

TWITTER FOR TEACHERS

A slightly leftfield look at how to use Twitter.

BY
 **sparky teaching***
TEACH WHAT COUNTS

Please feel free to leave this subtly lying around on your staffroom coffee table as a form of ninja CPD.

PART ONE: THE SKITTLEFALL

By way of apology for what is to come and a nod for being good sports, here is a plug for both Skittles and Ben and Jerry's. Both are wondrously tasty.

This PDF is based on a series of posts entitled 'Twitter for Teachers' that we posted in August 2014. It is intended for three groups of people...

- those who aren't on Twitter and don't see what the fuss is about
- those who are new to Twitter and want to get the most from it
- those who are trying to persuade colleagues to get on board and want something vaguely lively to show them by way of persuasion...

So, rather than doing this the usual, boring, way we're going to attempt this through the medium of Skittles (Twittles, so to speak). Sweets can be very persuasive.



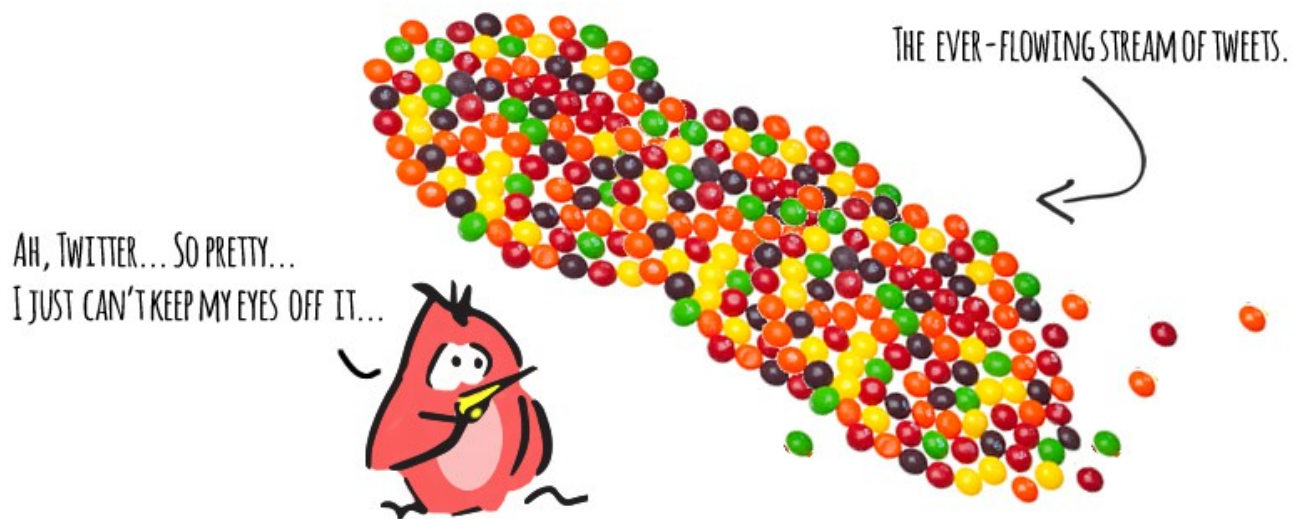
Here goes... Let's start with a simile...

1) TWITTER IS LIKE A WATERFALL (OR A SKITTLE-FALL).

Imagine a constant stream of Skittles like a waterfall. This is, in essence, what Twitter is like. You think we're idiots? Google "Skittles" and look at what's in the description for their homepage. "An endless color stream of bite-sized content." If that doesn't describe Twitter, we don't know what does. There's method in our sweet-based madness.

Unless you search specifically for something, you see what's being talked about at that moment (in real time). Reading tweets is the Skittlefal equivalent of sticking your arm out and getting a handful of candy to munch on. Sometimes you get good stuff, sometimes you've missed it because it was tweeted earlier. The advantages of such an immediate method of communication are clear — for example, Twitter is fast becoming the place to go for news (if there is an earthquake somewhere in the world it will often be tweeted about long before it is ever mentioned on TV news). Another advantage (particularly for teachers) is that you can tweet a question (e.g. "Any creative ideas for my English lesson on myths tomorrow?") and get responses pretty soon after.

One disadvantage, however, is that a constant stream of Skittles can be rather distracting...



2) EACH TWEET IS LIMITED.

Each tweet is limited to 140 characters. This includes things like punctuation and spaces, so a tweet saying: "Hello world!" would be 12 characters long (10 letters, a space in between and an exclamation mark on the end). Presumably the point of keeping things brief is to ensure the more verbose of us don't write whole essays...



3) WHAT YOU SEE DEPENDS ON WHO YOU FOLLOW.

