Bringing ‘Expert Voices’ into the room: a reflective case study on using social media in teaching practice

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Case Study-in-progress

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Abstract:

Moving from corporate communication to academia presented the opportunity to apply transferrable skills to teaching politics. Grounded in Honey & Mumford’s Learning Styles, taking account of Prensky’s work on the Digital Native and with more than a nod to the emerging body of work on using Twitter for teaching by Steven Curtis and others, this study reflects on the use of Twitter as a means to connect Part 2 and Part 3 undergraduates to the subjects of their study in both American Government and UK Politics survey modules.
I had my Twitter feed open on screen as we discussed the upcoming election. Prior to the class I’d put a tweet out to the candidates asking for their take on the key issues in the race. It could only be about 6.30am in the morning in Massachusetts, so I hadn’t expected any immediate answer. While we looked at a print out of polling predictions, a new tweet pinged to the top of my feed. It was Frank Addivinola, the Republican candidate. Less than two minutes later, Kathryn Clark, his Democrat opponent added her thoughts. I tweeted back another question and both jumped back with their answers. The mood in the room changed. In the space of a couple of minutes, my students had moved from reading about an election three thousand miles away to being directly involved in it. The connection was personal. The candidates were in the room.

Background

In September 2015 I started my first full-time academic role as a Teaching Fellow in the Department of Politics and International Relations at the University of Reading…at the age of 51. It followed 26 years of working first in journalism, and latterly in corporate communication. I undertook a Masters in International Relations between 2007 and 2009 and segued into PhD research in political history. Both degrees were awarded by Brunel, and I undertook all my study on a very part-time basis while continuing to work on the communication end of major change projects (mergers, acquisitions, disposals and new ways of working) in major organisations including Diageo, Adecco, Unilever and Volkswagen Group. In 2010 I undertook my first teaching on an American History module at Brunel, and between 2012 and 2015 I first taught on, and then convened modules in American Government and UK politics at Reading on a sessional basis as I sought to transition out of industry and into academia. On completing my PhD, I landed a one-year Politics Teaching
Fellowship at Reading. I finished my last piece of corporate work on August 31, starting my new role the following day. It included my two existing modules, full convening/teaching of two further seminar-led Part 3 modules; responsibility for all short-term and full year placement students; editing and producing a weekly Politics Radio show (and dealing with two related academic assignments) and convening and part-teaching a compulsory undergraduate research methods module. In term time, I am face to face with students for close to the same time each week as a Primary school teacher would spend with his/her pupils. It is a fast-paced role and most of my modules are in the hinterland where politics meets history – the perfect place to use the skills I had learned and applied in corporate communication in an academic environment.

Engaging students

When I was first a student at Manchester University in the 1980s, the practice of teaching was largely chalk and talk. I attended lectures, took notes and, augmented by the relevant reading, turned them into essays. There were some seminars and these mainly consisted of close reading of learned articles with staff-led discussions. My over-riding memory of these seminars as a student was of fear: fear of not knowing the answer to whatever laser-beamed question the academic shot at me, and of being exposed in front of my peers. Over 20 years on, returning to education as a mature student, my experience was that very little had changed. While the seminars were more open to dialogue, too few students were sufficiently invested to do the pre-reading, and the fear of exposure in the classroom remained. While I had some superb teaching at Brunel, I also experienced many lectures where academics delivered the same content as they had for years past, in the same way, reading the same notes – and probably making the same jokes. Seminars were very quiet,
with the same few students sticking their necks above the parapet each week, while the remaining dozen found very interesting points on the floor to stare at. As I continued through my PhD, I knew I wanted to parlay the qualification into a career. And from my first teaching experience at Brunel, I knew I wanted to focus on a teaching-intensive academic role. What I also knew though was that there were skills, tools and techniques I used every day in my communications role that could be used in teaching. This paper highlights three connected techniques, but focuses on one that unites the three: the use of Twitter to bring experts closer to my students.

