

Teachers: Embrace Twitter for Professional Development

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This is a reprint of a piece Denise originally wrote for us in 2008, updated to reflect the latest and greatest Twitter know-how.

I created my first Twitter account in 2008. Four years later, I finally made the commitment to using Twitter during an edtech conference, where I found myself frantically tweeting, retweeting, and refreshing my feed as I tried to take it all in. Honestly, up until I used it at that conference, I thought Twitter was just another social media blackhole. But through essentially constant use for those few days, I began to see Twitter as an excellent resource for educators and an invaluable tool for professional development – one of the best out there. So, for you teachers wondering about all the hype...I promise, Twitter is worth it.



Why Twitter Seems Daunting

Some of my colleagues are wary of Twitter. In no particular order, here are some of their concerns and how I think teachers can address them.

New Tech Can Be Intimidating

Technology, like any other skill, comes easier to some of us than others. I have plenty of colleagues who want to embrace technology in the classroom and just struggle to click with new tools. But with practice and support, figuring out Twitter is something that can be done, no matter what your tech or social media fluency.

My advice: do a bit of research before you dive in. Articles like [The Teacher's Guide to Twitter](#) or [25 Ways to Get the Most Out of Twitter](#) are a great place to start, as they link to tutorials and how-to guides that might make your transition to Twitter easier.

So Many Tweets, So Little Time

Another reason my colleagues are a bit hesitant to jump into Twitter is the overwhelming amount of content available on the platform. If this is on your list of things keeping you from Twitter, you definitely have a good point. There is a lot of information out there.

The trick is to follow the right people and organizations to fill your feed with information that you will find useful and relevant. By connecting with educators and administrators on Twitter, you are starting to build your Personal Learning Network. As you share resources with your network, you will also have access to the materials they share. New to the PLN? Check out [this guide from Edublogs!](#)

PLNs need to be curated. I've followed a lot of people on Twitter – but, if after a while, I'm not finding their posts relevant to my interests, I might unfollow them. Another trick is to follow the major players that are retweeted frequently so that their tweets will show up in your feed. This way, you can retweet them directly, rather than through someone else you follow. To get started, look around at who is getting props for their tweets in the educational world. MediaCore's list of [The 23 Most Influential Twitter Users in EdTech](#) has some awesome suggestions.

What Are Those #s and @s For?

To those who knew “#” as the pound sign, the secret language of hashtags and @ signs can be a bit strange. But these symbols are what curate productive discussion on Twitter.

Hashtags, for example, are key to sifting through information on Twitter. As a social studies teacher and also as a member of my school's academic technology team, I have a few favorites that I keep tabs on. For example, searching for #sschat or #edtech will pull tweets that have been specifically flagged for those interested in information about

Social Studies or Ed Tech, respectively, on Twitter. At specified times, these hashtags are also used for Twitter chats. Using a common hashtag, such as #ettipad when I was at the EdTechTeacher iPad Summit, meant that my tweets showed up for others who were following that same hashtag. The hashtag also allowed me to follow the discussions happening in other sessions at the conference; we were all connected as a community of professionals because we all flagged our content in the same way.

To get started with hashtags, take a look at this [list of education hashtags](#). If you're feeling adventurous and want to try a Twitter chat, I recommend checking out [#satchat](#) at 10:30 am (EST) on Saturdays, or [#edchat](#) on Tuesdays at 12:00 pm (EST) or 7:00 pm for engaging, lively conversations about current educational trends, technology integration, and education policy. Follow along with the discussion by searching for the chat hashtag, or join in by using it in your own tweets.

In contrast, using the @ sign to tag other users, such as @Edudemic, flags your tweets for them directly. This makes the person or organization you mention more likely to respond directly. From there, you might engage in a deeper and more meaningful conversation, or your @mention might retweet your original tweet to all of their followers, thereby exposing you to a much wider community.

Together, hashtags and @mentions are powerful tools not only for gaining greater personal exposure but also for finding the key information you need most and connecting with likeminded educators.

Public Persona

A valid concern: by default, when you put yourself out there on Twitter, anything you tweet is set to public, meaning anyone can see it. You can, if you want, change your tweets to "protected", meaning that only those users you have approved will see your content. You can read more about public and protected tweets [here](#).

Personally, I use Twitter to share articles related to teaching or blog posts that I've written. I don't update my followers on my status or whereabouts. For me, Twitter is a way of consuming and resharing information targeted to my interests. I favorite or retweet articles I want to read later, or tag colleagues to share content I think they might find interesting. My personal feed isn't a place where I comment on news stories, sports scores, or what awesome meal I'm eating, because I haven't chosen to use it in that way. If you're going to use Twitter for things beyond curating a collection of educational resources, I suggest having multiple accounts. Some people have one account as an educator, another for classroom activities, and another as an individual. You have to decide what works best for you – and what works in terms of your school's policies and your own level of comfort with what you share online.

The Ultimate PLN

The people in my PLN share amazing materials about all aspects of education. Articles about the teenage brain, project-based learning, or emotional intelligence show up in my feed because of the people I follow. Others share lesson plans or tips on technology in the classroom. Articles like this would have been buried in the vastness of the web for eternity – but I get to read them because they appeared in my feed.

As a teacher, I have made a commitment to Twitter-time. At some point during the day I will check Twitter and retweet a few things or add favorites to read later. My PLN cronies post links to the articles they've read, the trends they're following, and proud updates about their students' work and accomplishments. They ask for advice. They post questions. We collaborate across the country and continents, and I can engage as much or as little as I want.

For me, Twitter is a way of consuming information targeted to my interests. Using a hashtag like #sschat connects me to topics that will interest and intrigue Social Studies teachers – from all walks of life – and all because I know what to look for. Twitter isn't overwhelming anymore – it's incredible. I've connected myself to an extensive personal learning network of educators, entrepreneurs, and innovators through a little bird – and found it the best professional development I've never paid for. So, log in. Give it a try! Who knows what you might learn.