

## In the Classroom 34

# Using Twitter to Fuel Your Personal Learning Network

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**Stan Skrabut:** Well, welcome back. Thanks for taking time to hang out with me again. You know how much I appreciate it. You could be doing certainly many other things but you're hanging out with me. Maybe you're doing other things, but you're still hanging out with me and I really do appreciate it.

This week, we are going to continue our conversation about weaving Twitter into the classroom and how it ties into your personal learning environment, and that's specifically what we're going to address today. Before I start, there is a couple of things that well, I think are important. One or some of the beliefs that I have. First of all, I believe educators should be learners first and teachers second, that we should be continuously learning and improving our craft every single day. Twitter happens to be one of those tools that I use to fuel my personal learning environment.

My other belief is that learning is about dialogue and that you should be having a conversation either with the content or with others to keep your learning going. That learning happens in that space that there has to be dialogue and Twitter is a great place to have that dialogue that you can be communicating with anyone in the world and so let's get started.

First of all, what is a personal learning environment or a personal learning network, both, personal learning environment, personal learning network? Wikipedia defines a personal learning network as an informal learning network that consists of the people a learner interacts with and derives knowledge from within their whole personal learning environment, and in that personal learning environment are all those different tools, all those streams of knowledge that you bring in, those interactions. This is really tied to connectivism where you are connecting with other people in order to build knowledge.

I use a personal learning network in my learning environment to share ideas with others, to gain ideas from them, to share the ideas that I have, as a place or research where I can learn about new things and take deep dives into different content and really just about learning new things. That's what I use a personal learning network and I have many different feeds that are coming in and Twitter happens to be one of those prominent tools that I use.

I also use a tool called Feedly where I link all my blogs to it that I'm following and I get information that way, but I have many tools. Twitter happens to be one of those primary tools and I have set up a system in order to keep reviewing it and gaining information because frankly all these folks that are out on Twitter are sharing amazing content and

so you want to tap into that so you can continually grow and learn new ideas that can improve your classroom.

I think, to improve your classroom, it has to start with you, that you have to be open and receptive to new ideas but you also have to have a conduit to get to those new ideas and Twitter is extremely powerful for that. To make Twitter work it really starts with people, it starts with building your network of all these different people that you're going to basically follow and interact with to help you grow.

Where do you find these people? One, it can start out with blogs that you're reading. If you find somebody out there that you're reading their blog, you're resonating with what they're sharing, you like their ideas, see if they have a Twitter address, go to their address and then from your Twitter account simply follow them. Click on follow and then any time they're sharing things you're going to be able to see it. A little bit later here we're going to talk about that not only should you be gaining information, but you need to also interact with people and we'll talk about that in a little bit.

Starting out with people who you resonate with, who are providing great ideas that you want to follow them. There's lots of ways to follow them. Twitter is definitely one of them and we're focusing on that. This could be at a conference. You go to a conference, find out if they have a Twitter handle, what their Twitter account name is, their Twitter handle and add that to your list and follow them. You will find out that these people will also follow you back in many great cases. Now some they have hundreds and thousands of people that are following them and they probably not following all of them back but you can certainly follow them and gain great ideas.

Another place to find people to follow is to go to a friend of a friend of a friend. Basically you look at the people that an account is following or who's following them, you click on both of them and you'll get a list and from that list, you can start indicating that you want to follow certain people.

Now, before you do that, I would probably do some investigating. I would read their bios and look at their feeds to see if it's, in fact, something that you want to follow. Are you going to gain benefits from connecting with them in this way? But that is a way to go. Look at who is following or the people that you're following who they're following. Wow, a lot of following going on there holy smoke. Just look at the different groups, who they're following and who's following them and see if any of those people would be worth looking at and watching.

When you start following people, definitely go global. There are certainly a lot of folks that are in our niche, that are in our specific disciplines that you can follow but you will gain so much more if you expand your network to a global reach. See how other folks in our discipline are doing things in other countries and getting their perspective. At the community college I'm working at, one of the things that's very prominent in what we do is we have a global touch to the courses, that we want to think globally.

Well, Twitter is great way to start doing that that you will get a sense for how people are doing things in different parts of the world simply by following what they're posting in Twitter. You want to make sure that you set up your rules for who you're going to

follow. If they're not adding value, don't follow them. What are your rules for doing this? Do they have to be an educator? Do they have to be in my case, instructional technologist?

