# Health Education in the Twitosphere: Will You Follow?

## Elizabeth A. Fettrow

Department of Kinesiology & Health Promotion
The University of Kentucky
204 Seaton Building
Lexington, KY 40506-0219
Phone: (859) 257-3645
Email: liz.fettrow@uky.edu

### ABSTRACT

*Data concerning the prevalence of adult internet and social networking use confirm that Twitter use among adults ages 18-29 years old is greater than any other adult age group. The purpose of this article is to describe how the popular social media platform Twitter can be used as an electronic library, specifically a means of organizing and storing health-related information for professional use. Additionally, this article will outline the processes and procedures of an assignment incorporating Twitter, explain how the assignment was integrated into health education teacher education, and how it can be adapted to suit the needs of other target groups.*

## INTRODUCTION

Words such as "follow," "tweet," and "hashtag" have become popular jargon among the millions of Twitter users worldwide. Twitter functions as an online social networking and micro-blogging service that enables users to "tweet" bits (140 characters or less) of information at any time (NewsBlaze, 2014). According to Twitter.com, there are more than 271 million monthly active users, with 500 million tweets being sent per day (Twitter, Inc., 2014). Interestingly enough, according to a 2012 *Business Insider* report, a majority (83%) of Twitter users do so for news consumption (Smith, 2014). Due to the fact that Twitter is a free social media platform open to the exchange of information, it automatically becomes an expansive medium with which individuals can directly connect to and interact with people, organizations, businesses, and other consortia. What these data suggest is that a majority of Twitter users subscribe in order to stay up to date on current information and events.

In 2013, the Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project indicated that among a sample of 1,895 adult internet users, those between the ages of 18-29 years old comprised 31% of the respondents, dubbing this age group the "typical" adult Twitter user (Duggan & Smith, 2013). In January 2014, the same Pew report estimated that among 19% of adult internet users, those between the ages of 18-29 years old now comprised 35% of the sample, suggesting that this age group is experiencing a growth of new Twitter users (Pew Internet Project, 2014). Further, these data revealed that among adult Twitter users, those between the ages of 18-29 were significantly more likely than any other age group (30-49, 50-64, 65+) to be a Twitter user (Brenner & Smith, 2013). In considering these internet and social networking data that confirm the popularity of Twitter among 18-29 year old adults, the appropriateness of using Twitter as an instructional technique in higher education classrooms is well supported.

Given these assertions, the primary purpose of this article is to describe how to use the popular social media platform Twitter to create an electronic library to accumulate, organize, and store health-related information for professional use. As an added purpose, this article will address how this electronic library can assist in the development of ideas and

inspiration in lesson planning among pre-professional health education teachers. Finally, this article will discuss how the procedures of the assignment can be modified or adapted depending on the target audience, time frame for implementation, instructor comfort or preferences, and overall goals for the project amid each step of the assignment implementation.

**METHODS**

**Target Audience**

The assignment using Twitter was originally developed as a semester-long course project for health education teacher candidates. As such, it has been implemented twice with twenty-one students at the university level. Specific adaptations that can be made to the assignment are discussed when considering different target populations, such as students in secondary or middle school environments, as this age group is already likely to be familiar with the technology.

**Learning Objectives**

The learning objectives of the assignment are as follows: 1) Students will create a valid Twitter account, 2) Students will use their Twitter account to accumulate (at minimum) 75 health-related people, agencies, or organizations to follow, 3) Students will use Twitter to collect information (feeds) from the people or organizations they follow, 4) Students will use the list feature of Twitter to organize their collected content (feeds) by topic area, and 5) Students will use their lists to find content useful to creating a health education lesson plan.

**Materials and Resources**

One of the benefits of using Twitter is that it is a free service; however, students will need initial access to the internet (via smartphone or computer) to set up a personal Twitter account and continued access to use their Twitter account. Students can complete the assignment using either a smartphone or computer, as the functionality is the same for both.

