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*This is a transcript of an interview with Paul Cubbon. Video is available in SOL*R.*

Q. To start off with, if you could just introduce yourself and give a little background, this project and what you're doing. What problem were you facing that needed to be solved in this class?

Hello. My name is Paul Cubbon, and I'm a marketing instructor in the Sauder School of Business at the University of British Columbia, and I teach in a wide range of courses. I teach a number of things to do with marketing and communication in terms of design at a macro level and also specifically with regard to digital web-based communication and social media. One of the things that I found myself doing in recent years is trying to find ways to encourage students to interact more, not only in the classroom in a traditional way, but also in and out of the classroom via blogs and community forums and so on. To that end, I have been experimenting and building into the curriculum in a number of courses, both fourth-year specialist courses, MBA electives, but more recently on a large scale, a first-year course that is taught to 90 percent of our first-year students, 500 plus over multiple sections, a initiative where they are blogging and using Twitter or Twitter-like devices in the classroom.

Q. How were those incorporated? Could you talk us through an example?

I'm going to talk a little bit about how we've been experimenting with the use of Twitter in the classroom. For some people it may seem a little crazy, because it has deliberate constraints, 140 characters. How much can you say that's meaningful in that time, might be your question. And secondly, there might be some concerns of distraction. How can students be focused on the learning at hand? The key thing I would say, and it probably parallels some of the logic behind the use of clickers, which has been well documented in many institutions, including UBC, which is it's really a tool around engagement. I'll expand a little on that. What I'm trying to do is change the pace of things in a classroom. So I don't say to students, spend the whole class on Twitter, or any other device. But what we do do is encourage them to have their laptops or their web-enabled tablet or phone or whatever they might be using, and we'll say use it in an appropriate way to support your learning, to find things which will allow you to contribute to the discussion, in small groups, when we run small groups discussions, or in larger group discussion. Specifically with Twitter, I may incorporate it for ten minutes at most in a class, and what I'll say is something like the following. You've listened for a few minutes to a mini-lecture, an explanation of concept. And I'd now like you to spend a few minutes, five, seven minutes at the most, in a group discussing that and considering some of the opportunities, the threats, applications, examples that you can find that would bring this to life. What we're trying to do is engage people in the concept and get them to work it through in a way that allows them to show that they understand it and share it and build on each other. Now, in a small class, if I'm in a class of 30 or 40, I can just run a verbal discussion and engage most people. But once

you get to larger classes, and for me this is 100 to 150, but I know for many people that would be even more, you just can't have everybody talk. And the risk is that people just turn off, they're not engaged because they're not talking or they're not in a group that's talking, or they don't know even see that they have a chance to ever be seen. Right? And in fact, they're hiding. So what I do here is, is say instead of just firing from the hip immediately, we're going to give you five or seven minutes to do your work in a small group. And what we want you to do is to just tweet the core of the idea, the headline, to the particular Twitter account that we've got running. And students very quickly learnt this. It was not something difficult, although it was new for most of them. And what we found was that there was a pause, the change of energy and change of pace, while they did the work. And then suddenly there would be this rapid, almost machine-gun fire, and I'd have the Twitter account up on the screen, and what would happen is you'd see that there were dozens and dozens of comments coming in. And people could do it individually, they could have a spokesperson for their group, and what I would do is let that run for a little while, two or three minutes, and then stop and just say, please turn your eyes back to the front of the room, and we're going to have a discussion about some of these. I would pull out some of them that I thought were more interesting, and I would ask the person who or the group that had made the comment to expand upon it. This sounds like a lengthy process, but it's not any longer than running a mini-group exercise in class and some discussion as you normally would. But I found that the energy levels and engagement levels were much greater. Instead of having the usual suspects doing all the talking and everybody else checked out, there was a very high level of engagement. Even when people were not called upon to explain what they had tweeted about, their point of view was legitimized. What I also found was that in some classes, students very quickly learned that they could do other things beyond just use 140 characters. They would link into an example from a website. They would even have written something freehand, as a diagram or chart in a group, taken a picture of it on their mobile phone and uploaded it so that that then very quickly and efficiently was something we could all look at. So, again, the students find ways to make uses of the tools.

