



By Hadley Ferguson

the Flock!

Don't put yourself out on a limb. Build a professional learning network and watch links, blog posts, and other resources come to you.

A year ago, I had no idea what a PLN was. Before I built my professional learning network, I did all my learning by myself. If I needed to understand something for a new unit, I researched it on my own. That was before I discovered Twitter, the virtual meeting place where your PLN comes together.

A PLN is a community of individuals around the world who are learning together. They can start out as strangers, people you couldn't pick out in a crowded room. But Twitter helps these strangers come together to create a community built on communication and collaboration dedicated to making learning and education the best it can be.

Take Time to Build Your Community

The first thing to know is that developing a PLN on Twitter takes a commitment—not necessarily a huge one, but it does take some time. It is a bit like starting a new friendship: You cultivate a relationship by chatting over coffee in the faculty room or sharing an anecdote in the hall. It is the kind of commitment that causes you to pause rather than walk on, and that's what it will take to develop and maintain a PLN using Twitter.

The amount of time you set aside to build your PLN depends on you. It can be 10 minutes a day or an hour on a Saturday, but it is necessary, or you will never begin to learn from the people you are following.

As with any process, it can be broken down into several steps:

Set up your account. Once you sign up for a free account on Twitter, you'll be asked to write a 140-character bio and post a photo. It is important that you have a photo or avatar rather than simply the Twitter-bird default. That image makes you more real to your PLN. Also, make sure that you include in your bio what you are interested in, as people who are deciding whether to follow you will look at that to get a sense of what you care about. Mine reads: "History teacher, tech enthusiast, lifelong learner, Mom and Grandmom."

Learn to follow. Following someone requires nothing more than clicking the Follow button. Twitter then notifies that person that you are following him or her. It's a bit like offering a compliment. It means that you are interested in what he or she thinks. Generally, they will check out your profile and decide whether they want to follow you too.

When the people you follow post something, it shows up in your Twitter stream. Choose people you want to learn from. I look for educators, history teachers, and middle school teachers. You can search for a person you know in the Twitter search box, or you can search for keywords and find people who are interested in the same topics. Check out the person



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by reading the bio under the picture. Some people include their hometowns, their favorite sports, or their hobbies. Look for people you share a common interest with, whether it's an enthusiasm for baseball, lifelong learning, or ed tech.

I have one Twitter account set up for my professional development and one for my personal interests. That way, when I want to learn about teaching and new ideas about education, I go to my twitter.com/hadleyjf account. When I want to hear from the president or learn what is happening in Philadelphia, I go to twitter.com/hadleynana. For me, there is too much information to have only one account.

Tap into great lists. A good way to find people to follow is to check out the lists that other people create. A few of my favorites from fellow educators are: Shelly Terrell (<http://twitter.com/ShellTerrell>), Paula White, (<http://twitter.com/PaulaWhite>), Tom Whitby (<http://twitter.com/tomwhitby>), and Milton Ramirez (<http://twitter.com/tonnet>). They have identified people who are committed to learning and growing in a Web 2.0 world. Choose as many people as you want from their lists and begin to follow them.

Watch and listen. The wonderful thing about Twitter is that you can simply follow people and not say a word. Just read the tweets, click on links to blogs, and learn. There is no need to put yourself into the conversation until you are ready to be visible. You can spend hours and days lurking without tweeting anything. You never need to be the awkward person at a party, standing on the outside of a group, listening in, and wishing you could participate. On Twitter, all of the conversation comes to you. You are invited in from the start. The level of participation is up to you.

Very quickly, you will begin to find links to interesting blog posts or new tools for the classroom. It is a forum where educators post what they are thinking and what they stumble upon.

Give generously. The next step is to move beyond simply taking from the Twitter stream and start retweeting. When you retweet someone's post, it shows up in the stream of the person who posted it. That person "sees" you and will often thank you for sending his idea along. He may have no idea how many followers you have. He only knows that you liked what he posted. Often that person, or someone who follows him, will start to follow you, and you will begin to build your own following. The more you retweet, the more people will begin to follow you, because you will have made yourself visible to the PLN world.



Enhance Your Twitter Experience

Using a few tips and tools, you can transform your teaching and become a wise owl.

I have been encouraging teachers, students, and others to join Twitter and build their personal learning networks (PLNs) ever since I delved into this great social networking site last fall. Investing the time in Twitter has paid off in a number of wonderful ways. If it weren't for Twitter,

Ruggero Domenichini from New Zealand would not have taught my seventh grade Technology and Information Literacy class about his Web 2.0 tool, YouTellYou; Mark Moran, founder and CEO of findingDulcinea, wouldn't have taught my students and other teachers about his unbelievable online resource; our junior high students would not have participated in the award-winning Greetings-FromTheWorld wiki; and I wouldn't be as excited to go to ISTE 2010 in Denver (June 27–30) to see all of the amazing people I have come to know through their tweets.

