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Can every class be a Twitter chat?: Cross-institutional collaboration and experiential learning in the social media classroom

Julia Daisy Fraustino, West Virginia University

Rowena Briones, Virginia Commonwealth University

Melissa Janoske, University of Memphis

Abstract

Using the framework of experiential learning theory to guide assignment creation, instructors of social media strategy classes at three university campuses conducted cross-institutional Twitter chats with students. By creating topical case studies using the online storytelling platform Storify and discussing them during the chats, students applied course theories and concepts, built professional networks, honed professional skills, and broadened understanding of strategic communication using new tools in unique digital cultures. Qualitative textual analysis of the 2,088 tweets coupled with instructors' teaching observations revealed the assignments fostered conditions for an experiential learning process, which students enjoyed. Best practices for teaching using similar assignments in public relations and social media are offered.

Keywords: experiential learning theory, public relations education, social media, Twitter, Storify

The rising popularity of social media tools and technologies is readily apparent, as 73% of online adults use some type of social networking site, with 42% of them engaging with multiple platforms (Duggan & Smith, 2013). Although younger populations are typically seen as the primary social media users (Henderson & Bowley, 2010), middle-aged and older adults are also jumping on the social media bandwagon to learn more about products, stay in touch with family and friends, and gain timely information during disasters or crises (Creighton, 2010; Fraustino, Liu, & Jin, 2012). Clearly, social media tools are now popular channels for seeking and sharing information.

As the key communicators tasked with building relationships with publics, public relations (PR) practitioners need to respond to today's dynamic, shifting communication environment (Wright & Hinson, 2010; 2014), particularly via social

media engagement. A study by Booz & Co and Buddy Media found 88% of companies use social media for PR efforts (Falkow, 2011). Young practitioners increasingly must develop social media skills to be competitive on the job market and successful in the workplace, and such training can start in the PR classroom. By teaching PR and strategic communication students the core elements of public relations practice, which includes social media skills and expertise (Wright & Hinson, 2014), instructors invest in the future of the profession (Zitron, 2014).

The purpose of this study, then, is to explore innovative ways to teach students social media skills. Through cross-institutional partnerships, three distinct social media strategy and writing classes created case studies of relevant PR topics and shared those cases with one another via monthly Twitter chats. Cases and chats allowed for student work across institu-

tions that provided insights into effective manners of engaging students in social media learning, concept retention, networking, and skills development.

Literature Review

This review examines social media use, both in the PR practice and the PR classroom. It then turns to a discussion of experiential learning theory in general and related to Twitter in particular.

Social Media in Public Relations Practice

Using social media has increasingly become a part of public relations practitioners' day-to-day work. Kim and Johnson (2012) found PR practitioners must be social media savvy to compete effectively in the working environment. Demand for communicators with social media skills reached a milestone in spring 2013, with PR specialists being second-most sought after for social media knowledge and expertise (Lombardi, 2013). For many of these practitioners, the array of available social media tools have widened the parameters of communication options that allow them to reach out to and engage with key publics (Kim & Johnson, 2012). However, these tools continue to shift and change. An analysis of job site listings by Indeed.com found that employer interest in specific social media platform expertise has skyrocketed, with jobs requesting Instagram skills growing by a striking 644%, Vine increasing 154%, and Twitter up 44% between 2012-2013 (Stone, 2013).

Why are social media skills a high demand in public relations? According to Avery et al. (2010), both social media and public relations roles strive toward *building relationships*. "Social media are inherently interactive, communicative, and social. These innate characteristics are not commonly associated with marketing or advertising. Some herald social media as

bringing public relations full circle to its original foundation of building relationships" (Avery et al., 2010, p. 337). Social media help shift the organization-public relationship from one-way information dissemination to two-way engagement and dialogue (Creighton, 2010; Sweetser, 2010), which to publics is more personally relevant and similar to an interpersonal relationship versus a business transaction (Kelleher, 2009; Sweetser, 2010; Yang & Lim, 2009).

Social media require PR professionals to rethink and modify how they approach relationships (Kim & Johnson, 2012). Practitioners must relinquish some elements of (perceived) control to target audiences in efforts to allow feedback and participation (Henderson & Bowley, 2010; Solis & Breakenridge, 2009). Solis and Breakenridge (2009) claimed social media alter "the entire media landscape, placing the power of influence in the hands of regular people with expertise, opinions, and the drive and passion to share those opinions" (p. 1). Thus, because the relationship is collaborative, PR professionals need familiarity with a "push-pull" strategy, where information is simultaneously both pushed out to and pulled from key publics (Creighton, 2010, p. 198). Several studies have demonstrated push-pull is difficult for many practitioners and that professionals are slow to adopt social media tools despite recognizing their value (Jo & Kim, 2003; Kelleher, 2008; Seltzer & Mitrook, 2007); indeed, less than half are comfortable with the large variety of tools available to them (Lariscy et al., 2009). All hope is not lost, however. Wright and Hinson's (2010) two-year longitudinal survey of PR practitioners found 85% reported social media have changed their organizations' communication, and 99% claimed to have interacted with some aspect of social media.