Unless you go searching specific people or subjects, your Twitter feed is very much dependent on the number of people you follow and how often they tweet. If you only follow your Auntie Marge who was persuaded to sign up to Twitter one Christmas afternoon and hasn't been on since, your waterfall of Skittles will be non-existent. Similarly, if you follow as many people as you can, you'll get to a point where you'll have too many tweets to read. This principle of "what you see depends on who you follow" is important to remember when it comes to subject matter too. If you find the tweets you're reading are very argumentative, it's because you've chosen to follow some argumentative people. If they feature too much talk about teaching, try following some non-teachers to balance things out. To follow someone, search for their Twitter page and then click the blue 'Follow' button..

FIG. A
FOLLOWING TOO FEW PEOPLE.

I'VE BEEN WATCHING THIS SCREEN FOR THREE DAYS NOW... COME ON, AUNTIE MARGE, TWEET SOMETHING!



FIG. B
FOLLOWING TOO MANY PEOPLE.

MY EYES...



4) WHO YOU FOLLOW DEPENDS ON WHAT YOU WANT TO SEE.

So, having decided to give Twitter a go, you'll want to find some folks to follow — from famous people (the blue tick by their name shows that they're "the real thing") to your own colleagues or friends. The teaching community on Twitter is huge and very much alive and kicking. There are thousands of teachers out there tweeting fantastic websites, sharing ideas and writing blogs. Like any group of human beings you'll find some that only want to talk about themselves, some that love a good argument and some that just want to quietly take it all in. Our advice: find those who inspire you, make you smile and get you thinking.

If you want to start off with someone, we're @SparkyTeaching — tweet us a message too and we'll help you on your way. To give you some idea of how we use Twitter, we try to steer clear of those who tweet mind-numbing updates in an official capacity, folks who tweet about how wonderful they are and argumentative types, instead choosing to go for more positive people, websites and companies. We follow loads of teachers, creative types (poets, artists, websites that post art), we try to follow new teachers (try to encourage them with RTs, ideas and so on), companies/websites we like the ethos of and no politicians whatsoever! But that's just us!

Each person's Twitter feed is different. It's really easy to think that what you're seeing is what everyone on Twitter is seeing, but it's a feed of your choosing. If everyone on your feed is talking about their kids, it's got something to do with the fact you chose to follow a load of parents. Never be fooled into thinking your Twitter feed is it.

To give you some ideas, we've made a list of some of our teaching Twitter recommendations. It's called Sparky's Skittles! It's a work in progress at the moment (33 members at the time of writing), but you can do two things with it. Firstly, take a look at the folks on the list and follow those who sound interesting — here's the list of names: <https://twitter.com/SparkyTeaching/sparky-s-skittles/members> Secondly, even if you don't end up following any, take a look at what they're tweeting as an example of how Twitter can be used to share great ideas: <https://twitter.com/SparkyTeaching/lists/sparky-s-skittles> It's just a taster and we've missed off many inspiring people.

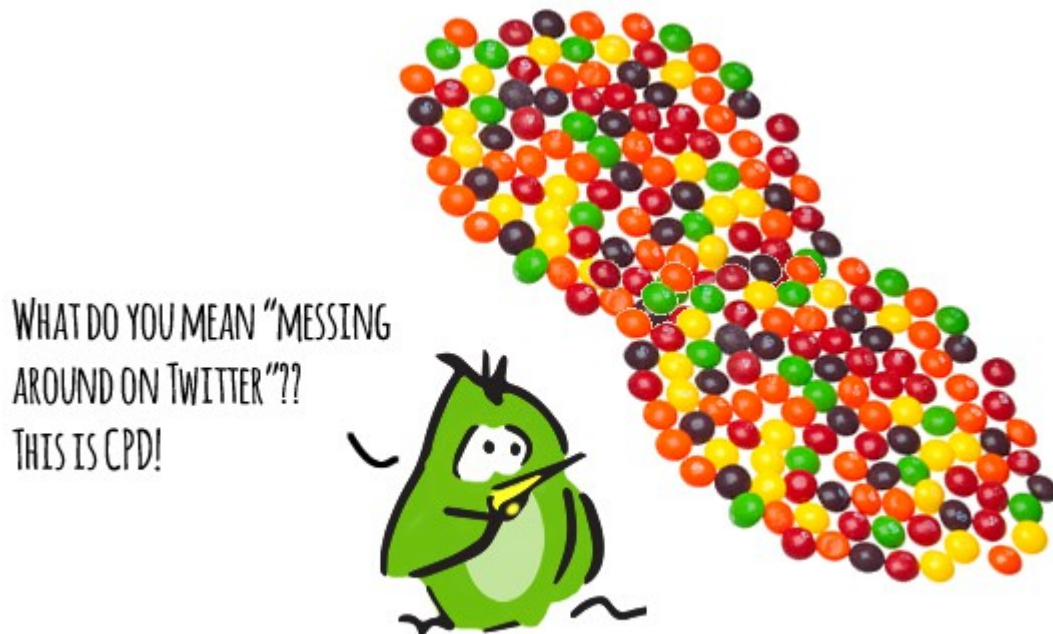
How do I get followers of my own?

