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Twittering About Learning: Using Twitter in an Elementary School Classroom

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Many years ago, when I first started teaching, a colleague showed me a great technique for communicating with families: At the end of the day, she used a 24- by 16-inch chart tablet to produce daily news in shared writing with her students. She, and then I, chose one student each day to take the tablet home. That student illustrated the news from that day. The student's family read the news, along with all of the previous news reports. The students took turns, so families saw it about once a month. I just loved the idea because it encompassed so many qualities that are present in good writing instruction: it taught kids to write using authentic, meaningful topics; it was written for a real audience; there was a clear purpose; it was accessible to, and useful for, the entire range of abilities in my classroom. Even the kids who didn't get to take the tablet home that day were participating in the shared writing, which means they were reviewing that day's learning and were more likely to have something specific to answer at home when someone asked "What did you do in school today?" Students loved the writing, illustrating and sharing their work, and they were highly motivated to do well because they knew many people would be viewing their efforts.

Over the years, I've gotten away from that tablet technique, but I've never stopped looking for ways to get kids to write about real things with a real audience in mind. I've never stopped thinking of ways to keep families in the loop about what we're doing in school. I've continually tried to make it a regular part of our day to review what we're doing. I've continued to use modeled and shared writing, and integrated and guided writing, as powerful teaching tools.

One year I ended each day by writing a blog with my class. We discussed the events of the day, chose one to focus on, and brainstormed details. We wrote and published on the spot. It was a great way to work on writing for a real reason, and the kids loved sharing their work with families. For a couple of years I also tried using our class web site. These approaches had advantages, but both were very time-consuming for me, and neither offered easy ways for families to participate.

This year, I decided to try using Twitter, and the more we use it, the more power I have found in it. Our class Twitter site now has more than 350 entries (called tweets), and we manage to add four or five each day. Almost every entry was composed by my first and second grade students. Along with text, there are photos taken by the students and posted on Twitpic, and audio of kids reading which we post on Chirbit. Now that the class has had almost a year of experience using Twitter, they know the routine, and composing is pretty easy for most of them.

We began the year with me posting a few tweets just to get started and try it out. I wasn't sure if it would work, or if the time spent would be worthwhile, since time devoted to one thing means less time for something else. Next, I modeled posting on Twitter in front of the class throughout the day, usually right before a transition while we met to share and review whatever lesson we were working on at the time. It didn't take long for them to catch on, and we were soon composing shared pieces. Students watched the projected image from my computer as I typed, watching the Twitter character counter descend from 140 to zero, and then into negative numbers as our expressions passed the character limit.

Once we typed the message, it was then time to edit and revise so that the tweet would fall into the range of 140 or fewer characters. I love that character limit feature for teaching; it provides a real and powerful way, and need, to teach word choice, ideas, and punctuation. Twitter also creates an authentic requirement to consider the needs and background of our audience in a way that most of the students didn't have to confront in writer's workshop, or math, or science, or other writing we did. I find first and second graders are still so egocentric that considering others is a fairly novel concept. Editing and revising the messages

often takes longer than composing, as the class debates which items are essential, which are implied, which can be assumed that our followers (mostly family members) know, and which we can hint at, with the assumption that family members can ask for more information if they want it.

After about 50 messages written as a class, I had the kids start composing the tweets themselves. I have a simple chart that shows whose turn it is. That student writes the tweet into a spiral notebook. Some students do it alone; some have a classmate help. I expect the students to write/revise/edit before bringing the book to me. They do so without complaint because they are eager to get their entries posted and they have been taught that revising and editing are part of the process. I have found this to be more effective than my efforts to get them to revise and edit in Writer's Workshop, where the length of the stories can be overwhelming, and where there is often no real reason for them to revise and edit beyond "...because I said so." The notebook entries clearly show me what each student understands about revising and editing, and give me ideas for next steps in instruction.

Sometimes I just type the tweet as written; sometimes I type it in the company of the student, who can then advise me on details to add or change. Often I type the message into Twitter in front of the class, as the author reads aloud. If the tweet falls short of 140 characters, the author can take suggestions from the class on what to add. If it's too long, the author can get help from the class on what to delete or change to get down to the limit. Whether with the student or in front of the class, I'm continually and quickly explaining what I'm changing and why, and I'm asking the students to do the same. Using Twitter this way embeds writing instruction all day long. I'm teaching as we go, in the moment, and the instruction is intrinsically meaningful and relevant. Rather than saying, "Today we'll talk about 'describing' words," at a random time in the year, we talk about about what we need, when and as we need it. This negates the question, "When are we gonna use this?" As a matter of respect to the author of that tweet, I generally get their approval before making changes, so there is always the feeling of ownership and the message that each voice is valued.

My class is becoming quite adept at adapting the original message to fit within the Twitter parameters. They discuss, debate, listen, and work together, often with great passion, as they explain and defend points of view. Of course, with a class of 28 first and second graders, we rarely have 100 percent of their attention 100 percent of the time, but since each entry is so short, it usually doesn't take long to figure it out and move on, so most of them can stay with us most of the time. I've also noticed that the more we do it, the more most of the students understand what's going on, making it more likely they'll participate.

