

What Twitter Says about the Education Policy Debate

And how scholars might use it as a research tool

BY MICHAEL J. PETRILLI

TWITTER WILL TURN 10 NEXT YEAR, meaning it's been a long time since it was the Internet's shiny new thing. We now take for granted that it's an important—if often vitriolic—platform for public policy debate, including the high-pitched battles over education reform.

What is new is the use of Twitter as an analytic tool. For example, the Consortium for Policy Research in Education (CPRE) made a splash in February with an innovative study of how the Common Core debate is playing out on Twitter; scholars found, among other things, that proponents tend to make policy points while opponents use “political language” in their tweets.

Innovative though that research may be, it's still fundamentally about Twitter. Another strand of research uses data from Twitter to measure other phenomena. Perhaps the best-known example is the work of University of Pennsylvania psychologist Johannes Eichstaedt, popularized earlier this year by an article in the *New Yorker*. He started with the Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) program, a decades-old algorithm developed by psychologist James Pennebaker and colleagues that can determine people's psychological states and personality traits by analyzing their speech or writing. He and his team then analyzed hundreds of millions of tweets and used them to code the emotional state of the U.S. counties from which they originated. Remarkably, Eichstaedt et al. found higher death rates from heart disease in counties where residents' tweets tended toward words related to “hostility, aggression, hate, and fatigue.”

This got me thinking: What does Twitter say about the tone of the education policy debate? And in particular, the emotional state of its combatants? To find out, I started with a list of the 25 top education-policy people on Twitter that I published on the *Education Next* blog in August 2014. (I've been producing similar lists annually since my Fall 2011 article, “All A-Twitter about Education.”) Then my colleagues used Pennebaker's *analyzewords.com* website—an offshoot of his LIWC—to analyze the recent tweets of those 25 individuals. Table 1 presents the results.

One methodological note: The tool only analyzes a handful of tweets at a time (which themselves are very short, at 140 characters or less), so we ran the test twice, a few days apart in late March, to ensure consistency. Individuals are only included in the findings if they scored “high” or “very high” on the various domains during both tests.

So what might we conclude? It appears that many of the leading tweeters in education policy are “arrogant/distant,” meaning we are “well read” and “use big words.” Good for us!

Before we think too highly of ourselves, though, we should consider that many people use Twitter to comment on pop culture, sports, or their daily routines; surely any public-policy debate will look smart compared to that.

It's interesting to see how similar some of the tweeters score. Jose Vilson and Sabrina Stevens, two of the few teachers on the list, both score high or very high on upbeat, plugged-in, and analytic. And it appears that Randi Weingarten and Michelle Rhee were separated at birth, with similarly high scores for upbeat, plugged-in, and arrogant/distant. Maybe they have more in common than they think.

Fun though this is, this exercise, like the CPRE analysis, is still about how people behave on Twitter. Might education scholars start to use Twitter to study how people behave or feel in the real world? For example, what if we could examine high school students' tweets to determine their level of engagement in school? And correlate that to student achievement? Might social media provide an answer to the elusive question of how to measure noncognitive skills? Or could social media provide an effective means to determine teachers' emotional states, and how they relate (or not) to their states' or districts' accountability regimes?

Speaking personally, I can say that using Twitter has become a lot less fun over the years, thanks to the nasty behavior that is so pervasive now on social media. But using Twitter to study education reform—now that could be a whole new adventure.

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Education Policy Tweeters' High Scores (Table 1)

