Journal of Public Relations Education
2019, Vol. 5, No. 1, 70-100

One Liners and Catchy Hashtags: Building a Graduate Student Community Through Twitter Chats

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Abstract

This study takes a mixed-methods approach to understanding how graduate student education and engagement are intertwined, as well as the ability of an ongoing Twitter chat to increase both. As more strategic communication master's programs utilize hybrid and online course components, finding new and innovative ways to help students feel oriented, engaged, and part of a community leads to increased success for both students and departments. The analysis includes the chats themselves, a mixed-methods survey to chat participants, and memoing completed by the researchers (faculty chat participants and the chat moderator). Key findings for graduate student engagement include the importance of building both online and offline connections, the ability of Twitter chats to increase fun and reduce stress, and to gain both tacit and explicit knowledge. Finally, the project offers practical suggestions for programs looking to start their own chat series to improve student engagement.

Keywords: graduate student community, student engagement, Twitter chat, social media, hybrid online education, professional development

Editorial Record: Original draft submitted to JPRE July 26, 2017. Revision went under review July 20, 2018. Manuscript accepted for publication November 2, 2018. Final edits completed January 22, 2019. First published online January 31, 2019.

Research on social media use in the general population has skyrocketed over the last few years, but most has been focused on either American adults at-large or specifically college students, largely ignoring graduate students. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2017), three million graduate students enrolled in programs around the country in the 2017-2018 academic year, a group large enough to be research worthy. For undergraduate students, student engagement and student achievement are positively correlated (Carini, Kuh, & Klein, 2006); it stands to reason that similar interactions would occur at the graduate level.

Twenty-nine percent of American adults who have at least a college education (a group that would include graduate students) are using Twitter, higher than individuals with any other level of education (Greenwood, Perrin, & Duggan, 2016). Social media, in general, is known to improve communication in a classroom setting (Tyma, 2011) and to help student perceptions of engagement and quality of education (Rutherford, 2010). Research that does exist on Twitter usage in the classroom, while focused on undergraduates, is positive (Fraustino, Briones, & Janoske, 2015; Tyma, 2011).

This project focuses on how social media use may impact engagement and education at the graduate level. Specifically, it looks at the impact of Twitter chats that are promoted and moderated by a specific department with a master's program in journalism and strategic media in the context of a mid-sized Southern university. The department in question was particularly interested in these questions, as it has both on-campus students and online students who take classes together and synchronously, making it necessary to find unique, creative ways to engage students regardless of whether they are participating in person or only online.

This project employs a qualitative content analysis of the Twitter chats and researcher memoing, as well as a qualitative and quantitative

online survey to understand the impact of the chats on student engagement and education. The study reviews literature on how technology and student engagement currently interact and ends with suggestions on incorporating similar chats into other master's programs.

Literature Review

This review builds on current literature related to synchronous hybrid graduate programs, addresses knowledge of current approaches to student engagement, particularly at the graduate level, and explores the role that technology plays in this process.

Synchronous Hybrid Graduate Programs

Online asynchronous courses—those that do not have a specified meeting place or time—have received criticism because of the feelings of isolation they can induce (Liu, Magjuka, Bonk, & Lee, 2007) and the lack of real-time interaction (West & Jones, 2007). Because of the noted shortcomings of online asynchronous courses, a number of post-secondary institutions are utilizing synchronous hybrid delivery as a course option where on-campus students participate simultaneously with online students via web conferencing services (Roseth, Akcaoglu, & Zellner, 2013). This offers the convenience of an online format for students and creates a greater sense of community for students by being able to engage with one another in both auditory and visual manners (Henriksen, Mishra, Greenhow, Cain, & Roseth, 2014).

Park and Bonk (2007) examined online and residential students' learning experiences in a synchronous environment. While most interaction for the students in their study was primarily task-related and focused on accomplishing course assignments, non-task related interaction was observed in the form of "humor, compliment, encouragement, or voluntary offer of additional supports" outside of the official course time (Park & Bonk, 2007, p. 252). Butz, Stupnisky, Pekrun, Jensen, and Harsell (2016) explored the role that emotions play in student achievement in

synchronous hybrid graduate courses. Results from their study indicated that success in such courses positively correlates with student enjoyment and negatively correlates with anxiety and boredom (Butz et al., 2016). Additionally, findings suggested that although students initially enjoy this type of environment for engaging with courses, the novelty of the delivery system tends to decrease over time. This is in line with earlier research that suggested instructors need to experiment with new tools to enliven student participation in technologically mediated programs (Hrastinski, 2008). This need to innovate and consider the holistic student experience is a major focus of student engagement literature.

