An experiment in form and content, its aim is to be a guide and map of some of the opportunities to develop more open and networked practices while navigating the potential downsides of social media, including perceived loss of privacy and amplification of disadvantage and abuse. It is an excellent and accessible starting point for, as well as route to, a deeper understanding and a more sophisticated use of social media.

—Prof. Shân Wareing, Deputy Vice-Chancellor, London South Bank University

How does social media affect working life in Higher Education? How are universities harnessing its power to aid student learning? This innovative collection brings together academics and those working in professional services to examine these questions and more. The diverse and expert contributors analyse the many ways social media can be used to enhance teaching and learning, research, professional practice, leadership, networking and career development. The impact of social media is evaluated critically, with an eye both to the benefits and the problems of using these new forms of digital communication.

This is the first volume to give such detailed attention to this area of high interest. Its innovative approach extends to its creation, with contributors found via their presence on Twitter. The short and impactful chapters are accessible while retaining an academic focus through their application of relevant learning theories and educational context.

Social Media and Higher Education is essential reading for any professional working in higher education, including lecturers teaching education courses. It is also significant for researchers looking at more recent developments in the field and what it means to work in a modern higher education environment.

As with all Open Book publications, this entire book is available to read for free on the publisher's website. Printed and digital editions, together with supplementary digital material, can also be found at www.openbookpublishers.com

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20. Learning to Twalk: An Analysis of a New Learning Environment

Andrew Middleton

Introduction

A Twalk is a learning walk in which a Twitter chat is used to capture and share key ideas amongst dispersed but connected walking groups. The Twalk concept represents a range of disruptive learning approaches in which social media, personal smart technologies and reconfigured learning spaces can be used to produce engaging student-centred and experiential learning. This chapter explains more about Twalks and how they can be designed to support learning in a range of disciplinary contexts.

The Twalk as a Learning Space

A Twalk involves walking as a member of a learning group to discuss a given topic, typically using a simple structure involving posing a new idea, question, or problem every ten minutes over the course of an hour. Groups in different locations follow a similar walking plan structured around the same discussion stimuli. Twitter, or potentially other social media such as Instagram, are used to augment the walk so that participants receive information through the social media channel and
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communicate their discussion outcomes this way too. Therefore, Twalk participants act as co-producers of knowledge by addressing ideas and questions together.

Several disruptive factors establish a Twalk’s pedagogic rationale including understanding both walking and tweeting as valuable learning activities in which the learner enacts a high degree of autonomy as part of an active networked learning group.

The use of personal smart technologies underpins these essential pedagogic ideas, empowering the learner and the facilitator by disrupting their dependence on traditional learning space. Smart technologies support the synchronous passing of digital and social media amongst networked participants. These ideas are found in the concepts of Social Media for Learning (#SM4L), Bring Your Own Device for Learning (#BYOD4L), and smart learning (Middleton, 2013). The Twalk concept emerges from this discourse on academic innovation as an example of a disrupted learning space.

An important context for the conceptualisation of Twalks is the investigation of learning space in the digital age, and specifically the agency of the learner as placemaker. Indeed, the first Twalk was initiated as part of a Media-Enhanced Learning Special Interest Group (MELSIG) event in May 2017 which involved walking groups located in multiple locations in the UK, North America and Australasia walking in concert to address a set of ideas about non-formal learning spaces.

Learning and Walking

A learning walk is a peripatetic space, a space defined primarily by the act of walking and talking. The intention for learning to occur is one of several factors that make the idea of learning walk both versatile and hard to define. Intentionality is key to understanding learning space in general and leads us to think about the formal, non-formal and informal nature of learning, participant agency, and control of the learning space, as well as the suitability of the educational spaces we already use (Middleton, 2018).