Although I've focused so far about the use of Twitter, it's not to suggest that this is a panacea or is a one-size-fits-all approach. I think that the important thing for me is the focus on engagement and interaction, and if that can enhance the learning for a greater number of students, then it's successful. But I'm as likely to use a paper handout for an assignment amongst a group, and then run a discussion, as I am Twitter. So one of the things which is entertaining for me is that I sometimes hear people say oh, you're the geek or the tech guy that uses all of these tech tools. And then they find out I've just done a paper-based assignment. I think the key thing is mixing it up and providing variety, and so Twitter in small doses, useful. But running a Twitter-based curriculum is not my intent. One of the benefits of using Twitter is it's free. It's open access and students are learning something which they are likely to encounter when they go into internships, co-ops and full-time employment after graduating. Some of the downsides of using Twitter, we found, involved things like students needing to be reminded to use a hashtag and link them back to the class, otherwise we didn't capture things. Some concerns from people about privacy, although that was minor in terms of people showing a concern. Or the fact that a few students that did currently have Twitter accounts feeling that their account was going to be polluted by all of this in-class activity. And one can imagine, as more people have personal

Twitter accounts, that that might become more of a concern. The other thing we found, and nobody's been able to explain how to overcome this, is that some but not all recently-created accounts didn't always show up in our threads. So we created band-aids or workarounds that allowed us to make this usable. But it led us to have some discussion internally with UBC Learning Technology Resources, Novak and his team, about what we might be able to do to harness some of the capability in the UBC blogging platform that would allow us to get a Twitter-like experience that we could use for engagement that overcame some of these problems. I met with Novak and his team, and Rob Peregoodoff from the Sauder learning technology group back in March, and we explained what we were trying to do, and they thought that they would be able to do this and they encouraged us to try out a variation on the UBC blogging platform, which I tried out in a short five-week MBA elective in April, early May. And we had lots of good experience, but we also found that as is often the case when you're experimenting with something, that there were some things that we felt could be improved. And we provided that feedback to Novak and his team, and they within a couple of weeks, very enthusiastically, provided us with something that addressed that. And effectively what we've now got within a UBC blogging platform is a behind-firewall, robust Twitter-like tool. It's called Pulsepress, or it's a customized variation of Pulsepress, and it's something that we plan to use in Commerce 101 in September of 2011, and so somewhere around 600 students, 18-year-olds in their first term in their first week will be exposed to this, and will find that they are able to comment, link things with a quick shortener, and it will all be tied into their UBC blog account, which they will have anyway for other things in the course.

Q. You had mentioned when we spoke earlier that you're co-teaching with other instructors. How did you get buy-in from the other faculty?

One of the challenges in some of the larger section courses is that more than one person might be teaching the course, either because different people are teaching different sections, or because there was co-teaching going on. And in my situation, I do quite a bit of co-teaching in a number of courses, and I knew that I needed to find ways of getting buy-in from my colleagues. As with anything new, there's often a range of concerns or uncertainty, and I find the best way to do these sort of types of things is to do them by demonstration and also by encouraging people to come by and see a pilot. What I found was that by getting my colleagues to come and sit in on a class where I was already using these tools, many of their concerns and questions were overcome. The questions and concerns seemed to be of two types. First of all, there is a personal fear or uncertainty of how would I use it, or what would I do? And I can normally overcome that by saying, I will be your support or assistant on this the first time. Or, you don't need to worry about the technical side. Think about the learning. So for example, I or a teaching assistant can just drive the Twitter feed, flicking through the screens et cetera, and I would ask my colleague just to treat it like a normal small group activity where you would provide the instructions around solving a problem, expanding upon things, applying a concept, and then you might be pleasantly surprised to see these things that come up that you can then probe. And you wouldn't necessarily always see these. I say it's a bit like an iceberg. There's a latent conversation waiting to happen, but if you just go verbally to the class, you're either randomly cold-calling and probing to see whether there was anybody awake at the bottom of the iceberg,

or you are going to the normal tip of the people that you know will add value. And so that's the first part, is being able to overcome the concerns about will they be able to make it work? And the second part, I think, which I've already just touched on there is they're pleasantly surprised that they actually get an expanded menu of content from the student body, and a broadened body of engaged students.