**Approaching learning styles**

In my communications work, I had specialised in what’s now known as employee engagement, a term popularised particularly by the work of David MacLeod and Nita Clarke. I had worked with Nita in 2011 on the first *Unlocking Britain’s Potential* report, which focused on the competitiveness of UK talent in a globally-challenging marketplace. Employee engagement brings together environment, communication and culture to create the right circumstances for workers to be not just present, but actively engaged in their occupation. It was a build on my two decades in business communication which had encompassed the phases of tell, sell, gain buy-in and involve before landing on the more holistic world of engagement. One area that engagement took much larger account of was the different learning styles of those who participated within any business, particularly in helping to amplify the employee voice. The model I used most was Honey and Mumford’s

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Learning Styles Model. This builds on the earlier work of David Kolb. Peter Honey and Alan Mumford identified four distinct learning styles of preferences – Activists, Theorists, Pragmatists and Reflectors. In managing large and complex communication programmes, I had created blended communication strategies that aimed to meet the needs of each kind of ‘learner’ – although generally they were mapped as employees rather than learners. However, on entering academia, it made sense to take a similar approach in creating blended learning experiences that would have a core understanding, but different means of communicating that understanding to different kinds of learners.

For Honey and Mumford, Activists learn by doing. They like the group discussions of a seminar, and prefer to brainstorm solutions. By contrast, the Theorists in almost every teaching group wanted the book; the background theory; the models and statistics played out in the lecture. They needed the lecture notes to analyse and ponder upon. They were generally quieter in class being drawn out only when they were very confident of their ground. Even more on the side-lines were the Reflectors; those who would always observe what others had to say before leaping in. They had an utter fear of exposure. Not so the pragmatists who wanted to know how to put learning into practice in the real world. They loved the discussion, but had little time for the theory and concepts often expounded in a lecture. I had years of experience appealing to such groups in work situations – and this was theory initially created for management development, but wholly applicable in the classroom.

Yet my experience was that it was not being applied comprehensively. As a mature student and then learning my trade by shadowing lecturers in both FE and HE environments,

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4 D Kolb, Experiential Learning, (London, 1983)
I still saw many echoes of my 1980s experience. Lectures largely appealed to the Theorists, seminars took flight where Pragmatists and Activists clustered. As I pondered my own teaching, I knew I needed to take transferrable skills from my old life: to take blended communication and make blended learning.

So far, nothing particularly new. But, the biggest change to affect teaching was the use of technology: not so much by academics, but certainly by students. When I first stood at the front of a lecture hall to deliver a lecture to 117 students in 2010, my words were punctuated by the rhythm of over 100 sets of fingers dancing across their laptop keyboards. Five years later, there is a hush. Few students now type as I speak. But many record what I have to say on their smart devices. They carry these devices into the seminar room, but it seemed that few of my colleagues made any use of them. For me, they were both a communication and a research tool. While I did not want students texting or checking Facebook during seminars, I was more than happy for them to use the skills they engage in socially every day to an academic purpose. I wanted to make the most of what Marc Prensky first described as the ‘Digital Natives’ when he wrote about the new generation of technology users in 2001. Prensky’s observations about the new generation of technology-savvy young people, with needs unmet by a community of ‘digital immigrant’ educators, has dated rapidly. His theory of a divide over technology is far less prevalent today with not just 90 per cent of 16-24 year olds owning smartphones, but half of all UK 50-64 year olds too (a doubling since 2012, and a figure that’s rapidly rising as the technology is increasingly

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commoditised). His observations were before the explosion of social media. In January 2016, it was claimed that 47 per cent of the UK population were active users of Facebook. Around 20 percent regularly used Twitter, while newer tools such as Whatsapp (24%), Instagram (14%) and Snapchat (12%) were gaining ground. While the young lead the way as users, these tools, along with professional networks such as LinkedIn, are now part of everyday life across all working and studying ages. Given the fact that almost all students had access to the social communication tools, and were using them, seemingly incessantly, outside the classroom, it made sense to look for opportunities to include them in teaching practice. But how, and where?