Student Engagement

Astin (1984) defines engagement as "the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience" (p. 297). This can be understood as the time and effort students devote to educational activities, which are comprised of both in-class and out-of-class engagement (Kuh, 2009). Research has shown repeatedly that student engagement is positively associated with desired outcomes for institutions of higher education, such as psychosocial development and academic success (Junco, Heibergert, & Loken, 2010).

Universities often focus more resources on undergraduate student engagement for a variety of reasons, including a greater number of students enrolled at the undergraduate level, a belief that academic units are meeting the needs of graduate students, and an assumption that graduate students already know how to navigate institutions of higher education (Fischer & Zigmond, 1998; Pontius & Harper, 2006). Research on student engagement concentrates on the undergraduate level as well. In their seminal study, Chickering and Gamson (1987) proposed seven principles related to engagement in undergraduate education: (1) student/faculty contact; (2) cooperation among students; (3) active learning; (4) prompt feedback; (5) emphasizing time on task; (6) communicating

high expectations; and (7) respecting diversity. These seven principles have heavily guided subsequent student engagement dialogue, research, and practice. Kuh (1997) even posited that this list of seven principles "is one of the most widely disseminated documents in American higher education" (p. 72).

However, there is a growing recognition that graduate students face a very different campus environment from undergraduate students and often bring in external circumstances that may make engagement more challenging (Pontius & Harper, 2006). Therefore, Pontius and Harper (2006) proposed their own seven philosophical principles for engagement in graduate and professional education: (1) eradicate marginalization among underrepresented populations; (2) provide orientation to the institution beyond the academic unit; (3) invest resources in communication; (4) facilitate community-building and multicultural interaction across academic units; (5) create engagement plans for students; (6) enhance career and professional development; and (7) systemically assess satisfaction, needs, and outcomes. Individual departments should consider how these principles can guide and improve programs and initiatives to better engage graduate students.

Cohort programs—groups of students who begin a program of study together—are becoming increasingly common in higher education to increase student retention and graduation rates, mainly in traditional, non-online programs (Lei, Gorelick, Short, Smallwood, & Wright-Porter, 2011). Even if a department does not intentionally follow a cohort-based educational program, students naturally form groups around similar interests, shared classes or both (Hubbell & Hubbell, 2010). Martin, Goldwasser, and Galentino (2017) found that graduate students in cohorts develop closer bonds than students in non-cohort programs, and that these close bonds positively influence student engagement. Because a cohort-model generally requires a more traditional educational format (in-person

and on-campus), graduate programs that offer distance education options may need to consider alternative routes for engagement. This is where technology may help to facilitate closer bonds and a cohort-mentality among students, offering the benefits of a cohort to all students.

Janson, Howard, and Schoenberger-Orgard (2004) reflected on their experiences as graduate students and the needs they had for emotional and academic support. One way that they were able to reduce isolation and improve engagement was through virtual discussions, although this study predated the development of Twitter. However, this virtual environment did provide stewardship opportunities to help orient new members to the community so that important documents could be saved and information shared (Janson et al., 2004). Relatedly, Kimble, Hildreth, and Wright (2001) discussed the role that virtual communities could play in managing both explicit knowledge (knowledge that can be easily codified and shared) and tacit knowledge (knowledge rooted in experience, which is less accessible). As Janson et al. (2004) explained, "Humans *need* other humans to surface and share tacit knowledge" (p. 177, italics in original). Therefore, opportunities for real-time virtual engagement results in not only helping to build the community but also in facilitating the sharing of vital information, which can help students gather knowledge that may not be easily accessible any other way.

Social Media in the Classroom

In addition to engagement benefits, incorporating social media use into a program can improve important digital skills. More than 90% of college students use some form of social media, and most consider themselves experts (Smith, Rainie, & Zickuhr, 2011). However, that self-assessed digital expertise does not always translate to actual professional skill (Kinsky, Freberg, Kim, Kushin, & Ward, 2016; Melton & Hicks, 2011). This lack of connection between living in a digitally saturated environment and actual digital competency must be mitigated in the

classroom with additional training and exposure to social media (Toliver, 2011). Experiential learning in the classroom setting provides students with a structured space to gain "expertise using technology" and the skills necessary for both the professional and academic worlds (Madden, Winkler, Fraustino, & Janoske, 2016, p. 203). Including this type of training in the classroom benefits the students and the faculty, keeping everyone up to date on the latest developments and polishing skill sets (Kinsky, Freberg, Ehrlich, Breakenridge, & Gomes, 2018).