There are a few ways to do this — some people will automatically follow you back if you follow them, for example — but the best is to put interesting content out there with a hashtag on there so people can see it. If you think of a great idea for a lesson, tweet it with the hashtag #SparkyIdea and we'll retweet it for you. Also, make sure that your Twitter bio (and name) makes people think "They sound interesting". And, whatever you

do, get rid of your default Twitter egg avatar — put something else there instead — it's the most visual thing that makes you you on Twitter.

5) SO WHY SHOULD TEACHERS USE TWITTER?

It's probably fair to say that (along, perhaps, with Pinterest) teachers have commandeered Twitter more than any other profession. It's a source of professional development, whether recognised officially as such or not and most teachers on Twitter could rattle off many examples of how Twitter has helped them develop as a teacher...

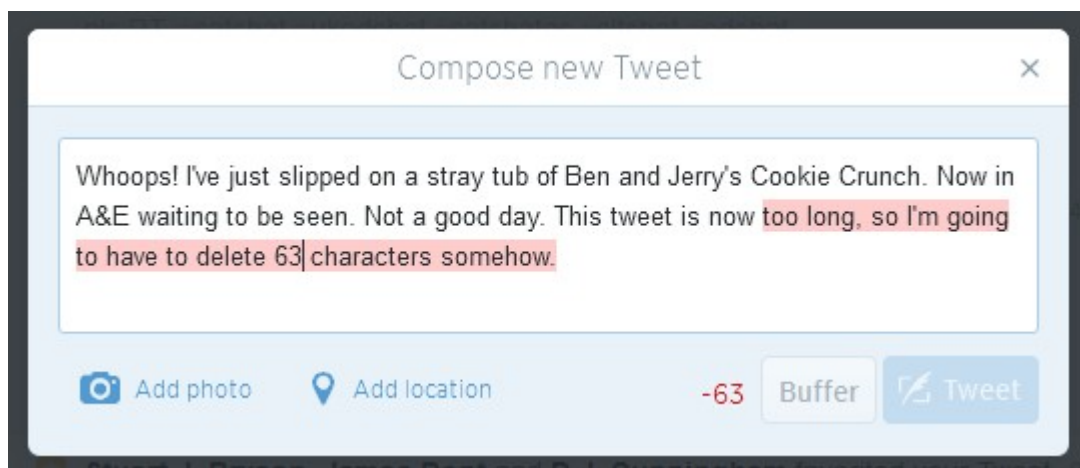


Here are some scenarios when Twitter might be useful to you as a teacher (these are all based on real-life tweets we've seen)...

- You're a sucker for a good teaching idea
- You're a sucker for sharing the good teaching ideas you've had
- You're teaching Photosynthesis next week and you're looking for inspiration
- You've got an interview and want some ideas of potential questions
- You find it inspiring to talk with teachers who think the same things you do, wherever in the world they're based
- Twitter has just shown you a completely new way of planning / teaching / marking
- You like to keep abreast of the latest resources, news and policy in Education
- Your class have done some brilliant art work and you want to share it
- Your class have started their own blog and you want to encourage visitors
- The inspectors are in tomorrow and you want to know what to expect
- Your school/class have their own Twitter account that you use to communicate with parents (showing off work, sending home information, building your school community, sharing your ethos)
- You want to use Twitter to get a new job (seen this done, not sure how successful it was, though!)
- You're doing a project and you want to use Twitter to tweet in the guise of William Shakespeare
- You want your students to take celebrities' badly-spelled tweets and correct them (a Brazilian school did this as a way of learning English!)