**Blended learning in modules**

I have inherited a number of modules at Reading. They have tended to be well-structured, heavily favoured towards small group teaching in seminars and have drawn in extensive use of videos, primary source documents, media reports and case studies all as a stimulus for discussion. This is built onto comprehensive reading lists covering key theories and the methodology to investigate them. But I experienced an air of passivity that may simply reflect my limited experience, but may be indicative of much teaching and learning at play in the political space today. As academics, I found we investigated people, policy, process, institution, theory and practice vicariously. We would look at what was going on and write about it, generally for an audience of other academics. As a PhD student and emerging HE teacher (and I am definitely a teacher rather than a researcher) my experience in grappling with politics was that it was an arms-length experience. What I missed from my days as a

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journalist and subsequently in corporate communication was the direct question. As a journalist, if I didn’t know the answer to something, I would ring the appropriate person and ask them (a very digital immigrant approach). My academic colleagues appeared more likely to posit a theory; socialise it at a conference, write it up as a paper; get it peer-reviewed – and about two years later it would be published...by which time, the world had moved on.

In looking to blend my old journalistic tendencies into a teaching approach, I needed to adapt my style while retaining its core immediacy. There is much virtue in the thoughtful scholarly approach of theory formulation and application, but for a teaching-intensive newbie, with over 20 hours of face to face class time each week, I simply had not got the time. I wanted to draw my subject matter closer than arm’s length. I wanted to establish connections for my students. My goal was to use all the existing tools of seminar engagement, but build on them through three means of connection: reaching out to ‘political voices’; putting political actors in the room; and participating in election races. Such approaches lent themselves to two modules: a Part 2 module on American Government, and a Part 3 survey module of UK Politics since 1960.

The social media tool that has underpinned each effort has been Twitter, and I have gained a growing interest in the emerging pedagogy around its use. Last year I tied into Steven Curtis of London Met’s work on using Twitter to keep topic conversations going beyond the classroom, and have used Carpenter and Krutka’s survey of the use of Twitter in education as a Launchpad to explore the current thinking in the field. The study is fascinating, and as the authors note: “Respondents reported intense and multifaceted

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utilization of the service, with professional development (PD) uses more common than interactions with students or families.” In terms of classroom activities, the authors noted the use of Twitter “including backchannelling (Elavsky, Mislan, & Elavsky, 2012), sharing resources (Matteson, 2010), historical perspective-taking and reenactment (Krutka & Milton, 2013; Lee et al., 2012), and even as a source for, and subject of, media study (Rinaldo et al., 2011).” However, it was almost solely used for intra-class activity, be that among the student community, or between students and faculty. The study did not note the use of Twitter as a means to engage with political actors. For me, that provided an opportunity to build on what had started as an ad-hoc activity.

The three approaches across two modules

1. American Government

Year 1.

I inherited this module as convener late in the day in 2013 with little scope to change the content. The readings were set as were the week-by-week themes with key support material in place. However, the direct connection between students and the themes we were covering seemed lacking. My student cohort of Part 2 undergraduates were largely UK-born and educated. About half had been to the US, though most had not ventured much further than New York or the Disney parks of Florida. The module kicked off at the start of Autumn term against the back-drop of the Government shutdown. This presented my first ‘connection’ opportunity.

Between 2010 and 2013 I had spent significant time in the US on PhD research trips. I had begun to build a network of contacts, several of whom I kept in touch with via Twitter.

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Prior to the American Government module starting, I reached out to several of them to create a series of ‘American Voices’ documents – one to two page opinion pieces from my contacts (or more often contacts of theirs) on the themes that would be of interest throughout the module. My initial bank of documents to augment our traditional source material in seminars included opinions from ‘heartland’ pastors on the role of religion in politics; voices from both sides of the divide on gun control; and a lively libertarian piece on America’s relationship with ‘Big Government’. None was a formal academic piece, but their purpose was to help students to get a sense of the prevailing mood of ordinary Americans interacting with government.

The 2013 Government Shutdown coincided with the first weeks of the module. I noted from Twitter that one of my contacts, an archivist at NASA’s Washington DC HQ, had been sent home as part of the shutdown. We exchanged emails and she agreed to share her experiences of the shutdown with students. She wrote a heart-felt and articulate ‘American Voices’ piece on the frustration of being a government employee at that time of paralysis, and also live-tweeted from her apartment, answering my students’ questions during an afternoon of seminar sessions.

