

# A Case for Twitter

BY DAVID HOBBS



**I**n the fall of 2011, my school had an emergency: a student went into a seizure in the cafeteria. “Teachers, please keep students in your rooms. We will make another announcement when you may release your classes.”

Was there a fight? Is this a lockdown? During my momentary panic, I would guess three minutes at most, every one of my students (who were still sitting in my classroom) knew what happened. Many were receiving periodic updates on the situation. The teachers were clueless.

What was the difference? Twitter.

Twitter represents the duality many educators see at the junction of technology and classroom practice. Undoubtedly it offers unprecedented avenues for communication and collaboration. When used properly, it has the capacity to mitigate school emergencies, offer dynamic and relevant learning opportunities, and create new webs of communication. It can be a tool for professional development, networking, and vast levels of interactivity. Tweets, however, can also be insensitive, inappropriate, hurtful, and illegal. They can disrupt instruction and

diminish school culture. They can pass through the walls of the school and open doorways to both learning and liability.

Twitter has built its reputation on names like Lady Gaga, Bill Gates, and Jimmy Fallon. But set aside celebrities and Twitter's scope for a moment and think about that situation in the cafeteria. One could argue that it merely exposed a generation gap or that I should be more strict with classroom policy. However, the truth was more than that: *students had found a faster and more effective way to communicate—not because of my help, but in spite of it.*

Twitter is powerful and it is also indicative of a technological crossroads in our schools; we are faced with a critical mass of users and devices, an evolving level of access and equipment, and an increasingly complex social and political landscape. These trends have affected both teaching and learning and have also exposed a gap between what schools are and what they can be. What follows is an exploration of Twitter as a platform for dialogue, collegiality, and instruction in our schools.

### Twitter as a PR Platform

School leaders know that if they aren't the ones creating the public narrative, it will be created for them. In this effort, administrators can turn toward Twitter as a vehicle for direct communication with their respective stakeholders. As Joly (2009) notes, "It can help individuals and institutions reach out to their network to share info, request help, organize, and update everyone in real time" (p. 39). Using Twitter as part of a comprehensive public relations plan provides three distinct benefits. First, it provides an accessible and interactive platform of communication for all stakeholders in the organization. Second, Twitter offers a medium of communication that builds upon the expectations of its consumer. Twitter takes advantage of the tools and expectations of a student body equipped with ubiquitous access to media and interactive communication. Last, the use of Twitter is an act of institutional branding. Schools that use Twitter are perceptibly engaged in a purposeful evolution of communication as a means to reflect their collective desire to engage in a 21st-century dialogue.

The first step is to use a Twitter account that reflects your professional identity; this can be as an organization or as an individual. "Administrators can establish a personal, professional, or district-wide Twitter account—or all three—and use it to communicate important messages with the community, cel-

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ebate their district's successes, reach out to teachers within their district, and connect and learn from administrators nationwide" (Herbert, 2012, p. 52). As many stakeholders will be particularly interested in only a slice of school or district communication, your messages should be sorted and filtered through the use of hashtags. The # symbol, called a hashtag, is used to mark keywords or

topics in a tweet. Twitter users created it as a way to categorize and follow specialized message threads—for example, #olympics, #myschoollunch, or #whatsforbreakfast. Using this tool, audiences can "tune in" only to the topics that are of interest to them without having to sort through irrelevant information. Moreover, this technique gives students, parents, and community members a voice on narrow issues, expanding the feeling of shared decision making and ownership in the school community.

School-related hashtags have emerged on virtually any topic imaginable. One of the broadest and most well known is #edchat, which covers topics ranging from school policy to technology to bullying to lesson planning. Herbert (2012) notes that "nearly 100 specialized educator chats have evolved as a result" (p. 51). Hashtags can be created by any user and offer varying levels of both specificity and purpose. Undoubtedly, this is only scratching the surface of specialized communication. It should come as no surprise that schools can designate hashtags for their athletic events, announcements, clubs, organizations, professional development, emergencies, and information for staff members.

Another benefit of Twitter as a public relations tool is that it is easily measurable, providing a way for administrators to gauge their own success, failure, or stagnation. For example, Twitter can measure statistics related to followers, tweets, replies, comments, etc. This information can be interpreted qualitatively, reflecting ongoing dialogue with students, teachers, and staff. Perhaps most powerfully, it can be used pragmatically to document actual policy and program improvements based on ongoing feedback while offering a public record of policy changes and institutional adaptation.

### Twitter for Professional Development

As the opportunities for individualized education have increased exponentially in recent years, the vehicles for teacher training have remained relatively stagnant. Using social media as a component of a comprehensive professional development plan offers teachers the flexibility and personalization that they strive to provide to their students. It also provides teachers with the

incentive and motivation to use these tools. As a result, it builds an institutional capacity for 21st-century learning.

Using Twitter as a vehicle for professional development establishes a collegial environment that breaks down the physical and time constraints that hamper teacher-training efforts. "The thing about Twitter is, it is a continuous source of self-directed professional development ... It's almost a gateway to deeper and richer communication and enrichment" (Lu, 2011, p. 20). However, many have questioned the depth of communication that is possible via Twitter. For example, Demsky (2010) justifiably observes that "with its limit of 140 characters per tweet, dotted by a jumble of insider code, and a seemingly limitless network of users posting new tweets by the second, Twitter can be a difficult tool for new members to navigate and operate effectively" (p. 16). In response to the need for more in-depth communication, Twitter adopted the use of "bitmarks" as a way to deepen conversation. Bitmarks offer a simple benefit: they automatically create shortened URL links that allow users to reference web pages without taking up valuable space. This tool allows users to link to audio, video, and other multimedia content while staying well within the 140-character limit of the Twitter platform. Administrators can use this capacity to tweet out staff surveys, academic studies, instructional videos, policy updates, daily announcements, and even the lunch menu. Bitmarks also provide the esthetic benefit of avoiding exceedingly long and complex hyperlinks that are common in other forms of interaction.