The relationship between learning and the quality of the spaces can be conceptualised as ‘built pedagogy’ (Monahan, 2002). This suggests that a peripatetic space might cause a different kind of learning.
Learning walks have been run at Sheffield Hallam University since 2014 as a convivial space for engaging academic staff in their continuing professional development (CPD) (Middleton, 2015). Here, the idea of a peripatetic CPD was intended to spotlight the significance of physical co-presence in learning design with the act of conversational walking challenging binary notions of formality, while raising questions about member and networked-based social constructivist learning. The walks demonstrated how the characteristic conversational fluidity of walking groups accommodates not only the sharing of practice, but the sharing of thinking. This creates an experience that is markedly different to that accommodated by a traditional classroom where participant agency and autonomy are usually subdued, with learners being anchored by their seating and where previous experiences of learning cause learner acquiescence.

More than anything, the peripatetic learning space is non-hierarchical and, as such, demands a dynamic, fluid and networked form of interaction. Its essential fluidity stems from our natural desire to be sociable in a walking group; to seed, listen to, pick up on and expand, share, and compare ideas. Wickson et al. (2015) highlight how building trust amongst strangers is an important outcome of their ‘walkshops’ because they are conducive to conversations.

Solnit (2014), in her history of walking as a form of activism, describes learning and walking in terms of the mind working at three miles an hour. In this, she is mostly reflecting on the individual thinker. Whatever its purpose, walking is steady, stimulating, and essentially therapeutic. This slow, individual pattern of thinking and walking is developed by introducing conversation to the walk.

The act of walking in partnership as a form of peripatetic learning space is not new, being Aristotellean in origin (Solnit, 2000). Aristotle’s habit of walking the perimeter of the Lyceum defines the idea of ancient Greek teaching, where the walk provided an intellectual scaffolding. The walking act itself is stimulating and removes the thinker from mundane worldly distractions while opening their mind to wider horizons.

Ruitenberg (2012) identified non-formality as being significant in her study of school children learning through urban walking. Non-formality as a concept of experiential learning space sits between the systemic functionality of the formal space and the personalised
experience of self-directed informal learning space. The non-formal learning space accommodates individual and collective intentionality and the adoption of a loose structure that will serve a group’s mutual learning purpose. In her case study, Ruitenberg reports on *Walking Home Carrall Street*, a series of experiential school walks curated through an area of Vancouver. Her students learned about their district using the alternative lenses provided by different invited walk leaders. She observes that school walks establish a novel learning space in which different factors affect the nature of the educational experience: the topic, the expertise, and style of the walk leader, and the extent to which the participant’s voice is heard. Our investigation into the Twalk as an emergent learning space is similarly hard to generalise due to the multiple design factors involved. The addition of a social media layer to augment the physical walk multiplies these experiential factors and the educational possibilities that this new form of non-formal learning space affords.

**Learning and Tweeting**

Typically, tweetchats and learning walks have much in common and this led to the idea of combining the two to explore how each could enhance the other.

A tweetchat, as a learning space, is characterised by its networked design. It is made up of individual learners who, of their own volition, come together to learn in a non-formal space through joint enterprise and for mutual benefit around a common interest. In this respect, the tweetchat has much in common with a Community of Practice (Wenger, 1998). However, the extensive literature on networked learning (see Ryberg and Larsen, 2008; Jones and Esnault, 2004) identifies problems with the concept of community as an adequate representation of the actual social behaviours evident in networked spaces. Community models suggest the importance of coherent, tightly knit, strong social ties. In reality, communal socially networked relationships are hard to circumscribe and are innately fluid, reflecting weak tie structures that are more dynamic and socially agile. Furthermore, the concept of networked individualism (Castells, 2001) embodies the intensified personalisation and individualisation evident in online spaces while
recognising the growth of interdependence amongst participants in online groups (Ryberg and Larsen, 2008).

Learning networks thrive through a co-operative ethos in which mutual interest, joint enterprise, and collaboration remain evident, and where cultural identities and values offer richer, more sustained conditions.