Also, social media-based interactions can encourage rich, meaningful dialogue and critical discussions of various topics (Moody, 2010), and social media in classrooms allows for the exploration of new ideas and different ways of completing tasks, while learning important and practical media skills. Social media usage in the classroom provides students with experience in the production and sharing of information quickly and clearly (Locker & Kienzler, 2012), and it provides training in basic social media skills, including how to manage a large amount of information and respond to it effectively.

Furthermore, the use of Twitter in and out of the classroom can be beneficial to both students and faculty (Hull & Dodd, 2017). Because of the interactive nature of Twitter, both students and faculty who use Twitter in the classroom report being more actively engaged in the learning process (Bowen, 2012; Virtanen, Myllärniemi, & Wallander, 2013). Also, students who use Twitter reported a higher grade point average at the end of the semester than non-Twitter users (Junco, Merson, & Salter, 2010). Twitter is easily accessible, increasing the availability of course content, instructors, and other educational resources (Van Rooyen, 2015). According to Hull and Dodd (2017), the use of Twitter in the classroom may involve all seven of Chickering and Gamson's (1987) principles of good practice in undergraduate teaching. Hull and Dodd (2017) argue the incorporation of Twitter into assignments and discussions makes

learning interactive, which allows students to see knowledge "as dynamic rather than being based on the fixed materials of a textbook" (p. 94). In addition, Twitter allows instructors to interact with students outside of the classroom and to provide additional feedback or information relevant to class (Hull & Dodd, 2017).

Fraustino, Briones, and Janoske (2015) found that Twitter chats in the classroom provide an experience that may benefit students with varying learning styles because each student has the opportunity to individually and effectively process information in their own way. Aside from reaching diverse learners, Twitter chats also provide students with the opportunity to network with students and instructors that they may otherwise never have met in person or interacted with beyond a surface level. These critical networking skills give students experience in navigating, building, and maintaining relationships in a social media environment (Fraustino et al., 2015). In addition, Twitter chats provided participants with an opportunity to better connect with their instructors who were able to demonstrate a personal side during the chat, thus forging a better student-instructor relationship in the classroom (Fraustino et al., 2015).

Based on this literature review, the following research questions are posed:

RQ1: How are Twitter chats used to connect and engage graduate students with their department?

RQ2: How do students make sense of the Twitter chats as part of their graduate education?

RQ3: How do students make sense of the Twitter chats as part of their engagement with a graduate school community?

Method

Data collection and analysis for this project included qualitative observation of Twitter chat interaction from three professors; qualitative

analysis of all seven Twitter chats (1,736 total tweets, ranging from 111 to 357 tweets per chat, with an average of 248 tweets per hour-long chat); and an online quantitative and qualitative post-only student survey.

Procedure

Twitter chats have been administered twice a semester by the master's program of a single journalism and strategic media department at a mid-sized Southern university, which includes students studying news journalism, public relations, and advertising. The chats began in fall 2015, for a total of seven chats at the time of data collection. All seven chats were moderated by one of the researchers, who is also the assistant director of the graduate program. The chats were held at both the beginning and end of each semester to help students build initial connections and to reflect upon what they have learned by the end of the semester. The chats lasted for one hour; had a general topic (examples included journalistic coverage of the Olympics, crises in the field, and connections between the field and politics); included general discussion and the chance to ask questions about the program or department; and occured during at least one graduate class, to ensure a base level of participation. Participation for students taking that class was mandatory but had no impact on their grade in the course; other graduate students not taking the course were informed of the chat via email and a post to the department's graduate student Facebook group; students were strongly encouraged to participate.

Because all classes in the department are a mix of in-person and online students, as well as full-time and part-time students, the chats had a mix as well. The chats had a total of 32 unique participants, ranging from 10 to 23 users per chat (based upon class attendance on that particular night and the ability or willingness of students outside of the course to participate), with an average of 17 users per chat. (Individual chat numbers may be slightly different from unique participants, as most

users participated in more than one chat, and since the chats happened over multiple semesters, some participants graduated and others joined the program during this time frame). Most often, chat participants were students, with three to six faculty members joining each chat.

