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Media Features and Reviews

Media Review: #sachat on Twitter

Review was edited by Reynol Junco (@reyjunco), Lock Haven University of Pennsylvania and Adrienne R. Dahms (@ARL275), Burlington County College. Contributing authors include Mallory L. Bower (@MalloryBower), University of North Carolina at Pembroke; Sarah Craddock (@sarahcraddock), University of Northern Colorado; Dionne S. Davila (@dramanique), University of Texas at San Antonio; Michael Hamilton (@m1hamilton), Worcester Polytechnic Institute; Cindy Kane (@cindykane), Bridgewater State College; Bryan C. Koval (@bryan_koval), Pennsylvania State University; Tom Krieglstein (@tomkrieglstein), Red Rover; Gerilyn B. Mitchell (@Gerilyn5), Christopher Newport University; and Debra Sanborn (@DebraSanborn), Iowa State University.

Reynol Junco's note: I was recently asked to write this review of #sachat, a weekly student affairs discussion on Twitter. I thought it would be intriguing to have willing #sachat participants contribute to it. Therefore, I posted a call on Twitter via the #sachat hashtag to gauge interest in collaboratively writing a review. Since there was enough interest, I posted a draft and an outline to Google Documents, and allowed anyone to collaborate. The result is this crowdsourced review, written by all of the listed authors and edited by me and Adrienne Dahms.

I have recently witnessed the depth and power of connections via #sachat. As #sachat participants who are graduating from their Masters programs are getting ready for the job search season, they have asked for input from the more seasoned #sachat professionals. In the past week, I have discussed supervisory styles with a second-year Master's student; I have reviewed the resumes of two job seekers; I have provided references for those interested in outcomes assessment; and I have discussed my ongoing research on technology and student engagement. I'm not alone—my #sachat colleagues provide similar support for others, too, and many more chat participants have eagerly offered to help in any way they can. It is this spirit of engaged helpfulness that makes #sachat extraordinary.

For the uninitiated, Twitter is a microblogging service—like a blog, only shorter. Much shorter. Updates (or tweets) posted to the Twitter service are allowed a maximum of 140 characters. If I were to describe Twitter using the Twitter Character limit, I would say,

“Twitter takes one of the best features of Facebook, the status update, and builds an entire site around it. Deceptively simple, yet powerful.” You might wonder how a technology as basic as Twitter can be so popular. I believe there are two reasons for this:

- (1) Twitter gets back to the basics of social media by allowing people to publically connect and communicate with each other. Unlike Facebook, the default (and expected) setting on Twitter is for everyone to be able to see and respond to your tweets.
- (2) It’s simple to use. There’s not much of a learning curve to get started and once you do, Twitter is flexible enough to be adapted for occasional and advanced users alike.

In the Twitterverse, there are a number of ways to forge connections. The most basic way is to build a list of people you want to follow. The tweets of anyone included on your “following” list will show up in your main Twitter stream and can easily be accessed by signing into the Twitter website or any Twitter client. In order to communicate about a common subject, without having to follow additional users, all tweets can be searched by hashtags. In Twitter, anything preceded by the # symbol is called a hashtag and is a clickable keyword. When you click on the hashtag on the Twitter website, and on most Twitter clients, you receive the results of a search for all tweets containing that tag. That’s where #sachat comes in. In this case, #sachat stands for “Student Affairs Chat.” #sachat is a weekly, focused, online conversation for student affairs practitioners and graduate students to share, learn, and connect with each other.

In October of 2009, Tom Krieglstein from Red Rover and The Student Affairs (SA) Collaborative tweeted the #sachat hashtag and asked others to join in. The initial participants of #sachat have, over time, developed personal *and* professional relationships. At first, #sachat occurred from 6:00 pm to 7:00 pm CST every Thursday. More recently, and as the group has grown, there has been another time slot added, 12:00 pm–1:00 pm CST.

With dwindling budgets during austere financial times, #sachat has proven to be a fulfilling and cost-effective substitute for those unable to attend regional and national conferences. Each week’s #sachat provides new insights and ideas from student affairs professionals from a wide range of functional areas and at different levels in their careers. It also affords participants a chance to network with student affairs professionals from many institutions and organizations—more than one would be able to connect with while attending a real-space conference.

Before each #sachat discussion, ideas are submitted to the SA Collaborative and an online poll is conducted to choose a topic. Each week during the #sachat, a volunteer moderator helps participants stay on topic during the hour by asking pointed questions and encouraging critical thinking. Moderators are members of the SA Collaborative and their role

is to keep the topic on task and share or retweet relevant questions from the community that may be lost in the chat stream. The following is a selection of recent #sachat topics:

- creative student leadership development;
- job search and interviewing advice for future student affairs graduates;
- making conferences more effective as an attendee;
- connecting with students on Facebook;
- how to stay motivated in student affairs; and
- picking and managing student workers.

#sachat has experienced considerable growth within a short period of time. The number of #sachat contributors and the number of tweets has quintupled in just over four months. The first session of #sachat was hosted during the second week of October 2009. At that time, there were 23 student affairs professionals who contributed 236 tweets during the hour-long chat. The latest session of #sachat (during the week of February 25th) had 124 contributors who sent 1,141 tweets. These figures do not account for the continuous #sachat conversations that have developed and grown nearly as quickly as the chat participants themselves. Although #sachat *officially* takes place on Thursdays at noon and 6:00 pm CST, an average weekday yields almost 250 #sachat-tagged tweets. Often, tweets between #sachat sessions are requests for information, references, or general help.

Twitter affords users the chance to remove many typical barriers to interpersonal communication that are experienced in daily face-to-face interactions. This is a major benefit of #sachat—that it provides participants a way of connecting with professionals at different institutions and at different levels in their careers with little regard for politics, status, or expectations. Participants in the #sachat span institutional types, regions of the United States, and functional areas within student affairs. During a #sachat session, participants have the unique opportunity to hear multiple perspectives on a topic which leads to a more thorough understanding of the issue at hand. Furthermore, professionals in the field interact with faculty and researchers, providing both necessary information and experiences to further their respective work. As the conversations continue outside of the designated #sachat time period, relationships form among participants. Student affairs issues become intertwined with real-life experiences, resulting in a rich community of practitioners and scholars.

By actively paying attention, “lurkers” can learn as much as someone who is participating by contributing to the discussion. Indeed, the members of #sachat emphasize the idea that “lurking is learning.” Since the dialogue is conducted in a public forum without privacy restrictions, all are allowed and even encouraged to follow along with no obligations or expectations to “speak up” unless the participant is comfortable doing so. At the end of each #sachat, the transcript is posted on the SABlog, so even those whose schedules do not allow

active participation or lurking still have access to the discussion and the contact information (Twitter names) of those involved in each week's chat.

If you would like to give #sachat a try, by all means, drop in anytime. You can say "hello" by sending an introductory tweet and including the #sachat hashtag. If you are unsure about how to get started with Twitter and/or you would like a little bit more help, feel free to contact any of the authors of this review. We will be happy to help you get started. Your #sachat colleagues will be happy to have you join in the conversation as we democratize the educational process and contribute knowledge to the community. After all, that is the *raison d'être* for social media.