



## Using Twitter for Professional Development

The term “professional development” conjures up thoughts of travel, conference fees, arranging substitutes, and loss of precious instructional time. But does it have to entail all that? Actually, no. A growing number of educators are using [Twitter](#)—yes, the microblogging platform Twitter—as a quick, easy, low-cost alternative.

If you aren't yet familiar with Twitter, it's a social networking platform where users share everything from what they had for breakfast to professional dilemmas – all in 140 characters or less. It attracts a wide spectrum of users, including a vast and growing contingent of educators.

Educators on Twitter often discuss what's working in their classrooms and how they've addressed important issues – much like you might with your peers.

### The Virtual Watercooler

Colleagues are a greatly underutilized professional development resource within the school building, and staff often remark about the benefits of setting aside time for collaboration with co-workers. What if the concept of “colleague” was expanded to include the wider community of educators nationally, and even internationally?

Making professional connections via social networking can not only result in a lot of great sharing of ideas and resources, but also combat the sense of isolation that many teachers experience.

It's like having a professional development seminar at your fingertips 24/7, ready to discuss the educational issues that matter to you the most.

Hesitant to get started? Hear what proponents of social media-powered professional development have to say. Then explore [Education World's](#) tips for easing into the process.

### Experts Say...

In a November 2011 post from “Finding Common Ground,” his *Education Week* blog, [Dr. Peter DeWitt](#) wrote:

“On days when I am trying to figure out how to help my students, whether they're in elementary school or the graduate course I teach, I turn to the experts. I'm not referring to the people who we see at conferences where we pay a conference fee to be inspired for an hour. I am referring to our colleagues who are only a password away on Twitter.

If you can set aside an hour or so (be careful because time flies on Twitter), go to Twitter and you will be met by colleagues from all over the world who are not only willing to help you find great resources, they will set you up with groups who can expand your content knowledge. These interactive chat sessions can be very beneficial to us as practitioners.”

DeWitt offered the following example: “When I want to learn more about social and emotional learning, technology or media literacy in the classroom, I read blogs and posts by Sean Slade, Lyn Hilt and Shawn Blankenship. Or I join the #elemchat session on Saturdays at 5 p.m. EST and talk with Judy Brunner.”

Here are some additional benefits of professional development via Twitter, as expressed by participants in a November 2011 *Education Week* discussion forum titled “Is the Best PD Happening on Twitter?”

“Although it will not replace strong PD, it is a phenomenal source of information highlighting best practices and innovative thinking about instruction. It has become the professional learning community I use as a mirror, window, and sounding board for my daily practice as a teacher and instructional coach,” said user “MrsMendelis.”

Participant John Bennett added, “With a search of hash tags, the notation of Twitter accounts in Internet pieces of personal interest, and general searches, one can identify [information] of personal interest. In most cases, the [information to be gained from] tweets is expanded beyond the 140-character limit, as most often those 140 characters include a link to another interesting posting.”

Said participant “parkerr,” “After more than 20 years working on facilitating communication and language in individuals with autism spectrum disorders and teaching others about it, I am happy to say that Twitter has provided the most and easiest-to-access opportunities for personal development.”

School administrator and blogger [Brian Paul Hill](#) offers additional insights:

"I think it's important for anyone working in education to have a Twitter account. We have to be consumers of information. Constant consumers of information. Information that is current and important. If we aren't doing this, then we become stagnant in our work and complacent in our profession."

Hill mentions a helpful tool for managing the constant flow of information on Twitter. "[Instapaper](#) is great because it allows you to save links to articles straight from your Twitter timeline. And it works with Twitter apps as well. So now, as I'm scrolling through a cluttered timeline at some point during the day, if I see a link to an article that sounds interesting, I just save it to my Instapaper account. Then, when I get home, I have a whole list of links to articles that I wanted to read, that were posted by people I follow on Twitter."

## Getting Started

Here are some tips to help you get started with Twitter as a professional resource.

1. **Set up a free [Twitter](#) account.**

This takes just a few minutes. Be sure to fill in your profile with information about being an educator. Don't worry – you don't have to share exact details. In fact, keeping it a little more broad (such as "middle school language arts teacher interested in classic literature, great student writing and good coffee") could be more beneficial, since it will lead more folks with common interests to you. To learn the basics of Twitter in "plain English," check out Steven Anderson's [Educators' Guide to Twitter](#).

2. **Write a few practice tweets.**

It can be a challenge to communicate meaningfully in 140 characters, so send off a few tweets to try it out and learn how to say what you need to within the limited space.

3. **Follow, follow, follow.**

Now you need to find like-minded people to follow. Basically, this means subscribing to their tweets (the tweets of those you follow will make up your Twitter stream when you log in). Use Twitter's search feature to find people in your field. You can search using terms like "teacher" or "principal." Once you find a few, you can also check out who *they* follow and begin following them as well.

You might also want to follow educator-related "hash tags." A hash tag is a way for people to search for tweets that have a common topic. The hash (#) mark precedes the topic name. For example, tweets relevant to elementary-school educators can be found as a group because they all share the #elemchat hash tag.

Any Twitter user can create a hash tag simply by adding it to his/her own tweet. The tags are therefore not only a way of organizing tweets by topic, but also a way of creating communities of people interested in the same topic. In addition, sometimes a hash tag is used to organize a live "chat" event, where participants sound off by tweeting about a given topic.

Shelly S. Terrell, author of the "[Teacher Reboot Camp](#)" blog, shares the following helpful education-related hashtags:

#edchat  
#sschat  
#kinderchat  
#cpchat  
#ntchat  
#elemchat  
#edscape  
#tlchat  
#subject  
#edcampKC

4. **Join in the conversation.**

The great thing about Twitter is that it's one great big conversation – and all you need to do is jump in. Do this by both sending tweets about things on your mind and responding to the tweets of others. This give-and-take helps you build rapport with your followers. Also, attend one of the many education-related Twitter chats that happen each week, such as #edchat on Tuesdays at 12 p.m. EST. To find a list of education-related Twitter chats, check out this resource on [Free Technology for Teachers](#).

5. **Tweet like your mama and principal are watching.**

Though Twitter is a great big free-for-all, it's up to you to protect yourself and your career when using it. Bear in mind when tweeting that anything you write could be seen by your personal and professional connections – and act accordingly. If you wouldn't say something in front of a superior, don't tweet it – even if you have your account set to private. Being set to private doesn't prevent others from re-tweeting your tweets to their followers.

6. **Follow Education World on Twitter.**

We're [@Education World](#). Hope to hear from you soon!

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