**PROCEDURES**

The procedures for implementing the assignment using Twitter are delineated in this section. Previously, the students were given a semester to complete the assignment, but if a shorter time frame is preferred the assignment can be modified to suit the shorter time frame. In order to determine the best way to implement the assignment, the instructor should first consider his/her expectations for the duration of the project and modify the next steps accordingly.

Prior to distribution of the assignment

Prior to the distribution of the assignment, the instructor should prepare students by spending 15-20 minutes introducing the Twitter platform, explaining the general purpose and utility of the technology, and informing students that a new user's default settings are "public," meaning that a user's tweets will be available publically. Students should visit the "Security and Privacy" tab in their settings to change this option to private and to control other privacy features such as allowing other users to follow, tag, or discover them by email address or location. Thus, it is recommended that instructors encourage students to select the tab to "Protect my Tweets" if they have any concerns about privacy related issues. If protected, the user will need to permit other users to follow him/her by manually approving those requests. If students have an already existing/active Twitter account, they can either use that account or create a new one to use for this assignment.

Step one

The first step of the Twitter assignment implementation is to create a valid Twitter account. The process of creating a Twitter account is simple and can be accomplished within a few minutes as most students can easily complete this step on their own. Regardless, the instructor should set aside time to allow students to complete this step in class so as to be able to troubleshoot any problems or issues that arise. The most common issue is creating a unique Twitter handle (user name). In order to help students set up a Twitter account, instructors should go to www.twitter.com/. Once the sign-up process is complete, the instructor should allow students to explore the platform for a few minutes. If the instructor has a personal Twitter account, it might be helpful to sign-in to that account during this step of the process. The "Help Center" feature of Twitter can assist new users in becoming more familiar with the platform; so in the event there is not sufficient time to interact with the features of the platform students can get more information from the Help Center. In addition to the Help Center, there are Twitter tutorials available on YouTube to help

students get started. For example, YouTube's "Twitter 101: A Beginner's Guide" walks new users through the process via video (USA Benefits Group, 2014).

Step two

The second step of the Twitter assignment is the most time intensive portion for students; students are asked to follow a minimum of 75 people or organizations using their Twitter account. The people and/or organizations they choose to follow must be relevant to health and/or health education. Because of the numerous potential individuals and organizations to follow, providing examples of content to follow would be helpful to students. As a reference, a list of previously used people/organizations can be found in Table 1. Note that the feeds included in this table are not all considered reputable by academic standards. Initially, the assignment was created with the purpose of finding *applicable* content, not necessarily *credible* content. With regard to the latter, the assignment could be refined in such a way as to require students to follow *only* credible people (known experts), organizations or associations, agencies, etc. in health and health education. Requiring students to selectively follow only those people or organizations that they believe are credible can provide the instructor with insight as to whether or not they are able to discover and differentiate valid health information from promotional or general consumer-driven/commercial content. Step two of this assignment can be modified depending on the target audience. For example, educators using this assignment with middle level or secondary school students could ask students to accumulate many health related resources and then help them differentiate between valid and invalid health information across many areas of health topics. As part of this learning process, students could be asked to write a brief summary of each person/organization/agency they follow on Twitter and conduct follow-up research to determine their credibility.

Step three

The third step of the assignment involves the creation of lists within Twitter. A list is a built-in funneling system where users can filter those people/organizations they follow into categories. Basically, users are creating an organization system for their content. A table of potential list topics can be found in Table 2. At minimum, students are required to create a total of ten

lists, but this amount can be modified depending on the length of the assignment and the expectations for how much content will need to be collected. The initial expectation was that in order to create a list, there should be no less than five people/organizations in that list; however, the specific criteria can be left up to the instructor's discretion. An example of what users will see in their Twitter account under the list feature (once they have been created) is shown as a screenshot in Table 2. Like the user's Twitter handle, these lists can be made either public (default) or kept private. If lists are made public, other users can subscribe to those lists. If they are private, only the user will see those lists.

