

Twitter for Twitchy Teachers

(A common sense guide)



This guide is intended for schools or teachers considering or already using the social networking service, Twitter, in the school. It does in no way constitute legal advice and is to be used as a guide only.

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Introduction

Have you been thinking about getting onboard with this social networking hype? What is it, what do you get out of it and what should you be aware of?

This guide is intended to be a brief introduction specifically for school staff (teaching and support) that have been thinking about delving into social networking, specifically Twitter.

There are lots of positives and a few negatives to using Twitter not only in school, but also as a personal account if you work in a school.

Hopefully this guide will balance some of these positives and negatives so that you can make an informed decision; have a browse through this document and if you're still not sure give it a go; the bottom line is that if you don't try you won't know. If you try it and don't like it you can always delete your account.

What is Twitter?

You'll see a few names attached to this: a micro-blogging site; a social network to name two. Essentially they all mean the same thing. Twitter is a service that delivers bite-size chunks of information in 140 characters or less and allows you to connect and engage and collaborate with others for a variety of reasons.

You may hear the phrase "the Twitter stream". A great metaphor I read somewhere (sorry, I can't remember where) explains the stream as follows: think of tweets that people send out as drops of water in a stream. If you are standing at the side as the stream goes by don't be concerned by every drop of water in the stream. In other words, don't worry about the ones you missed, you don't have to continually keep up with every tweet.

Why Twitter?

So, why would you want to use Twitter?

Here's a small list of reasons.

1. One of the best uses of Twitter in a school environment is a "broadcast" account. This is a one-way flow of communication to parents and/or students and can be used for many things: news and events, important information, informing parents of homework set and deadlines. The only boundary is your imagination.
2. Collaboration – use a school account to work together and share ideas between the teacher and pupils. Or you could collaborate with other teachers about lesson plans etc. You can also collaborate with schools from another area or another country (think languages).
3. Creating polls – Twitter is a great way to get feedback and for polls either from the students or from parents.
4. More and more schools have to become like businesses; you have to market yourself. Use a Twitter broadcast account to showcase the great work you and the children do amongst your community.

Again, this is just a small list of ideas, but you can see the list could be endless.

Twitter as a PLN

One of the greatest uses of Twitter is a Personal Learning Network (PLN). Personally I have learned so much from so many people on Twitter; information and research that would have taken me hours or days to find gratefully handed to you by like-minded colleagues. Even information I didn't think I needed!

Granted, it can be a bit of information overload but you have to discipline yourself into switching off sometimes.

Twitter in School or Personal Use?

There are different things to think about depending on how you intend to use Twitter, i.e. as a personal account or professionally within school as a tool for learning and collaboration.

For personal use - it is a great way to keep in touch with people: friends, family, colleagues; and also to meet new colleagues, find out what is going on in your area, keep up with local and national news, your sporting heroes etc. One of the downsides to information that is so public is that messages can be taken out of context. There is many a debate for why you should or shouldn't use social networks for just this reason from colleagues, self-proclaimed experts, unions, local authorities and many more.

The bottom line is this: use your common sense; understand that your information can potentially be seen by anybody (but see "Private or Public" below), so think before you press send. Could your post be viewed as controversial, derogatory or inflammatory?

For school use – the same theory as personal use applies, however there is much more to think about here. There isn't anything difficult but you have to understand the risk to the school rather than just the risk to yourself. I have previously written a brief guide about policy, liability and safe use of Twitter in schools and have re-emphasized that in the e-Safety section towards the end of this guide (you can download the full guide at <http://www.esafety-adviser.com/twitter>).

Setting up an account?

I considered writing a full overview along with pictures on how to set up a Twitter account step-by-step but to be honest this would be insulting. Go to <http://www.twitter.com> and set-up the account. It really is as simple as that. But before you do read the sections below on "Public or Private" and "Picture and Bio"

Public or private?

When you set up your account you get the option of having your tweets public or private. This is completely down to your personal preference but essentially means this:

Public: your tweets will be public to everybody, not only through Twitter but also

through search engines like Google. There's no problem with this, as long as you

remember that your chats and tweets are public.

Private: your tweets cannot be seen by anyone unless you follow them and they follow you. People you are not following cannot DM you (see below) and your tweets cannot be re-tweeted (RT).

Picture and bio

When setting up your account consider what you are using the account for. Do you want your personal picture up there? As you use Twitter more and more you tend to recognize accounts by their picture so it isn't a good idea to keep changing your own. Many people don't like to put up their own picture but it does give a more personalized feel. Again, consider what others may think of the picture; a suggestive picture of you on your latest 18-30 Ibiza jaunt is probably not the greatest idea if you are a teacher!

Your bio also says quite a bit about you. When people follow me I look at their bio first; if the person (or company) sounds interesting then I will follow. If the bio is blank or is clearly somebody trying to sell me something I don't follow. Again your bio will be dependent on what you are using the account for.

