



A careful approach to digital scholarship

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A CAREFUL APPROACH TO DIGITAL SCHOLARSHIP

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🖼 ["we are the lions" by Fio](#); CC BY-NC 2.0

The Twitter format lends itself to excitement, leaping out, connecting with people over content, not into content, and offers opportunities for people to make what they want of out of journal article reading. It's one of the reasons the activity has always appealed to me; it fits my desire to DO things with articles, and it makes them seem like they should be accessible, like what would be in a book club on the weekend. It breaks down the distinction between being a learner and scholar for sure. (Laura to Simon, in the #TJC15 [Twinterview](#))

For a lot of reasons, the types of learning and knowledge valued in our world are diversifying. [Networked participatory scholarship](#), which is [increasingly carried out](#) on social media platforms such as Twitter, provides opportunities for [alternative forms of academic expression](#): those that do not necessarily fit

traditional academic criteria but fulfil professional and personal needs of faculty, students, and researchers anyway. The [Twitter Journal Club \(#TJC15\)](#), an open, unstructured, academic reading group found on Twitter, provides meaningful learning experiences while embracing the holistic and messy nature of learning. Within this space, we — [Laura](#) (the group's creator) and [Simon](#) (a frequent participant-observer) — have found [room to breathe](#) as well as opportunities to care, in terms of emotional and intellectual engrossment, relational and personal interest, and kindness and mutual respect. As such, we find this alternative, digital approach to academic reading one that engages its participants in uniquely creative, playful, and *human* ways of learning even as it augments and challenges traditional academic practice.

A Connected Kind of Care (Laura)

A professor once told me that I loved ideas too much, because I treated them as if they were people. It is true that I tend to treat ideas with an ethic of care, [described by Nel Noddings](#) as “a state of being in relation, characterized by receptivity, relatedness, and engrossment” (p. 11). As she describes it, care is a reciprocal act requiring mutual acknowledgement and acceptance. The presence of care is challenged when any participant (giver or receiver) actively or passively rejects the act. Some may find it problematic to connect this sort of care to articles and books. However, I believe ideas are extensions of the people who form and express them. By relating the ideas found in texts back to their creators, my peers, and our collective contexts, I experience a refreshing form of learning: one that permits and requires the integration of abstract and situated, intellectual and visceral reactions.

I used to attend a faculty reading club every week. It was not really open to students, but the faculty thought I might benefit from observing how they engaged in scholarship. Therefore, I joined the group as they read Bakhtin's [Rabelais and His World](#) and watched them sift through each section like archeologists working a gridded field. Line by line, they summarized, analyzed, critiqued, and compared Bakhtin to Vygotsky, Foucault, and Wittgenstein. Their approach was disciplined and intellectual. It was rational and refined. It was definitely careful. However, for me, it was missing a special sauce: that relational, human dimension to Noddings's care that motivates me to learn more. Furthermore, the faculty's approach to scholarship had no place for the connection of ideas to emotion or life experience. Although, at the time, I did not know Vygotsky, Foucault, or Wittgenstein, I related to Bakhtin's commentary on the human body through my previous career in healthcare. I understood the text deeply and differently than the faculty, but the crystallized structure of scholarly interpretation offered no entry points for a unique perspective or approach.

Whether they exist in the academic settings of health professions, hard or applied sciences, social sciences, or humanities, journal clubs (book clubs, reading clubs) facilitate professional development for faculty and the introduction of disciplinary language, thinking, and collective knowledge to novice scholars. Twitter Journal Club emerged from my desire to experience scholarly reading with a different sort of language, thinking, knowledge, and *care* than that expressed in traditional academic journal clubs. For an hour, participants use the hashtag #TJC15 to live-tweet and discuss their reading and responses to a previously designated journal article. Participants nominate articles through an [open online form](#), the only specific requirement being that the article is freely available for participants. There are no pre-arranged talking points or discussion questions. However, after the event, [the tweets are aggregated and published](#) so that participants can reflect upon or follow up with discussion points made.

I created Twitter Journal Club because I needed a forum that valued holistic expression over structured, “expert” approaches — not as a replacement for traditional scholarship, but rather an augmentation. It fulfills my needs because it is *physical* (requiring such intense attention as to impact the participant viscerally), *emotional* (involving interpretation that often begins with what is “liked”), *hopeful* (requiring trust that the unscripted and unpredictable event will be worth the time and effort), and *relational* (facilitating connections between people and ideas, across contexts). Amy Collier and Jen Ross are beginning to explore the concept of academic “[not-yetness](#),” people, settings, and situations that do not understand everything, satisfy every condition, or solve every problem. I believe Twitter Journal Club is scholarly reading in the “not yet” form, a validating space for individuals who, too often, are left to observe from the thresholds of traditional academe. Also, it is meant to be fun.

A culture of permissiveness pervades the Twitter Journal Club experience that allows learners to take what they like from the event and while encouraging reflection, creativity, and a personal sense of agency. Individually, participants have chosen to [read in advance](#), [not read in advance](#), [digitally annotate in advance](#), and create their [own organizational agendas](#). Individuals have experimented with real-time communication through [video](#), [images](#), [animation](#), and [annotation](#). We have also tried synchronous [physical and virtual](#) events. When article authors participate in the discussion, their presence tends to transform the events into spontaneous question and answer sessions.