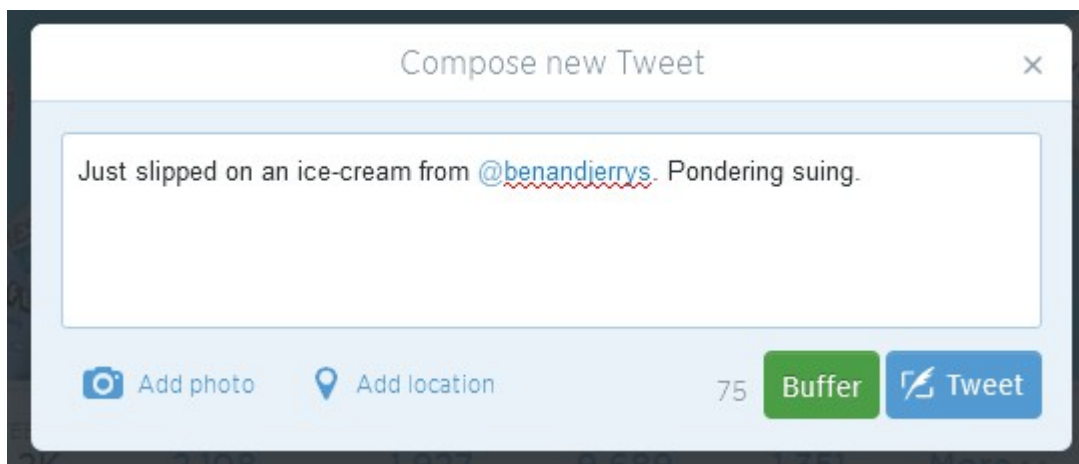
5) YOUR SKITTLES

Theoretically, you could use Twitter just to glean from other people (and many users do), but to get the most from it, try tweeting yourself... Add your own shiny Skittles to the waterfall, so to speak. It's easy enough to tweet — just type your message in the "Compose new tweet" box and click "Tweet". If you go over the 140-character limit, it's easy enough to see...



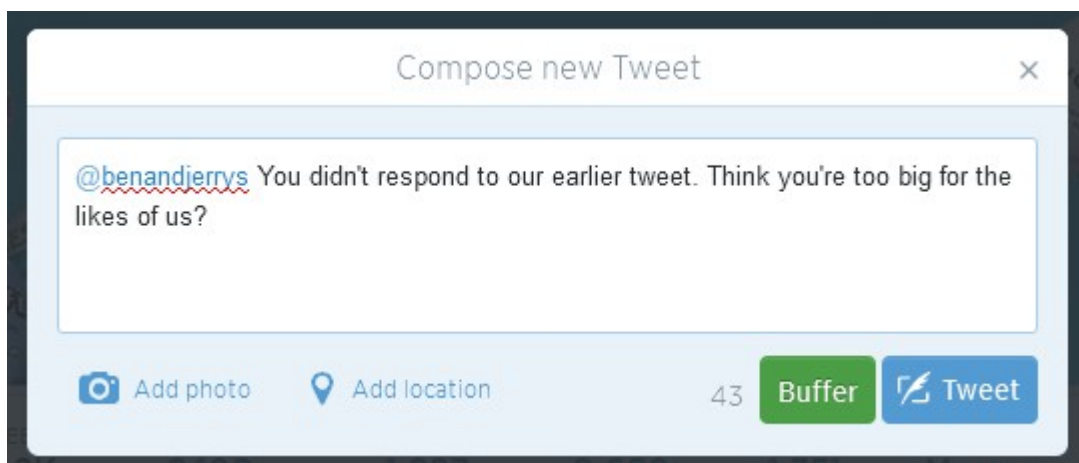
And then you face the challenge of working out which grammatical or spelling mistake to make in order to get it down to the correct size!

To get someone's attention, type their Twitter name in your tweet...

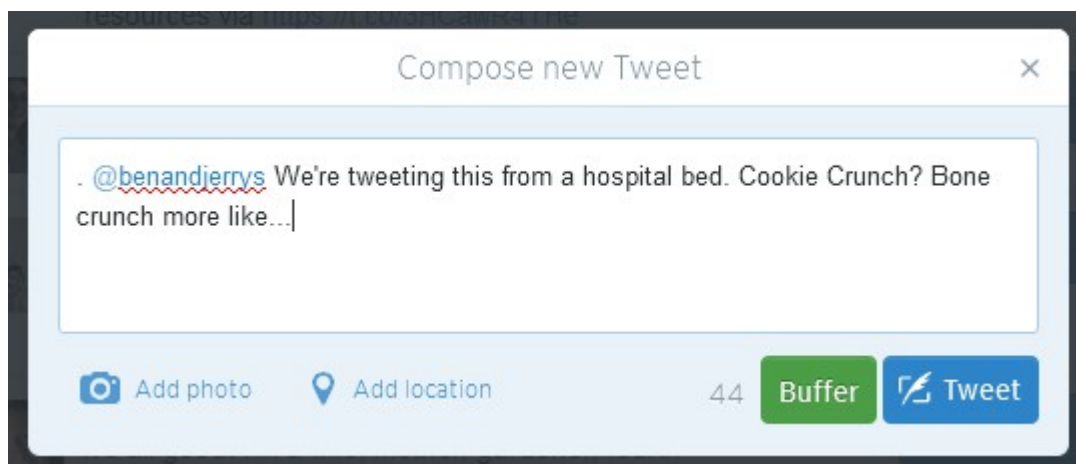


Although this tweet can be seen by anyone who follows you, the mention of @BenAndJerrys would bring it to their attention (if they weren't a multinational ice-cream company who must get thousands of tweets aimed at them every day).

If you start your tweet with someone's name, only they (and anyone else who follows both you and them) get to see it...