The other change I made to the module was to follow the final weeks of an election campaign so that students could get a sense of how the process worked in the US, and approach it as if they were a potential voter, voting for the first time. Elections were thin on the ground in Autumn 2013, but we landed on a special house election in Massachusetts District 5, which was the knock-on effect of John Kerry’s appointment as Secretary of State.¹⁰ The Democrat candidate, Katherine Clark was odds-on to succeed Ed Markey who

¹⁰ http://www.sec.state.ma.us/ele/eleseif/repincongressScal.htm, last accessed March 16, 2016
had vacated the seat on taking up Kerry’s Senate seat, and she was opposed by a local lawyer, Frank Addvinola. I set up a session late in October for students to get to know MA-5 and the issues of the race. On arriving for the seminar, they were divided into Democrat and Republican teams, told to fire up their smart devices and to find out as much as possible about their candidates. All the information they had was a basic map, and the social media details of the runners in the race. I had my Twitter feed open on screen as we discussed the upcoming election. Prior to the class I’d put a tweet out to the candidates asking for their take on the key issues in the race. It could only be about 6.30am in the morning in Massachusetts, so I hadn’t expected any immediate answer. While we looked at a print out of polling predictions, a new tweet pinged to the top of my feed. It was Frank Addvinola, the Republican candidate. Less than two minutes later, Kathryn Clark, his Democrat opponent added her thoughts. I tweeted back another question and both jumped back with their answers. The mood in the room changed. In the space of a couple of minutes, my students had moved from reading about an election three thousand miles away to being directly involved in it. The connection was personal. The candidates were in the room. The fact that we had the attention of the candidates hijacked the seminar – but in a good way. Via two or three tweets, we explained who we were and our interest in the election. The Republican candidate answered several more questions as my first seminar group finished and my second began. Those students from the first group who could stay did, and explained to the newcomers what was happening. After three or four tweets, Katherine Clark dropped out, but one of her staffers took over, and several supporters from each side joined the conversation. It was one of the most engaging hours of teaching I have been involved in.
Out of class, my students continued to engage with the election via Twitter, keeping up with the contacts they had made. The following week in seminars, the groups used the information they had gathered, supported by news coverage on YouTube, local newspaper coverage – and a contact we had made at a local college in Massachusetts - to construct a number of follow-up questions to pose to the candidates based on the issues, in the opinion of my class, that mattered most to young voters. These were longer-form than the 140 character twitter limit. So we decided to measure what means would be most effective to get them answered. We posted them on the candidates’ Facebook sites; emailed them to the local TV station set to host an election debate; and also emailed them directly to the campaign headquarters. None of these methods gained any traction. Indeed, over the next week, we got no response or interaction from the candidates at all. Yet a week before polling, we sent shortened versions of the three most popular questions via Twitter:

- What is your stance on gun control?
- What measures can you take to support education opportunities in MA5?
- If elected how will you support gender equality?

Each received a fulsome response – albeit from Katherine Clark’s staff, though the Republican candidate responded personally. Unsurprisingly, Katherine Clark won the election with two thirds of the vote – matching the prediction of my students who conducted a poll among the 60+ of them in our last week of the autumn term.

**Learnings**

This was all about being flexible. The initial contact with the campaign was ad-hoc; the subsequent contact was reactive. The only outcome I was concerned with was ‘connection’
– it was successful, but ultimately not measurable. What was most noticeable was the impact on students. Rather than studying dusty books and dustier theories, the reaction was that they were directly engaged in the election process. None of them had a vote in MA5, but across five weeks in the autumn of 2013, they acted as if they did.