The limited character space, the speed, the uneven familiarity with the article across the group, and the tendency to connect the article to life experience all challenge the learning objectives and expectations we usually associate with academic reading clubs. While the traditional approach encourages participants to “dig in” so that they might study every aspect of the article, Twitter Journal Club participants tend to pick out phrases or conclusions they find personally compelling, and then use those points to trigger a conversation. Often, these discussions are not about the article itself, but rather what the participant is currently studying or doing elsewhere. In other words, participants “jump from” the article, letting it inspire excitement or further connections around other work they are already doing. As such, it has met with some resistance from established academics who find it “sloppy”, “ineffective”, or potentially “harmful” in establishing bad habits. On the contrary, I have found that the Twitter Journal Club has provided me with space to meet scholarship on my own terms — and with a great deal of care.

A Political Economy of Care (Simon)

I was introduced to Twitter Journal Club at a moment of transition and opening up to new ideas. I was a year into a new job, in a new university, in a new discipline, in a new country. I had transitioned from being a scholar of higher education with an interest in my pedagogic practice to being an academic developer. Being literally dis-placed brought with it feelings of disorientation, but also wonder and excitement. I was in a situation where there was space to fashion myself anew as an academic.

I was already involved in an academic reading group. We were engaged in this reading in a context of a highly charged gender politics of academic promotions within our institution. We read in the context of petitions, court cases, and demonstrations. Our reading took up these themes, allowing us to examine a range of debates about how the university and academic practice could be both critiqued and re-imagined. We read and debated about the [absence of care in the academe](#), but also how [care could be a core value of academic practice](#). The boundary between scholarship and our daily lives as academics became seriously blurred, and blurred seriously. For me this was reflected in a renewed interest in using my professional blogs as spaces to rehearse ideas, to practice writing, and to speak out loud about thoughts and writings

that were in progress. I had done this from an autoethnographic perspective in my ongoing '[broken academic](#)' project. This involved linking wellbeing and the micro-aggressions of academic life to the broader political economy of higher education. Twitter Journal Club appeared at the confluence of these streams of activity and is always connected to experiments in open education and scholarship, and of critical reflections on the political economy of academic practice. Central to this are struggles to enact an ethic of care in the academe.

There are aspects of my experience of Twitter Journal Club that enact an ethic of care that is at odds with the [intensified performative culture of higher education](#) where we find that the [values that animate us as educators and scholars are displaced](#). One dominant characteristic of this environment is the growth of methods of management that seek to [align the personal CV of the academic to institutional objectives](#). These methods work to [alter our own practices](#) and relate to how we perceive ourselves as academics. At the personal level we can feel a fundamental disconnect between the institutionally defined identity and those values and ideas that animate us as educators and researchers. As [Sue Clegg and Stephen Rowland](#) so rightly point out, care is one of the virtues so frequently displaced in the modern university. I remember all too well being requested to reduce the amount of formative feedback I gave to my students in order to increase time for writing and research. Writing and research were viewed, in this particular conversation, instrumentally as means by which the university could improve its position in relation to other institutions. It was not that this academic manager refuted the pedagogic value of caring about feedback. But the care I gave to providing worthwhile formative feedback was seen as a costly virtue.

In this wider performative culture we may find ourselves [seeking spaces where we can enact the virtues](#) that are important to us, where we can enact care and kindness. And this is partly what attracted me to Twitter Journal Club. In this space I hoped to both examine the potential virtues of open educational practice, and to enact careful engagement with texts, authors, and interlocutors.

And that is why Twitter Journal Club was so fascinating and challenging for me. It offers ways of relating to knowledge, colleagues, and writing that is more akin to a [gift economy](#) than the competitive culture imagined for us. One example of this ethic of care is that we do not seek to deconstruct the authors' text and ideas. The articles provide us with stimulation to consider our practice in relation to the central ideas explored in the articles. It is a kind of additive approach rather than the subtractive attitude often encouraged in the training of academics. It's not that the critical engagement with the texts is completely suspended, but that Twitter Journal Club is not the primary space for that. [In spaces such as Twitter Journal Club it is the connections and the working out of ideas that is foregrounded](#).

An Invitation

Twitter Journal Club has an emergent quality, respectful of and contingent on the receptivity, energy, and generative potential of the people who participate. In contrast with the polished finality usually associated with scholarship, the event foregrounds the working out of ideas. And in this space made especially for trying, room to care emerges – not in the tentative, cautious manner of academe, but rather in the rich, relational expression of the human experience. All carers are [welcome](#).

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About the Authors



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[Simon Warren](#)

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3 RESPONSES



Gideon Burton

[Reply](#)

🕒 [July 14, 2015 at 3:05 pm](#)

I was expecting something more of a defense of scholarly discourse within the new media, but instead was introduced to a new way of reading (not producing) traditional scholarship. I was drawn to the human and ethical angle here, and this gives me a way of understanding online discourse as an opportunity to counter-balance the performative culture of higher education. I agree that "At the personal level we can feel a fundamental disconnect between the institutionally defined identity and those values and ideas that animate us as educators and researchers." I would add to this that online discussions, such as this one being organized via the hashtag #TJC15, permit one to find extra-institutional or -disciplinary peers who bring value less as experts and more as fellow learners. I appreciate this new way of looking at how we can respond to scholarship and make friends as we do so (with both ideas and people).

Pingback : [A Story of Twitter and Friendship | Messy Thinking](#)

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18 hours ago

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