Social Media in the Classroom

Even though students' self-perceived identity as digital natives may be accurate in their personal lives, they often need help translating those skills to their academic and professional work (Melton & Hicks, 2011). Using social media in the classroom, especially for projects that require understanding of how an organization might strategically engage with social media, can improve student collaboration, understanding of strategy, technical skills, and networking (Melton & Hicks, 2011). With an overload of digital information readily available, the ability to process messages quickly and clearly is a skill worth incorporating into the classroom environment (Locker & Kienzler, 2012). In the social media context, both instructor credibility and social identification on the part of the student with a commenter can impact both educational effects and cognitive learning (Carr et al., 2013).

Computer-mediated communication can enhance peer-led discussion of concepts, including theoretical ideas (Robertson & Lee, 2007). A study on student creation and use of audio podcasts and videos showed using multimedia allowed students to supplement and enhance their learning, including increased comprehension of the material (Parson, Reddy, Wood, & Senior, 2009). Social media based interaction, whether teacher-student or student-student, can encourage rich dialogue and critical discussion of topics (Moody, 2010).

Using social media in the classroom also allows students to explore important ideas in new ways while enhancing digital literacy. Students find material more compelling when they are producing as much as consuming (Searls, 2000). Using creativity to interact and create allows students to improve both self-reflection on the material and social inclusion in the classroom

(Purg, 2012). It is important that students engage critically with material. Asking questions, especially of social media content, helps students understand how material relates to broader social, political, and economic forces (Buckingham, 2006; Purg, 2012).

Experiential Learning Theory

Such hands-on engagement is embraced by experiential learning perspectives. Several decades ago, Kolb (1984) introduced experiential learning theory (ELT) based on dominant early learning theorists such as Dewey, Lewin, and Piaget (Baker, Jensen, & Kolb, 2002; Kolb, 1984; Kolb & Kolb, 2005). ELT unpacks learning as a cyclical and integrative process of thought and experience. As Kolb (1984; Kolb & Kolb, 2005) described, ELT integrates six foundational propositions about learning: (1) it is process as opposed to outcomes; (2) it involves re-learning; (3) it entails resolving conflicts between opposite ways of being oriented to the world, requiring reflection on differences and disagreements; (4) it is holistic and adaptive; (5) interdependent actions between the learner and the environment prompt it; and (6) it is the act of constructing and reconstructing knowledge. Learning, according to Kolb (1984) is "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience" (p. 41).

Specifically, Kolb (1984; see also Baker et al., 2002) conceived of two ways of grasping and two ways of transforming experience: Learners grasp experience through *concrete experience* (apprehension) and *abstract conceptualization* (comprehension), and they transform experience through *reflective observation* (intension) and *active experimenta-*

tion (extension). Therefore, experiential learning facilitates students' creation of knowledge through a spiraling learning cycle of experiencing, reflecting, observing, and acting – all within the context of the learning environment and topic. Students engage in prompted actions (concrete experiences) that they internalize and apply to theory and ideas (abstract conceptualization), which can create a foundation for students to interpret others' and revisit their own actions (reflective observation), spawning new implications for next actions tested in subsequent situations (active experimentation). All this grasping and transforming of experience is then applied to new experiences, abstractions, thoughts, and actions, and the cycle repeats.

To maximize knowledge creation according to ELT, students must choose from sets of opposing learning abilities to resolve the learning situation topic/problem (Kolb, 1984; Baker et al., 2002). For example, to grasp experiences, some students may tend to intake information primarily through tangible sensations, while others gravitate toward symbolic representations or logical reasoning. Likewise, to transform experience, some may prefer to dive in headfirst and engage in action immediately, whereas others are more comfortable first watching others' actions and reflecting on the observed results. The literature shows that creating a holistic learning environment wherein students can enter the cycle at any stage and circle through it recursively using an assortment of learning abilities can increase learning by students with various personality types, backgrounds, and learning styles (e.g., Cheney, 2001; Healey & Jenkins, 2000; Kolb & Kolb, 2005, 2009).

