Teachers’ Expression of Moral Discontent through Twitter

With the influx of new technology over the last decade, research in the social sciences has expanded to include the internet as a primary data collection source. This summer, I worked with Professor Doris Santoro of the Education Department to investigate how K-12 teachers use Twitter as a means to shape their teacher identities, develop community, perform self-care and preserve the integrity of teaching. While some research has been done using Twitter as a data source, most Twitter-based research has looked at networks of users on Twitter and their interactions rather than analyzing user’s tweets directly. By using data scraping tools, I assisted Professor Santoro in the collection and analysis of teachers’ tweets to see how teachers expressed moral discontent about their work on Twitter.

The beginning stages of our research were focused primarily on learning about past research using Twitter and methods for data scraping. We began with a literature review on research using Twitter as a data source in order to study the methodology of other researchers. We found that most research using Twitter has looked at typical Twitter conventions such as usage of the @ sign, url shorteners, hashtags, and retweets (RTs). While this didn’t inform our effort to gather more qualitative information in the first stages of our research, it did offer directions for us in determining our own methodology. These articles allowed us to gather ideas for data scraping, coding schemes, and analysis that we could apply to our own work.

We began our data scraping by using a program called ScraperWiki to gather tweets from a set of 100 users selected by Professor Santoro that self-identified on Twitter as teachers and posted at least occasionally about their careers. ScraperWiki allowed us to automatically gather these users’ tweets over time and download Excel spreadsheets containing information on their tweets such as the tweet body, the hashtags used, and the location from which the tweet was sent. Professor Santoro and a collaborating colleague of hers, Professor Jessica Hochman of Pratt Institute, created a coding scheme in order to categorize tweets into specific themes, such as tweets relating to education policy, community, or teaching practice. Once they had coded users’ tweets, I began analysis on Excel of the various data sets in order to look at the most frequent themes present in teachers’ tweets. By using certain mathematical commands on Excel, I was able to count the various appearances of codes to look at trends in our data.

Working on this project allowed me experience multiple phases of research, a welcomed surprise. Because I worked on this project throughout its development and earliest stages, I was able to see how a research project is designed and then carried out; even though the research was not finished at the point at which my fellowship ended, this project challenged my previous ideas about research and I quickly grew to appreciate all the details, stages, and nuances involved in a quality project. I am very grateful to the Gibbons Summer Research Fellowship for giving me this opportunity and to Professor Santoro for being such an inclusive, approachable, and helpful mentor throughout the project.