Step four

The fourth step of the assignment is the least prescriptive part of the Twitter assignment. The reason for this is that ultimately the user (student) will determine what Twitter content (based on the lists) she/he wishes to use to create a lesson. In health education and teacher education, the rubric for the lesson plan is something with which students are almost always familiar, and thus this expectation (in terms of lesson planning) would remain the same for this assignment as it would be in their professional education courses. If, for example, the instructor decides that the students will write a lesson plan on the topic of alcohol and other drugs (AOD), students would be expected to utilize the Twitter content to begin generating ideas, connecting that content to the health education standards, and contemplating teaching strategies that can be used to accomplish the lesson objectives. The collection of content via the Twitter assignment is not expected to accomplish the task of lesson planning, but can rather be used to accumulate and organize resources related to health and health education. As an added step, the student can use her/his Twitter account to access information that would assist in the development of lesson plans for particular content areas. If the assignment is used in health education teacher preparation, the instructor might want to require students to model these lists based on the nine content areas found in the Health Education Curriculum Analysis Tool (HECAT). Those content areas include: alcohol & other drugs, health eating, mental & emotional health, personal health & wellness, physical activity, safety, sexual health, tobacco, and violence

prevention (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2012).

**EVALUATION**

The Twitter assignment is evaluated based on the assignment rubric and subsequent grading criteria. Because the expectations for students are clearly delineated in the assignment guidelines, very little interpretation is required to evaluate students' performance on the Twitter assignment. The recommendation for evaluation is that the Twitter assignment is first peer-evaluated, and then instructor evaluated. The purpose of peer-evaluation is to allow students to share and discuss their resources. Future iterations of the assignment do not have to include the peer-evaluation component, and it is also possible for instructors to modify/change the elements of the assignment to include a more detailed description of students' expectations. Additionally, the instructor could include more specific grading criteria for each of the evaluation categories than what is presented in the rubric, which is presented in Table 3. The lesson plan, on the other hand, can be evaluated using the instructor's (unit/department/university/state) inclusion criteria but should include a reference to the material obtained using Twitter.

**CONCLUSIONS/DISCUSSION**

One of the most appealing features of the Twitter assignment is that it can be modified to suit the needs of the target audience or be modified based on instructor preference. Also, the extent to which this assignment can be either basic (Twitter 101) or complex (multiple steps, interacting with other Twitter users) makes it feasible and practicable to many disciplines. Potential target audiences include students in higher education, students in pre-professional education programs (including health education), practicing health education teachers, and students in middle and high school.

The use of Twitter in this article represents a unique contribution to the field of health education teaching and learning. Several other studies have demonstrated how Twitter can be used as an educational strategy but with a particular focus on the microblogging function. For example, Borau, Ullrich, Feng, and Shen (2009) discussed how Twitter can be used as a

communication tool to support learning English, particularly among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students in higher education. In another study, Dunlap and Lowenthal (2009) concluded that the use of Twitter in online higher education courses could enhance social-presence and facilitate conversation and connection among students and faculty in ways a traditional Learning Management System (LMS) could not. Both of these studies and others in the literature focus on the communicative services/functionality of Twitter whereas the current article seeks to clarify how Twitter can be used as a content repository, or electronic "library."

As a final thought, using social media for the good of teaching and learning is undoubtedly pertinent to current and future educators as most teacher education programs heavily emphasize (if not require) the use of technology in the classroom. As a relatively new technological innovation, the functionality of Twitter as an educational strategy has yet to be explored in this manner in the literature. While it appears as though the main intent of Twitter use includes personal communication, conversations, information sharing, and news consumption, an alternate view of this highly popular service provides a different avenue by which health education can be practiced in the Twitosphere.