Experiential Learning in Communication

and Public Relations

As Atif (2013) observed, undergraduates in today's media-rich environment have been raised alongside technologies. Recently, the World Wide Web celebrated its 25th year of existence (Wagstaff, 2014) – a birthday milestone many current undergraduates have yet to achieve for themselves. Growing up with continual access to social and digital technologies, today's students are likely to favor technology-enhanced social contexts versus face-to-face contact. In spite of this, however, Atif (2013) asserted that the undergraduate classroom has been slow to incorporate digital ways of learning. Public relations scholars might be at the forefront of such endeavors, however, with social media academics such as Freberg (Loren, 2013) and Sweetser (Sweetser, 2008), among many others, openly using popular social media platforms in their teaching.

Public relations scholarship has begun to show the link between instructors' efforts to teach social media and the potential value of experiential learning. For example, using a pre-post test survey design with a final sample of 25 students, Wilson (2012) found that fostering participatory learning in the context of client-based projects led to increases in some aspects of students' reported critical-thinking and problem-solving proficiencies. Further, the value of experiential approaches seems generally supported by instructors and potential employers alike. For instance, interviews with educational service providers and focus groups with those holding accreditation (APR) by the Public Relations Institute of Southern Africa (PRISA) found providers and practitioners in South Africa assessed experiential learning techniques as highly important in preparing students for public relations work roles (Benecke & Be-

zuidenhout, 2011).

Similarly, in the U.S., Todd (2009) found PR practitioners requesting graduates to have hands-on skills and experience with digital technologies. Particularly interesting in the context of that and the current study, Anderson and Swenson (2013) conducted a Twitter chat with social media industry leaders as a method for obtaining data, uncovering that the responding PR pros believed there was “no substitute for hands-on practice” using various digital technologies (p. 3). As one of their participants, Social Media Manager Matt LaCasse, said: “Frankly, the only way to train them is to have them do it” (Anderson & Swenson, 2013, p. 3).

Twitter and Experiential Learning

Twitter is an excellent platform for putting experiential learning in the public relations classroom into motion. Twitter is a micro-blogging social networking site on which users can post brief, conversational statements of 140 characters or fewer (Twitter, n.d.). Users may “follow” other users, causing those users’ tweets to show up in a streaming feed, allowing for a variety of ways to consume and share information. Users may interact through, for example, “retweeting” (posting another user’s tweet verbatim for one’s own followers to see), “favoriting” (starring another’s tweet to indicate approval), “@replying” (replying directly to another’s tweet), “@mentioning” (tagging another user in one’s tweet), “direct messaging (DM)” (sending a private tweet to another, including pictures and/or links in tweets, and joining conversations through using “hashtags” (the symbol “#” preceded by a word or combination of words that can then be used as a search mechanism to find specific content among billions of tweets).

Twitter is intended to be, and is per-

ceived most positively as, a personal and conversational medium (Twitter, n.d.). It is a self-proclaimed “global town square,” that is, “a public place to hear the latest news, exchange ideas and connect with people all in real time” (Wickre, 2013, para. 3). This idea has important links to experiential learning, particularly the notion that experiential learning can occur not only through gaining physical experiences (e.g., using a new digital platform) but also via *conversation* (e.g., engaging with others on topics of potential divisiveness). In their book on the relationship between experiential learning and conversation in business, Baker and colleagues (2002) discussed how the act of engaging in dialogue with people with potential conflicting opinions can create social experiences that spur people to see the world differently, creating knowledge. Thus, it follows that if students are provided the opportunity to engage with classmates and non-classmates on Twitter about controversial, socially relevant, and/or new professionally pertinent topics, they stand to enhance knowledge through contemplating opinion differences – all in addition to gaining hands-on experience navigating and contributing to a popular social media platform with a limited character allowance and a unique digital culture of its own.

Thus, considering all above, we pose these overarching research questions:

RQ1: How, if at all, do students apply public relations concepts via interactive discussion on Twitter?

RQ2: How, if at all, does creating case studies using Storify and presenting them in cross-institutional Twitter chats facilitate an experiential learning environment for students?

RQ3: What best teaching practices can be gleaned from this study?

Method

Qualitative textual analysis of tweets coupled with field observation allowed researchers to understand how students can use social media to enhance classroom experiences and the plausibility/impact of experiential learning opportunities (Berg, 2009).

Procedure

Three upper-level social media course instructors, one at the main campus of a flagship mid-Atlantic public research university, a second at a satellite campus of the same university, and a third at a southern public research university collaborated to create assignments that would tap into the theoretical constructs and goals discussed above. Collaboration was deemed key to ensure students were exposed to viewpoints from a variety of belief-systems and backgrounds, as conversation has proven helpful for experiential learning (Baker et al., 2002). The team devised three related assignments: (1) social media bootcamp, (2) Storify new media case studies, and (3) cross-institutional Twitter chats. Data and results pertaining to the first item will appear elsewhere in a forthcoming book chapter; items two and three are expanded upon below.