The tweetchat hashtag is a common identifier that allows associated tweets to be aggregated into a shared stream alongside other tweets that incorporate the same hashtag. Knowing and using the hashtag gives anybody access to the Twitter chat as a reader, author, or curator. Curation refers to the manipulation of media and, in the case of Twitter, is found in the favouriting and saving of messages, the replying to messages, retweeting and quoting messages, and the copying of others into messages by incorporating their Twitter handles. The power of these actions is multiplied by the number of participant curators. This creates an unusually equitable and student-centred learning environment and even those with a nominal leadership role have no more rights than other participants.

While the hashtag creates a way to assemble participants, the formation of a question set gives the tweetchat its focus and structure. Approximately five questions are designed on a given topic to be delivered, in most cases, over the period of an hour. Following a brief welcome tweet, the nominal session leader will post the first question in a single tweet. It will take the form ‘Q1 question text #ourhashtag’ where the question text and hashtag are replaced by the respective details. On receipt of the question tweet anyone can post a reply incorporating their answer by using the syntax ‘A1 answer text #ourhashtag’.

A further development of the tweetchat in recent years has been the capacity for participants to incorporate images and video. Smart devices enable this because the integrated camera, web connectivity, and digital media apps support the finding, taking and modification of photographs, graphics and videos. Such media can be used to draw attention to topic matter, flag question tweets, create a sense of participant presence, and can provide non-written information pertinent to the discussion. All of these enhance the mobile Twalking environment giving the physical space new significance.
Multilogue

Perhaps the most significant characteristic of the tweetchat is what Megele (2014) refers to as the multilogue; a term originally coined by Shank (1993). The simplest way of defining this is as ‘everyone talking at once in a constructive way’. On the face of it the idea of multilogue suggests an unhelpful cacophony, but in the user-centred networked space of the tweetchat it produces a discourse-rich space in which each participant constructs their own route through the semi-structured conversation. Participants are able to control their own pace, weaving in and out of the trajectories of other participants. Further, it is argued that the tweetchat participant acts in neither a synchronous nor asynchronous space, with individual conversations and routes traversing, forwards and backwards, through time at a user-defined pace. This can create the effect of eddying in the Twitter stream as some conversations linger longer than others at the discretion of those participants keen to explore or resolve a particular point. This has been referred to as ‘multichronous space’ (Middleton, 2018).

Common Structures and Connected Spaces

The Twalk method was designed to incorporate the respective strengths of the tweetchat and learning walks.

The most obvious similarity between the two is their semi-structured conversational design. Both are designed to address an over-arching topic typically organised around about five open-ended discussion points spaced evenly over an hour.

Learning walks are characterised by the number of small group conversations that happen amongst walkers as each question, activity, landmark, or topic is encountered. Ruitenberg (2012) noted her walks were less effective when the invited walk leader was too prescriptive and did not allow enough space for the walk participants to contribute and talk intuitively. Nature walkers do not shout at each other, but converse in two’s or three’s; in a walking group of eight people, for example, it is probable that three or four conversations take place concurrently. These are guided by the outline structure and purpose, so that conversations find connections without being overly determined
by the walk leader. Similarly, tweetchat participants tend to self and co-direct their navigation of the topic. Megele’s ENABLE framework (2014) refers to leaderful participation as a feature of a well-designed social media-enhanced learning environment. As people walk and talk at difference paces, eddies occur. As sub-groups catch up with other sub-groups there is the potential for ideas to be shared naturally. Therefore, whether walk, tweetchat or Twalk, the networked environment allows space for leaderful learning and participant voice.

A third similarity relates to the use of knowledge, experience, and content. Both spaces epitomise student-centred active learning environments. Knowledge is brought into the respective environment by the participants themselves, although introductory knowledge may be shared beforehand by the facilitator. Once the walk or the tweetchat is underway there is no didactic teaching. Instead, participants develop their knowledge and their learning together by working with the facilitator’s prompts. Using conversation, participants share and challenge opinions, knowledge, experience and ideas in an act of co-production. Learning, in both cases, is an outcome of this collective act.