But sometimes you might want to make a point to someone and want everyone else to see it. In that case, you need to ensure your tweet doesn't begin with their name. What better way than to put a tiny full-stop at the beginning. That way the whole world can see what you're tweeting in response to someone...



6) FAVOURITES, REPLIES AND RETWEETS

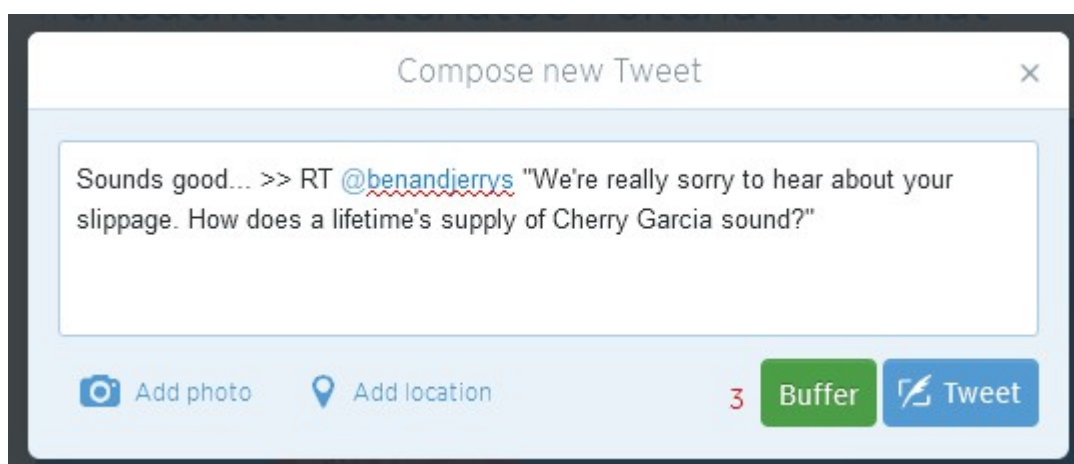
If you come across a tweet that you think is particularly inspiring, you can do one of a few things.

Firstly, you can favourite it (by clicking the star symbol underneath). This is the candy equivalent of fishing out an orange Skittle and saving it for later (are you fed up of the simile yet?). As well as favouriting interesting/useful content, people sometimes use this function to say “I’ve seen your tweet and it caused me to chuckle, but I’m not going to deign to send a reply saying so.”

Secondly, you can reply to it (by clicking the L-H pointing arrow symbol underneath). When you do this, you’ll notice that a message box opens up with your addressee’s name at the start. Remember what that means? The tweet will be seen by them.

Thirdly, you can retweet it (by clicking the square arrows symbol underneath). To stretch a dying simile, this is just like taking a Skittle from the waterfall and then throwing it back in so that everyone who follows you can see it. The more retweets a tweet gets, the more eyes that get to see it.

Another way of retweeting a message is to type it out for yourself with the letters RT (retweet) at the start, together with the name of the person who originally tweeted it. Some people do this to try and get some retweets of their own, sometimes it’s because they want to add a comment...



On the subject of RTs, sometimes you’ll see initials in the middle of someone’s tweet. RT stands for retweet. MT stands for ‘modified tweet’ (it’s been changed, usually to save space). OH stands for ‘overheard’ (ie. “I noticed someone saying this hilarious joke, but it was in a conversation with someone else, so I can’t really retweet it”). HT stands for ‘hat tip’ or sometimes ‘heard through’ (ie. “I thought this link was pretty good and I want to credit the person who originally put it out there”). As a general rule, all of these initials are about giving credit. Don’t just tweet someone else’s witty comment or wonderful photo — say where you saw it first. One thing we like to do is to do some Googling and actually mention the actual cartoonist’s or designer’s name if possible as well as the person who tweeted it.

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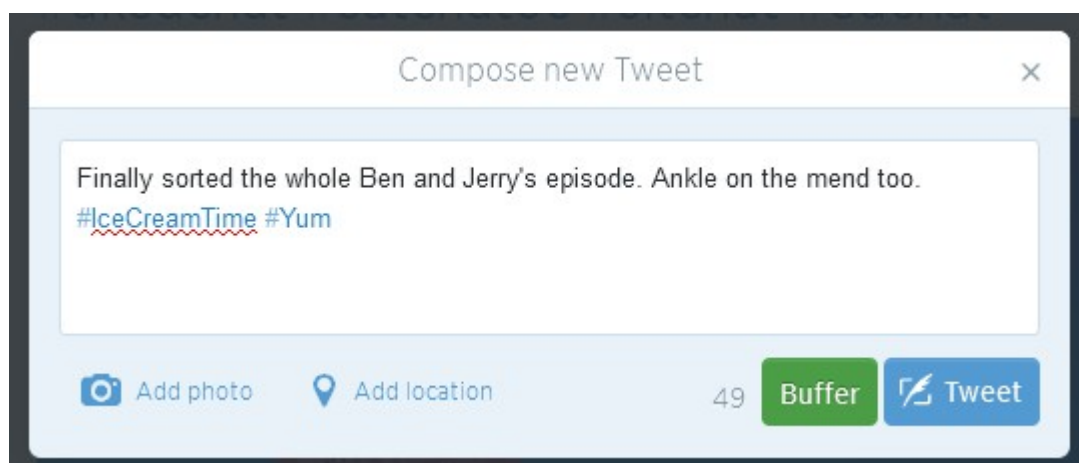
Finally, you can do things like block or report a user if you receive tweets that are offensive, spam etc. Don't bother engaging with someone whose sole purpose is to argue. Unfollow, block, move on. Life's too short.