First, all students were given an initial assignment to create a case study via the online storytelling tool Storify (<https://storify.com/>), which enables users to collect and embed evidence from a variety of online sources (e.g., blogs, Google searches, YouTube, Twitter, online news media websites) in their “stories.” Students were invited to choose topics of interest, but they were required to discuss a time when an organization used (or failed to use) social media to effectively (or ineffectively) engage with publics. Giving students responsibility to find their own real-world

examples of organizational social media use of relevance, and requiring students to package their information using an unfamiliar social media platform, was meant to further experiential learning goals.

Each student or pair of students first presented his/her social media case study in a traditional in-class oral presentation at his/her home institution, including in-person question-and-answer sessions. Then, students who had presented the case study in the month leading up to one of the three scheduled Twitter chats shared their cases with chat attendees for discussion based on questions posed by the students themselves. Twitter chats are real-time conversations participants engage in by tweeting using a pre-determined hashtag. In many cases, including ours, a moderator poses questions and participants tweet answers (Cooper, 2013). Student questions were distributed in the chat by the instructor-moderator. Appendix A shows some case study topic examples, organized by story year.

Data Collection

Data included transcripts of all tweets from three Twitter chats, collected using the assignment’s designated hashtag, as well as teaching observations from each of the three instructors.

Twitter chats. Three Twitter chats occurred, each about four weeks apart, on different days and times in order to reach the broadest number of student participants. The instructors organized and moderated each session. In addition to the three instructors present, 49 students participated in the first chat, 53 in the second, and 44 in the third. Twitter chat transcripts contained 824 tweets from the first chat, 604 from the second, and 660 from the third, for a total of 2,088 tweets for analysis. Students were required to participate

in at least one Twitter chat over the course of the semester; they could also participate in other chats for extra credit.

Teaching observations. All three instructors gathered observations about experiences teaching the course, moderating the Twitter chats, and helping students enhance knowledge/skills. The three instructor-researchers engaged in regular and extensive peer debriefing throughout the data collection and analysis processes.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using a grounded theory approach, with a constant comparative method to identify and draw out themes from the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Line by line coding of Twitter transcripts brought about emergent themes, which were then merged into categories through axial coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). In addition to grounded codes, themes and concepts were drawn from a priori codes in relation to the literature and research questions. Attention was paid to anomalies or negative cases (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). The researchers met frequently to discuss coding, ensure consistency, and revise codes and categories as necessary. Peer debriefing allowed for identifying and removing researcher bias (Corbin & Strauss, 2008), which increased credibility while providing a space for ideas and assumptions about the data to be challenged and discussed among the research team (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2008).

Results

Applying Course Concepts

The first research question asked how, if at all, students applied public relations concepts via Twitter chat discussions. Several overarching class concepts were used

as discussion points by the students to make connections between the Storify cases and their understanding of public relations strategy. The most resonant themes emerging from chats included professionalism, influence/perceptions of the media, insights on crisis communication, social media campaigns, and public relations best practices.

Professionalism. Exemplifying this theme, the Storify case on Justine Sacco's inappropriate tweet that prompted her employer to terminate her employment brought up discussion in the Twitter chat focusing on what constitutes professionalism. Students emphasized maintaining integrity, especially as a representative of an organization:

Student A: The fact that her profession was in the comm field & she decided that was appropriate to write...that's baffling. #NOTOK

Student B: She's a communications professional. Shes expected to act like a "professional". She was wrong for tweeting that.#tweetfilter

Student C: Her tweet was extremely offensive and as a PR professional, she should have known better. She asked for that.

Influence/perceptions of the media. Twitter chat discussions also featured the power of mass media to influence students both personally and professionally. As one student tweeted, "...most of us are public relations majors so we should understand how media can affect us." Other students discussed their concern about what the media constitutes as newsworthy:

Student A: It's honestly sad that the media puts so much emphasis on celebrities rather than things that affect us directly.

Student B: I couldn't agree more. It's sad how the media shifts attention.

Students also engaged in a conversation surrounding the media's role in publicity:

Student A: We learned in my reputation management that bad publicity can really take away your most loyal customers.

Student B: Not all publicity is good publicity, if your company enters a crisis and can't resolve it, your rep will be damaged.

Student C: If all publicity were good publicity, there would be a lot less jobs related to PR. It would all be too easy.

