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TWITTER AS HIGHER EDUCATION COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE: A POLITICAL SCIENCE PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

A community of practice is where a group works together, towards a shared goal. This article argues that Twitter hosts a community of practice within political science and international relations. This occurs in three key ways: offering us an area to share our feelings about our role as educators, connecting us to a wider network of educators in our discipline (and other educators), and providing a space to proffer practical support. This is especially true due to the current COVID19 pandemic, when many educators are delivering their teaching remotely and potentially feeling cut off from colleagues and students at their institution. In more normal times, Twitter also offers a valuable means of connecting with other scholars in the discipline, across the world, acting as a space to learn from and support each other. The article finishes by reflecting on what this might mean for continued professional development in the discipline.

KEYWORDS

Twitter, Internet, communities of practice, teaching

1 INTRODUCTION

Within political science and international relations, there has been much discussion in recent times of the positives and negatives of social media, from digital diplomacy to the ability of third parties to influence election results through targeted advertising. Turning away from disciplinary research, however, and instead looking toward the profession, this

article argues that social media – specifically Twitter – can function in a very useful manner for political scientists within wider professional development. Specifically, I argue that it functions as a community of practice (Lave and Wenger 1991) for political science educators, which is a group of people working towards shared goals, learning from each other as they interact in the same space. Here, I distinguish between a community of shared political science interests in general and a community of practice based upon our identity and efforts as educators specifically, focusing on the latter.

For members of the social science community who do not employ this tool, Twitter is a social-networking site where you can publicly share your own thoughts and seek out other people to “follow”, so that you can see what they are posting. The benefits for political scientists of engaging regularly on Twitter might include finding details of conferences that you might otherwise not have seen, to being noticed and added to peer review lists, to extending your professional networks. There are a growing number of academic works on the relationship between Twitter and academia, with one type of articles focusing on how learners, broadly speaking. Caliendo, Chod, and Muck 2016 (see also Sweet-Cushman 2019) talk about the ways in which Twitter can be used to stimulate political interest amongst undergraduates, Jester (2018) has written about social media campaigns to engender a better range of subjects and authors on reading lists, e.g. *Women Also Know* and *Why is My Curriculum White?*, whilst Blair (2013) makes the argument that its use democratises learning in political science. There is also a growing body of literature examining the ways in which political scientists themselves use Twitter (e.g. Bisbee, Larson, and Munger 2020).

I begin by setting out the theory of communities of practice before explaining the method. I then make my case along three key lines: that Twitter offers political science educators a

space to share our feelings about our role as educators, that it connects us to a wider network of political science educators (and to those in related disciplines), and finally that it offers a space in which we can offer each other practical support. This article finishes by considering that we might incorporate into continuing professional development activities social media use for the purpose of engaging with communities of practice, due to the benefits described above.

2 COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

In order to make this case, I employ the concept of a community of practice. A community of practice is one in which all work together in order to move towards a shared goal, each learning from others in the process (Lave and Wenger 1991). The conceptualisation of communities of practice as spaces for education also reflects the way in which we as political science educators are constantly learning new topics, new techniques, and new pedagogical concepts. Our participation in these communities is an everyday activity and it is a constant, ongoing process.

Many different types of political science educators use Twitter, from established academics to those new to teaching. With respect to the former, 'Membership in the CoP offers form and context as well as content to aspiring practitioners, who need to not just acquire the explicit knowledge of the community but also the identity of a community member' (Duguid 2005: 113). Lave and Wenger (1991) argue that within these communities there is a core and a periphery, occupied by established and newer members respectively. In the case of political science educators on Twitter, it is perhaps possible to argue that the core/periphery distinction functions to destabilise traditional power dynamics. Whilst a senior higher education position may make you more

interesting to potential followers, granting a bigger platform, your place in the core or periphery of the community is also in large part dependent on your desire to engage on this subject. This means that relatively new and junior members of the community who participate in discussions regularly and thoughtfully can locate themselves outside of the periphery. In order to most fully understand how this operates, Wenger's (1999) three-part typology is useful. He argues that these form the core elements of a community of practice: mutual engagement, joint enterprise and shared repertoire.

Work on communities of practice has been updated more recently to focus specifically on digital communities of practice (see for example, Dubé, Bourhis, and Jacob 2005 – interestingly, though perhaps unsurprisingly, much of this literature comes from organisational management). In this case, I argue that political science higher education practitioners have as one of their goals improving in the delivery of their teaching, whatever this may look like for them. As a result, Twitter provides a good example of communities of practice for political scientists within higher education because it moves us towards this broad aim in a variety of ways.

3 AN AUTO-NETNOGRAPHIC APPROACH

In order to advance this case, I adopt a reflective auto-netnographic approach. Netnography is an approach developed by Robert Kozinets (2015) and is a portmanteau combining the terms ethnography and internet. It is defined here as ‘a written account resulting from fieldwork studying the culture and communities that emerge from online, computer-mediated, or internet-based communications ... where both the fieldwork and the textual account are informed by the qualitative methods utilized in consumer research, cultural anthropology, and cultural studies’ (de Valck, van Bruggen, and Wierenga 2009: 197).

