

## Engaging Participants Through Twitter: Six Reasons I Went From Skeptic to Fanatic

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At the AFA Annual Meeting in 2010, I became increasingly aware of the power that Twitter could have on the educational experience of participants. During the opening session, several of us were engaging with each other about key points the speaker was making. We were summarizing his points, challenging assumptions, and applying it to our contexts. I found that Twitter was actually keeping me engaged in the large opening session, which in all honesty was not all that revolutionary and was certainly a bit of a “canned” speech. At that same Annual Meeting, I was working on a presentation with a few folks called “The Next Amazing Top Fraternity and Sorority Professional” in which one of my co-presenters wanted us to use Twitter. It was my first time using it and seeing how it engaged participants in a way that I had not seen before. Now, I am hooked.

I believe there are six good reasons to use Twitter in educational sessions:

1. **Invite interaction:** Not everyone wishes to contribute vocally. As you seek to engage people in discussions in workshops, you can use Twitter for those who wish to share but do not wish to do so vocally. Additionally, because larger sessions prohibit all from sharing, using Twitter can provide a forum for increased levels of contribution while respecting the short time for most educational workshops.
2. **Help them create the experience they need:** Someone recently told me that they thought that Facebook was sharing a story with your friends while using Twitter was hoping someone “out there” would listen. I think this is a great description of Twitter. I think that people seek out educational experiences for different reasons. As educators, presenters should engage people in ways that help them get what they need from the workshop. Twitter can do this as they engage with others, maybe review tweets from other sessions going on at the same time, and provide feedback.
3. **Assess learning:** We should be assessing learning in any educational forum. What is it that participants leave your workshop better prepared to do? Asking some questions and using Twitter as one means to collect evidence can be a great tactic.
4. **Develop a record of participants’ perspectives/feedback:** I like to review the Twitter feed after my workshops to see what people “held onto” and what were the most salient points. If things I felt were particularly important are never mentioned, I can examine how to strengthen those points in the future. From that I am able to improve future sessions.
5. **Share learning with others (and not just at the conference):** There are often multiple sessions going on at one time that people wish they could attend. By encouraging people to tweet during your session, you can provide a record of their learning that others, not in attendance, are able to review. The return on investment can be significant as people can feel as if they have attended more sessions than they really did. Additionally, sometimes people cannot come to the conference or are not necessarily inclined to attend. Because people from anywhere can follow the backchannel of discussions by reviewing a hashtag (e.g. #AFAAM2012) you will have people not even at the conference gaining new perspectives. I loved how at the Annual Meeting in 2011, people not even in attendance were following attendees’ tweets during the opening session with Susan Komives, Terrell Strayhorn and Vasti Torres.

6. **Give them something to do:** I think we all have been in sessions in which we frankly became bored or the expectations for the session fell flat. My example of this was Barry Posner's session at the Annual Meeting in 2010. As he continued to provide an informative, but really very elementary, general session on leadership, I found that Tweeting about his content was the only thing keep me going. I got a lot out of Twitter discussions with Andy Houston, TJ Sullivan, Chad Ellsworth, Tricia Fechter and others. Presenters should acknowledge that encouraging tweeting during a session allows participants to multi-task in a way that makes sense to them.

I was not an early adopter of Twitter. Was what I had to say that important? I now use it daily to share my thoughts on a range of issues. I have also prioritized it within each educational workshop I have conducted since December 2010. It makes sense to engage people in a way that works for them and can help you as a presenter to collect information about what they are taking away from your session.