One of the concerns that some people have, and I think legitimately so, is that if students have their laptops or their mobile devices out in class, that they're just not concentrating on what you, the instructor, are saying that's so important that they need to attend to and to learn. And I'm sympathetic to this, and I have some colleagues who - no-laptop policy in class colleagues. And I think there are times and places for certain policies and rules, and I think students should be prepared to know that they, in the working world as well as in the education environment, have different rules for different situations. So although in many of my classes I encourage the use of laptops and other devices, there are some situations where I'll say, "Please put your laptops away. Just concentrate on what's at hand." And so I think control your environment, just like you would at any time. Having said that, I recognize that we don't want to end up going around policing students, and it becomes distracting from the main purpose of why we're there, and almost impossible in large classes. If students are determined to text their friends, then they're going to hide their phone under their desk, or whatever. So my intent is to keep the pace fast and to say yes, we will use multiple devices just as you might flick from making paper notes to notes on a computer, you might flick from looking through a textbook to, if you chose to, printing off slides, to what's on a laptop to the discussion on the front of the room. So multitasking is to a greater or lesser extent a reality of what's going on. And what I'm trying to encourage is efficient and relevant multitasking. So what was in a previous era people reading newspapers or doing crosswords or passing kind of notes, handwritten notes to their friends, is now the temptation of Facebook or Twitter or texting, et cetera. I try to minimize that by making the class appealing and engaging, and also raising the challenge to people to stay on task. So, for example, one of the things I do every class is, in a low-key way, I make a conscious effort of taking my phone out and holding it up and saying, "I'm just putting it on silent and putting it away, because I don't want to be distracted for the next 80 minutes." And I said, "You will have many friends who are not in class at the moment, and they will text you to ask you what you're doing." I said, "Close that window, close the Facebook browser." I said, "I'm not coming around to check, but otherwise you'll miss more interesting and important stuff because your friends were bored." And so I'll say that longhand in the first class, and after that, I just found that bringing it up as a physical cue gets a significant majority to comply. And the people, I think they almost appreciate the fact that you're giving them permission to check out from their friends. And the few that decide that they're going to keep their social windows open, they were going to do it anyway.

Q. What advice would you have for others trying a similar technique?

So if people are going to be considering bringing in a tool like Twitter or the Pulsepress UBC Blogs equivalent, then the first thing I would do is just say come and sit in in somebody else's class that's already using it, to see how they use it. I think there are no magic solutions. We've got lots of tools in our toolkit, and this is another tool. And so you have to be able to be clear

about how it's going to allow you to further the learning objectives that you have for your course. I think that selective use can be helpful. But doing it only once or twice is probably not enough. I found that students get into habits and expectations, and so for example, I think I did something like every other class using Twitter. But if I'd only done it once or twice, I think there would be still too many students saying what's this about? Because there is a little bit of a learning curve for people, as you ask them to do any type of different activity or exercise. So being able to repeat the format on a different application is something which is very helpful. So to recap, find somebody who's already using it. I'd be very happy for 2011 to have visitors come on in. And probably the first times that you do it, if you possible can, have a teaching assistant with you in the classroom. It's a lot easier to do this when there is somebody to support you. I'm not suggesting that you can't do it on your own, but getting going just means that you're not distracted by the technology. You can focus on the discussion that you're trying to run through.

Q. One of the things you'd said earlier, too, was about making it low-risk so the students weren't intimidated by it.

Oh yeah. I found a way of bundling this into overall participation for students, so people can be concerned and fearful that they're going to make mistakes and get things wrong. And so what I pointed out here is they weren't being graded separately on this, and that they couldn't get a negative scoring. What they could do is enhance what they were already being asked to do, which was to participate in meaningful ways.

Q. Where do you see this going? What would you like to be able to do in the future?

I think moving into the future with education and use of technology, we need to be careful that the technology doesn't get in the way. I think as ever, if we can ensure that the techniques and gadgets and mechanisms by which we engage students and enhance learning are almost invisible, people didn't notice what they were using. They just came out and said it was a cool class. I don't want people to come away saying oh, we used Twitter today. They might the first time, but by the time the term's over, I want them to just say, you know what, that class rocked because we did so many things, or we did a number of things that were interesting and I think that I learned lots, and I want to go back to the next class.

One of the things I'd add as well is we're often told that this generation of students we're teaching is the digital generation, and I chuckle sometimes because on the one hand, yes, it's a generation that's grown up with the internet and with the ability to access lots of things. But also, I find that there is currently also quite a lot of conservatism amongst many students about using tools that they're not already familiar with. So they use a few tools, Facebook, texting, with huge frequency and competency, but many of the other tools that we think will be useful to them in education and in my sphere, in business, they've had limited usage of. So for example, very few of them have actively blogged before. And they might be fearful of the fact that one of the key assignments in the course requires them to blog. And so then I ask them, how many of them have uploaded photos and opinions and videos to Facebook? And of course, the number is around 100 percent. And I said, great. You've already had your first lesson. Facebook is such

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an intuitive and flexible multimedia tool that actually, it is their training wheels for most of the things that we want them to then play with.