One thing to consider if you are using Twitter for a personal account; ensure your school is happy if you intend to use the school name. School policies should include in their policy what they are happy for staff to do (or not do) and should set the boundaries whether you are using a school or personal account.

Following and Etiquette

Some may say that it is considered polite to follow anyone that follows you. I don't buy into that theory. In the same way that I go to a party, I don't suddenly become friends with all the strangers just because they were at the party. As I mentioned above if the person's bio looks interesting then by all means follow, you can always unfollow later.

On that note of unfollowing don't take it personally if you are unfollowed by others. Sometimes this is deliberate for a variety of reasons, sometimes Twitter has a glitch and unfollows people for you. It can be frustrating sometimes as people may see that you have unfollowed and take offence.

When you do follow others or they follow you and you follow back, I always try to make

the point of engaging with them and say hello. Others do this with an automated Tweet which I find very impersonal. Others, especially companies, will send you an auto-DM back directing you to the great products on their website, or asking you to “Like” them on Facebook. This is my pet hate!

The fundamental point of a social network is to be social; you can apply your own theory to this. Personally if I have tried to engage with someone or a company a few times and I don’t get anything back, they get unfollowed as clearly they are on Twitter for ulterior motives or are just basically anti-social.

The Basics

To get you used to using Twitter you need to be aware of a few basics. The rest you will pick up as you go along:

@replies – if a tweet has @esafetyadviser in it I will be notified when you send it. You can use this to engage directly with me, or if you reply to something I have said you will see that it automatically gets put at the front of the tweet when you press “Reply”

DM – this stands for Direct Messages. These are private messages between you and the person that you want to receive the tweet. Other people that are following you cannot see these messages. In order to send a DM you have to be following that account, and they have to be following you.

N.B. Twitter has been know to have a “glitch” every now and again where DM’s are made public. Be careful what you send!

RT - This stands for ReTweet. If you want to share what someone else tweeted with all of your followers, it is only polite to give them credit by including “RT @(username)” somewhere in your message. When you press “Retweet” their username is automatically added.

Twitter and the law (defamation etc)

The law has always had difficulty keeping up with technology, and this is also true of social networking. However we are now starting to see “real-life” law transposed to “virtual life”. The days of there being a distinction between real life and virtual life are

pretty much non-existent now.

Whether using a personal account or a school account it is important that you and the school have an understanding of the law in this context.

Here are a couple of examples:

Section 127, entitled "Improper use of a public electronic communications network" says in subsection (1) that it is an offence for a person to send a message that is grossly offensive or of an indecent, obscene or menacing character over a public electronic communications network. It is this subsection that the above tweeters all fell foul of.

Joshua Cryer, a law student, was convicted after posting a series of racist tweets aimed at the footballer Stan Collymore. The judge determined they fell into the category of "grossly offensive" and sentenced him to a two-year community order.

Joshua Cryer, 21, admitted using the social networking site to bombard Collymore with abuse in an attempt to "snare a celebrity" by provoking a reaction.

He was charged under section 127 of the Communications Act of sending grossly offensive messages, which included racist taunts, to the former England player. He was sentenced to a two-year community order with 240 hours' unpaid work and ordered to pay £150 costs to the court.

Liam Stacey, a 21-year-old biology undergraduate at Swansea University, pleaded guilty to a charge under the Crime and Disorder Act of making racially aggravated comments.

Lisa Jones, prosecuting, told the court: "Fabrice Muamba collapsed on the pitch and was believed to have died. Shortly after, Stacey posted on Twitter: 'LOL, Fuck Muamba. He's dead'." Stacey is due to be sentenced this week and has been told he could be jailed.

The prosecutions demonstrate the determination of law enforcement agencies that what occurs online should be subject to everyday rules and regulations.

e-Safety – Policy, Liability, Safe Use

This section is more relevant if you are using a Twitter account in or for school use.

Policy

When I say policy schools can apply different names; the ICT policy, internet policy, acceptable use policy or e-safety policy. Although some schools do have separate policies generally these all refer to the same thing - the appropriate and inappropriate use of ICT equipment within school (whether school or personally owned), plus the appropriate and inappropriate use of school owned ICT outside of school.

Within any policy there will be the "Acceptable Use" section; invariably this will be the page that is put in the home/school agreement or put on the school wall. The wording in this part needs to be written concisely and clearly in a manner appropriate to the age of the user.

If a school starts to use social networking whether by staff or by the children it would be advisable to create a social media policy or embed it into your current policy. Again, there doesn't need to be anything complicated about this; a clearly written and concise page will suffice which can then be used as a school agreement between school/staff member and school/student.

