms. We frequently limit ourselves unintentionally due to our misunderstanding of our role as pre-service teachers. We also overlook that we do not have to have our own classrooms to refer to ourselves as actual educators or to participate in teaching practices. Exposing pre-service teachers to the ways in which they can become involved within the professional teaching world can help them enhance their teaching methods, artifacts, and relationships. Throughout this semester, we have used Twitter to enhance these items and in turn have broken the barrier we place between actual educators and ourselves.

Obstacle 2: "I Have Nothing to Contribute"

When we were first given the task of creating a professional Twitter account, we had doubts about how it could impact our professional career as future teachers. Our presence on Twitter was nonexistent prior to our English education courses; however, we knew Twitter was a form of social media that was used by an enormous amount of users worldwide. As we created our Twitter accounts, we followed our teachers' lead by following major educational organizations as well as various prevalent voices in the field of education. Many of our classmates expressed concern with not wanting to participate on Twitter because they felt as if their voices did not matter on such a

large platform. They also felt as if they were not as important as other members of the English education community because they were only pre-service teachers. A large part of this goes back to the imaginary line drawn between being a pre-service teacher and being an actual teacher.

The professional topics of conversation that were present within the educational community on Twitter made us feel a little hesitant to begin participating in conversations. We shared the same concern of our colleagues of not being as qualified to actively participate in discussions with professional educators. We still thought of ourselves as unjustified in assuming the role of an actual educator while we were still pre-service teachers. However, using the Twitter platform allowed us to explore our roles as actual educators at our own pace.

We began to "like" certain tweets and began to re-tweet articles posted by various users. We eventually became confident in stating our thoughts on re-tweeted material. Our professors were integral to our growing confidence on Twitter. They not only "liked" our tweets, but also posed questions and thoughtful responses that pushed us to think of ourselves as teachers. By participating in dialogue between professional organizations and individuals, we were able to use Twitter as a tool to help us become more comfortable with our roles as educators. The articles and responses presented by teachers on Twitter exposed us to the relevant topics of conversation amongst actual educators and helped us to further our accountability among the academic community, dissolving the mindset of having no valuable input as a pre-service teacher.

Obstacle 3: "I'm Never Gonna Use This"

What started as a way to only get class participation credit is now one of the ways we are building our future classrooms. Because of Twitter we have lists of books to read, methods for leading class discussions, ways to arrange and organize a classroom, and ideas for writing assignments. We are able to see what teachers are currently doing in their classrooms and learn from their conversations on Twitter. Twitter also proved to be a valuable tool in our practicum experience. Not only were we able to implement some of the methods we learned through Twitter, but we were also able to use Twitter as a way to share our experiences with our classmates and professors. We could share what worked in the classroom, and we could reflect on what didn't work so well and get immediate feedback.

Twitter has also drastically changed the relationship between student and professor. At first, communicating with our professors outside of the classroom was a little awkward. We were accustomed to collaborating with them inside the classroom by having discussions. We were not accustomed to having these collaborations move past the classroom and put into practice. The conversations we were having on Twitter did not stay outside of the classroom; instead our professors would comment on various tweets during class. We were shown that our voices on Twitter did impact our educational journey because of this. Having our instructors by our side, acknowledging our participation, helped boost our confidence within the classroom as well as within the education community.

Twitter has also allowed us to begin participating in other collaborations while still pre-service teachers. We were exposed to terms, organizations, and events that helped socialize us within our profession, which we consider a jump-start within our personal career. Now, there would not be room for collaboration if nobody replied to our tweets. However, the members of the ELA education family on Twitter once again reinforced our aspiration to become English teachers through their generous comments and conversations. Dialogues between professors, teachers from across the United States, and recent English education graduates became a regular form of exchange. Instead of just re-tweeting or liking a tweet, we became part of the collaboration we were amazed with from the start.

Obstacle 4: "This isn't real writing"

As pre-service teachers, we are constantly discussing how to incorporate out-of-school literacy practices into our methods of teaching. Incorporating social media is one way to leverage out-of-school and in-school writing. Yet, in classrooms, because social media is not classed as "academic discourse," it is often not taken seriously as a learning tool. Similarly, using Twitter as an educational tool within college courses did not appear practical or professional for several of our classmates, many of whom refused to participate in the assignment out of hand. While we did commit to participate, it was not as easy or straightforward as we first imagined; but, through our participation, we learned that unsanctioned writing practices can be fruitful for learning as well.

At first, we took time to consider what was acceptable discourse while tweeting. We often were unsure if we could express our thoughts within 140 characters without using abbreviations and other informal features of writing. This particular conflict began our own personal journeys of understanding our beliefs on traditional writing practices and how Twitter could be used to bridge these practices with what students are already composing outside of the classroom. Maybe the reason why pre-service teachers do not fully understand how Twitter, or social media in general, can function positively in their classrooms is because they have never tried to do it themselves. If we are constantly talking about, but never participating in, using these methods in our future classrooms, then we do not have the right to ask our students to.

Furthering this thought, we began to feel a false sense of pride for believing our teaching philosophies included being an advocate of not restricting what "good" writing was within our classrooms. We began to question every lesson plan we made that involved a new, exciting method with "fun" activities, which we had never completed from a student's perspective. We thought about how a student must feel when we try and "speak their language", only to tell them to change the way they compose it in the process. Though the task of creating a professional Twitter account was not something regularly asked of pre-service teachers, we quickly realized why our professors had asked us to.

Conclusion/Summary

With Twitter being more of a non-traditional assignment in our college classroom, there was plenty of doubt on how much our professors would actually be paying attention to our activity on Twitter. However, we found that our professors were actively involved in our Twitter presence. This made our personal involvement with Twitter seem more appreciated by our professors. It also showed us that they were actually reading our tweets and taking the time to respond to them.

As pre-service teachers, we believe we need guidance from our professors when participating in an activity, such as Twitter, that may be a little challenging at first. Also, our professors took the time to learn this new platform of communication with us. They made it clear that they too were learning how to use Twitter to the best of their ability. If we are shown that there really is no correct way to try new educational approaches to teaching, then we will be more inclined to participate. As pre-service teachers, we often have trouble jumping into new learning strategies on our own. Having our

professors to share challenges with made using Twitter ten times as meaningful.

The vulnerability expressed by teachers longing for knowledge in their content relaxed us and enticed us to reply, comment, or express our gratitude for their articles and resources. To our surprise, the educators posting these articles responded to us and encouraged us to research the subject further. The conversations we experienced on Twitter exposed us to collaboration before internship. We feel that pre-service teachers need more intentional and guided experience collaborating with educators prior to internship. Being part of the Twitter community helped us create a library of resources to reference for future teaching. Just as important, it helped us make the transition into members of the English teaching community.

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