**Year 2.**

Over the summer I re-vamped the module, specifically to build in two sessions centred on the mid-term elections. This time I had specific aims for engagement on the module. It had become a flagship for the department, and thus I had goals of increasing student satisfaction. Proportionally, numbers were up on the previous year, though from a smaller cohort, and the aim was to beat the 96 per cent student satisfaction achieved the previous year. Among my new ‘American Voices’ I also caught up with a female African-American political journalist via Twitter. She agreed to answer our questions on the media’s relationship with US politics, and became our first spoken ‘American Voice’ graciously recording a 45 minute mp3 sound file that I was able to circulate to students to help them understand how the elite and pluralist concepts of media management played out in reality for one journalist on the North East political beat. The journalist, Gabrielle Gurley, also helped us to select our election race to follow in the Mid-Terms. This pitched Seth Moulton, an Iraq war veteran backed by significant out-of-state money against Richard Tisei, who lived with his husband on Main Street, ‘next door to Mom.’ What was interesting was that Tisei was the Republican. At a time when Tea Party Conservatism appeared dominant, and while Obama’s stock was falling among Democrats, what made this contest interesting was that both candidates largely ignored their respective party stances and fought the contest based on their personal characters and local appeal. Again, my students engaged with the
election via social media, keeping up with events via Facebook, YouTube and the online versions of the local media. They were very surprised that the candidates struck them as the reverse of party expectations, and this generated excellent discussion around the role of parties in the election process today. Did we have the ‘eureka’ Twitter moments? Not this time round. Despite choosing a race next door to the previous year’s one – and therefore one where we felt confident we could reach the candidates in real time, they never responded during our seminar sessions. There seemed a little more wariness among these candidates, and the responses we did get were a little blander; a little more formulaic. Nonetheless, the students bought into the process and came out at the end of the Mid-Terms with a significantly stronger sense of being participants rather than bystanders. Across this period, seminar attendance was near 100% with lecture attendance very close behind. Satisfaction for the module at the end of the year was 100 per cent, and, though there may only be a tenuous connection here, student grades for the module averaged 3 per cent higher. Taken with the ‘connection’ steps taken in my UK Politics module, it enabled me to apply for, and be successful in gaining, a T&L Small Project grant from the university to formalise my engagement activities in 2015/16.

Year 3.

While much of my T&L funding has gone to support engagement opportunities in the UK, I was able to make some improvements to the American Government piece. The focus again was to keep the student satisfaction score high through student engagement with a view to enhancing student participation and performance. Again, there was little choice in which election to follow, and I settled on the Kentucky Gubernatorial election. Kentucky traditionally elects Republicans locally but sends democrats to Congress. And it was
expected that Jack Conway, the State’s Attorney General would win the Governor’s race. He
was faced by an incomer Republican in Matt Bevin, and a local tech millionaire independent
in Drew Curtis. Curtis engaged with us immediately via Twitter. Once again, I divided my
groups into ‘supporters’ of each candidate and they followed/liked their various social
media profiles and sought to gain insight into the race across a range of media, not least by
keeping up with their candidate’s social media activities. Curtis, never likely to win, proved
to be open, accessible and a wry commentator. The two mainstream candidates? Initially
interested, but not wholly bowled over by the prospect of answering a raft of questions
from young people 3,000 miles away with no stake in the election. So we needed another
means to connect. Given my background, and the success we had enjoyed drawing Gabrielle
Gurley into our conversation the previous year, I contacted the Political Reporter on the
local newspaper in Kentucky’s state Capital, Frankfort. Again, I used Twitter to make my first
contact with Brad Bowman.11 Wryly amused at first, this journalist proved to be educational
gold. He was delighted to answer my students’ questions, via Twitter initially, but then by
recording a three-part audio summary of the political situation in Kentucky, including clips
from candidate speeches and interviews and even bedded-in with stirring and appropriate
music. My teaching philosophy is Reithian – inform, educate and entertain.12 Brad Bowman
certainly over-indexed on the inform and entertain quotients.

