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FEATURE

Why All the Chatter About #EdChat?

How administrators can sift through the noise to find their voice on Twitter and refine their personal learning network.

By Marion Herbert — District Administration, April 2012
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On Feb. 23, Steven Anderson, instructional technologist for Winston-Salem/Forsyth County (N.C.) Schools, celebrated his three-year anniversary—on Twitter. Anderson began exploring Twitter in 2009 as a way of finding people with



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similar interests, opposing views, and resources on integrating technology in the classroom to share with teachers and staff in his district of 57,000 students.

In 2009, Twitter, the social-networking platform that allows users to post content up to 140 characters in length, was gaining momentum. Users produced nearly 100 million tweets per quarter the year before—a 250 percent increase from 2007. During this time, Anderson began connecting with educators Shelly Terrell, a foreign language teacher working in Germany, and Tom Whitby, a retired English teacher turned education professor at St. Joseph's College in New York. These three Twitter pioneers saw the education conversation evolving on Twitter and wanted to organize it for other educators to join. Terrell suggested using a hashtag symbol, a Twitter feature that when prefixed to a word flags your post so any Twitter user can read it by searching that same word. With that, #edchat was born. In 2012, #edchat continues to garner more followers each week, and nearly 100 specialized educator chats have evolved as a result. Twitter has grown to more than 600 million users, and while it may seem as though tweets about Justin Bieber and what celebrities are eating for lunch have cluttered the Twitter ecosystem, educators continue to connect, share and learn through this medium.

Although arguably one of the most popular education conversations to follow on Twitter, #edchat is hardly alone. Hashtag conversations have been popping up over the last few years, and many have caught on for specialized conversations on elementary schools, technology, professional development, mobile learning, principals and administrators, among others.



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Most principals and other administrators on Twitter acknowledge that there are more teachers on Twitter than administrators. It is unknown whether that is due to the simple fact that teachers outnumber administrators, or to the greater likelihood that younger and more tech-savvy teachers use Twitter more than typically older administrators do, or to some other factor, but almost all agree that getting administrators to use Twitter is an important move. Administrators can establish a personal, professional or districtwide Twitter account—or all three—and use it to communicate important messages with the community, celebrate their district’s successes, reach out to teachers within their district, and connect and learn from administrators nationwide.

The Rise of #EdChat

After its inception in 2009, #edchat garnered a few hundred followers. Through Twitter, Anderson, Terrell and Whitby set up a chat to meet each Tuesday.

Soon after, the live chats grew to include thousands. In 2010, #edchat peaked as one of the top 10 trending topics on Twitter. Although it originally met at 7 p.m. Eastern Standard Time, a noon chat was set up for educators overseas. #edchat quickly established itself as the education hashtag.



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Discussions on #edchat widely run the gamut, says Whitby, from bullying to bring-your-own-device policies, reform ideas, teacher evaluations and flipped classrooms. As time went on, many followers wanted deeper conversations on subjects pertinent to them, such as special education and teacher issues. “Some people want more specialized chats for their specific subject, focusing on administrators, special education, the grade level they target, etc. We think these Twitter chats evolved from what we started. We created the foundation,” says Anderson.

How to Build Your PLN

Twitter isn't just about participating in social media; it's about continuing with your personal learning network (PLN) and growing it. Besides Twitter, many administrators turn to other social media platforms, including Facebook and LinkedIn, to reach out to their colleagues to stay on top of current issues and mandates in K12.

Sharon Irvine, executive director of human resources for Ypsilanti (Mich.) Public Schools, says she has used Twitter prolifically in her human resources role and in her former role as a principal. “The first thing to do is start following credible sources,” she says. “Start 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.” In doing this, she continues, you are building a news feed of reliable information that can lead you to other users who may weigh in on topics that are important to you.

One way to gauge the influence of someone on Twitter is to view their Klout score. Klout is a Web service that measures users' online influence based on their ability to drive action. On Twitter, for instance, the number of times folks reply and re-tweet messages indicates they are impacting the conversation greatly. ASCD, a membership organization, formerly known as the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, that

develops programs and products that are essential for educators, is one of the most influential voices in education on Twitter. ASCD scored a Klout score of 56, which, albeit is relatively low when compared to Lady Gaga's 93, but very high when equated to average users, like a certain *District Administration* editor, who scored a mere 22. ASCD has proven its message on Twitter is valuable to many, and visiting the Klout Web site can allow users to view the scores of other people they intend to follow.

However, a high Klout score isn't everything. Administrators must be sure the content they are receiving is important and relevant to them. On his personal blog (blog.web20classroom.org), Steven Anderson wrote a three-part series in September 2011 on the ins and outs of using Twitter as an educator. In "What I Wish I Knew before I Started Twitter," Anderson addresses users who wish they knew how to find people and build their PLN.

Lurk and Learn |lərk/and/lərn| *Verb* **1.** The act of creating a new Twitter account, although initially remaining somewhat inactive. **2.** Taking time to find relevant people to follow and learn how others engage and interact on Twitter.

Re-tweet /twēt/ *Verb* When a twitter post is so informative, edgy, hilarious, or innovative that you feel compelled to, in turn, re-tweet it to your followers.

