



# What do U.S. and Spanish pre-service teachers think about educational and professional use of Twitter? A comparative study

Jeffrey P. Carpenter <sup>a,\*</sup>, Gemma Tur <sup>b</sup>, Victoria I. Marín <sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup> *Elon University, Campus Box 2105, Elon, NC 27244, USA*

<sup>b</sup> *Universitat de les Illes Balears, 1 Calvari, 07800 Eivissa, Balearic Islands, Spain*

<sup>c</sup> *Universitat de les Illes Balears, Cra. de Valldemossa, km 7.5, 07122 Palma, Balearic Islands, Spain*

## HIGHLIGHTS

- 153 pre-service teachers in the U.S. and Spain used Twitter during coursework.
- Perceptions of Twitter for learning aims and prospective professional use were studied.
- Majorities from both countries saw benefits to their own educational use of Twitter.
- Participants were less positive about the use of Twitter with their future students.
- U.S. participants were more positive about educational and future professional use of Twitter.

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## ABSTRACT

This mixed-methods study explored pre-service teacher (PST) perceptions of educational and professional uses of the social media platform Twitter. PSTs ( $N = 153$ ) from two universities in the United States and Spain used Twitter for course assignments. Most participants from both contexts perceived Twitter to have useful educational applications and intended to use it for their own professional purposes in the future. PSTs were more ambivalent regarding Twitter use with their future students. U.S. students held significantly more positive beliefs about Twitter's educational use. We discuss implications for Twitter use in education and teacher education in an era of ubiquitous social media.

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## 1. Introduction

Social media use in education can be uncomfortable terrain for many teachers and teacher educators accustomed to formal learning environments with clear boundaries. However, social media's affordances can also facilitate the kinds of discussion, reflection, support, and peer feedback that many educators value. Technologies such as Twitter can overcome “temporal, geographical, and hierarchical confines that often characterize communication in more formal settings” (Carpenter & Krutka, 2015a, p. 29).

Social media helps users with shared interests to form “affinity spaces” characterized by peer-to-peer learning (Gee, 2004), and use collective intelligence to address and even solve complex problems (Rheingold, 2012). Potential educational applications of social media are therefore of interest to many educators.

Research on the use of social media such as Twitter in PK-12 settings suggests these tools facilitate opportunities for educators to join online communities of practice that enhance collaboration (Wesely, 2013). Participation in such online spaces can help combat feelings of isolation (Carpenter & Krutka, 2014a) and gives access to otherwise unavailable resources (Dede, Ketelhut, Whitehouse, Breit, & McCloskey, 2009). Furthermore, technologies such as Twitter potentially help teachers to take control over and personalize their professional learning (Carpenter & Krutka, 2015b; Risser, 2013).

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [jcarpenter13@elon.edu](mailto:jcarpenter13@elon.edu) (J.P. Carpenter), [gemma.tur@uib.es](mailto:gemma.tur@uib.es) (G. Tur), [victoria.marin@uib.es](mailto:victoria.marin@uib.es) (V.I. Marín).

Scholars have, however, also contrasted the informal, unstructured interactions that are typical of social media, with the organized and expert-focused nature of many classrooms and educational institutions (e.g., Dabbagh & Kitsantas, 2012). Schools have traditionally faced limitations of time and space, and have norms of authorship, ownership, and academic integrity that may conflict with common social media behaviors. Some educators perceive social media as potentially distracting and in many cases school districts have sought to block access to such sites (Carpenter & Krutka, 2014a). Such factors, among others, present clear challenges to social media's adoption by teachers and schools.

Given the important place of social media in contemporary culture (boyd, 2014), and its role in other spheres of modern life such as politics (Shirky, 2011) and business, it is likely that today's pre-service teachers (PSTs) will in the future work in schools where social media will play some role in learning and teaching. Already in a 2014 survey in the United States, 31% of K-12 teachers reported utilizing social media for professional purposes such as communication with colleagues, students, and parents (University of Phoenix). Teacher educators therefore have an interest in trying to understand how to prepare PSTs to be able to respond to both social media's affordances and challenges. With this in mind, we set out to evaluate our own PSTs' perspectives on educational social media use, focusing on their required use of Twitter in our courses.

