Pleased to Tweet You

Making a case for Twitter in the classroom

By Kate Messner

THE LIGHTS ARE DIMMED AND THE LCD PROJECTOR IS ON WHEN MY SEVENTH GRADERS arrive for English class on a cool September morning at Stafford Middle School in Plattsburgh, a small school district on the western shore of Lake Champlain in Northern New York. They burst into the room, but fall silent when they see a conversation unfolding before them via TweetChat on the big screen.

"What are they talking about?" Hailey asks.

"It's the author of this book." I hold up *Operation Yes* (Scholastic, 2009), a middle grade novel about kids in a military base school and their improv-loving teacher that I'd just booktalked the day before. "And her editor, Cheryl Klein at Scholastic. They're having a Twitter chat about how they worked on the book together and revised it to make it better."

The kids are glued to the screen, where #yeschat continues. (A Twitter hashtag, using the number sign before a word or phrase, allows users to follow conversations on a given topic.) My students follow along as Sara Lewis Holmes, the author, describes her morning writing routine and her high school drama teacher, who was the inspiration for the character Miss Loupe. Klein describes the sense of community

that made her want to acquire the manuscript for Lewis Holmes's book. As other people join the chat and start posting questions, a light goes on for my kids.

"Hey wait!" says Kiah, one of my students. "Can we talk to them, too?"

I nod. "We're logged in under our classroom Twitter account [@MessnerEnglish]. They're taking questions now. What do you want to know?"

And just like that, my classroom has grown. No longer just 15 kids and a teacher. It's all of us, plus a children's author in Virginia, a book editor at her desk in SoHo, and another half dozen children's writers from around the country, all talking about writing and revision. My kids want to know more about the revision letters that authors get from their editors—sort of like getting your paper back from teacher with "try again" written at the top.

MessnerEnglish: How long was the editorial letter for OPERATION YES? #yeschat

SaraLewisHolmes: 8+ pages? I'll have to go look that one up. #yeschat

Chavelaque [Cheryl Klein]: I just looked and the 1st letter was, uh, 15 single-spaced pages. 8 of those were plot outline & discussion, tho. #yeschat

MessnerEnglish: 18 pages – wow! There are so many ideas in your book- Alexis wonders how you come up with and organize them while you write. #yeschat

SaraLewisHolmes: It all goes in my plain, spiral notebook. I collect ideas like pieces in a puzzle. #yeschat

The 15-minute chat (bit.ly/iIyiE) wasn't our entire English lesson that day, but a quick enrichment activity that we'd revisit while polishing our own personal narratives later on. That's generally how our classroom Twitter account works. It's a tool that we take advantage of when it fits our teaching and learning needs and when special opportunities arise.

PLNs for our students

As the ranks of educators on Twitter grow, we hear more and more about the importance of their "PLNs" (a term reportedly coined by educational technology guru David

teacher6th:
School lifted filter for teachers after sharing information learned from twitter experts and research-thanks for all your help! Win for all.

Warlick). A PLN, or Personal Learning Network, is a group of like-minded professionals with whom you can exchange ideas, advice, and resources. So why shouldn't our students have PLNs of their own?

That's not so easy in some school districts, where Twitter is blocked along with MySpace and Facebook. But teachers who wish to use the tool for classroom purposes might consider crafting a petition to access it.

I started thinking about a classroom Twitter account last spring when I realized how important mine (@KateMessner) had become to my professional development. For me, Twitter represents a stream of recommended resources and allows me to connect with other writers and educators. Since my Twitter account covers both my life as a teacher and my world as a children's author, I've had teachers reach out to me as a resource. My new middle grade novel, *The Brilliant Fall of Gianna* Z. (Walker/Bloomsbury, 2009) is about a seventh-grade girl who leaves her leaf-collection project to the last minute and ends up with one week to collect and identify 25 leaves in her Vermont town. This fall, I've received tweets from a half dozen teachers reading *Gianna* Z. with their students and using the activities in my online study guide. Would I be willing to tweet or Skype with the kids to answer some questions when they finish reading? Absolutely. User names were exchanged, times were arranged, and we connected on Twitter in a series of messages of 140 characters or less.

That got me thinking. What if my students could draw on the expertise of authors and others as they're learning the craft of writing? What if they could pose questions to a PLN? At the end of June 2009, I submitted a proposal to our district technology coordinator, requesting permission to open a classroom Twitter account. I explained how I'd monitor the account to ensure student safety and how we'd make use of it educationally in my seventh grade English classes. But the plan also left room for growth, since the most valuable benefit of an emerging technology is oftentimes one not yet discovered.

Writing a proposal

Online safety is always a concern when new technology is proposed for the classroom, so it's an important issue to address in any social networking proposal. And of course, student learning should be at the heart of such requests. Here are some dos and don'ts for crafting a successful proposal:

DO...