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**Table 1. Example of People/Organizations per List Topic for Use with the Twitter Assignment**

| List/Topic | Organization Name, Twitter handle (@_____) |
|---|---|
| **Food/Nutrition/Obesity Prevention** | Food Network @FoodNetwork<br>No Kid Hungry @nokidhungry<br>Foodie @Foodie<br>USDA Team Nutrition @TeamNutrition<br>SchoolLunch @SchoolLunch<br>Mission:Readiness@Mission_Ready<br>Alliance for a Healthier Generation @HealthierGen<br>Child Obesity 180 @ChildObesity180<br>Robert Wood Johnson Foundation @RWJF |
| **Physical Activity/Physical Education** | WalkMe @WalkMeInc<br>PE Scholar @PEScholar<br>ACSM @ACSMNews<br>Let's Move! @letsmove<br>NFL PLAY 60 @nflplay60<br>Society of Health and Physical Educators @SHAPE_America |
| **Health Care** | MayoClinic @MayoClinic<br>WebMD @WebMD<br>American_Stroke @American_Stroke<br>American Lung Assn @LungAssociation<br>American Diabetes Assn @AmDiabetesAssn<br>American Heart Assn @American_Heart<br>American Red Cross @RedCross<br>American Cancer Soc @AmericanCancer |
| **Teacher Education** | Education Week @educationweek<br>EdWeek Teacher @EdWeekTeacher<br>Edutopia @edutopia<br>ClassFlow @MyClassFlow<br>ASCD @ASCD<br>Intel Education @IntelEDU<br>National Education Association @NEAToday |
| **News** | The New York Times @nytimes<br>Washington Post @washingtonpost<br>The Today Show @TheTodayShow<br>Huffington Post @HuffingtonPost<br>USA Today @USATODAY<br>TIME.com @TIME<br>NBC News Health @NBCNewsHealth |
| **Safety** | Safe Kids Worldwide @safekidsusa<br>Safety 1st @Safety_1st<br>KidSafe Foundation @KidSafe<br>Children's Trust @ChildrensTrustS<br>Prevent Child Abuse @PCAAmerica<br>Stop Abuse Campaign @AbuseStoppers |
| **Health Education** | American School Health Association @ ASHAnews<br>Society for Public Health Education @SOPHEtweets<br>KidsHealth @KidsHealth<br>WK Kellogg Foundation @WK_Kellogg_Fdn<br>Shape Magazine @Shape_Magazine<br>Women's Health @WomensHealthMag<br>SELF Magazine @SELFmagazine<br>Healthy People 2020 @GoHealthyPeople |
| **Bullying** | The Trevor Project @TrevorProject<br>Bullying Prevention @Olweus<br>StopBullying.Gov @StopBullyingGov<br>Bully Movie @bullymovie<br>Stomp Out Bullying @STOMPOutBullying |

**this Table provides an example of selected Topic Areas and is not meant to be an all-inclusive list

**Table 2.  Example Potential List Topics using Twitter's "List" Feature**

Subscribed to          Member of

Food/Nutrition 🔒

0 Members

Physical Activity 🔒

0 Members

Health Care 🔒

0 Members

Teacher Education 🔒

0 Members

News 🔒

0 Members

Parenting 🔒

0 Members

Health Education 🔒

0 Members

Bullying 🔒

0 Members

| Table 3.  Twitter Assignment Evaluation & Scoring Rubric | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **The Twitter Assignment Evaluation Rubric Criteria (3)** | 0-Did Not Complete | 1-Did not meet expectation | 2-Met Expectation |
| 1. Establishing a Valid Twitter Account | Did not establish a valid twitter account to use for the assignment. | Established a valid twitter account but did not use it to complete the assignment. | Established a valid twitter account and used it to complete the assignment. |
| 2.  Follow a minimum of 75 credible health related people/organizations using Twitter account. | Did not follow any credible health related people/organizations using Twitter. | Followed less than 75 health related people/organizations using Twitter account. | Followed 75 or more health related people/organizations using Twitter account. |
| 3.  Organized content into lists. | Did not use Twitter account to organize content into lists. | Created less than 10 lists in Twitter, and/or had less than 5 people/organizations per list. | Created 10 or more lists in Twitter, and had 5 or greater people/organizations per list. |
| Score/Comments: | | | |
| **Total Score:**<br>**6/6 = 100%**<br>**5/6 = 90%**<br>**4/6 = 80%**<br>**3/6 = 50%**<br>**2/6 = 33%**<br>**1/6 = 16%** | | | |