All responses and contributions used in this paper included a department hashtag to make following the conversation feasible during the chats themselves. For the purpose of anonymity, the hashtag and the handles and/or names of participants were removed from the results.

Qualitative data. Data were analyzed via a grounded theory approach, with constant comparative coding to identify and establish themes (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Line-by-line coding established emerging themes, which were then combined into axial coding categories. All three researchers were in contact throughout data analysis.

All three researchers also memoed about their experiences with the chats and what they noticed about student engagement. Memoing is a way for researchers to write "clear descriptions" of how they are interpreting the data as "a final component of analysis . . . an insightful, interpretive exercise" (Warren & Karner, 2010, p. 242).

Quantitative data. A post-only survey was administered online via Qualtrics. Since the program is relatively small and researchers wanted to preserve anonymity, no personally identifying information was collected, participation was voluntary, and students were not offered anything in return for their participation. Students were asked to participate via the graduate program's Facebook page, and the survey was administered in each of the four graduate courses offered in the semester. Of the 31 graduate students in the program at the time of survey administration, 16 participated, for a participation rate of 51.6%. Students self-reported participating in an average of 2.5 chats apiece, with half of students (50.0%) participating in 3-5 chats during their time with the department.

Two scales were adapted and combined to create the survey: the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) (Junco, Elavsky, & Heiberger, 2013) and the Sense of Belonging Scale (Good, Rattan, & Dweck, 2012), where questions were adapted from math to the area that students study. The open-ended questions from the survey were adapted from Welch and Bonnan-White's (2012) questions on Twitter enjoyment.

Students were asked 46 Likert-type questions adapted from the scales discussed above: four quantitative questions related to their Twitter usage and participation in the chats and four open-ended questions used to describe their experience with the chats and how they believed the chats affected engagement and education.

Results

RQ1: How are Twitter chats used to connect and engage graduate students with their department?

The chats allowed graduate students to not only engage with one another, but also with the faculty, established through themes of *accessibility to online students, tacit knowledge, explicit knowledge,* and *integrating knowledge across classes.*

Accessibility to online students. Survey results indicated that 69% of students felt the department "very much" or "quite a bit" emphasized attending campus events and activities. For a graduate program that offers a completely online degree program, though, this emphasis for on-campus students can feel isolating for online students who do not live near campus. To account for these geographic limitations, the Twitter chats offered a way for all students to equally participate in an event. This response from the qualitative survey feedback indicates the importance of these types of online events:

> As an online student, chats connect me more so than any other offered activity outside of the classroom. It reinforces the community connection. . . . that I am in fact a member of this

> college community and not just an outsider looking at dozens of emails of things I can't attend or participate in because I can't attend classes on location.

One online graduate student participated in the first departmental Twitter chat and said, "I've only been in the program for one week and I'm enjoying interacting with my professor and classmates so far."

Twitter chats also offered the opportunity for students who had completed coursework and were writing theses or capstone projects to still feel like they were part of a graduate community. In the survey, one student wrote, "I am currently not enrolled this semester and still interact with my professors and classmates." A student who was not able to participate in the Twitter chats one semester noted feeling like they were "missing out on the conversations with other students and faculty." By creating a consistent and ongoing Twitter chat series, students could actively develop community and relationships regardless of their locations.

Tacit knowledge. Twitter chats also offered a way for students to share insider advice and tips with each other that may not have been previously shared. For example, one Twitter chat conversation focused on giving tips for success to each other. This was incorporated into a visual design course where students tweeted a graphic they had created with advice for their fellow students. One student tweeted out advice for research topics in the courses: "Pick a damn good topic for mass comm theory. Your life will be so much easier if you use it for mass comm research methods, too." Faculty members also responded with their advice for success in graduate school. As one faculty member tweeted, "There will be stress. Find one day a week that you do something for yourself." In an even earlier Twitter chat, students were asked about the best things they have learned in the program. One student responded, "I learned that sometimes it's good to just...write! Forget the formalities and be free! [A local author] helped me with that :)." This tacit knowledge sharing also

translated into more in-person interactions for some students. In the survey feedback, one student wrote that, "I enjoyed it more because it got the class to have more discussion outside of the Twitter chat." In reflecting on the Twitter chats, the faculty moderator said that "It's our online beer after class (except we're also still in class), a chance to reflect and share on what we know and what we're doing."