Our coup of the year with Brad came just before the election when he was able to
get Democrat candidate and race favourite Jack Conway to record a message especially for
my students. It was a two-minute fairly general answer to what he would do for the State –

11 @bradleybowman is the political Correspondent for the State Journal in Frankfort, Kentucky,
www.state-jounal.com
12 These Reithian values still persist as the BBC’s Values today
and for young people in particular – but again, it connected with my students drawing them closer from bystander status to people who had registered interest in an election in another system thousands of miles away. They had skin in the game. Assessing our research, we predicted a narrow win for Conway. And on the day before the polls opened, he indeed had a five point lead. The following week that prediction prompted a raucous discussion of polls and polling as Matt Bevin had unexpectedly turned the tables and was on his way to the Governor’s mansion. Both main candidates had been polite and positive towards us via Twitter, but Brad Bowman was our game changer.

In addition to our involvement in the election, one of the key additions to my ‘American Voices’ library this year has been through another Twitter connection, Adam Winkler. I use Winker’s book Gunfight, as core reading for the gun control seminar week. While knowing he’s a Constitutional Law Professor at UCLA, I don’t know him personally and have had no contact with him. That was until we both got involved in a multi-person twitter conversation about Donald Trump at the start of the primary process. After that conversation petered out, I took the opportunity to tweet to Winker that I used his book and wondered if there was a follow-up planned (it’s now five years old). While saying there was not, he indicated he would be happy to answer any questions I had. Now that was too good an opportunity to pass up. So in the next round of seminars, students brainstormed what they wanted to know and I emailed their questions over to UCLA. In January 2016, Adam Winkler became our latest ‘American voices’ spoken voice. His 15-minute audio file updating his thoughts since Gun Fight, has proved to be a popular student source being used regularly in the latest round of essays.

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13 A Winkler, Gun Fight, (New York, 2011)
The main thrust of my T&L funding was to bring expert voices directly into the room, either through inviting political figures to talk with students here in Reading, or by taking my students to their environments, less as tourists and more as process participants. There will be more on this in the next section. The cross-over into the American Politics Module occurred in February when US Ambassador Matthew Barzun ran a highly interactive session with around 275 Politics and associated subject students across all our year groups. While I had previously seen the Ambassador speak at an Eccles Centre event, our interaction consisted of; “Hi, I’m Matt” and a handshake before he moved on. However, that was enough for me to parlay into an invitation via Twitter for him to come and see us in Reading. A tech specialist who is quite active on social media, the tweet was enough to hook Barzun in. While it took five months of organising, and involved sniffer dogs and an armed police presence, the visit did much to break down the barriers between my students and the world of diplomacy in foreign policy. The year’s wheel came full circle when I was speaking to the Ambassador prior to his meeting with the students. Noting he has a home in Kentucky, I talked to him about our interest in the Gubernatorial. “You spoke to my friend Jack?” he asked, sounding genuinely surprised and interested. “He was five points up with a day to go – how on earth did he manage to blow that?”

**Learnings**

Approaching an election race through a media lens proved an effective way to engage students. Their interest went far beyond the classroom sessions, and students were highly proactive in bringing information they’d gleaned from Kentucky sources to later classes to keep the issue live and happening within our learning. Bringing in voices such as Barzun and Winkler broke down barriers too, moving the interaction from students and nebulous ideas
in print to students and people. This is not a case of either/or. It is a combination of both, adding to the mix of blended learning.

**UK Politics**

While the main thrust of this paper has been on the use of Twitter to connect with, and build relations with, ‘American Voices’, I have also been able to bring the ‘Political Voices’ strand into my UK politics teaching over the past two academic years. Twitter has played a part, but a much smaller part. However, the idea of ‘connection’ has been constant. Two examples from last year stand out.

Midway through the year we were looking at constitutional reform. One of the key readings was a chapter from the PSA’s own Matt Flinders, written in 2006. It’s a strong paper that does much to highlight the inadequacy of New Labour’s approach. But on a close-reading session with 15 students, it was proving hard going. They were getting lost in the argument, and frustrated that it was written, seemingly, mid-process. It was a session that wasn’t working. So it was time to change tack. What did they really want to know? I asked. Essentially, it boiled down to three points:

- What prompted the writer to write the piece at the time
- The essential point he wanted to leave with readers
- Whether his view has changed at all over the passage of time.

