

Twessays and Composition in the Digital Age

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While written assignments are typically growing in length in line with the ever-expanding volume of resources available to student writers, platforms like Twitter demand more succinct approaches to writing and offer a range of non-traditional stylistic options in its toolbar. Perhaps the twessay is the haiku of the essay genre: short but with a depth of field when well-deployed.

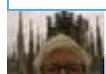
As well as the brevity and style of a tweet, this medium can also contribute to student learning in terms of critical thinking and engagement with topics. Studies like Brooke A. Carlson's "[Twitagogy: Writing, Information Literacy, Written Communication, and 21st Century Pedagogy](#)" find that uses of Twitter in the classroom and for assignments enhance critical thinking due to the "flexibility of both thought and practical employment of character" that Twitter incites. Given that the major focus of written assignments is argument and research, one of the greatest challenges faced by undergraduate students, in my experience, is to become critical thinkers and develop critical voices. When I was a Masters student, one of my advisors told me that the best barometer of whether or not you have a clear, convincing thesis is if you can sum it up in a single clear, convincing sentence. Such advice of course was aimed at students who already had several years of higher education and BAs under their belts, and thus, several years to develop our critical abilities. Today, new undergraduates face not only the challenge of getting to the point of applying, analyzing, and evaluating concepts, ideas, and information. They are also now tasked with creating such things as blogs, infographs, animations, films, web designs, wikis, podcasts, vlogs, and so on. However, [Kristen Hawley Turner argues](#) that we should view some students — particularly those who grew up in middle class households — as code-switchers who are adept at moving fluidly from one mode of communication to another given that their natural habitat as writers, readers, and learners is now a diverse home to many platforms for narrative-making and sharing.

Furthermore, studies like [Lunsford and Lunsford's](#) respond to growing worries about the state of student writing and literacy. These fears are direct reactions to prevalence of texting, tweeting, IM-ing, instagramming, hashtagging, emoji-deployment, and general abbreviating of written expression heralded by the popularity of texting and social media communications. Trubeck imagines the fears of some university teachers when she states, "the logic goes, social media and text messaging reward short, abbreviated expression. Student writing will be similarly staccato, rushed, or even — horror of horrors — filled with LOL abbreviations and emojis." Studies like Lunsford and Lunsford's disprove such theories about the metastization of linguistic abbreviation and the destruction of creative expression via emoticons and other symbols of the digital age. As far as engaging pedagogically with Twitter, [Carlson's qualitative study of incorporating Twitter in classroom activities](#) further quells these fears about literacy, demonstrating the benefits of using Twitter to strengthen critical thinking skills. My own experiences of using Twitter for postgraduate research methods-based modules has shown numerous benefits in terms of introducing students to the importance of research dissemination, networking, and expressing their ideas in multiple, dynamic, public ways. My foray into the realm of twessays was also the first time I deployed Twitter as a teaching and learning tool with undergraduate students.

The Twessay Assignment

I included twessays in my pedagogical approach to a core module called [Concepts and Collaboration in Digital Arts and Humanities I](#) (DH1001) in Autumn 2015. Using the central theme of narrative, students were introduced to topics such as the open access movement, digital writing and storytelling, emojis and linguistics in the digital age, transmedia storytelling, and interactive digital documentaries. The assessment asked of them was equally multiple in terms of narrative expression, including blogs, discussion boards, oral presentations, collaborative projects that ranged from emoji translations of popular music to animated GIFs and short films, and of course, Twessays. Their works take them to every level of [Bloom's Digital Taxonomy](#). Their first twessay assignment was based on our preceding classes on the topics of open access, hacktivism, and open digital writing:

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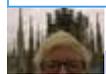


Donna M. Alexander @americasstudies

Write an essay on #openness in 140 characters that explores the term using #DHUCCTwessay. Play, experiment, explore. Don't waste a character
[10:05 AM - 9 Oct 2015](#)

The second twessay assignment was based on our study of various forms of digital narratives and storytelling:

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Storytelling is evolving. Write an essay about this issue in 140 characters using #DHUCCTwessay. Innovate, narrate. Don't waste a character.
[10:52 AM - 13 Nov 2015](#)

In preparation for their first twessay assignment, I asked the students to read Stommel's "[The Twitter Essay](#)" in advance of constructing their own twessays in order to demonstrate where my pedagogical approach was coming from.

I also gave the students some extra guidance on how to approach the twessay component of this assignment given that none of them had ever been asked to use Twitter in this way before:

Aside from the deadline, the only rule is that you must include #DHUCCTwessay somewhere in your tweet. You may include other hashtags, links, images, etc. But it must make use of the 140 characters. Take your time and compose your twessay carefully, making sure every character of your tweet is necessary and meaningful. As you work, think also about the components of a traditional essay: a hook, an argument, supporting evidence, etc. While you can take creative license in how you interpret the word 'essay,' you should at least be able to make an argument (if pressed) for how your Tweet functions as an essay.

