

Twitter and its role in Business Education

Fads come and go, but some may prove beneficial to teachers in helping to motivate students and tap into something they think is relevant to their lives and ways of learning. In this article, Keith Hirst looks at how his school has tried to utilise Twitter to help student learning.

There are some modern bandwagons I am happy to ignore and willingly give up my seat on board. Be it The X-Factor, Big Brother, tattoos, celebrity worship and any other populist, media-inspired 'must-haves' and obsessions; thanks, but no thanks. This list, for me, included Twitter, which I saw as yet another flash in the pan – until a year or so ago.

Twitter has become more than a bandwagon and threatens to have a longevity that Wayne Rooney's hair transplant can only dream of. It is evidently established as a vehicle for generating and transmitting knowledge and information. Whilst much of this information is, at best, banal and mundane – 'I'm shopping with my mum' – there is plenty of valuable content that can be accessed and used in the field of education. Business Education is perhaps singularly well placed to tap into what Twitter has to offer. Business organisations tweet important information and data. Journalists, opinion-formers and newspapers do likewise. This information is often useful for Business teachers and students.

It was therefore with a guarded scepticism that colleagues in my department decided to dip a toe into the water to see if Twitter could be used to improve the learning experience of students at GCSE and A-Level. What follows is a summary of our experiences.

How to set up a departmental Twitter feed

Set up is extremely straightforward. Create an account and off you go. You may need to give some thought to an appropriate name for your own department as this is something that, once set up, will not change.

Twitter is very easy to use, an observation supported by the number of Premier League footballers and celebrities who manage to tweet their own musings.

Note that Twitter does offer the ability to personalise the page wallpaper, for example with your own school badge or colours. An example is

shown of how we did this in Figure 1 below. This is possibly best done by a member of the ICT staff with responsibility for the school website.

Teachers who are granted access rights can then post items as they see fit. Twitter is designed to be used on the move – primarily for smart phones. So, once you have the appropriate 'app' on your phone, off you go.

Possible uses by Business/Economics teachers

Follow – Business Education is well placed for the organisations and individuals who can be 'followed' for the information they may impart. For example, Stephanie Flanders and Robert Peston are two leading BBC journalists who use Twitter to post their observations and insights. The World Economic Forum (@davos) and the Confederation of British Industry (@CBI_press) do likewise. The list of potential groups and individuals that a department may choose to follow is virtually unlimited.

Post useful articles/information – by using a URL shortener (for example, bit.ly, tiny url), the addresses of useful websites, stories, etc. can be posted within the 140-character limit of a tweet. For example, if I wanted students to see the following article, this could be tweeted as in Figure 2 on the next page.

Inform – post information for students, such as reminders about homework or examinations. This is useful on a day-to-day basis and also in times of disruption, such as that caused by the snow which fell towards the end of 2010. Students were informed and reminded of what they needed to do during this disruption by virtue of the School's Twitter account.

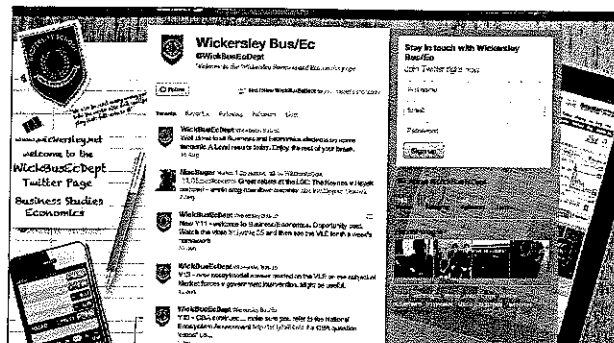
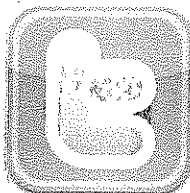


Figure 1 The Wickersley School Twitter page



Figure 2 Posting articles

Post images – Twitter can be used to prompt debate and discussion through Business-related images which teachers can post. Once you have a Twitter account you can post images to the feed through related sites such as Twitpic (www.twitpic.com). This allows images to be posted in addition to text and links. This is very useful for a teacher who may see something of interest when out of school – that unusual name for a business, workers clustered around a hole seemingly totally unproductive, that amusing strap line, the mostly empty restaurant which stays open regardless of the lack of customers – anything which you see that could promote the interest and enthusiasm of students and make the connection between the classroom and the world outside.

Messaging – students tend to have ready access to their teachers today through email. However, the private message facility on Twitter is another means by which contact can be made. This is clearly useful at key times of the year, such as during the examination period and when last minute words of advice are important.

End of lesson plenary – this does not involve using Twitter itself. However, asking students to write a 'tweet' of a maximum 140 characters summarising what they have learned in the lesson can be an effective plenary and requires students to think about and record what they have learned. Importantly, this should not involve students writing what they have done in the lesson. This task is all about what has been learned. Listening to a selection can be informative and illuminating for the teacher.

Pitfalls

Teachers need to be aware of the difference, in the eyes of many students, between ICT for school and ICT for personal use. Just because it is ICT does not mean that it will be instantly and enthusiastically embraced by students. Indeed, the opposite may be true. Students are generally expert users of ICT for their own purposes. Experience at my own school suggests that ICT should be an important but relatively small part of the mix. The fundamentals of teaching and learning are more important and no use of gimmicky ICT tools can overcome any weaknesses that lurk elsewhere in this mix.

Our experience suggests that Twitter does not have the same appeal to young people as Facebook.

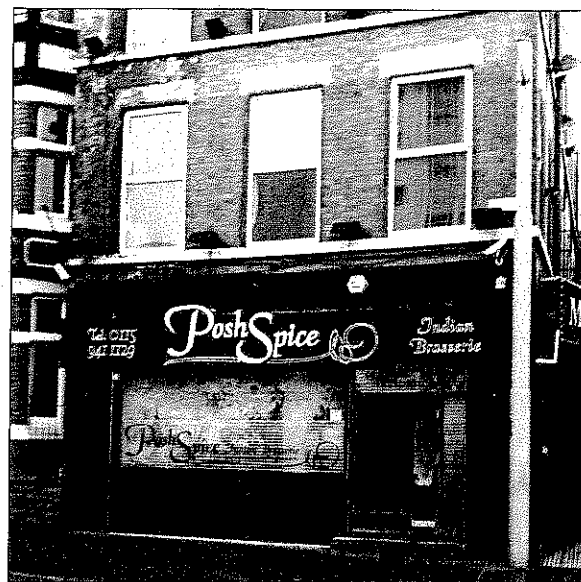


Figure 3 Images are a useful way of prompting students to think about business issues. Is this image showing entrepreneurial spirit? Is the restaurant just opening – or just closing down? If it is just opening do you think it will be a success and why? If it is just closing why do you think it did not survive? What about its location?

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(We have established our own Facebook account and use this in a similar way.) However, Twitter has a functionality and ease of use that means it can be readily adopted by departments, teachers and students.

Note that Twitter is an open blogging site and therefore students will be able to see the posts of individuals who they click through to view. Whilst it is straightforward to block any individuals from following your own departmental feed, it is not possible to prevent students from looking at related posts on Twitter. This has not been an issue at my own school, but it is worthwhile being aware of the potential issues involved. Our view was that students have access to the Internet – good and bad – on their own phones and computers and we did not want to rule out using tools such as Twitter on the basis of some puritanical stance that has no relevance once students leave the site.

Note from Editor: If your school has used Twitter or Facebook as a means of supporting the teaching and learning process, TBE would be very interested to hear how you have used it and what success or otherwise you have experienced so far. Please e-mail your responses to andrew.ashwin7@gmail.com

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