Explicit knowledge. Although less frequent than community building and tacit knowledge sharing, the Twitter chats also offered an opportunity for graduate faculty to share important reminders and updates with students. Explicit knowledge sharing helped to reinforce information and deadlines that were available online and in emails sent to all graduate students, but that may have been forgotten or overlooked. For example, in one Twitter chat, the moderator took the opportunity to see if students had any questions about the graduation process: "And speaking of forms, who has questions about advising or candidacy or what you have to do to get out of here? #dontleaveus." Similarly, she shared "a quick reminder, for those of you graduating this semester (!!!!!)—forms are due to [the graduate director] tomorrow!"

Integrating knowledge across classes. Twitter chats also provided an opportunity to both share and reinforce knowledge gained from graduate courses. Each Twitter chat consisted of thought-provoking questions designed to encourage conversation about issues related to the fields of study. Students then were encouraged to apply their course knowledge and professional experiences (along with relevant and humorous GIFs). For example, in a Twitter chat a few days before the 2016 presidential election, one of the questions posed was "What has the election taught us about social media usage in professional settings?" Student responses included "I've noticed how often social media commentary can become news," "It's too often used for off-the-cuff 'reporting' that lacks proper context," and, "You really need to control

your campaign staff, too. Low level staff can say something and cause an issue."

One of the challenges of a professionally oriented graduate program is helping students to see the connection between classroom work—particularly theory and research methods—and their future career options. In a chat from April 2016, the moderator tweeted, "Make your profs feel good: how can you take what you learn in the classroom and apply it to real world experiences?" One student responded that it is a good idea to "Build off of real world things we created . . . like our content creation assignments!" Another student responded, "Networking tip: Talk with absolutely everybody - and their moms and dads." However, in the humorous spirit of the chat, one student did respond to this question with "I'm drawing blanks tbh ;)."

RQ2: How do students make sense of the Twitter chats as part of their graduate education?

While students did gain both tacit and explicit knowledge, they also worked to integrate the chats into their overall educational experience by building *stronger connections overall, peer relationships,* and *faculty relationships.*

Stronger connections overall. Students came into the Twitter chats with social media experience and knowledge already in place—nearly all participants (93%) reported using Twitter outside of the departmental chats, and 73% reported using Twitter in other classes or programs of study. Furthermore, many students saw the connection between the Twitter chats and social media training for a future career or career advancement; however, many of the respondents saw the stronger connection to the graduate program, faculty, and their peers as the most important educational outcomes. The majority of respondents described their overall quality of education in the program as "excellent" (50%), followed by "good" (31.25%), and "fair" (18.75%).

Many students pointed to the Twitter chats as a way to boost their connection with fellow students and with faculty members. The Twitter chats provided a space outside of the classroom for students and faculty to chat about topics related to the program while also allowing students a chance to be free of more formal classroom structures. One student commented, "[The chats] feel like separate time frames that are used to really get to know the department. I don't mind that. I like having a space where this is fun and this is work but we learn from both." Another reported that the chats "made me feel more connected, and therefore, more likely to join in, in class." Both comments are emblematic of the responses many students offered. The idea that being more connected to other students and faculty leads to a greater involvement in the classroom and in the class materials is also evident in the survey results. Nearly 88% of respondents said they asked questions or contributed in class often or very often.

Peer relationships. Many students reported a stronger relationship with their peers as a result of the chats, while reporting a tangential connection to their grade in a class or a specific learning outcome. This, however, did not seem to devalue the chats for students. One student, when asked whether the chats affected grades or classroom performance, responded, "Not really other than to help foster camaraderie with classmates," while another respondent said, "I feel my classroom performance was better because I'm also invested in my colleagues' success."

These open-ended responses were supported by the survey data, as well. The majority of students (75%) surveyed reported that their relationships with other students are supportive or friendly. The remainder of students reported a "sense of belonging" (12.5%), or, for two students, a "sense of alienation" (12.5%). In addition, approximately 82% of respondents reported having conversations with students of a different

race or ethnicity often or very often. In addition, nearly 81% of students reported at least sometimes having serious conversations with students who have very different religious beliefs, political opinions, or personal values, which helps to support the goals of the graduate program—to help students gain a broader understanding of the world around themselves and to move beyond that which is already familiar.