School Liability

There are certain liabilities on any school when you open up new services such as internet use, email facility or social networking. The easiest way to explain this is to use an example. A teacher is using Twitter in the classroom; the children are working collaboratively using a particular hashtag each sat at a computer. Out of the blue one of your followers posts a particularly nasty tweet and includes the hashtag, it also has a link to an inappropriate image. The children click the link and are horrified. They go home and tell their parents and some of the parents decide to group together and sue the school. Not only that the media are outside the front gates the next morning. Who is liable, the teacher or the school? Ultimately it is the school (there is a slight difference with academies but that's not for here). That example may sound a little extreme but it isn't outside the realms of possibility (a hacked account?). The point I am making is that the school has facilitated a service and children (or staff) have been subjected to emotional distress. You could also think of this in terms of cyberbullying, harassment, malicious communications. It doesn't matter, the school holds the liability.

Child Safety

Aside from education the most important part of school life is that of safeguarding the child. In the context of using services such as the internet, social networking etc. we are talking about e-safety. By opening up these channels you are potentially allowing communication on a 24/7 worldwide basis therefore it is vital that e-safety is considered.

Many will try to complicate this but actually the advice surrounding any service is essentially the same. Risk assess and mitigate, if you can't mitigate the risk is there another way to achieve something similar? If the risk is high and you can't mitigate or do something similar, you can't do! This is what puts many schools off using ICT services, the apparent fear of the unknown or the incorrect assumption that they're not "techie" enough.

The bottom line is this (in my opinion): children cannot be wrapped up in cotton wool. The dangers of the internet, Facebook, social networking in general are sometimes blown way out of proportion. Using the analogy of driving, there are real dangers on the roads. These dangers don't stop us from driving, neither do they stop us from taking the children in the car. Whether consciously or sub-consciously we risk assess, we drive safely, we don't use our mobile phone, we don't drink and drive. By applying some simple rules we are as safe as we can be.

For the vast majority of Twitter users the same is true, they will have a trouble-free digital life and by the application of some simple "lifeskill" rules the safety of the child and the liability upon the school will be a low risk assessment.

Using Twitter Safely

In terms of child safety and school liability of using Twitter there are limited but effective options; a locked (non-public non-searchable) account or an unlocked (public and searchable) account. By default Twitter is a social networking service and is therefore unlocked (public).

By locking your account you can prevent people from following you automatically. In effect you are "vetting" users. It also means that your tweets are not public and are not searchable. The tweets you post are only viewable by the persons you have approved to follow you.

Here are a couple of important tips:

1. Twitter states that its service is not directed to persons under the age of 13, therefore you can create accounts for under 13's but ensure you have parental consent before you do so and that the account and profile do not reveal any personal information.
2. You are what you tweet!
3. Although you (or the school, see below) owns the account, Twitter retains the right to use, copy, reproduce, process, adapt, modify, publish, transmit, display and distribute" your tweets. However, they are your tweets and they belong to you (or the school).

User Agreement

So, after all that, what we need is a user agreement. A simple document (or page) that outlines the dos and don'ts. If the children are going to be using Twitter I would recommend spending 30-40 minutes letting them come up with the user agreement with a little steering from you. This builds in a sense of empowerment and trust.

What you will see is that there are many similarities between what you have already (hopefully) in your home/school acceptable use agreement and therefore you don't actually need a separate document.

It could be that you are only using a school Twitter account within the school, however by coming up with an agreement you are empowering the children to be good digital citizens rather than "here are the rules for Twitter".

Here is what you should be considering; each of the points should be discussed with the children so that they understand them:

1. Never post any personal information (give examples such as age, hobbies, phone numbers, where they live, photographs etc).
2. Never post anything that you would find upsetting (bullied/bullying).
3. If you find anything upsetting, don't reply, tell an adult you trust.
4. Be careful who you talk to, not everybody is who they say they are.
5. If somebody asks you to meet them in the real world, tell your parents or an adult you trust.

In terms of adults using Twitter the above would be common sense however the school policy should go a little further in order to mitigate any risk of liability to the school. For example:

1. You will never be derogatory to any person or bring the school name into disrepute.
2. You will never engage knowingly with a pupil outside of school.
3. You will retain a personal/professional boundary at all times.
4. You will never post pictures of the children or refer to them at any time.

e-Safety Summary

There are plenty of schools that are using Twitter as a fantastic teaching and learning tool - safely! Whilst there are risks of safety and liability you are able to mitigate these risks with some very simple steps:

1. Carefully consider what you are going to use the Twitter service for and also what type of account you want (personal school endorsed or school owned).
2. Ensure that the appropriate use of these accounts are written into the school policy.
3. Empower the children with the knowledge to become safe and responsible users, in other words good digital citizens.

If you have any questions or comments on any of the above, or if you would like me to expand any further please let me know by dropping me an email to:

alan@esafety-adviser.com

If you've got this far, thanks very much for reading and I hope you have found some of it useful 😊

Alan