Insights about crisis communication. Many Storify cases focused on crises; thus, Twitter chat discussions often focused on what constitutes effective crisis management. In one example, students talked about Carnival's crisis response to a malfunctioning cruise ship:

Student A: Even though the response was not immediate, I think it was smart for them to gather all info and then address the public.

Student B: Carnival was very effective in relaying their messages. They kept nothing secret and kept the media up to date.

Students also discussed what they would have done if tasked with Carnival's crisis response:

Student A: I would have handled the crisis much sooner than they had and focus on ensuring frequent cruisers that it won't happen again.

Student B: I think I would have made a formal apology IMMEDIATELY, and then used all outlets to say how

we were fixing the problem.

Student C: In addition to the actions they took, I would have also outlined how the co. would avoid the issue in the future.

Another perspective of crisis management was brought up in a discussion of the Columbia Mall shooting, which involved several key players including local police and mall staff. Students talked about the importance of providing up-to-date information to community members:

Student A: Both parties need to be sensitive to the families/situation. The involved party should try to tell the truth and be objective.

Student B: The already involved party should act objectively and in the best interest of the victims.

Launching successful social media campaigns. Many of the cases focused on social media campaign strategies. As one student tweeted, "definitely social media presence is the key to success these days." Others agreed and discussed how social media can help with relationship management. For example, students talked about Esurance's Save 30 campaign:

Student A: New media platforms can serve any client with the right spin, like the #EsuranceSave30 superbowl campaign.

Student B: It just gives them the idea of using SM platforms to interact w/ customers in fun ways that generate awareness.

Student C: It provides an exemplary basis of effective hashtag usage, and show credibility in its campaign by airing the winner on TV.

Downsides of social media engagement were also topics of conversation,

especially how organizations relinquish control to publics. As one student tweeted, "You never know what the publics will post. There are some crazy people using SM." Another student agreed, and tweeted, "Ppl love to interact thru SM so its attention grabbing, but people do not know boundaries in a lot of cases." Students were then asked to comment on the positives and negatives of a social media campaign. One student tweeted, "Positives: garners more attention, campaign spreads quickly and easily, international usage. Negatives: outlet for neg responses."

General discussion of public relations best practices. Finally, some valuable insights were given by students in terms of PR best practices that practitioners should consider:

Student A: One thing advertisers and/or sponsors should know...know your audience!

Student B: Honesty is the best policy. No need to sugar coat things. We're all adults!

Student C: Your audience should always be taken into consideration when introducing a new PR campaign!

Student D: In order to be seen, you must be heard! PR 101!

Facilitating Experiential Learning

The second research question sought to determine how, if at all, Twitter chats could facilitate student experiential learning. Data showed the chat exhibited experiential learning characteristics, particularly themes of learning as a process, constructing and reconstructing knowledge, and learning through conversation. Students also appreciated networking opportunities and demonstrated learning advancements using Twitter as a professional com-

munication tool.

Learning as a process. Many observations indicated students' knowledge gain through experiential learning. Two examples can highlight the chat's ability to accommodate different learning styles and to engage in the full ELT cycle, respectively. First, by examining students' Twitter handles in relation to frequency of tweeting throughout the chat, it was evident that some users began tweeting and interacting shortly after introducing themselves while others did not engage with chat content until after a few case discussions. This is perhaps reflective of different styles for grasping and transforming experiences. That is, the former group could constitute those who tend to learn through *concrete experience*, by jumping in and doing, whereas the latter group might be those who prefer *abstract conceptualization*, such as by carefully observing and learning from others before reflecting and testing.

Second, in several instances, it appeared that students realized they had neglected to use the hashtag that would allow others to see them as participating in the conversation, and followed up by sending an identical tweet that used the hashtag. We observed this in our experiences debriefing with students as well as looking at students' full Twitter feeds. This might reflect evidence of a cycling learning process whereby the student likely acted by tweeting (*concrete experience*), thought about what he/she knew about Twitter chats from readings and course content (*abstract conceptualization*), saw what others were doing and how that fit with what they did (*reflective observation*), and revised behavior to fit new knowledge (*experimentation*). This is one practical example of students cycling through the experiential learning model. However,

results showed students demonstrated experiential learning principles not only in hands-on, tool-learning capacities but also related to PR concepts (noted above) and by leveraging exposure to others' ideas to cultivate deeper thinking about pressing social issues, as the next examples will show.

Exposure to different people and ideas/Constructing and reconstructing knowledge. Students often engaged in side conversations with each other, replying to students rather than solely to the moderator. For example, one student asked her own question on a case study about celebrities announcing homosexuality via social media. She inquired: "Q18 follow up: I wonder how people, especially celebrities, dealt with being in the closet even 20 years ago?" Another student replied to her, noting "Idk much about it but celebs would protect each other, ex Rock Hudson was a famous actor in the 60's and was gay." This reflected experiential learning both as a function of the first student being prompted by a case study to think about and question her knowledge base as well as knowledge gain through questioning existing thoughts and opinions.