I retained Stommel's two-pronged approach of requiring students to come up with their own twessay and then engaging critically with the twessays of their peers. However, I asked them to blog their critical responses rather than tweet them. Our students are required to develop a professional digital identity, and their blogs are central to this. By incorporating their blogs into the assignment I aimed to encourage a sense of networked learning and writing, in which all the bits and pieces in their digital toolkit have the potential to speak to one another in the same way that they as students can learn to continue the conversations in the classroom with conversations online through public reflective writing practices and communication on social media platforms.

After the deadline I compiled their responses in a [Storify](#) to give the students chronological access to their tweets for the peer-to-peer assessment part of the assignment. Their collection of micro-essays touch on a range of "big" issues, including class, civil rights, morality and ethics, privilege and discrimination, collaborative research, and democratisation of knowledge. Many of them reveal particular topics and aspects of the subject matter that really engaged them. They support their claims with links to relevant articles, and illustrate their arguments with images, GIFs, memes, emojis and other symbols.

Results of the Assignment

I ran their twessays through [Voyant](#) to get a sense the key themes. I spliced words that had been crunched together. Additionally, just to see what would happen, I included the emojis when I prepared the tweets for Voyant (symbolised by ð in the even though the software doesn't recognise them individually. Interestingly, if we consider the emojis as a single term, then they are among the most frequently used "terms" by the students. This coincided with the Oxford English Dictionary naming the "face with tears of joy" emoji the [word of the year](#). This naturally led to some class discussions about the changing nature of language in the digital age and likely encouraged their twessay experimentations with language and structure.

While text language certainly seems to reflect what Stommel refers to as the "[tangible violence technology has wrought upon grammar](#)," the emoji, while replacing words as we know them, introduces a certain thought process into writing, an element of choice regarding when, where and how to include them, and to what end? Of course, I don't deny that emojis on a very basic level serve to abbreviate. However, emoji and other symbolic play, in these twessays at least, seem to be the result of careful and often poetic and aesthetic choices on the part of the author. In some cases emojis expand the remit of the twessay, like [this one](#) in which the author uses the "pill", "dollar" and "upwards trend and yen" emoji to develop a transnational argument regarding corporate motives behind paywalling of research publications.

Students also played with formatting and language. [Here](#) for example, the student uses various punctuation, symbols and spacing in order to create a visual twessay, a blend of diagram and word narrative in order to achieve a depth of field within the 140 character limit. In terms of linguistic play, [this twessay](#) that was submitted for the second twessay assignment works with standard UK English, abbreviated English, Irish, Chinese, Portuguese, Romanian. Moreover, it draws attention to how methods of storytelling have changed over time by including a GIF of Baz Luhrmann's 1996 adaptation of William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. One could take this further and note the GIF itself as another mode or dialect of digital written communication.

Some Conclusions

Using twessays as assignments achieved a number of key things. Firstly, it stripped the essay down to its very basic, central goal: to make and/or argue a relevant point. Students had nowhere

to hide. No deluge of jargon, no wordy sentences cobblestoned across the page in meandering paths of adverbs and adjectives (see what I did there?) would help them here. Instead, they had to rely on an economy of language and a rather different “toolkit” to the ones they are accustomed to in typical word processing software: 140 characters, hashtags, hyperlinks, images and emojis. Twessays encouraged students to diversify how they communicate a major scholarly topic, roaming beyond the formalism of the traditional linear, longform academic paper.

In the end, my simplest hope was that by stripping away the usual trimmings, these students would become better writers in any form, long or short. It was not my intention to permanently convert students to a much shorter form, to win favour, or to convince them that my way was better than the other longer ways in which they are asked to produce narratives. The longform linear narrative has its places in what we do as teachers and learners. An exercise in simplicity and brevity became, for students, a challenge to find ways to express depth of thought and understanding in a 140 character box, a type of narrative origami where the whitespace is collapsed, folded in, and imbued with tighter layers of meaning. Under the identity of a single hashtag, their cacophony of ideas forms a scholarly community in which they can read and critique one another’s work, in a public space where the audience also expands beyond their own peer group.

Ultimately, their creativity, their abilities to adjust to the diversity of writing platforms, and their understanding of the topic itself underpin the success of these assignments. [Trubeck notes](#) that “in shifting from texting to writing their English papers, college students must become adept at code-switching.” We, their teachers, should engage in our own code-switching in terms of the assignments we set. When the students in DH1001 were given free reign over their construction of a twessay in terms of language and content, there were no linguistic massacres or narrative dismemberments. Instead, they produced a stream of creative and diverse twessays that responded to questions and demonstrated their understandings and interpretations of the topics at hand. [Katherine D. Harris notes](#), as I have, the challenges that first and second year students face when trying “to articulate their ideas in complex, sophisticated writing”, and sees the benefits of, instead, inviting them to blog, tweet and make digital and material objects. When we ask them to play, experiment and code-switch, the spotlight on such lofty and daunting articulations is dimmed. This does not mean that we are dumbing down when we ask students to produce something shorter, less traditional, or less formal. In fact, I believe the pressure of writing in public, and the lack of a formal template against which they can model an assignment introduces new challenges.

Special thanks to the DH1001 class of 2015/16 for engaging with these assignments. Thanks also to Jesse Stommel for his work that inspired my inclusion of Twitter Essays in the module