Typically, this kind of research tends to be performed through the investigation of online communities (Costello, McDermott, and Wallace 2017; Bowler 2010). Netnography is especially well-suited to an examination of communities of practice, then, because it is specifically designed to investigate the social elements of the internet.

This approach further makes the case that our experiences within digital spaces are no less real than our experiences offline. That is, the so-called “real world” cannot be separated from our digital lives because our experiences within this space are also authentic; the distinction between these domains is therefore a social construct, with no relationships or experiences being any less “real” than others, simply different. As a result, Kozinets (2015) asserts, the understandings gained by this approach do not need to be supplemented by other methods or methodologies in order to generate knowledge about the world.

To specify further, this approach is auto-netnographic. That is, I draw upon my own experiences of this space in order to shed light on its use within the political science community. For background, I am a 31-year-old white British woman who has been teaching at universities since 2014, across a variety of modules. Within this article, I have in places included examples, though I have not included other peoples’ tweets because I do not want this work to change how others might engage with me on Twitter (and for reasons of privacy, where topics such as mental health are concerned).

As Cantwell, Meehan, and Rubio (2021) have highlighted, some types of academics are more likely to face online harassment: ‘public-facing scholars, scholars who teach controversial subjects, and women/BIPOC scholars’. This work does not ignore the difficulties in engaging with social media spaces as academics. As a (white) woman in academia, I have myself experienced aggressive or threatening behaviour from others on the internet (almost

exclusively men), whilst male academics have on occasion patronised me. I am, therefore, keenly aware on a personal level that there are costs to this engagement. Other research has also demonstrated that women of colour specifically face greater levels of online harassment, which has a variety of impacts including threats to physical safety, poor mental health, and the ability to remain within online spaces (Amnesty International 2018), mirroring their experiences in the academy itself (Wright, Thompson, and Channer 2007). The ability to engage on these platforms is, therefore, understood to be uneven, with marginalised academics less likely to have a positive experience; this article does not seek to ignore this. Instead, this article seeks to apply the communities of practice literature to this particular space which, by its nature, places greater emphasis upon the positive elements of sharing teaching experiences.

4 MUTUAL ENGAGEMENT: CONNECTING WITH A WIDER NETWORK OF POLITICAL SCIENCE EDUCATORS

Wenger (1999: 73) argues that ‘people are engaged in actions whose meanings they negotiate with one another’. Key to this is “enabling” engagement and I have found Twitter to be an especially effective means of engaging with a wider network of educators due to its format. Compared with other platforms, such as Facebook or Instagram, Twitter makes it significantly easier to access and engage with people who you may not already know. This is especially useful for educators from under-represented groups, e.g. women, who may be shut out of traditional networking opportunities. Barnes and Beaulieu (2017), for example, find that women within political science are at a disadvantage in terms of networking and that this requires urgent redress. Twitter mitigates this problem by providing opportunities for engagement within the political science educator community.

The possibilities of engaging with those outside of our circles whom we do not personally know makes it possible for me to engage with political science educators at other institutions. I am based in the UK and have for example recently spoken with educators at the University of Bristol and Aberystwyth about teaching. Beyond this, it is possible to engage with educators *across the world*. A particular colleague in the United States will often respond to tweets asking for examples of simulations in politics and international relations, whilst another in Brazil is keen to share learning resources he has designed for the discipline. This means that I can connect instantly not only with a small number of people in my department but with literally thousands of other political science educators throughout the world. Furthermore, this space also offers us the possibility to connect with educators in other related disciplines, such as sociology or history amongst others, making the boundaries of our community of practice somewhat fuzzy. These local, national and international, disciplinary and cross-disciplinary connections are important and positive because (as I set out below) this makes it possible to draw upon a significantly greater range of shared resources.

5 JOINT ENTERPRISE: SHARING YOUR TEACHING EXPERIENCES

The second key element of Wenger's (1999) three-part typology is joint enterprise, where members recognise community identity and act upon this in concert. Twitter can be employed by political science educators as a space in which to share their feelings about teaching, which functions also as a means of creating and maintaining bonds within the community of practice (it also provides a sense of catharsis). This might be sharing positive experiences but – as I have observed but opted not to quote for obvious reasons of privacy – it is also a place to share that you might be having difficulties or experiencing poorer

mental health. The current moment is a peculiar time to teach political science: a global pandemic that has been heavily politicised, the widespread violence against people of colour including by the state, Brexit, US presidential elections and climate change. As Berry et al. (2017) note, there are several reasons why people might share on Twitter their feelings of low mood, however, the most important was a sense of community that this engenders. I have seen many political science educators reflect on this on Twitter, typically explaining that they feel odd or despondent about these issues, which are unlikely to go away any time soon.