I think that I follow people that provide value to me. I have to also remember that it's not just a one-way situation, that I'm not just taking from them but I also want to give back and so that's also part of the equation and hopefully folks gain things from me as I'm going forward.

After a while, if you're contributing to the Twitter-verse you're going to have people that want to follow you. They're going to follow you because they're curious on what you're sharing or you're adding value which is what we're trying to do, you're adding value, you're adding to the conversation. With that, look at them, follow them back and develop relationships.

You're going to find if you get in really involved into this Twitter, you're going to have conversations with people back and forth. Then you're going to meet up at a conference and it's like meeting old friends. It's really cool when you start getting into these conversations with people that you've only known virtually and then you meet up face to face, it's a wonderful experience.

There is a sense of balance so Twitter is trying to help keep a balance. It doesn't want you to get too skewed one way or another. But if you want to go out and follow a thousand people who are in your discipline go ahead and follow a thousand people in your discipline. Twitter will let you know if you're running foul of their following people. The other day I was trying to follow-- I was just going through my list to see who is following me and I wanted to start following people back and apparently I did it too quickly because Twitter put the breaks on me but I went back an hour later and I was able to start following people again. They don't want to automate that following and conversation.

The key to this whole personal learning environment, first of all, it's personal. There are no rules for how you set this up. It's an informal learning environment. You set it up any way that you want. There's is no right or wrong way to do this but there are some strategies that you may want to consider to doing this.

If you're brand new to Twitter, you may want to be a lurker right away, somebody who sits in the background and just follows conversation. You're just going to start following people and reading what they're saying. Nothing wrong with that. That's why they have the term lurker. You are just lurking in the conversations. At a certain point you're just going to want to get involved. You're going to see something that you really like and you want to share it with others,. That's usually the progression, that you see something that you jump in and you start sharing what other people are posting. That's a great way to get started.

Another thing that you're going to want to do is also respond. That individuals go out and they make a post, you like it, you want to add to the conversation, so you respond, that you reply to it, perhaps thanking them for making that post and adding some other

value to the conversation that helps to keep the conversation going. That is a way to continue.

You start off lurking, then you're into the retweeting, now you're responding to them.

The next point is to add your own content where you find information or you wish to contribute information and you go out and make your own post. That's like the normal progression as it's going forward. You're very much encouraged to add things. It could be that you're documenting your learning journey, you're learning new things, you just simply want to share with the world because that's what educators do, that's what instructional technologists do. They're out there working with others, sharing the information that we have gleaned over the years and making it very useful.

When you do this, I would strongly encourage that you set up a listening post or like a command central that you want to put together. I use a tool called TweetDeck, I use for setting up my personal learning environment. In TweetDeck, I have columns for anytime anyone mentions me I can see that so I can respond more readily. I also have columns for searches that I've put together. Anytime I think somebody mentions a certain hashtag that I will see that pop up in my stream, I have a column dedicated to that hashtag. These are things that you can do that any searches that you're putting together, that you put them, create a search in TweetDeck to do this.

Now another tool that you could use is called Hootsuite. I will link these into the show notes as well as other articles that I think are relevant, speaking about this personal learning network. You set up this-- Initially, you're setting up a listening post, but this tool will allow you to retweet posts, to respond to post and to create your own posts very easily. You'll find very rapidly that people will start following you, they'll be interested in what you have to say. Those are tools that I recommend.

As you're working along, you're going to continue wanting to expand your network, you're going to have key people that you're certainly following and you may want to set up a list of key people and put that into your TweetDeck so you're following anytime they post something that you get it right away. But when you are working on your audience, first of all, they're going to be looking at your bio to see if you're worth following. Make sure that you flesh out your bio, tell them what you're interested in, what your field of study is. You can also pin a tweet on your personal page that will stay there. That may be a way to add to that description.

As I also mentioned, continue to share other people's work, be a sharing type of person. If you see something that resonates with you that you found interesting, maybe they're sharing an article or something like that, make sure that you retweet it. If you find a post online, maybe that you went to a blog post or a news article, there's often a tweet button associated with that, click on that button and it will be ready to tweet. All you have to do is add some additional value. Why did this post resonate with you? Why are you sharing it? Just add that and send it on out.

You can also send images and video as part of this. Share your own work. Very often, we only talk to 30 people at the most in our classroom, that we're only sharing the cool stuff with 30 people. Share it with more people, share the things that you're writing. If

you happen to be out there blogging, make sure that you share your blog posts. If you're writing a book, share that. Get the word out about what you are doing.