Tweeting throughout the day means that writing has become an integral part of whatever we do, rather than a separate subject that is given some attention and then put away to be forgotten until the next day. It has also taught the students to see their lives and activities as worth sharing. And it is extremely rare that anyone tells me they don't know what to write about.

The messages we post to Twitter can be read right away, or once a day, or whenever the reader wants. Parents who want frequent updates on class activities have them. Those who want to check in periodically can do so. Relatives near and far can stay in touch in meaningful ways. I have wondered whether it is crushingly boring to read about the mundane activities of our classroom, but parents and family members don't see the tweets from Room 302 as boring. They seem to enjoy the windows into their children's days. And the brief nature of the tweet makes it easy to read and move on.

The experience has been amazing for the students: enjoyable, beneficial, and motivating. They are proud to see their initials at the end of a tweet, and they're willing to do the writing work needed to make it happen. They're reading and rereading over and over again, working on things like fluency, phrasing, rate, intonation, to get good enough to be recorded on a digital audio recorder, which helps them to be better readers. They're excited about learning to use the digital camera so they can add a picture to their topic, and they're looking at each event in class through the filter of "What can I tweet about this?" and "Is there a picture I can take and tweet about?" Some of the students and families have now created their own Twitter accounts, and the students are able to communicate with one another. This means they are voluntarily reading and writing away from school, which shows me they consider themselves to be readers and writers, and that they value reading and writing. They're learning the real purpose and power of literacy: communication. If they're using language and technology in this way in first and second grade, there is no telling what they'll be doing in years to come.

Those who care about the students find value in our Twitter site, too. Simply by following our class, or by taking the time now and then to read through the site with their child, they support the idea that the students have important things to say; they convey the idea that writing is worthwhile, as are the students' efforts to write, revise, and edit. They are able to have meaningful discussions about what is happening all day in the children's lives, and they can avoid asking "What did you do in school today?" The text, along with the pictures and audio, make our work public, making it easy for families and friends to stay in touch.

I remain aware that this a very public and far reaching forum, and I try to maintain privacy for the students. We're careful on our site not to use last names of students; we include no names attached to photos; and we try to be careful to not post information that might be too personal. Twitter allows me to block any followers I don't know, and I do. I could stop people from accessing the site anonymously by using the "Protect my updates" setting, but I decided not to because that would not allow me to use the automatic update feature on my school web site. The reality is that in this day and age, kids need to be aware of how to navigate these issues, and it only makes sense to me to embed the learning as we create the product. I remind families to help with this by supervising the students while they use Twitter at home.

I regularly print tweets for any family that would like a hard copy and at the end of the year make CDs for each child with the entire record of our Twitter writing. This makes it easier for families without Internet to access the tweets, and ensures that the writing will be preserved. Imagine being able to go back and read what you did in first or second grade, as told by you and your classmates? I think many of them will find it to be an interesting artifact.

When I began using Twitter with my class, I wondered if it would be worthwhile. As this year ends, I believe it was. I'm convinced that literacy is the foundation to everything else we do in school, and having literacy embedded in our days has helped to implant literacy in who the students are. They have both the knowledge of how to use literacy to enhance their lives, and they have the disposition to do so. An additional benefit of this endeavor is that my incoming students and families will be able to get a sense of what the new year will be like, which may help ease some anxiety and increase eagerness for school to start again. I've come a long way from when I started using that 24- by 16-inch tablet with my class, but I feel with Twitter I've managed to maintain and amplify all the best parts of it. I think my colleague from all those years ago would be impressed.

About Our School and Access to Technology

I teach at an elementary school in Washington State with a wide range of family income levels. We are keeping the school anonymous for the purposes of this article to preserve students' privacy. We're a small school of around 300 students. Our technology access is limited: most classrooms have document cameras, but few are connected to computers. We have no computer lab, and my classroom has the only teacher-dedicated computer. and I make CDs of students' Twitter writing to allow families without Internet access to read students' work. Using a public site such as Twitter allows families to access us on public computers at libraries and community centers.

Room 302's Parents on Twitter and Chirbit's Impact

Twitter has been a great way for us to stay in touch with what Sam is doing in school. When asked what he did in school he often replied, "I don't know." But now he is excited to show us on Twitter.

Last night we listened to Sam and his classmates singing. The kids get such a kick out of hearing themselves on the computer, and I know parents appreciate it, too!

Twitter has created a connection among the parents, our children, the classroom, and the teacher. This exchange of information allows us as parents to watch our children develop and grow throughout the year. I believe our children will receive a better education by creating a connection between everyone. With a more unified interaction and knowledge we can all work towards a common goal, increasing the value of their education. The kids have learned extra skills that they may not receive anywhere else: Taking pictures, telling about their daily events and learning about all the different mediums that are available to them for

communication.

With our day-to-day busy lives, parents want to connect with their children and feel a part of their daily experiences. Often an inquiry is met with "Not much happened today.." or the ever popular, "I don't know..." Twitter in the classroom allows parents to be a part of their children's learning experience and more importantly, offers a prompt to begin discussions at dinnertime or enroute to baseball practice.

Room 302 Twitter and Other Sites

Room 302's writing on Twitter:

<http://twitter.com/room302>

Room 302's audio micropodcasts on Chirbit:

<http://www.chirbit.com/room302>

Room 302's photographs on Twitpic:

<http://twitpic.com/photos/room302>

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