Far and away the simplest thing to do was to ask him. So I emailed him. Three hours later he emailed back, both with some useful answers I could pass on to students and with a link to some relevant blog pieces. Too often we miss the obvious opportunities to connect with an expert we know isn’t just out there, but who is active – and doing what we do.

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The second connection from 14-15 came through the unexpected route of a misery memoir. At the same time I was putting together materials for a session on Trade Unions and politics in the 70s and 80s, I was reading Alan Johnson’s two volumes of memoirs, *This Boy*, and *Please Mr. Postman*.\textsuperscript{15} I noted that Johnson had lived as a child in Walmer Road in Notting Dale in West London in the 1950s and early 60s. So had my parents and grandparents. In fact I had been born just streets away. It was a very tenuous connection, but just enough to use to write to the MP for Hull West and Hessle to ask for his thoughts on the government-union relationship in the late 1970s and early 1980s. At the time, as the second volume of his memoir recounts, he was making his way as a Communication Workers union official so had a particular insight I judged useful to students. His response was quicker than expected, offered a number of quotable quotes – and even provided one used as the basis of an exam question.

**Political Voices**

The key success for the UK politics programme has been a round of speakers over the last 13 months that has drawn my students significantly closer to parliamentary and devolved politics. And it started with a tweet. In the run-up to the 2015 general election, I was looking for a speaker to come to Reading to talk to my students about why young people don’t vote. I picked up on a conversation Stella Creasy was involved in on the topic on Twitter. While she didn’t respond to me direct, someone from her office got in touch to say she was coming to Reading to campaign and did we want her to drop by? Another great opportunity that came more by chance than through planning. At two days’ notice, Stella Creasy came

\textsuperscript{15} A Johnson, *This Boy*, (London, 2013) and *Please Mr. Postman* (London, 2014)
and spent 90 minutes with about 40 politics students. The buzz during and after the event was palpable.

With a Small T&L grant and the calling card of the successful Stella Creasy visit to use, I set out last summer to attract one or two speakers to Reading and to arrange two politics trips that were more than a simple show-round. My four initial targets were: Sir Vince Cable; Ambassador Matthew Barzun; Plaid Cymru Leader Leanne Wood and House of Commons Speaker, John Bercow. I gained access to Sir Vince via a tweet picked up by a Lib Dem colleague in Twickenham. Sir Vince presented to an audience of 160 students here at Reading in October. An old fashioned phone call to Leanne Wood’s office led to 25 students making a trip to the Senedd in December including an hour’s Q&A with Ms. Wood the day after the Syrian air strike debate in Parliament. Ambassador Barzun visited in February, and 32 students headed to London in March for a day at Parliament culminating in almost an hour’s Q&A with ‘Mr. Speaker’ (my constituency MP) in Speaker’s House. A strike rate of four from four – and two successes that started with Twitter. I have no expectation of being so successful in attracting interesting Political voices in the future. But while Twitter remains in vogue, I will continue to use it to reach out and make connections I feel will benefit my students, their learning experience and their understanding of relevant areas of politics.

**Learnings**

I have yet to see either the student satisfaction responses from this year’s modules, while their assessment culminates in exams in May. Anecdotally, the modules and ways of learning have been very well received, and earlier today I was delighted and humbled to hear I have been nominated for a Teaching Excellence Award in the annual student union
awards scheme. Using Twitter as I do – and once students are following me and each other I also use it to retweet items of interest that I pick up - will not replace any other aspect of the formal learning process, but will continue to augment it.

Conclusion

In the past seven months I have become a full-time teacher in an HE environment. But in taking on this role, I have drawn on more than 20 years’ experience of connecting people through corporate communication. While my audience was previously employees, my experience has been that students have similar needs in terms of effective engagement. I suspect that nothing of what I am doing is unique and it is too early still in the process to claim any lasting and measurable success. However, it may be that it opens a new avenue of pedagogy around the use of social media. I have much to learn and more to apply. But if others are interested in finding out more, contributing to my knowledge or sharing the highs and lows of discovery, I would be delighted to make contact. There is the old school way of course – m.j.shanahan@reading.ac.uk. Or we can always meet in the Twittersphere: I’m @Leapfrogmark.

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