7) THE HASHTAG

Hashtags (a word or phrase beginning with the # symbol) are ways of allowing your tweets to be found by others and vice versa. At the risk of annoying you now, searching for a hashtag is the Skittles equivalent of pulling out all the strawberry flavour Skittles on their own...



This can be useful if you're taking part in a scheduled chat (e.g. #ukedchat is used for an education chat for UK teachers) or want to see all the tweets about a given subject (e.g. #CCC14 might be a hashtag used for the Connecticut Cheese Conference 2014). Some people use hashtags just as a form of expression, but it doesn't really mean anything when they do... Here's an example of pointless hashtagging:



You can invent your own hashtags as ways of tagging your own tweets. At Sparky Teaching, we use the following hashtags of our own. Feel free to join in with them:

#SparkyIdea — denotes a teaching idea that we think might be useful

#HmmsTheWord — is the hashtag we use to post our links to our 365 Things To Make You Go "Hmmm" and for anything to do with our new book of the same name

#SparkySchool — is used when we come across a school with a similar ethos to us

And then there are the one-offs... At some point in our time on Twitter we came up with one on ninja CPD and also #ClassroomPracticeInspiredByFootballManagers. Ah, happy days...

There are so many Twitter hashtags used by teachers, this post isn't the place to deal with them. We hope to write a follow-up post listing them. However, purely to be encouraged as a teacher, do take a look at #PedagooFriday which mainly UK-based teachers use to tweet about something great that happened that week in the course of their teaching. It never fails to put a smile on our face and is exactly what teaching is about.

In fact, #PedagooFriday is probably exactly what Twitter is all about too. Be an encouragement, share your encouragements and be encouraged.

Originally posted on July 25 2014 by Sparky Teaching here:
<http://www.sparkyteaching.com/creative/twitter-for-teachers/>

PART TWO: UN OEUF IS UN OEUF

Initially, Twitter can seem daunting... “I’ve just tweeted, but no one’s seen my tweet because I’ve only got two followers and one of them is my dad.” Compared with the big beasts of Twitter, your own messages and retweets don’t seem to cause the slightest ripple. It can feel like you are talking to yourself.

Whether you’re new to Twitter or have thousands of followers, here are a handful of encouragements...

ENCOURAGEMENT ONE: IT AIN’T ABOUT THE FOLLOWERS.

It’s worth considering this diagram we made up, which is true for every Twitter user — yes, even those big educational tweeters with thousands of followers...



Twitter isn’t about how many followers you have. If it was, then the world’s best self-promoters would be those who got the most from it. Perhaps they may think they do, but we’d like to think that it’s the world’s best listeners / gleaners who find it most effective.

No matter how many followers you have on Twitter, don’t take it to heart (whether it’s masses or only a handful). For some, the number of followers they have is a badge to be proud of, but try not to attach too much importance to this. Try, to develop a well-honed Personal Learning Network (PLN) rather than a cult following! Think The ‘A’ Team rather than an army of devotees. Admittedly, the more followers you have the larger the ripple you can have by tweeting something, however each Twitter avatar is just a person sitting behind a computer and the more of those you have following you, the less you can get to know them. Certainly, the above diagram is one we should all take a long, hard look at more often. We’re just tiny blades of grass.

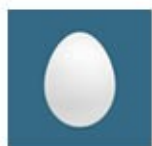
Or to quote @ThatIanGilbert: “Worth remembering that thinking Twitter represents the educational community is like listening to the staffroom from outside the door.”

ENCOURAGEMENT TWO: UN OEUF IS UN OEUF.

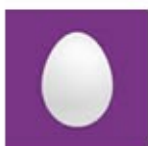
To quote a children's poem by Allan Ahlberg — “Everybody was a baby once.” Or, in the context of Twitter — “Everybody signed up with an egg avatar and no followers at all. Even Stephen Fry.” Your followers will come...

UN OEUF IS UN OEUF...

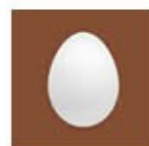
OPRAH WINFREY ON DAY ONE.



CMDR CHRIS HADFIELD ON DAY ONE.