Once you feel comfortable becoming part of the conversation, you might want to add a comment before retweeting the link or comment. Do this by typing something such as “Yes!” or “Gr8 idea” before you retweet. As you do this, you show yourself a bit more. If you want to remain invisible and simply learn without commenting, you can do that, but if you want to enter the conversation, then these are small steps to build your confidence. You can simply add “Good idea” with little concern that you might make a mistake, though from my experience, the educators who take time to have conversations on Twitter rarely point out mistakes. Even when there is disagreement, it is generally in the context of trying to provide the best for kids.

Expose yourself. This is where it can get a little scary, because the next steps require you to begin to expose yourself and your thinking. You can do a tremendous amount of learning without going any further, but there is so much more available if you share your ideas with the people who are now following you. Begin by tweeting the links to tools and sites that you find in your daily work as an educator. If you read a good article, copy the link and send it out. If you use a tool effectively, tweet about it. “Used Wallwisher with 8th grade today. Loved it.” You will develop the habit of including your PLN in your thinking. The wonderful part about having only 140 characters is that there isn’t much room to make a fool of yourself. And if you do, as I have, it passes quickly and no one remembers.

Tag your tweet. Using a hashtag—another word for the pound sign (#)—in your tweet will give it even more exposure. A hashtag will add it to the streams of the educators who follow that hashtag. Some of the education hashtags I find useful are #teachers, #educators, #web20, and #pln. When you add a hashtag to your post, more people will see what you are sharing.

At this point, you may find yourself becoming addicted to Twitter and to conversations with your PLN. Using Twitter to tap into my PLN has made my teaching suddenly come alive. I have discovered people who wanted to help me succeed or help me figure out what went wrong. When I have a question, I turn to my PLN and wait to hear back. It may seem like 140 characters does not allow enough room to communicate, but those few characters connect me to blogs and websites. Over time, I have built relationships with people I know only by their photos or avatars, but they are real people to me nonetheless. I look for them in my stream of tweets and recognize them as they scroll by. They are my PLN, and I am part of theirs. So join the flow of ideas and learning and watch it change how you see yourself as a teacher and your students as learners.



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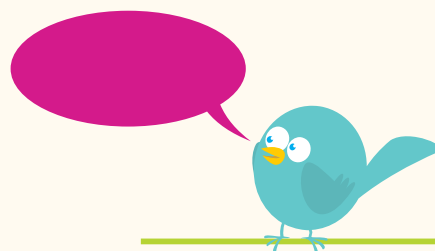
Once you start using Twitter, you’ll start reaping benefits such as these. For those who have opened up an account and dabbled a bit but still don’t see the point, I’d like to offer a few other tools and tips that can improve your Twitter experience.

Use a Twitter Organizer

Add a Twitter organizer or manager to your desktop such as TweetDeck (www.tweetdeck.com) or HootSuite (<http://hootsuite.com>). I prefer TweetDeck because I find it easier to use. Both of these tools organize your Twitter stream into columns, such as

All Friends, Mentions, Direct Messages, or any special lists or searches you follow. You can open as many columns as you want, and you can delete them at any time. I often have several columns open for my favorite lists.

Twitter users create discussion forums using a hashtag (#) followed by the topic. This allows you to search all of the tweets containing that hashtag, even if you aren’t following the person who sent the tweet. For example, when I compose a tweet and include my school’s hashtag, anyone searching for #vanmeter will see this tweet. It is a great way to share and connect



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twitter twerminology

Block: To deny a follower access to your tweets. This is not the same as unfollowing, which will only take their tweets out of your Twitterstream.

Direct message: A private tweet only one person can read, much like an e-mail. To message one of your followers (you must also follow him or her), type D and then the person's handle at the beginning of your tweet, or use the Direct Message button on your twapplication. You still have only 140 characters.

Follow: To add a tweeter to your list of Twitter "friends" so that their tweets will be included in your Twitterstream.

Hashtag (#): Discussion stream aggregating tweets on a given topic. Include this symbol along with a tag (e.g., #ISTE10) in your tweet to have it aggregated with other tweets on that topic. Search for established hashtags to see the ongoing discussions on those topics.

List: Twitter function that allows you to compile your favorite tweeters by topic (e.g., ed tech tweeters) to share them with others. Your lists are viewable to anyone who follows you, and others may add you to their lists without asking your permission.

Lurk: To read tweets from your PLN without participating in the discussion or sending out your own tweets.

Microblog: To blog in short bursts, such as the 140-character updates that Twitter limits you to.

Mistweet: To accidentally send a tweet to the wrong person or through the wrong Twitter account.

Reply (also @reply): Tweet in response to others' tweets by putting @ before their Twitter handle at the beginning of your tweet.