Words reveal more than they say

Klout Score (August 2014)	Tweeter (Twitter handle)	Identification	High Scores for...
84	Arne Duncan (@arneduncan)	U.S. Secretary of Education	Upbeat, Arrogant/Distant
83	Diane Ravitch (@dianeravitch)	Education historian, NYU	Arrogant/Distant
81	Randi Weingarten (@rweingarten)	AFT president	Upbeat, Plugged In, Arrogant/Distant
80	Michelle Rhee (@michellerhee)	Former D.C. Public Schools chancellor	Upbeat, Plugged In , Personable, Arrogant/Distant, Analytic
72	Xian Barrett (@xianb8)	Chicago middle school teacher	Plugged In, Arrogant/Distant
71	Anthony Cody (@anthonymcody)	Co-founder, Network for Public Education	Plugged In, Arrogant/Distant
70	Jose Vilson (@thejlv)	New York City teacher	Upbeat , Plugged In, Analytic, Sensory
69	Andy Smarick (@smarick)	Partner at Bellwether Education Partners	Plugged In, Arrogant/Distant
68	Tom Vander Ark (@tvanderark)	Author, <i>Getting Smart and Smart Cities</i>	Plugged In, Arrogant/Distant
68	Audrey Watters (@audreywatters)	Writer, hackeducation.com	Angry, Plugged In, Personable, Arrogant/Distant, Space/Valley Girl, Analytic , In-the-moment
68	Sabrina Stevens (@teachersabrina)	Head, Integrity in Education	Upbeat, Plugged In, Arrogant/Distant , Analytic
68	Mark Naison (@mcfiredogg)	Co-founder, Bad-Ass Teachers Association	Arrogant/Distant
67	Patrick Riccards (@Eduflack)	Director, Woodrow Wilson Fellowship Program	Worried, Arrogant/Distant
67	Campbell Brown (@campbell_brown)	Founder, Partnership for Educational Justice	Angry, Plugged In , Arrogant/Distant
67	Robert Pondiscio (@rpondiscio)	Senior fellow, Fordham Institute	Arrogant/Distant
66	Michael Petrilli (@michaelpetrilli)	President, Fordham Institute (author)	Plugged In, Arrogant/Distant
65	Carri Schneider (@carrischneider)	Director, GettingSmart.org	Upbeat, Plugged In, Arrogant/Distant
65	Mike Klonsky (@mikeklonsky)	Education professor, activist	Worried, Arrogant/Distant
65	John Bailey (@John_Bailey)	Executive director, Digital Learning Now!	Plugged In, Arrogant/Distant
64	Alexander Russo (@alexanderrusso)	Blogger, education writer	None
64	Joy Resmovits (@joy_resmovits)	Education reporter, Huffington Post	Arrogant/Distant
64	Elizabeth Green (@elizwgreen)	Cofounder, Chalkbeat	Worried, Depressed, Arrogant/Distant, Analytic
64	Libby Nelson (@libbynelson)	Education reporter, Vox.com	Analytic, In-the-moment
64	Jonas Chartock (@jonaschartock)	CEO, Leading Educators	Plugged In, Arrogant/Distant
64	Morgan Polikoff (@mpolikoff)	Assistant professor, USC	Personable, Analytic

DEFINITIONS (from AnalyzeWords.com)

EMOTIONAL

Upbeat Lots of positive words and "we" talk. You've got energy, kid, if you ranked high in "upbeat."

Worried Anxious language dominates your Tweets, as do nervous questions.

Angry Short of constantly writing in all caps, someone high in the "angry" category uses hostile words and talks a lot to YOU.

Depressed Sad, melancholy, inward-looking. Lots of self-references and frequent use of depressive words.

SOCIAL

Plugged In Socially engaged. A category reserved

for prolific Tweeters; you scored high in this area if you use social words ("party!") and include frequent shout-outs to your @friends.

Personable Engaged in other people's well-being and at peace with expressing your own uncertainty about the world. High scorers in personable use positive emotion words, ask questions, express their own ambivalence and reference others frequently.

Arrogant/Distant Well-read and smart with an arms-length approach to socializing. You scored high in this category if you discuss actions instead of emotions, use big words and don't reference yourself much.

Space/Valley Girl Excitable! If you rank high in valley girl, you love recounting your newest story with a lot of LOLLLLLLLLLS!!!!

THINKING

Analytic If law school exams were a person, they would rank real high in this category. Ample large words and phrases that include complex thinking styles (e.g. "if - but not...")

Sensory A tendency to reference your feelings and surrounding environment. A "Northern California" approach to Tweeting (sans reusable bag).

In-the-moment Grounded in what's hot now, with Tweets that breezily reference today.

NOTE: **Bold** means the person scored very high on both 3/24 and 3/27.