These three factors demonstrate some of the similarities evident in learning walks and tweetchats that led to the development of the Twalk concept and its potential as a media-rich blended learning environment.

By bringing the idea of walk and tweetchat together, connecting one walk to another in real time becomes possible. Potentially, this allows a walking group in London to walk alongside a walking group in Liverpool, Sheffield, or Ireland, Canada or Australia, as we have experienced. The idea of common map emerges in which the same walk can be followed by groups wherever they are located (if time zones permit) by using the same structure. In May 2017, and then in subsequent Twalks, the author and other colleagues have designed multi-location Twalks. The intended benefits of this global approach depends on the actual learning context (e.g. the Twalk topic, level, and generalisability), however this level of connectivity situates Twalk participants in a connected context that helps them to challenge their parochial outlook while valuing their knowledge and experience in relation to that of others.

Practically, then, the idea of a ‘map’ is problematic. While the use of the nomenclature emphasises the geospatial aspect of the Twalk, the term
‘plan’ or ‘schedule’ explains what is needed to ensure geographically dispersed Twalks keep in step with each other. To achieve this, the map design needs to include generalisable landmarks. For example, on our campus Twalks we have included landmarks such as cafes, PC Labs, an atrium, a lecture theatre, and so forth; features typical of any campus.

How to Plan a Twalk

Beyond the pedagogic rationale of the Twalk there are several design factors that need to be considered to ensure the Twalk integrates properly with the disciplinary context.

Theme

A Twalk, as with any learning event, needs an over-arching theme. This will relate to learning outcomes or a weekly topic. The topic creates the basis for the question design and the selection of physical landmarks that give the Twalk its character, structure, and route.

Common sites

The Twalk’s landmark stages create a sense of purpose and structure so that walkers are challenged periodically to summarise and share their discussion before moving to the next phase.

In our work so far, Twalks have largely been used to develop awareness about learning spaces amongst academic staff so the connection between the topic and the material space has been quite literal involving groups located on different sites comparing the designs of their respective campuses; but we have also used metaphor and challenge-based approaches.

Discipline and place-specific challenges reflecting the learning context can be devised. Participants can be asked to respond to the space in a number of ways. For example, ‘describe the equipment you find here and offer tips for its use’, ‘look for the clue’, ‘discuss what the place means to you’, ‘ask someone you meet what they think about…’, etc. The essential challenge for groups is to compare what they think with others.
Imagery

Landmarks can be selected to prompt the taking of photographs. Participants should be free to use photographs as they see fit, but questions can be set to create an explicit photographic challenge. Twalk participants can be asked to capture their thoughts visually accompanied by tweets used as captions. Visual challenges allow participants to creatively elicit new meaning from a situation, reinforcing the stimulating and permissive nature of the Twalk learning space. Even when the use of imagery is apparently superficial (e.g. a photograph of blue sky to represent creative thinking), the response can convey something of the tone of the Twalk and the readiness to play with ideas. Such playfulness can foster a collective spirit and creative bond that transmits well through the social media, establishing ‘the urge to return, recreate, and recapture the experience’ (McArthur and Farley White, 2016, p. 39). In a recent short Twalk we incorporated selfie challenges along with more serious discussion points which helped to establish a playful tone, even while keeping the Twalk groups on task.

Roles and Teams

Keeping up with the Twalk schedule can be demanding as teams navigate the topic. Assigning roles within Twalk teams has been helpful. In some cases we have established triads in which participants have been given the roles of Leader, Timekeeper, and Scribe to ensure that each team focuses on the question, keeps to time, and posts, reads and replies to the Twitter stream.

The Hashtag

Creating a suitable hashtag is straightforward but important nonetheless. A hashtag gives the event its identity. It holds the myriad components together.

You can choose any string of characters and numerals preceded by ‘#’. Your hashtag should be unique as participants use it to search for and aggregate any postings that incorporate the tag. It needs to be short and easy to read as it will be typed in numerous times by those responsible for tweeting and typing will often happen on the move due
to the pace of the Twalk. It will probably not include whole words as these are likely to use up characters, so meaningful abbreviations are usually chosen as the basis of good Twalk hashtags.