JAMIE OLIVER ON DAY ONE.



(FREE-RANGE. ORGANIC.
BUT STILL VERY MUCH AN EGG.)

ENCOURAGEMENT THREE: THE UNSEEN RIPPLE EFFECT.

This encouragement comes from experience. Sometimes you can spend forever crafting the perfectly-worded tweet about something you'd like a response from. Perhaps you're directing folks to your new class blog. You click 'Tweet' and then... Nothing. No Retweets, no Favourites. Seemingly, no response.

On our website we have Google Analytics and it was about a year ago that we discovered that we could see which pages visitors were viewing in real time. We soon noticed that after tweeting something which seemingly had no response, we still had plenty of visitors to that particular page as a result. Just because people don't Retweet something or comment, it doesn't mean they haven't seen it. These are the unseen ripples. Don't get disheartened if you don't get a reaction — people still respond by clicking links — we've seen it.

ENCOURAGEMENT FOUR: BE YOURSELF.

If you're not the self-promotional type, don't be. If you're the sort of person who doodles their way through staff meetings (would it surprise you to know that's us?!), then don't pretend to be fascinated by the latest data reports. If you have a love of History, share it — tweet about it — be infectious — pass that interest onto others. If you're an ideas-person, don't pretend to care about philosophical discussions about the role of pedagogy in the 21st Century classroom, just tweet really good ideas. If you're all about the kids, tweet examples of their work and show us all how brilliant they are.

To use a verb we like around these parts — use Twitter to spark something and *be* sparked.

PART THREE: TIPS FOR SCHOOLS

More and more schools are creating Twitter accounts, used with varying regularity and degrees of success. Although they're aimed at schools, most of the following tips are equally applicable to individuals.

SIX TIPS FOR SCHOOLS ON TWITTER:

1. WRITE YOUR BIOG CAREFULLY

Consider the two invented school biogs below. This is perhaps an over-generalisation, but they do sum up the two ways schools seem to be using Twitter :



There are plenty of both types of schools out there — we almost copied those biogs word for word. Now, ask yourself:

- Which of the two schools conveys their school ethos the best?
- Which one would you most like to work in? Or send your children to?

Rhetorical questions with obvious answers and yet there are lots of schools who “welcome” followers with brief, dry facts about what the account is, not (crucially) who they are. This really gets our goat. Do you want to be seen as a lifeless establishment? It might be worth commenting at this point that, given the prevalence of the first type of intro in our locality (South Wales), someone somewhere seems to have advised them all to put that caveat in. We’d probably suggest you think carefully about taking that advice. Your Twitter bio is what many people will read first about your school — try and write something that sums you up as the caring creative community you no doubt are.

2. SEE TWITTER DIFFERENTLY

In our example, @JustASchool see Twitter as a great way of communicating to parents — almost as the modern equivalent of the school letter that gets sent home. It allows for quick, easy posts:



Schools that use Twitter in this way often follow very few people — what need is there when you are using Twitter to announce, not to converse? They are often cautious tweeters, sometimes be protective of being seen to promote other tweeters.

@OneMoreSchool are trying to use Twitter in a different way. They see it as a great way of communicating with parents (and the wider community). They really want to express their school ethos through their tweets and so use it to celebrate student achievements, converse with other people and retweet links and quotes they think tie in with their ethos:



They appreciate the fact Twitter brings them into contact with schools, teachers and the public all over the world. They retweet photos parents post and reply to comments others make about them. They are approachable and not-in-the-least officious.

Again, the point we're making is obvious. For the first school, Twitter is a noticeboard to post things on — during the holidays the Twitter account goes silent. For the second, Twitter is seen as a community to get involved with — during the holidays the Twitter account is just as lively. Try to be like the second.

3. LEARN FROM OTHER SCHOOLS

Possibly the best way to achieve the above is to learn from other schools. Search for things like “primary school” or “high school” on Twitter and think about what you see.

Which schools do you want to find out more about? Why?

What are they doing that resonates with you? Where would you put them on a scale from Just A School to One More School?

4. CREATE A SCHOOL HASHTAG OR TWO

Whilst researching this article, we saw a couple of things we thought were worth mentioning as good practice. Bear in mind it is the summer holidays here in the UK and many school Twitter accounts lie dormant. Some schools are tweeting away, however:

—Euxton CE Primary are encouraging students to read during their summer holidays by encouraging them to get their parents to tweet photos of them reading in unexpected places with their own hashtag — #ExtremeReading.

- The District CE are similarly encouraging summer reading with an invented hashtag — #DistrictBookworms.

- *What hashtag can you invent to get your school community thinking and learning outside of the school building?*

– *Can you inspire a sense of belonging with a hashtag? (CLUE: the answer's yes)*

- Newburn Manor Primary are tweeting all sorts of summer things to do in the North East / Newcastle area and are clearly very in touch with their community.