Faculty relationships. In addition to stronger relationships with peers, many students also reported the chats made them feel like the faculty was more accessible. One student reported, "Twitter chats did not affect my involvement, but it did give direct access to professors (and helped humanize them)." Another respondent added, "It probably showed the professors that we are interested in the department."

The majority of students surveyed reported that their relationships with faculty are "helpful" (56.25%) and "available" (31.25%). In addition, 87.5% of students reported that they had talked to at least one faculty member about their career plans while in the program, and 81.25% reported discussing readings from their classes with a faculty member outside of class at least sometimes.

RQ3: How do students make sense of the Twitter chats as part of their engagement with a graduate school community?

Students overall reported feeling that the Twitter chats improved their engagement with the department community because it allowed them to *"have fun a little," interact with faculty,* be an *active community participant,* and conversely, at times, to feel *bored and overpowered.*

"Have fun a little." In the qualitative survey results, many students reported the feeling of ease and comfort the chats gave them. One student said that they "liked being able to interact with students from different classes and just relax and have fun a little. I enjoy people's humor on the chats." Another student talked more broadly about how they "loved the sense of community I felt," and how that was especially important

during "the lighthearted moments and the times when, despite the efforts of some, we just let it get silly for a little bit. It was a nice reprieve from the usual stress." Graduate school can be a stressful experience, something mentioned often during the chats, so students seemed to have extra appreciation for an activity that was connected to the department but was also a chance to talk about how stressful the department could be.

These chats are often a mix of academic questions, reminders about department information, and then *Friends* quotes, zany GIFs, and questions about zombies. The faculty chat moderator memoed that she:

> likes to be there with a group of students, playing songs and talking and laughing about our favorite tweets, or explaining on the fly how to find the perfect GIF or coming up with hashtags together. That's where I think some of the real work of this comes into play—the chance to have fun with an online conversation that's also part of an offline experience.

Interact with faculty. Faculty interaction through the chats helped with a student's perceptions of their educational experience, as discussed in RQ2, but it also offered a chance for students to see a different, lighter side of their professors, increasing their feelings of engagement and connection. One student talked about how they "like the casual atmosphere the Twitter chats create. It allows us to feel more at ease with professors." Another indicated that humanizing the faculty was important, where they "like the interaction between faculty and classmates outside of the classroom because I can see their true humor and ideas." One of the faculty researchers memoed about how they are "teaching my first graduate class this semester, and I feel like I knew a few of the students based solely on the conversations we had in the Twitter chats—and they seemed more comfortable with me because they recognized me from the chats, as well." Faculty were also able to get in on this, using the chats to find out what students wanted, what questions they had, and reiterating

the importance of engagement by asking, "any other ideas ya'll have for grad student fun times? It's important to stick together!" From the survey, 93.75% of students said they found faculty to be available, helpful, and sympathetic overall; while the Twitter chats may not be able to lay claim to the entire reason for that, the quotes discussed here indicate that they certainly helped support that connection.

Active community participant. One of the best benefits the chats offered was for students to almost immediately feel like part of the community. Over 76% of the students surveyed indicated that they agreed or strongly agreed with the idea that they enjoyed being an active participant in the department, and over 56% of students agreed or strongly agreed that they belonged to the greater academic community. The community building via the chats also acted as an icebreaker, with one student noting that "I liked being able to interact with others in the program. Put a name with a face. It became an icebreaker and helped to create class connections." The chats also helped students feel more comfortable, and to "assess other personalities and made me comfortable with my classmates and other faculty members." Finally, one student said, "Professors I've had have been involved with each student from beginning of semester to end."

The chats also served as a way to introduce students to broader communities. In a chat from April 2016, networking and job searching was a main topic of conversation. One professor noted, "I credit #networking at local PRSA events to the job I'm in now!" and another encouraged students to "get in the habit of #networking in your city. Pick biz casual events where ppl you want to meet will be."

Bored and overpowered. Within the survey, two students (12.5%) did report they felt a sense of alienation within the department; clearly, the chats, and perhaps other factors at work, were not enough to build engagement with every student. One student noted that the chat was

"boring. I don't really see the point in them," and another student felt like the chats made them "enjoy myself less. I feel like they take away from class time and don't help at all." While neither of the students elaborated on the reasons behind feeling this way, one student offered a hint, saying, "I liked the different conversations but I did not like that some participants seemed to overpower others in the Twitter chats." This is definitely something to keep in mind for future chats, and as the faculty works to continue to improve student engagement.

