

we'll tweet again



Tom Barrett continues his exploration of the social networking site that is proving increasingly popular with professionals in all areas, including education...

Last issue, I wrote about starting to build a Twitter network, and the potential benefits, in a professional context, of doing so. If you were inspired as a result to get micro-blogging yourself, then this is probably a good moment to throw in some encouragement to keep going! You may be finding it less than totally rewarding right now, but as you carry on using Twitter, your experiences will change; I remember going through a period of use with my fledgling and still-growing network, when between 20 and 30 people were listening to my updates, but I was getting little or nothing by way of feedback. This can be very disheartening, and is a reason why many people turn away from the site during those early days. However, perseverance is the key to unlocking the two-way communication later on that is so valuable. I think that my first really successful interactions with those in my network took place when between 80-100 people were following my updates. I call

this 'the tipping point', and I think all users go through that moment of sudden realisation of the power of networking using Twitter.

Twitter has had a direct influence on all of my current roles at school due to the timely nature of connections that it enables one to make with fellow education professionals from around the world. I hope that the following real examples of the benefits I have enjoyed will encourage you to continue to develop your own personal learning network. Both experiences combined to form my own 'tipping point' - after which I knew for sure that an educational network using Twitter could play an extremely valuable part in my professional life.

I had hit a block. It was during some non-contact time that I receive as the school's ICT subject leader - and I was supposed to be writing a progress survey for all of the children in the upper juniors, regarding a class based laptop resource we had been using for a full term. However after a while, the questions dried up - so I turned to my Twitter network for some inspiration. I simply stated that I was drafting a laptop survey, and needed some ideas for questions; and within seconds I had colleagues from Scotland, New Zealand and Australia contributing their thoughts and offering suggestions for what I could include. In fact some of these individuals were using laptops in their own schools. I went on to draft the survey in a Google Document, and shared it with the Twitter users, who then in turn helped edit and mould further drafts. I did not have to wait for email replies, forum or message board responses - Twitter had made a real-time difference to the work I was doing as an ICT coordinator.

As a classroom teacher, too, Twitter has a regular and important impact on what I do. As you begin to monitor the updates of your network it will quickly become clear just how many weblinks users share (see my

challenge in the last issue). These range from blog posts they have just written, to sources of information, to online resources that you can use with your class. But an important facet of being involved with a Twitter network is just how easy it is to connect speedily with teachers in other classes, schools and countries. For example, when two Year 3 teachers asked me to help them connect with some other classes via email, I instead immediately turned to my Twitter network and sent the request. By the time the school day had ended I had four or five teachers from different schools across America who were willing to be involved with the small project. With Twitter, you can reach out to other classes and teachers so quickly and easily, that it leaves you with more time to focus on the collaboration itself, and the learning potential of the connections you make.

Tom's Twitter Challenge - part two

I hope that the challenges in the first article proved useful and gave you a little nudge in the right direction. We explored the idea of searching for key phrases related to your work and also the essential finding and posting of links to Twitter. This time I have two simple tasks that I hope will help you to manage and build your Twitter network.

1 Twitter Software

As I am sure you can imagine, the worldwide appeal of using Twitter has triggered the development

of many pieces of software that allow you to see and interact with your Twitter network. Finding and using third party software like this can often enhance and facilitate the networking experience. Try downloading Twhirl (www.twhirl.org) or Tweetdeck (<http://tweetdeck.com>). Each of these applications interprets the experience differently – whereas Twhirl is quite simple, for example, Tweetdeck allows a much more refined Twitter experience. You will have to make your own mind up which you prefer. (You could even try a mobile application for your iPhone or iPod Touch.)



2 Join a Twibe

One of the ways to find fellow teaching colleagues using Twitter is to participate in the many Twitter group tools. Twibes (www.twibes.com) is one such example – currently there are over 1800 Twitter users in the Edtech Twibe (www.twibes.com/group/EdTech), and over 350 members of the Museum Twibe (www.twibes.com/group/museums). I am sure there is a group that would match your current role within school - of course, you then have the opportunity of following fellow Twibe members individually, and adding them to your network.

Jargon Buster

Hashtags -

These are used as a prefix to a keyword or tag (#ashes has been a popular one recently and of course #iranelection). When someone uses a hashtag, he or she is 'marking' the message so it can be found amongst the whole debate or within the topic discussed. Hashtags are especially useful at conferences so that delegates can easily find comments from other people.

Tweets

The messages we add to our timeline, all of which must consist of 140 characters, or fewer.

Retweet

You may resubmit someone else's message if you think your own network would also benefit from it. This is regularly done if someone has posted a link to a great site or classroom resource – it can be retweeted multiple times, thus spreading the word a little wider each time. Look out for the abbreviation RT at the beginning of a Tweet.

Tweeps

A word used to describe the people in your network – other Twitter users.

Mr Tweet (<http://mrtweet.com>)

Mr Tweet is a service that recommends other Twitter users to you based upon who is in other people's network, and your relevant interests. If you are in another teacher's network, for example, you may be recommended to further teachers. This service also has the added feature of written recommendations from other users.

TwitPic (<http://twitpic.com>)

This is an additional tool that allows you to upload a photograph, add a message, and then post a link on Twitter, thus enabling you easily to share photos with your network. It's often used with a camera phone.

TweetDeck (<http://tweetdeck.com>)

A 3rd party application that allows you to manage and interact with your Twitter network. It provides a wide range of functionality, such as Group and Search columns, as well as being able to update Facebook, too.

Next issue I'll complete this introduction to Twitter with a variety of tried and tested classroom activities that will begin to harness the power of your newly formed network. We will also look into the impact Twitter can have on the learning environment, school and community (and see whether the magazine's sub-editors can come up with yet another tweety pun for a title!)

Why not follow me on Twitter @tombarrett and drop me a Tweet to let me know how you are getting on or ask any questions?