**The Map**

The ‘map’ is an instruction sheet that includes everything a Twalk participant needs during the Twalk. There is a template to follow in MELSIG’s online Twalk Toolkit (MELSIG, 2017).

The map is site-specific. While co-Twalkers will follow the same schedule and question set, the map needs to show details of the actual route being walked in each location. Therefore, Twalk organisers need to co-ordinate the production of their respective handouts across sites.

Ideally, each person should have a printed copy of the map and if there is a chance of rain, it is advisable to laminate the maps or provide them in protective sleeves. It can be distributed online as a PDF, but this is not ideal where small screens are used, where connectivity may fall out, and where screen collateral is best dedicated to the Twitter stream. Further, we have found that rain and shine can make screen reading impractical.

The Twalk hashtag needs to be presented clearly and in large bold type, some visual annotated representation of the route including landmark viewpoints should be given; as should a tabulated schedule that includes a small photograph of each destination, its question, and the syntax required for tweeting responses.

**Inside, Outside and Incorporation with Special Events**

Twalks can take place anywhere. There is no reason for them to be inside or out; instead, Twalk designers should focus on what will work in their context. Walking outside introduces management issues to do with the weather, safety, and keeping local walking groups within sight of each other to ensure coherence and cross-fertilisation of conversations. On a practical basis, walks outside are likely to go beyond the range of Wi-Fi networks and this then introduces issues relating to connectivity and the cost of tweeting, especially where large media are incorporated.

We have successfully incorporated Twalks within special events such as conferences. They can enhance such events by promoting networking
and changing the dynamics of the day. This can help to enliven delegates in an early afternoon, for example, where energy levels tend to dwindle. We recently conducted a half hour Twalk as part of a one-hour workshop at a national event. Having sight of the conference building during the planning phase was helpful. The short Twalk format we used was stimulating and allowed us to engage participants beyond what is normally possible in room-based workshops (Middleton et al., 2017).

Similarly, Twalk methods can be adopted to facilitate events such as poster assessments, field trips and placements to enhance interactivity.

Safety

Finally, it is recommended that participants involved in Twalks are briefed about keeping safe. Successful Twalks will deeply engage walking groups, though there are numerous dangers not normally present in a static classroom, for example walking along and crossing roads, or climbing and descending stairs. We have produced a Twalk Toolkit that explains more about this and provides other materials to help with the planning of a Twalk (MELSIG, 2017).

The Twalk as a Hybrid Learning Space

To conclude, we consider what kind of education a Twalk can offer.

Twalks can be configured to engage students in ways that challenge them by re-situating learning away from familiar and predictable spaces. They can be used to,

- foster a sense of belonging;
- develop learning and knowledge through an ethos of co-production;
- develop co-operative learning and working strategies, team building, communication skills and networking skills;
- develop interdisciplinary and cross-institutional activities.

The Twalk is an intrinsically stimulating, versatile, and novel learning space that can be adapted to context.

The Twalk concept was created to demonstrate the potential for future experiential and blended learning environments. In particular,
development of the concept has intentionally set out to play with the possibilities of social media for learning (#SM4L) and bring your own device for learning (#BYOD4L) and to explore these phenomena within the context of the hybrid learning space in which the learner is networked across the physical and digital space (Middleton, 2018). A hybrid learning space allows the learner to find their own pathway through authentic problems on their own or amongst clusters of co-located and remotely located people. This takes ideas often perceived as essentially digital phenomena such as Personal Learning Networks (Cronin et al., 2016) and social networking, and allows the academic to consider them as integral dimensions of future blended learning spaces. The Twalk demonstrates the feasibility of this spatial conception and so it is hoped that the pedagogic basis of the Twalk not only leads to further adoption of the method, but to a wider appreciation of hybrid learning spaces.

References