Some students more overtly challenged others' opinions. For example, in a robust, multi-tweet, multi-participant conversation surrounding a data breach at Target stores, a few interactions respectfully butted heads:

Student A: I know I didn't want to shop at target until last month cause I was too scared!

Student B: I know this won't stop me from shopping at target in the future :)

Student C: Target did a good job keeping the public informed but I think there should have been more than 10% discount.

Student E: I was hesitant about returning to Target but I couldn't stay away! ;)

Student F: I don't think they handled it well because they only offered a discount but people were still left unprotected.

Student H: ... I also think they could of given the customers a bigger discount :)

Student I: Thats a good idea, but how much would you give out? XD

Student G: [retweet Student I]: \$1000 :)

This example indicates the chat offered opportunities for people from different classrooms and of varying opinions to interact surrounding a wide assortment of PR issues. As the interaction above highlighted, one such popular topic was crisis communication. And these interactions, in turn, resulted in the construction and reconstruction of knowledge as students reflected on their own opinions in relation to others'.

Networking opportunities. Students appreciated the networking opportunities afforded by the Twitter chat's learning-by-doing nature. Rather than merely thinking about the uses and benefits of Twitter, as might be done in a conventional classroom setting, students engaged in tweeting with others, exposing them to new people and ideas. For example, one student in the first chat thought about the benefits obtained from participation, among them "Positives...hmm, we met you guys at [another school] #networking." Across both chats, others echoed this sentiment. For example, one participant said "As always, enjoyed the #[Chat]! Nice to communicate with other students on topics.. #ShareTheKnowledge #Network" and an-

other tweeted, “Thanks for having us! so much fun as always #[Other School] have a great day!! #naptime.” Some even viewed the events as a mechanism for “healthy competition” of displaying case study work and engaging in insightful discussions: “[Other School] y’all better BRING IT next time (; #justkidding #healthycompetition.” And networking opportunities extended beyond university peers. One student proudly told her instructor that PETA reached out to her as a result of accessing her animal-rights case study on Storify via her tweet.

Developing knowledge of Twitter as a professional tool. In setting up the chats and debriefing afterward with students, the instructors were interested to find most students had never participated in a Twitter chat prior, and several had never used Twitter for any purpose. During the chats, students asked questions of instructors via Twitter (e.g., “@[Instructor] what was the website we used for the twitter chat again??”) and interacted with other students both online and offline to gain proficiency using the medium. Students expressed pride in their developing skills and seemed thankful for the opportunity to develop them in a welcoming environment. One student proclaimed “My first tweet ever! #yayme #ifeelold.” Another announced, “as my first twitter chat it was [sic] been fun and interesting! Thank you!”

Student response to experiential learning. Experiential learning principles in action spurred positive student reception. For example, one tweeted “Every class should be a Twitter Chat!” Another wanted to know “Can we do this every class?” Yet another offered “I think these twitter chats should take place every class #JustSaying.” Another student tweeting from an instructor’s classroom noted “Fun way to

learn. Haha #iamrightnexttoyou,” and yet another exclaimed “whoever came up with twitter chats is a GENIUS. Great tactic to get students to do their work and participate.” In instructors’ debriefings, students expressed enthusiasm for using course assignments to gain experience navigating the quick pace of Twitter chats. Some students expressed this in the chat as well, for example: “This was so fast paced but still great discussion. I look forward to the next one!” Students also liked that the chat allowed them to meet not only other institutions’ students but also instructors: “...honestly this is a fun way to learn and communicate with students and teachers!,” one tweeted. As the final chat came to a close, one student joked: “Time to regret not paying attention in the rest of my classes this semester b/c I spent so much time Tweeting for PR.” Finally, many students enjoyed experiencing the gratification of a successful chat. One student excitedly took and tweeted a screenshot of the chat hashtag being listed as a top ten trending local hashtag on Twitter.

Best Teaching Practices

The final research question aimed to determine what, if any, best teaching practices could be gleaned from the study. Insights from all three instructors are compiled here and discussed without individual attribution, as the instructors reached consensus. Namely, themes related to balancing content, moderating the chat, providing carryover into the classroom, and specifics for assignment setup and grading are discussed next.