Discussion

The main goal of this study was to better understand whether or not a series of Twitter chats for faculty and master's students was able to build engagement and improve education within the department. These chats allowed the department to build upon Pontius and Harper's (2006) seven principles of orientation, community building, and the development and assessment of student success and outcomes in order to improve classroom interaction and to increase application of knowledge to the field as a whole. These outcomes were particularly important since the department has both online and on-campus students who all take classes synchronously.

Many graduate programs are increasingly moving to, or at least incorporating, online options for students (Best Colleges, 2018), and as these programs continue to focus on student enrollment and graduation rates, understanding and utilizing methods to improve student engagement becomes an important focus of research (Junco et al., 2010). The students studied here were able to have more diverse conversations with classmates, to be more involved with faculty, to gain more experience with media tools, and to have additional spaces to ask questions and make connections, all of which should be goals of effective graduate programs. In this section, we spotlight main areas of accomplishment, acknowledge that the goals may not be met for every single student, and offer practical

suggestions for other faculty and programs to implement their own chats.

Engagement Learned

Student engagement has improved since instituting the Twitter chats, both within classes and the department, and also at a level of engagement that students see as necessary for successful navigation of the job search and application process. Because social media is such an integral part of a media professional's world, social media engagement and networking is education (Fraustino et al., 2015). While faculty are working to better engage students with their peers and with the department, the Twitter chats are also helping students to better engage with future clients, readers, watchers, publics, and consumers. Some students also work to maintain these Twitter relationships by tweeting outside of the formal chats to each other and to faculty. Additionally, as the number of graduate students who are Black, Hispanic, or over the age of 25 continues to increase, being able to hold conversations with diverse audiences becomes increasingly important (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017).

The results of this study also reinforce the literature that social media help to create rich and meaningful relationships (Moody, 2010) in a way that goes beyond what some students may experience in ordinary in-class interactions with students and faculty. Engagement increases success, particularly engagement that fosters enjoyment and innovation (Butz, et al., 2016; Hrastinski, 2008; Junco et al., 2010). One of the researchers memoed, "Anecdotally, as a faculty member, I can see where the Twitter chats have fostered and strengthened relationships that may not have otherwise happened—even among the faculty." Offline interaction increases trust among community members, which reduces concerns with sociability, which increases online knowledge sharing, leading to the mix of offline and online interaction seen as the most beneficial component for building community (Matzat, 2010).

This also connects to the importance of non-task oriented

interaction in the form of humor and social support (Park & Bonk, 2007). While the levity of the chats may mask some of the skills reinforcement that occurs, most students responded well to the ability to have fun with the chats and used them to humanize their classmates and professors. The chats appeared to increase the willingness to talk about research outside of the classroom and engage with someone different from them. Similar to Hrastinski's (2008) findings, Twitter chats were also a way to incorporate different technological tools into the graduate student experience.

Keep Our Chats Weird

The humor and social support evident in the chats also allows for a more organic and relaxed building of engagement. Trying to make the chats more structured or requiring students to post a specific number of tweets or replies may make students feel "on," or compelled to recite answers to formal questions in an orderly fashion. In some ways, the natural conversation flow and amorphous structure of the chats is what makes them not only fun but also successful. In many ways, the chats are more effective at getting the students to interact than the beginning-of-the-year social event, a common method for boosting engagement. There, people select a seating arrangement at the beginning of the night and usually stay there until the end of the social. Mostly, they talk to students and faculty they already know, or they remain flies on the wall without engaging, and the online students are left out almost entirely due to geographic restrictions. In the Twitterverse, the chats allow for more flexibility, potentially fewer awkward social situations, and a greater chance for everyone to be heard and seen.

This flexibility comes through in the skills gained, as well. From a faculty perspective, students are building social media usage skills, networking skills, impression management skills, social media engagement skills, and critical thinking skills (even if just to outdo the last funny meme that was posted). Part of graduate school is teaching students

to be part of the broader academic community and to become peers to the faculty (eventually), so this flexibility, skill building, and connection are all good things.

Perhaps relatedly, some students found the chats to be overwhelming or overpowering, often due to the speed of interaction, or believing that the information discussed was not interesting or relevant to them. These students require attention paid to them and a moderator's ability to draw them out, but they also gain the ability to practice having conversations with people different from them or in situations where they need to network or participate, even if it is complicated.

