

Finding my online voice

It was a beautiful August day, and I was on a socially distanced hike with friends along the Appalachian Trail. But instead of enjoying the scenery, I was distracted by my phone. It kept buzzing in my pocket as hundreds of Twitter notifications flooded in. I had been on Twitter for about a year, mainly tweeting about science. I enjoyed it, but none of my tweets ever got much traction—until that day. I was excited—and nervous. Was I ready to be Twitter famous?

I had spent much of the previous day wrestling with data files prepared by a junior co-worker, first using the version they named “final” only to find that the actual values I needed were in a file named “final2.” After I sorted it out, I sent a quick—hopefully polite and constructive—email saying that we needed to do a better job naming our shared files. Late that night, I was awoken by a notification on my phone: My colleague had emailed with an apology and assurance that they would do better in the future. Unable to go back to sleep, I decided to tweet a brief comment about the importance of properly naming research files, hoping that some of my few dozen followers would benefit. To my astonishment, it was retweeted by a high-profile academic account, and it had blown up by morning.

Before that point, my tweets had been limited to sharing research results, without adding any personal perspective. I was hesitant to share my thoughts or experiences, thinking no one would care—or, worse, that colleagues and potential future employers might misinterpret them. After all, who was I to offer advice? I’m just a Ph.D. student doing my best; I didn’t know whether I was doing anything right myself!

But seeing people from across academia retweeting me and agreeing with my point shifted my mindset. Maybe I do have something to offer.

Since then, I have been regularly tweeting about my experiences as a Ph.D. student, including navigating authorship conflicts, maintaining work-life balance, mentoring undergraduate students, giving presentations, writing, and more. Some tweets inspire a lot of responses, others fewer. Regardless, I’ve found that I enjoy offering my perspective. I am not an expert on academic life, but I’ve learned that I don’t need to pretend to be. Sharing my experiences is still useful and rewarding.



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plying to were a good fit. This time, most programs offered me a spot. I thought others might benefit from the insight I had gained, so I posted a series of tweets.

Many students reached out, thanking me and asking follow-up questions. One first-generation student in Nigeria—someone I would never have connected with were I not active on Twitter—asked me whether I had time to provide feedback about their statement, which I was honored to do. The student also mentioned how they benefited from my posts and the discussions they spurred, which reinforced my motivation to keep at it.

Although I sometimes feel uncomfortable and vulnerable sharing my experiences on a massive global platform, I’ve found that it is well worth it. I’ve learned that we are all stronger if we authentically share and connect with one another. ■

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