Balancing content and conversation flow. The Twitter chats were an hour each, not long to discuss multiple cases with 50+ students. Further, time was reserved at the beginning for students to introduce themselves to one another to encourage net-

working and at the end for wrap up. We discussed nine cases in the first chat, 12 in the second, and 30 in the third. The decrease in discussion time for each case was clearly noticeable from the first to second chats. The moderator had to move quickly, oftentimes just as the conversation had become deeper, and students would continue to talk about previous cases, sometimes causing confusion about which comments were related to which cases. Some students mentioned they felt rushed, so instructors told them they could choose to discuss the case(s) they found most interesting for as long as they wished.

By the third chat, instructors moved to dispersing the case links in groups clustered by topic area, shifting the discussion from a case-by-case examination to using the cases as examples of larger discussion topics (e.g., crisis communication, products and product launches, celebrity endorsements). This seemed an effective way to increase time spent on topics while engaging many cases. However, students were also enthusiastic about the chance to have their classwork discussed with a wider audience. Even students who had chosen identical case study topics (e.g., three students chose the Lay's Do Us a Flavor campaign) found others had different perspectives on the same campaign, which they compared and contrasted to their own constructions and outlooks. Ensuring all students have a chance to showcase their work is key.

Moderating the chat. Moderating a large and content-full Twitter chat is a complicated balancing act. The tendency to over-moderate can be strong, similar to temptation in a more traditional classroom to ask a question and then immediately provide an answer. In the Twitter chats, providing students with time to think and engage allowed them peer interaction,

increasing benefits of experiential learning. The cross-institutional collaboration increased access to relevant concepts and new opinions.

Instructors not tasked with moderating a particular chat (in this case, each chat had one instructor designated as moderator) should find ways to engage with the students. One instructor took on the role of asking deeper questions of specific students to encourage them to bring additional insights to the discussion. This helped keep the chat from remaining at surface level, as students knew they might be faced with follow-up questions. Other times, a non-moderating instructor would provide positive feedback to comments or would retweet questions to help students stay on topic. Having two additional instructors participate in the chat helped manage the volume of content, answer questions, and engage all of the students more fully. Further, because conversations were occurring on Twitter, instructors could be slightly more relaxed with students than in a classroom setting, making jokes or side comments. Students noticed and appreciated this virtual closeness, both in the chat and in the classroom afterward.

Carryover into the classroom. Questioning where other instructors or students placed emphasis and why can be helpful for students and instructors. Some terms or connections students made had been discussed on one campus but not another. So, each class was able to debrief separately after the chat, sharing new ideas with their classmates and determining where these ideas fit in the existing course structure. Relatedly, keeping track of the chat concepts or topics was useful for instructors later in the semester. Witnessing what students were interested in discussing with each other provided examples instructors could use in future class sessions to

strengthen connections across course material.

Assignment setup and grading. Not all students had the same level of comfort or ease with using Twitter. Thus, instructors devoted time and resources in class, giving links to articles about how to participate in Twitter chats and discussing expectations. However, this could be expanded by perhaps hosting a brief mock chat in class. It is also helpful to allow students to assist one another during the chat. We chose chat times so that at least one occurred during each institution's class session, allowing students to participate while surrounded by their peers both off and online.

All three instructors used the same rubrics for grading both the Storify case study and the Twitter chat. The Twitter chat rubric, however, was quite basic, as this was a pilot effort. The rubric simply asked whether the student had done a number of things: tweeted two unique comments, retweeted comments from two other participants, and made one @reply to another person. While this made grading simple, it also assigned the same grade to a student who tweeted "yes!" in reply to a question and a student who tweeted a thoughtful response using course concepts. Future rubric iterations could distribute points that reward content substance as well as technical skills. Of course, it is important to keep in mind that students can use merely 140 characters per tweet and thus do not have the ability to engage as fully as they might in a several-minute presentation with oral follow-up Q & A.

Finally, reflection is an important part of the experiential learning process. We required students to complete a reflection paper early in the assignment process. In the future, writing brief reflection papers on each chat might help students better adjust their experimentation.

Discussion

Overall, this preliminary investigation of how Twitter chats might be effective teaching tools in the social media classroom yielded several noteworthy insights. For example, through creating case studies featuring PR and strategic social media concepts, students applied course materials to the "real world." Sharing those case studies via the fast-paced and interactive Twitter-sphere with students in similar classes at different campuses allowed students to experience and engage with an assortment of viewpoints on essential concepts. In this study, students discussed items ranging from PR employee professionalism to crisis communication to campaign strategy.