Typically, visible in both in-person interactions observed by the researchers, and in the analysis performed for this project, Twitter chat nights are upbeat, fun, and exciting. Students like class that night, no matter what happened earlier, and it is powerful to be able to offer them that oasis in what can otherwise be a stressful, demanding, confusing time for them. On Twitter, they do not have to focus on getting the right answer or having the proper insight into a reading; the chat becomes, in a way, the great equalizer, allowing students to engage with a discussion no matter what.

Stop Avoiding the Questions

Some of the more self-reflexive chat questions, those focused on what students were getting from the program and able to apply in professional settings, were often the ones that devolved most quickly into humor and where people didn't really answer the questions. There was, however, an impressive amount of discussion about broader topics within the field, such as the role of social media in the elections and crisis case studies. People seemed to take these questions more seriously, so it seems like the best Twitter chats are those that allow for some community building (through ice breakers and humor) while still focusing on broader societal questions. It is possible that students are not always aware of what

they are learning or how much they are learning in the moment, and so having a moderator and a variety of questions and opportunities to answer them becomes helpful.

We See You, and We Like You

The chats worked well to engage online students, a definite boon for a program that encourages student participation in events where not all students can attend. Here, the online-offline combination is potent. The "offline experience" also seems to exist for the online students as well, since their "offline" piece is being in class, even if that class experience is computer-mediated. Students who were not even taking class during a particular semester, and thus might be expected to be slightly less engaged than others, reported using the chats as a way to continue that engagement, and to feel connected to the community at large. Students can also be encouraged to continue using the department's hashtag beyond the chats to engage one another, and the faculty, during other classes, guest speakers, or departmental events.

Suggestions for Starting a Chat

The chats used for this paper were held twice a semester, once at the beginning and once at the end, in order to help students feel connected right from the beginning and to reflect upon what they had learned by the end. Chats were an hour apiece, always the final hour of one graduate class, in order to offer a guaranteed audience for the chat. This class was typically taught by the assistant graduate director, who acted as the moderator. Chats were promoted via class and event announcements and the department's social media pages. Students and faculty were strongly encouraged, but not required, to participate. Suggestions for starting a chat are included below:

1. Familiarize students with Twitter chats, and jump in! The best way to do it is just to start.
2. Develop a good hashtag that can be used over and over, and in

multiple situations. Check to make sure no one else is using it, and that it does not mean something unsavory.

3. Have people introduce themselves, their area of research/ interest, and a great icebreaker.
4. Pick a topic and 2-3 questions surrounding it (related to the department/field/class). Have these prepared in advance and within Twitter's character limitation.
5. Use a platform to make the chat easy to follow, such as TweetDeck.
6. Hold the chat during a class time, so a core group of participants is present.
7. Be willing and prepared for the chat to go off the rails, at least a little bit.
8. Have a moderator, preferably someone who has participated in Twitter chats before, who can help bring things back to the general topic and encourage quieter participants.
9. Make sure other faculty are able to participate and understand how to best engage students on Twitter.
10. Have fun!

Limitations and Future Research

While this project has much to offer in the way of graduate student engagement and community building, it is not without its limitations. One issue with this project is that the survey only reached students who were still in the department, and only approximately half of the students in the department took the survey. Without a pre-test, there is no point of comparison for knowing how students felt about their engagement and education before participating.

Future research into engagement learning could look at what skills develop through engaging, and why students may not conflate this type of learning with "book" learning. Possible future research on Twitter

chats specifically as a learning tool can also look at how to foster deeper interactions between faculty members in a program, as this is not often an interaction method for co-workers, and it would be helpful to model that engagement for the students. Additionally, as so many master's programs expand to include both on-campus and online offerings, it would be helpful to test the results in other programs or to compare results among multiple programs.

Conclusion

This research project offered a look at the knowledge building, education, and engagement of graduate students participating in Twitter chats within their academic department. For students in the synchronous hybrid program described in this study, the chats offered the benefit of the cohort model (Martin et al., 2017) and a way for the department to improve the experiences of a variety of diverse learners, thus meeting the goals of the graduate program. Twitter chats can be a fun, interesting, exciting way to help graduate students feel more connected to their department and to build the confidence necessary to go out and be successful members of the field and broader community.

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