These things, open up additional opportunities, you can be asked to come and speak on a podcast or at a conference based on what you're sharing in the classroom. I mean, I've run across some very skilled educators who are doing amazing things in their classroom who other people could certainly benefit from, but were not sharing. There's an article and I can't remember who wrote it right off the top of my head, but he mentioned that at one time, the phrase "Knowledge is power" held true. That you know the person who had all the knowledge, everybody in the organization would come to them to get that coveted knowledge so they can move forward.

Well, that is switched now. The sharing of knowledge is power. You can see this across the Twitter-verse that those individuals who readily give or share information are being sought out. They are out there, in the public view, sharing their wisdom and other people are glomming on to that. If you have all this coveted knowledge that you're holding close to your chest, I think you're going to find difficult, more difficult than these people who are readily giving it away. There's always more. The cool thing about knowledge as the quote says, if you give it away, you still have it. By spreading this, it becomes more powerful.

That's in part why I'm doing a podcast. Sharing these lessons learned that I've learned over my time, my existence. If someone benefits from it, I'm all the more happy, so that's why I do it. The other thing about this idea in Twitter and being out there is that it is about the sharing, it's about talking with people, it's the interaction. Interact with people, be part of that dialogue with people and you will just learn that much more.

Figure out hashtags. Hashtags are not hard, use hashtags, create hashtags, and you will help with this conversation. Put those hashtags into your TweetDeck or Hootsuite so you can follow them. That helps to filter the conversations. That's kind of important. Like I said before, kind of go outside what you would consider your logical network. You're going to gain other ideas from these other networks. Think of it as people that you're following for personal reasons and professional reasons. New ideas come from the interaction of those two groups.

The last thing that I want to share comes from some of the benefits. This is an article that Mike Korea wrote in 2014. It's *Eight things they don't tell you about personal learning networks*. I thought it was worth sharing and so I will. One of the things that he pointed out is that because of his learning network in Twitter, he can ask questions to that Twitter-verse related to his class and have people from all over the world participate and this adds engagement in his classrooms because he's able to tap into this world of knowledge. People are surprised how he gets to know all these different people.

He also pointed out that he understands more of the daily lives of people in different parts of the world. It gives him a glimpse, it gives him an idea of these different cultures and how things are the same, but different. This helps with this worldview that the more you know about somebody, the more that you begin to appreciate them and the cultures that they live in. I think we need this as we go forward.



Also, every country they teach in, they have different ways of teaching. We can get locked in, this is the way that we need to teach, but frankly, other places are successful or even more successful than we are in the classroom. It would be great to be able to tap into these ideas. With Twitter, you have that capability. You also get to challenge your own views and your teaching styles because of all the different input that you are receiving. You will have new ideas, and it gives you an opportunity to challenge how you are thinking about certain topics.

I get this while I'm listening to podcasts. As I'm listening to these podcasts, it's like I'm getting exposed to new ideas that are making me rethink my present world view of things. This is kind of exciting. As he mentioned, he specifically said, "I'm more in touch with and less apathetic about the political situation in places around the world." Because he's exposed to real people in real places, he's more in tune to what is happening than simply picking it up on the news. He's gotten to know these people, he's gotten to talk with these different people, and it's making more of an impact. This is something that you can bring also to your students. He has been exposed to different foods from around the world that he's willing to try and has a better understanding of time zones.

Finally, he said that travel and conferences are now more fun because he is built this network, this virtual network of people, and he may run into them at a conference where he gets to meet them face-to-face, and this is exciting opportunities. This is why I think also personal learning networks fueled by Twitter are really important. They're easy to set up and they're very much automated, that all you have to do is go look to your little command central, in my case, it's Tweetdeck, and here are these columns of information based on things that I want.

I wanted to follow these people, I wanted to investigate this term, and do some more research, and I can do that. I can automate it further. I can use a program called IFTTT, and I can gather all the tweets around a specific hashtag or a specific search phrase. This can feed into your research, that if you're interested on how people are reacting to some situation, you can set up various search terms and feed them into spreadsheets, and then do some more qualitative research around them. It's something that you can do.

All I know is that Twitter is very prominent in my personal learning environment, my personal learning network, these people that I have followed. I am constantly picking up new ideas and things that I later use in my work environment. I encourage you to set up your personal learning environment and go do that. We are at the end of this session. Before I go, I want to put in a little plug for my book.