"Another thing people may not understand is the idea of quality over quantity," writes Anderson. "You don't have to follow 1,000 people to get a huge amount of meaning out of Twitter. Rather, choose people who provide value to you."

Likewise, how many followers you have is somewhat irrelevant. "Remember, you can follow folks and they may or may not follow you back," writes Anderson. "That's okay. I see more and more people who are worried about followers. Worry about the information you want to gain while here and forget about the other stuff."

Derek McCoy, principal at the rural West Middle School in Montgomery County (N.C.) Schools found that, with time and patience, his PLN grew naturally. "When I first joined, I was mostly kicking around a new tool, like trying the tires out on a cool new car," he says.

McCoy says he began just looking for resources and then

gradually started sharing resources as well and participated in hashtag chats. He then began engaging in a chat, #edfocus, that is generally tagged for discussions on reforms and followed by principals and administrators. This connected him to Justin Tarte, assistant principal at Poplar Bluff Junior High School in Missouri. McCoy says he became deeply involved in book discussions geared toward administrators and reform movements on #edfocus, which led him and Tarte to organize a chat with education researcher Robert Marzano.

“I couldn’t believe that I was going to have a chat with Marzano on his book,” says McCoy. “I really felt my Twitter experience had come alive. I’ve learned more about education leadership on Twitter than any PD in the world could have done. Once you develop your PLN, you can take that information to your schools.”

Your PLN will take continuous refinement. Follow people and sources you find to be the most pertinent. Users are not notified when you unfollow them, so if they no longer provide you with relevant information, unfollow them and find others.

Moreover, it is an efficient means to consumer news and information. “The character limits and the ability to customize the profiles I follow allow me to get exactly the news I want—everything from national resources like ASCD to my local chamber of commerce, to the teachers in the next room, all pushed to me in short, real-time snippets,” says Bridgette Wagoner, director of educational services in the suburban Waverly-Shell Rock (Iowa) Community Schools and sitting member of ASCD’s legislative committee. “Iowa educators are very active on Twitter, and I feel more informed and empowered than ever before because of this. For example, here is a major education reform bill being considered by our state legislators. On a daily basis, I follow updates from lawmakers, get opinions from teachers and school leaders, and interact with our State Director of Education Jason Glassia.”

Wagoner says her district used Twitter while it implemented a 1:1 iPad initiative. Through Twitter, they connected with a school in

Scotland and a high school in Massachusetts going through a similar transition to share information, feedback and policies. “I recommend every educator get on Twitter,” says Wagoner. “The connections and resources I have constant access to have provided me with the best professional development.”

Beware of the Digital Footprint

Although exact numbers and percentages are



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unknown, there are fewer administrators on Twitter than teachers. Tarte believes this could be in part due to the fact that there are simply more teachers than administrators overall, or the generation gap. For those who do join the conversation—and Tarte feels there is a larger push for administrators to join—being aware of your social media presence and digital footprint is vital.

“I’m very aware of my digital footprint, and I encourage my teachers and students to be aware as well,” says Scott Taylor, assistant superintendent at Kennilworth (N.J.) Public Schools. Taylor says he is vigilant about keeping track of who follows him, as there are many Twitter spammers who follow accounts and potentially have viruses.

Some administrators advise creating multiple Twitter accounts, such as an account for personal use, an account for your school or district at large, and a professional account for you individually. Taylor says he teaches seventh-graders each marking period about using social media responsibly and plans to have a professional development session for teachers the first day of school this fall to discuss Twitter and appropriate uses.

Influencing the Conversation

To use Twitter practically within your district, many administrators advise remaining focused on your mission, whether it is to celebrate successes in your schools or to gain and share resources, and not to get distracted by using it as a platform

for professional advancement. Taylor specifically says he won't use Twitter as a platform for PR. "I'm not in the business of picking up thousands of followers," he says. "I'm sure teachers would be turned off if they saw I was using it as a marketing tool and not genuinely about fostering conversations."

The community of educators on Twitter is growing rapidly. Although some users feel it could reach more constituents, others are wary of expanding it too far. "I don't think Twitter will ever be a change agent," adds P.J. Caposey, principal of Oregon High School in Illinois. A self-proclaimed #edchat enthusiast, Caposey recognizes that Twitter is limited in terms of its ability to influence political change in education reform and that users need to be open to following different views and to use it less as a platform for personal gain.



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"Twitter isn't anonymous; it's always good PR all the

time," says Caposey. "People are often intimidated by taking a certain stand on issues. People who are using it as a tool for professional advancement aren't truly trying to get both sides of the conversation. It's those who don't who are truly looking to expand their personal learning network." Whitby, however, prefers that #edchat and the entities that it has spurred remain a sounding board for education professionals and not an open discussion for all constituents. "Sometimes when you engage people who aren't educated on the issues or have a stake, they're there to just sound off on certain topics, and it detracts from the conversation." It's standing as a trending topic on Twitter is irrelevant to Whitby, who feels the tweeting education community is definitely strong and thriving.

"It's very important for the reform movement that educators remain connected," says Whitby. "You find that problems that are common to you are common to others across the nation. We have to be lifelong learners and teach children to be lifelong learners. We need students to know that they need to learn more than I or any one person can possibly give them, and being connected is

how they can get that information.”

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