Further, the Twitter chats appeared to foster conditions for experiential learning as described by Baker et al. (2002). Students demonstrated they were engaging in learning as a process rather than outcomes, and they showed evidence of constructing and reconstructing knowledge through environmental interaction. Findings indicate Twitter chats may provide potential for individuals with different learning styles to cycle effectively through the learning process to gain knowledge. Students also expressed appreciation for this innovative learning environment, which included engagement with course material, networking with other students and instructors, and new professional familiarity with a popular social media platform. The chats also encouraged students to develop networking skills as they interacted with others and learned how to make connections via Twitter. Thus, the students were able to experience relationship building from various levels, learning in real-time why social media platforms can be conversational and relationship-focused (Avery et al., 2010).

In addition, communication scholars have found benefits of instructors using social media not only inside but also outside the classroom. For example, based on their survey of public relations students, Waters and Bortree (2011) asserted that by creating and maintaining social networking profiles, instructors humanize themselves. That is, “by demonstrating a more personal side, professors can reduce the nervousness many students feel when approaching authoritative figures” (p. 3). Our experiences corroborate this notion. Each instructor noted a shift in classroom climate, and the instructor-student and student-student relationships seemed deeper and more personal following participation in the Twitter chats.

Purg (2012) noted the act of creating increases self-reflection and social inclusion, which the instructors observed in their students throughout these assignments. Using platforms such as Storify and Twitter and comparing their work to that of their peers, not just in their own classroom but at other universities, gave students new insight into self-expression, storytelling, diversity, and community via social media. Searls (2000) noted that producing and consuming information together makes content more compelling and interactive; students were excited to share their Storify cases with one another and to receive feedback on Twitter. Melton and Hicks (2012) discussed the idea that using social media improves collaboration, and with this study, we found collaboration also improves social media understanding and connections to the underlying PR knowledge base.

Limitations and Conclusion

As with all studies, there are benefits and constraints. The cross-institutional, social media-based nature of this study provided specific insights and best practices

for teaching similar courses, but there are limitations. For example, although the instructors were able to pick up on issues mentioned by students through the chats and general class discussion, additional student data could provide other insights. Future research on this and similar assignments should collect quantitative and qualitative data surrounding student experiences, perhaps by administering an anonymous survey and/or conducting interviews and/or focus groups. Further, these data are qualitative and highly contextualized. Findings here might not transfer to other settings, instructors, and students.

Overall, this project was a useful teaching tool. Partnering with instructors at multiple higher education institutions may enable professional development opportunities for both instructors and students. Course-sponsored Twitter chats in particular may provide potential for those of different learning styles to cycle through the experiential learning process to create and recreate knowledge around theoretical and practical public relations concepts.

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Appendix A. Examples of Storify New Media Case Study Titles and Topics

<i>Storify Case Study Title</i>	<i>Storify Case Study Topic</i>
BP Oil Spill	Fallout from the oil spill; still an issue for BP years later (2010)
Te'oing	Manti Te'o's fake girlfriend scandal (2012)
McDonald's Twitter Campaign was a #McFail	Using #McDStories for negative stories of McDonald's (2012)
How to Take a Disaster and Make	Carnival Cruise Line's ship Triumph had an engine fire
The Greatest Twitter Fail	Tweet about not getting AIDS in Africa due to race (2013)
Batkid Saves Gotham City	Fulfilling the wish of 5-year-old Miles Scott, aka Batkid
Six Californias?	Campaign to split the state into six separate states (2013)
Guess What Day it is?	Analysis of Geico's Hump Day camel commercial (2013)
Literally Totes the Most De-ranged Strat Email, Like, Ever!	Viral email from the Social Chair of University of Maryland's Delta Gamma Sorority (2013)
Target Credit Card Breach 2013	How Target handled theft of customer credit card details
Cheerios	Cheerios commercial features interracial couple, garners
SeaWorld: Their PR Transition	Impact of <i>Blackfish</i> (documentary) on SeaWorld PR (2013)
Lay's "Do Us a Flavor"	Launch of annual Lay's Do Us a Flavor campaign (2014)
#Esurancesave30 Super Bowl	Launch of Esurance's Save30 Super Bowl campaign (2014)
Shooting at the Mall in Columbia	Shooting at the Mall in Columbia, Maryland and Twitter response of Howard County Police Department (2014)
#AerieReal Campaign: No More Photoshop!	Aerie clothing store's lack of photo retouching (2014)
University of Maryland Data	The computer security attack exposing records of University
Seth Rogen: More than Just a Comedian	Seth Rogen's testimony before the Senate about Alzheimer's, and then discussion on Twitter about the lack of support (2014)
Sochi Causes MAJOR PR Prob-	Coca-Cola's backlash from LGBT activist groups for not
Ellen DeGeneres Takes Over	Ellen as Oscars host, selfie tweet heard 'round the world

Note: Students selected their own topics of interest.