

Professionally Tweeting

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Introduction: The Good and Bad of Twitter

According to the *New York Times*, Twitter, an online social networking tool which began operations in 2006, now has over 160 million users across the globe (Miller & Vega, 2010). With this huge user base comes both positives and negatives. First on the negative side, Twitter has the potential to be extremely annoying. It gives the tweeter (person who sends a tweet on Twitter) an instant, pervasive and global platform where they can post thoughts which, in many cases, should not be allowed to escape from their brain. These kinds of postings have been labelled as 'vacuous, inane and limited' (Wright, 2010) because of the 'triviality of most people's updates' (McFedries, 2007). This is summed up in an article in *Time* magazine which writes, 'the one thing you can say for certain about Twitter is that it makes a terrible first impression'. Taking some real tweets as an example, a recent check of Twitter (November 1, 2010) revealed the following 'inane' information:

1. A woman tweeted that she was excited to find out that a new episode of *Glee* was on TV tonight, but then became disappointed when a friend told her it was a repeat.
2. A man sent a tweet to all his followers to say that he had too many tweets to read today.

Twitter also has the potential to be dangerous. An *abclocal* news article from 2009 highlighted an unfortunate situation where a man decided to send out a tweet to his followers that he was going away on holiday. He got back to find his house robbed. It was not proved that his tweet directly led to the robbery, but sites such as *pleaserobme.com* are trying to draw attention to the fact that posting location information on sites such as

Twitter, Facebook and Foursquare can have dangerous consequences.

So it is perfectly understandable for the individual who doesn't want to tweet irrelevant information, and/or offer their house up for a potential break-in, to avoid ever signing up for an account. But Twitter is more than just a haven for 'junk' information and personal details. There is at least one reason why considering becoming a 'tweeter', sending your first 'tweet' and 're-tweeting' for the first time could be a wise decision: Twitter can be an excellent platform for building up an online Professional Personal Learning Network (PPLN). This article will explain what is meant by a PPLN, why Twitter can be a good platform for such a network and how to go about setting one up.

What is an online Professional Personal Learning Network?

Similar to an offline network of friends, colleagues and relatives, an online Personal Learning Network is a community of people who interact to benefit the individuals involved. Web based tools, such as Twitter, Facebook, personal blogs, wikis, email services and Instant Messaging services (IM), can all be combined into a highly personalised 'network' of online tools for social communication and collaboration. People can network with other individuals to learn more about food, health, music, movies, education, science, politics, finance or virtually any number of other areas of interest. The network is created and controlled by each individual so that they are streamlining into their network only the content that they want to be involved with. In the 21st century, the biggest advantage of online PLNs is that they are easily accessible and highly mobile thanks to the introduction of 3G and Wi-Fi Internet access on mobile devices.

A 'Professional' PLN is one which streamlines the personal network into one used mainly for professional development, where the individuals can collaborate on issues which directly concern their particular careers.

Why is Twitter a good platform for a PPLN?

Twitter is free, global, easily accessible, simple-to-use and extremely popular. All of these features have led to it being used by

some of the most influential people and biggest companies and organisations in the world. In general (but by no means always) the big industry names and organisations use Twitter to build-up favourable online reputations, so you will usually find their 'tweets' to be informative and valuable. The tweets may contain links to interesting and useful websites, information about upcoming events, mentions about other people's or companies' blogs and homepages, or just short and simple comments, opinions and views. In relation to the English teaching world, Twitter can be used to directly connect with ELT professionals such as Scott Thornbury, Jeremy Harmer, Mark Warschauer, Dave Sperling and Chuck Sandy, and organisations such as IATEFL, The British Council, The TESOL Association and Guardian Education.

Using Twitter, you can instantly connect with these people and organisations for free and start building up your own specialised network of learning. You can start and stop following anyone at any time which gives you the freedom to personalize your network to your current interests. For example, you may currently be interested in the use of technology in language education so you can start following Mark Warschauer. You can then check to see who he is following and who he is being followed by and if any of those people or groups interest you then you can add them to your own Twitter PPLN. Later on you might feel that you are getting

too many junk or irrelevant 'tweets' from a particular person or group, which is clogging up your tweet feed (the list of tweets that appears on your homepage), so you decide to stop following them. This 'following' and 'un-following' is done by clicking on the specific button under each person's name.

As you begin to follow people, they may begin to follow to you in return. It is a good idea to start sending out some professional tweets, even if you don't have any followers yet, because people can read them and make the decision on whether or not to add you to their list. If you already have a professional online presence in the form of, for example, a website or blog, then you can add a link to your Twitter feed so that tweets on Twitter appear on your blog and people can link through to the Twitter homepage and start following you. You can also give your Twitter username at the end of professional emails or comments on professional blogs so people can connect with you. Slowly, your own Professional Personal Learning Network begins to take shape as you carefully choose and moderate who you follow, who follows you (you can 'block' unwanted followers) and where you link to your Twitter account and Twitter feed in the online world.

How to set up a PPLN on Twitter: Step by Step

1. Sign up for a free Twitter account at www.twitter.com (click on the yellow 'sign up' button on the right of the page).

Choose your username (sometimes called 'Twitter handle') carefully as this is what will identify you across Twitter and across the online world when you make any links to your account on your own blog or other people's. Some people use their real full name for easy identification, others use a shortened name and still others use a nickname. The choice depends on your feelings about having your information out in the public domain and whether or not you want to be easily identified.

2. If you are new to Twitter then, on the homepage, go to the help section (found in the dropdown menu by clicking on your username) and read through the 'Twitter Basics' section which explains all about tweets, re-tweets, hashtags, direct messages and also how to set up your mobile device to link with your account for mobile tweeting.
3. Use the search box at the top of the page to find people and organisations you want to follow. Alternatively, find them through links on their blogs and web-pages or recommendations on other sites.
4. Check the tweets that the person or organisation has sent out recently and decide if you want to follow or not. Click the green + button to start following or select 'block' from the drop

down menu under the 'gear' tab to un-follow someone.

5. Start making your presence felt online by sending out some tweets, leaving comments (with links to your Twitter site) on other people's blogs, linking to your Twitter account through your own blog, and signing off on professional emails with your Twitter username. Only link through personal blogs and sites such as Facebook if you want people to be reading your personal online information. Slowly you will begin to get followers and you can keep track of these by making sure you are signed up to get email alerts when someone starts following you. Use this service to moderate your followers and block people who send out advertising and spam tweets.
6. Regularly conduct 'housekeeping' on your Twitter site by moderating people you follow and people following you. Use the 'lists' function to streamline tweets from a particular subsection of the people you follow. Keep track of who is 're-

tweeting' your tweets and 'mentioning' you through the tabs at the top of your homepage.

7. Always remember to be careful with the information that you send out into the online world, such as personal details, photos and location information, because this can sometimes be used by others in unexpected and unpleasant ways.

Making Twitter Work for You

Twitter, in just its 4 year history, has become one of the most globally used social networking platforms. Whilst this undoubtedly leads to some negatives, in the form of unending irrelevant and inane tweets and the potential for personal information to be comprised, it also offers unquestionable positives for any individual who takes the time to personalise and moderate their tweet feed (the stream of tweets that each individual receives). An informative, mobile and easily-accessible Professional Personal Learning Network can be set up in minutes, for free, and this learning network can prove invaluable in the professional development of the individual involved.

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