Twitter provides a venue to access the expertise and experience of those outside of the building. Whether it is an opportunity to observe other teachers or collaborate with classrooms in another district, state, or nation, schools can open up teacher training to a world of expertise and interest. For example, departments can use Twitter to elicit feedback on booklists, create reading schedules, or coordinate themes vertically throughout a district. Schools can develop and share summer reading lists with districts around the country by following national book awards or bestseller lists. Herbert (2012) gives advice on how to begin building these networks: "The first thing to do is start following credible sources ... [S]tart with formally credited sources, such as departments of education across the nation, and get as many different sources of information as possible. You want to build your library and personal information feed." As you become more comfortable with the platform it is easy to establish a flexible collegial network. "Follow people and sources you find to be the most perti-

nent. Users are not notified when you unfollow them, so if they no longer provide you with relevant information, unfollow them and find others" (Herbert, 2012, p. 53). As such, communication undergoes an organic evolution based on shared interest and expertise.

As a contrast to its flexibility and adaptability, Twitter offers a platform whereby teachers can create lasting relationships with colleagues. "Teachers have traditionally networked through conferences. A drawback from those meetings ... that once they are over, the connections often disappear" (Lu, 2011, p. 20). To mitigate the loss of both connections and inspiration, Twitter can offer a bridge between conferences or devoted professional development time. School leaders and conference presenters can keep conversations running through continual Q&A forums or faculty discussion boards. Curriculum coordinators can offer hashtag conversations as sounding boards for classroom practice or department policies. Twitter offers a structure through which these connections can remain and evolve until the next opportunity to meet. Furthermore, if the discussion becomes stagnant or repetitive, participants have the opportunity to leave, expand, or alter the discussion however they wish.

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#### Twitter to Teach

Embedded in our instruction needs to be a communication framework that addresses the ethical, social, and educational realities that spring from 21st-century technologies. For example, Common Core State Standards focus on the responsible use of relevant tools, stressing the notion of a digital footprint, the reality of cyberbullying, and the permanence of online content.

The benefit of using Twitter as a tool for instruction reflects this vision; it is a real tool that is used in the real world. Furthermore, it offers a platform from which teachers can explore some of the ethical and social dilemmas that social media present. Twitter provides a relevant teaching method and potential for inventive classroom interaction. Gill (2009) notes that "it is also a way of getting two-way communication going with students, many of whom keep up with the latest technological developments and are avid users of it already" (p. 16). Within the classroom, teachers can use Twitter for feedback and interaction. They can take advantage of hashtags to engage students on a specific topic or class (e.g., #hobbsblock1). They can also create realistic or fictional situations whereby students can respond to prompts or dilemmas, even phrasing their messages in the voices of characters.

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The performative nature of Twitter sets it apart from many other classroom tools. It allows students to engage in learning that is authentic, public, and generative. “I think that to perform in front of your peers is a really powerful motivation. It’s possible to feel powerful and skillful in front of your peers. I think if media, if technology can make certain forms of performance that thirty years ago you would need a studio to produce, I think that has real potential for engaging kids” (T. Newkirk, personal communication, August 8, 2012). For example, student products, videos, conversations, and debates can instantly be transferred from classroom to classroom in real time. Dialogue can emerge around different perspectives and student projects, independent of time and location. Lessons and units can be shared and compared between teachers, and all classroom participants can engage in learning that is collaborative, authentic, and global. Twitter can foster a capacity for students to take control of their own learning, where students eclipse the role of mere consumers of content to become producers of learning experiences.

It is also important to note Twitter’s capacity to promote inclusion, clarity, support, and a sense of classroom community. As an example, Wright (2010) detailed a case study of pre-service teachers using Twitter as a platform for instruction. The study initially took note that “a common criticism of this microblogging service ... was that it led to vacuous, inane and limited postings” (pp. ?). However, the group was struck by the support structure that developed as a result of their interaction. When conversations became difficult, “participants were buoyed by the rapid replies from their peers.” Additionally, “supportive posts were highly valued, reducing participants’ feelings of isolation and emotional overload.” The platform “reduced isolation and supported a sense of community” (pp. ?). The study also noted that the 140-

character limit of the platform became a benefit to discussion and interactive dialogue. “While they found the 140-character limit initially restricted their ability to explain ideas, it focused their thinking to reflect purposefully on their experiences” (pp. ?). As with any classroom tool, Twitter’s capacity for distraction and fragmentation should be balanced against its potential for unification and motivation.

### Back to the Classroom

It is helpful to bring this exploration back into the context of our situation in the cafeteria. As our teachers watched the PA system and waited for information, stuck in our own little bubbles and unaware of the larger picture, the students waited for us to catch up. Unfortunately, the students still are waiting for us to catch up. They are waiting for us to find more efficient and informative ways to communicate. They are waiting for us to share our practice and develop new expertise. They are waiting for us to become better learners.

The case for Twitter is a small but meaningful one. It involves sharing these stories and reflecting on our shortcomings as well as our accomplishments. It involves questioning our own practice, taking some risks, and, potentially, stumbling a bit. It encourages us to work in real time with a collaborative and global audience of peers. It is a case that demands as much from us as we demand from our students.

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