### 1.1. Twitter

Twitter is a microblogging platform that allows users to share brief messages, known as *tweets*, with other users. Tweets can include text, images, hyperlinks, and videos. By including hyperlinks in tweets, Twitter can be used as a "pointing device" to share or recommend content found on other websites or platforms (Forgie, Duff, & Ross, 2013, p. 8). Another Twitter feature is the common use of hashtags (#) to mark tweets as relating to a particular topic; hashtags serve to connect Twitter users with shared interests who might not otherwise know each other. Since its creation in 2006, Twitter has grown such that in June 2016 it had more than 310 million monthly active users (Twitter, Inc., n.d.). Recent research suggests Twitter is relatively popular in both Spain and the United States (Table 1), although not to the extent of the most popular social media service, Facebook.

Twitter's educational potential was noted soon after its inception (e.g., EDUCAUSE, 2007), and a number of studies appear to confirm that it can indeed support educators in their work. As a teaching and learning tool, Twitter has been credited with improving engagement and grades (Junco, Heiberger, & Loken, 2011); boosting collaborative learning and self-confidence among introverted students (Voorn & Kommers, 2013); encouraging informal learning outside the classroom (Kassens-Noor, 2012); and enhancing participation (Hunter & Carraway, 2014), including in large-classroom contexts where participation can be difficult to elicit (Elavsky, Mislán, & Elavsky, 2011; West, Moore, & Barry, 2015). Research by Luo (2015) concluded that when guided by the instructor, course-related Twitter use was associated with improvement in learning in terms of task focus and deep thinking skills. Luo and Franklin (2015) and Blaschke (2015) also included

Twitter among social media tools that offer possibilities for facilitating higher-level learning skills. The former observed Twitter influencing self-discipline and self-exploration. And, the latter confirmed the possibilities of Twitter and social media services to support meta-cognitive skills.

Prior research also indicates that some in-service teachers use Twitter to support their professional growth (e.g., Holmes, Preston, Shaw, & Buchanan, 2013). In contrast to the professional isolation often associated with teaching (Lortie, 1975; Pérez Gómez, 1997), Twitter provides educators with easy access to large numbers of colleagues with a variety of experiences and expertise. Wesely (2013) studied the use of Twitter by a group of world language teachers who connected via a common hashtag, and determined that these educators utilized Twitter as a full-fledged, democratic, and non-hierarchical community of practice. Risser (2013) described the case of a novice teacher who was able to use Twitter to develop a support network that facilitated her transition into the profession. Carpenter and Krutka (2015b) analyzed 494 educators' descriptions of how they used Twitter for professional learning, and found that Twitter provided access to both new knowledge and new relationships. With some in-service educators thus appearing to benefit professionally from Twitter, consideration of how pre-service teachers might also utilize Twitter seems worthwhile.

### 1.2. Comparative research

Separately, the authors previously conducted research on PST Twitter use for academic purposes (Carpenter, 2014, 2015; Marín & Tur, 2014; Tur & Marín, 2015).

In this study, we sought to better understand the role of Twitter in teacher education through comparative study. Noah (1984) has suggested that comparative approaches "can help us understand better our own past, locate ourselves more exactly in the present, and discern a little more clearly what our educational future may be" (p. 551). Previous studies have presented findings that suggest there are important cultural differences in communication technology use (Arapci, 2015; Chapman & Lahav, 2008; Tarhini, Hone, & Liu, 2015). For example, Jackson and Wang (2013)'s research found that in the more collectivistic culture of China, social networking service activities were less important to users than in the individualistic culture of the United States. It is apparent that social media activity is culturally influenced, and it was therefore possible that experiences with and perceptions of the academic use of Twitter might vary in important ways in the two contexts of our study. Twitter has a global reach, with support of more than 40 languages and over 79% of its active accounts outside of the United States (Twitter, Inc., n.d.). It seems likely that research on Twitter that focuses on a single context may fail to capture or uncover important factors associated with how Twitter can and cannot be used.

In addition to such cultural differences in social media use, teacher education varies across borders. PSTs enter teacher education programs with prior experiences of and beliefs about education that influence how they respond to their coursework (Joram & Gabrielle, 1998), and those experiences and beliefs naturally differ by culture (e.g., You & Jia, 2008). In addition to differences in

**Table 1**  
Use of select social media among online adults in the United States and Spain.

Source	Facebook	Instagram	Twitter
U.S.A. 2014 (Duggan, Ellison, Lampe, Lenhart, & Madden, 2015)	71%	26%	23%
Spain 2014 (International Advertising Bureau, 2015)	96%	25%	56%

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