Indeed, COVID19 has transformed the way in which we deliver education, with many institutions across the world moving to online teaching at various times. There is, of course, a pre-existing body of work on online teaching/learning pre-COVID (e.g. Hamann et al. 2016), but the pandemic has created a range of other considerations. For some educators, the move to remote work, in whole or in part, has increased feelings of isolation as it is not possible to converse with colleagues in corridors or kitchens for a quick conversation (Hammond et al. 2020). This feeling of isolation has also been recorded specifically amongst political science educators (Breuning et al. 2021) and is something I felt myself, especially in the earlier days of the pandemic. Feelings of isolation come in the context of increased pastoral care demands from students, who may have suffered job losses, illnesses, or bereavements during the last year. All of the difficulties of COVID are found within our student populations and staff attending to these matters have not had the support of their colleagues in the ways they would have done before. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Ramos et al. (2021) have found that the pandemic has created heightened levels of anxiety amongst the political science community, especially marginalised groups. Twitter's importance as an anti-

isolation tool is therefore increased, as educators have had less opportunity engage with colleagues in spaces that engender organic conversations about our experiences or feelings.

The digital space to share feelings is perhaps particularly important to political science educators from marginalised groups of different kinds. A large-scale examination of the political science community on Twitter (#polisci) by Bisbee, Larson, and Munger (2020) finds that women within this group are more likely to use Twitter (to share research), for example. This is all the more important for those who might have no one else who looks like them in their department; it is also, therefore, useful to reflect upon this from outside of my own direct experience. Rollock (2018) found that, in the UK at the time of survey, there were a mere 25 Black female professors in the whole country: there are approximately one hundred universities in the UK. Twitter provides easier access to those who understand your experiences as a marginalised political science educator, whether these are positive or negative.

Early career academics are another marginalised group. For many of us, when we first started teaching, there was little training and beginning a teaching career is especially challenging in this current moment. I began teaching as a postgraduate student and received a one-day workshop beforehand, developing my skills in practice and through attendance at training I found myself. As a result, this digital community of practice is especially valuable to more junior members who gain knowledge of community experiences, logic and practices alongside their membership identity (Duguid 2005).

6 SHARED REPERTOIRE: OFFERING AND RECEIVING PRACTICAL TEACHING SUPPORT

Lastly, Wenger (1999) notes that a community of practice has a shared repertoire, making use of shared concepts and tools. I myself regularly draw upon the political science teaching community on Twitter. Most recently, for example, I asked if anyone had any recommendations for films relating to international relations, as I wanted to put together a list for my students. I got dozens of replies from political science educators across the world and three hours later my list contained 153 films. I will also respond to tweets asking for materials if I have any relevant lectures or seminar materials; this is not simply about sharing materials, however, but it is also an opportunity to help colleagues lessen their workload slightly with very minimal effort on my own part. As a result, one of the core benefits of communities of practice, beyond the aforementioned ones of connectedness and moral support – is therefore a highly practical one: it makes it possible for us to save time on our labour. In an environment in which it is often possible to spend vast amounts of time on most tasks we are likely to encounter, this is significant advantage.

Twitter further functions as a space for organising the political science educator community. A good example of this is the (cross-disciplinary) list of people who signed up to offer teaching cover for classes where someone was off sick; the signatories – including myself – came from a very wide variety of countries. As Lave and Wenger (1991) assert, communities of practice can emerge organically or be more planned and, as this last example demonstrates, the political science community of Twitter operates in both ways. The organisational nature of this community of practice is especially beneficial for some groups, including early career academics.

In June 2020 I attended the teaching and learning conference of the European Consortium for Political Research and many of the discussions from the (online) conference moved onto Twitter afterwards. Here, we discussed embedding critical thinking as habit and logics underpinning accessible teaching. Sharing resources – for those engaging in both the sharing and receiving – also strengthens the sense of collective community because we feel that we are helping each other. I feel connected to this community of practice and thus am keen to make use of the opportunity to learn from others in a variety of ways, including engaging in wider discussions.

7 CONCLUSION

Overall, Twitter provides a valuable community of practice for political science educators. It provides mitigation against feelings of isolation by helping educators believe that they are part of a community, where they can share their feelings, negative or positive. It also provides a place in which we can learn from each other and draw upon existing resources that members have made, reinforcing this sense of community. Here, I have argued that Twitter might provide some means of situating ourselves within the wider political science educator community of practice. It is my own feeling that this has helped me personally and I would invite others to consider joining the site in order to perhaps benefit from this community, too.

If, as I argue, Twitter functions as a disciplinary – and more broadly, social science – community of practice, what might we do with this information? There has been an interesting variety of educational works on the use of Twitter in the classroom (e.g. Abella-García et al. 2019) but we arguably need to place greater consideration upon the ways in which social media might be incorporated into continuing professional development for

higher education practitioners. I am not advocating for workshops that show practitioners how to market themselves on social media or how to behave appropriately in online spaces, however important these training opportunities may be (Searles and Krupnikov 2018 provide a helpful guide to the use of social media for advisors of postgraduate students). Instead, I invite us to consider engaging practitioners in conversations about the different uses social media might have for the development of communities of practice and how to engage with these communities. If you are not yet embedded within the community it can be difficult to navigate (who should you follow? Which sorts of conversations are useful to engage in?) and, as a result, harder to make the most of it. Perhaps, then, there is value in integrating discussions of this nature into continuing professional development plans for higher education practitioners.

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