= *Could we take your school Twitter feed and plant it anywhere else in the country without anyone really noticing or does it very much reflect your locality?*

5. DON'T CREATE AN ACCOUNT IF YOU'RE NOT GOING TO USE IT

It's probably better to not be able to be found on Twitter as a school than to have an account that was last used in 2011 and still has an egg for an avatar. It doesn't matter so much on a personal level, but you are a functioning organisation and it's important that you are seen to still be functioning! In a similar way, it's best not to be found on the internet at all than to have a website that was last updated five years previously. Possibly the best way to ensure that your Twitter account is used widely and in a lively way is to give multiple permissions. If your admin staff, your Headteacher and a handful of Twitter-friendly teachers are all able to post tweets on behalf of the school, your Twitter feed may be more eclectic.

Try not to let your Twitter feed go silent during school holidays either. As we speak, someone somewhere is spending their summer holidays tweeting on behalf of their schools. That's good practice.

6. SHARE YOUR SCHOOL ETHOS WITH TEACHERS TOO

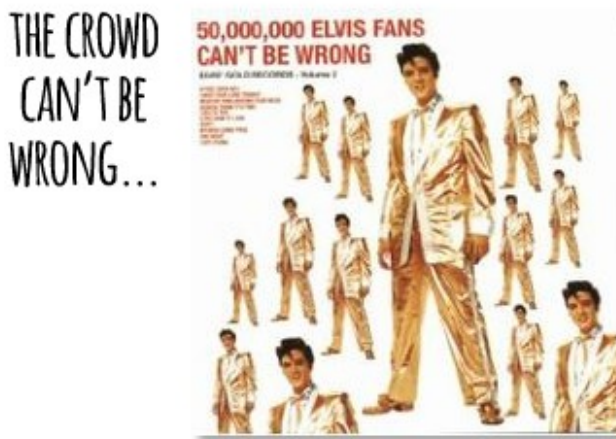
Twitter isn't just about communicating with the outside world. It's also a great tool for Professional Development between your staff — to share good practice across the school, to tweet links that tie in with a particular school focus or perhaps to ask for ideas from other colleagues. Some schools even have a separate Twitter account for this purpose. Our imaginary second school in the example above have one — @OneMoreSchoolCPD. It's a mine of provocative ideas, links and discussions for teachers who work at One More School and it really ties in with what management wish to focus on at any point in time.

CAN SO MANY TEACHERS BE WRONG?

Every so often someone on Twitter tweets something like: “Let’s see how many teachers are on Twitter. RT if you’re a teacher.”

Without being cynical and seeing it as a way to get thousands of retweets (in which case: “I’m loving Oxygen at the moment. RT if you can’t live without it either!” might be even more effective), it’s always interesting to see how many teachers, teaching assistants, admin staff, librarians do retweet it and are clearly using Twitter for professional purposes. It’s loads. However, it’s a tiny proportion of the whole.

Elvis Presley’s ninth album, released in 1959, was called 50,000,000 Elvis fans can’t be wrong. Is this true? If large numbers of usually rational folk start doing something (whether it be buying rock and roll records or joining Twitter), should it warrant you taking a second look? Or, were The Simpsons right to question that premise?



CAN IT..?



We’d argue that, although it might feel like an exclusive club that you don’t know the rules to, with so many teachers all over the world singing Twitter’s praises, it is worth checking out and investing time in using. In that respect, we hope that this series of posts has helped you.

Whether you’re on your first tweet or your 2000-and-first, we’ll happily encourage you further. Remember how to get someone’s attention on Twitter from Part 1? If you need any inspiration, type “@SparkyTeaching” and type us a message.

We’ll do our best to help you on your way.



We like to think our teaching resources are a little bit different... Resources with a twist, so to speak. If you're a creative teacher who treasures character and wants to do everything in their power to ensure their students aren't just passing through on an exam conveyorbelt, you've found like-minds. Howdy.



Our resources have been used by schools all over the UK and US, as well as other countries including Australia, Canada and New Zealand, and we hope you find something that we do that resonates.

If you want to get more than one of our resources, take a look at our Special Offers page as we often have better deals if you want to buy a few resources at once www.sparkyteacher.com/resources/offers.php.

Not everything is for sale, though - there are plenty of free resources on the site. Have a browse at www.sparkyteacher.com/resources/

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**£94
£75**

A collection of teaching resource books is shown. From left to right: 'PALEOPE', 'MESSAGES THAT MATTER TOO!', 'SHINE!', 'FLY RIGHT!', 'OPEN UP ZONE OUT READ ON', 'THE ALLIANCE FOR SCIENCE', 'Game Show Maths!', and '365 THINGS TO MAKE YOU GO "HMMM..."'. A red circular badge on the right shows a price reduction from £94 to £75.

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