Retweet (RT): To repeat someone else's tweet to all of your followers. You do this by putting "RT" at the beginning of others' tweets or by using the Retweet button on the Twitter page or your twapplication.

Twaffic: Traffic on Twitter.

Twapplications: Applications (such as TweetDeck or HootSuite) to make it easier to use Twitter.

Tweeple: Twitter users. See *twit* and *tweeter*.

Tweeps: Your PLN posse of friends who follow you on multiple social networks, including Twitter.

Tweet: Message sent via Twitter.

Tweeter: Twitter user. See *twit* and *tweeple*.

Twit: Twitter user. See *tweeple* and *tweeter*.

Twittersphere: The entire community of all Twitter users.

Twitlectomy: The act of unfollowing and/or blocking a follower.

Twitterati: A-list tweeters with thousands of followers.

Twitterstream: The continual, chronological stream of tweets from the tweeple you follow.

Twitticisms: Witty tweets.

Twittiquette: The etiquette of the Twittersphere. Includes such rules as thanking those who retweet your tweets and retweeting others' tweets rather than passing off the resources they tweet as your own discoveries.

Unfollow: To stop following a person so that their tweets no longer show up in your Twitterstream.

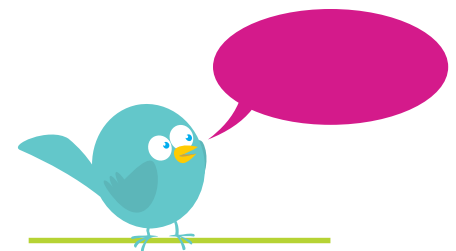
within a certain group and to connect with others interested in the same things you are.

I have met a lot of my Twitter friends by searching for hashtags such as #followfriday (giving shout-outs to fellow Twitter friends on Friday), #followalibrarian, and #edchat (see *L&L*, May 2010, "Exchange Ideas on Edchat," page 33).

You can also create and follow personalized lists of people through your Twitter account. These lists might be your own PLN, a list of all of the Twitter users within your school, or all the authors you follow on Twitter. You can also follow other users' lists by adding them to your TweetDeck or Twitter page.

If you are new to TweetDeck, you might not have noticed how easily you can send replies, retweets, and direct messages simply by hovering over someone's profile picture. Click the retweet button next to a tweet that you like, and the message automatically appears in the update box. You can also send replies and direct messages this way.

Another advantage of using an organizer, as opposed to the actual Twitter site, is the increased functionality. You can compose updates, add a column, send a picture, shorten your tweet to 140 characters using TweetShrink,



You can also
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personalized lists of
people through your
Twitter account.



TweetDeck allows you to view several columns at once. You can see direct messages, monitor tweets from your tweeps, and follow a conversation using a hashtag.

and translate a tweet from a foreign language. These organizational applications also allow you to manage Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, and MySpace all from one place. You can even send an update from multiple places at once.

Manage Tweets with a Bookmarklet

In the past when I would find a great resource to share, I would send out an e-mail. If my recipients wanted to share the information, they would, in turn, forward the e-mail. Now when I find a resource to share, I use the bookmarklet Hootlet, a tool within HootSuite, and send a tweet. Merely drag Hootlet to your bookmark bar or your favorites list, and it will allow you to easily send tweets to any of the accounts (Twitter, Facebook, etc.) you have linked to your HootSuite account.

Say, for example, that I find an online elementary book site that I would like to share with my Twitter friends. When

I am at that site, I click on Hootlet in my bookmark bar. It brings down a box with a tweet already created. It also shows the different accounts I have tagged within my HootSuite. I can send the tweet out like that, add to it, or edit it before I send it to my followers. I can add a hashtag or even mention another user within this tweet.

Be Strategic

Once you start tweeting on a daily basis, it's good to take stock of what you are tweeting. I love using the formula that Angela Maiers posted on her blog Putting Learner and Learning First. In the post "Twitter Engagement Formula," she writes, "70% of Twitter time should be spent sharing other voices, opinions, and tools; 20% of tweets should be directly responding, connecting, collaborating, and co-creating with Twitter colleagues; and 10% is chit-chatting trivial details about your life as a human being."

Don't assume that this Twitter business made sense to me at first. I gathered some strong resources about Twitter, added several key friends I found by networking through Twitter and other social networking tools, and jumped right in! I love how this tool has helped me build my PLN and make connections with others all over the world.

Resources

HootSuite: www.hootsuite.com
 Putting Learner and Learning First, "My Twitter Engagement Formula": www.angela-maiers.com/2008/09/my-twitter-eng.html
 Shannon Miller's Diigo list of Twitter resources: www.diigo.com/list/shannonmiller/twitter-resources
 TweetDeck: www.Tweetdeck.com



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