- Start with a rationale. Why is this technology or Web site useful for student learning? What will be accomplished by introducing it?
- Do your homework. There's a good chance someone is already making successful use of the technology. Be prepared to give examples of where it's being used and how.
- Address safety issues. How will you ensure online safety, particularly with regard to social networking sites? Will you only have a classroom account? If students are to have individual accounts, how will their use be monitored?
- Include parents in your discussion and invite them to learn about the technology, too.

DON'T...

- Assume that administrators already understand resources like Skype and Twitter. Be sure to provide a clear explanation in your proposal.
- Go it alone. If possible, enlist the support of like-minded colleagues in the creation of your proposal so that different grade levels and/or disciplines are represented.
- Limit yourself with the language of your proposal. While you may have a few ideas for how you'd like to start using a resource, be sure to leave the door open for future innovation. The more you make use of a resource, the more you'll see how it might be helpful to student learning in other areas.

The Twitter proposal that I sent to my district technology coordinator last spring provided an outline of ideas for using Twitter in the classroom, including:

- Crafting book recommendations in 140 characters.
- Posing questions about current study units on Twitter.
- Following experts in various fields of study (following historians who specialize in the American Revolution, for example, when we're studying that topic, or following an author as we read his or her work in class).
- Tracking current events on CNN and other news feeds.
- Hosting discussions with other classes via Twitter.

Approaching your administrator

After consideration by district technology coordinator John Haubner and other administrators, my proposal was approved in time for the start of school and @MessnerEnglish became our class Twitter account. Haubner says it's up to teachers to make a strong case when submitting requests like this one. "It's essential that the teacher emphasize responsible use by students. Probably the most important piece is close monitoring of students by the teacher," he says. "As long as the staff member can show a detailed educational plan for the use of Twitter/Skype/etc., there should be little problem with unblocking."

That's just what Texas teacher Deborah Morgan (@mrsmogan) did to get special filter override privileges so she could use Twitter in her classroom at Colleyville Middle School, a suburban school serving grades 6–8 in the Dallas-Fort Worth area. Morgan has a separate Twitter account for her class (@Room213cms), where she shares homework assignments and reminders and answers questions from her student followers. One recently tweeted, "I'm running out of colored index cards for native Texans project. What should I do?" Mrs. Morgan's response came in well under the 140-character limit: "Use paper."

Teachers and librarians are finding Twitter's great for research, too. Karen Burns, a librarian at Gig Harbor High School in Washington state, created a Twitter search widget (bit.ly/2bAI0j) for current events in Africa to help ninth graders with their research projects. A note on the library site directs students to click on links in the tweets to access a variety of related articles. Of course, all the usual rules about checking validity of online sources apply to students using Twitter for research.

Karla Duff (@teacher6th), a middle school teacher in Oelwein, a small city (pop. 6,600) in Northeast Iowa, was hoping to bring social networking into her classroom this fall, but she works in a district where virtually all social media is blocked by filters. For the first weeks of school, she made use of what she calls "back-door technology," copying and pasting useful text and photos from her Twitter and Facebook accounts into her teaching blog, which Duff can access at school. All the while she was collecting evidence to make a case to administrators. "I need them to understand that this is where the students are, where they are motivated, and where they are learning. This is easy to show with the activities my classes have been participating in," says Duff.

Her efforts paid off. Duff shared the good news via Twitter on October 24:

> **teacher6th:** School lifted filter for teachers after sharing information learned from twitter experts and research-thanks for all your help! Win for all.

Two months with Twitter

Back in my seventh-grade class, our Twitter experiment is just a couple months old as I write this article. But already, students are getting the idea that their community of learners can extend far beyond the classroom. When my student writers were working on ways to develop more authentic characters, they posed the following question on Twitter:

> **MessnerEnglish:** Advanced Creative Writing Class wants to know: What are your favorite strategies for developing characters' personalities?

Within a day, four published authors had responded to our tweet for help with sage advice that my students rushed to try out for themselves.

When we finished a class read-aloud of Rebecca Stead's novel *When You Reach Me* (Random House, 2009), a middle grade science-fiction mystery that absolutely captivated my students, they wrote Twitter book blurbs, trying to capture the essence of this book we had loved in 140 characters or less.

> **MessnerEnglish:** WHEN YOU REACH ME by @rebstead is a big puzzle of a book with a surprise ending in which everything comes together. (Julian)

> **MessnerEnglish:** In @rebstead's WHEN YOU REACH ME, a common girl named Miranda has her world turned upside down. A thrilling novel! (Emma)

> **MessnerEnglish:** The book WHEN YOU REACH ME is the best book I've read in a long time. You get captured and you can't get out! (Lauren)

We checked our Twitter account after a long weekend and discovered a surprise reply to our book-blurb series from the author herself:

> **rebstead:** @MessnerEnglish I love these so much - where were you guys when I was trying to write my flap copy?

If only we'd all been on Twitter back then—I'm sure my students would have been happy to help.

Kate Messner (kmessner@katemessner.com) is a middle school English teacher and author of The Brilliant Fall of Gianna Z. *Messner wrote our August feature "Met Any Good Authors Lately? Classroom author visits can happen via Skype" (is.gd/4Uk9M).*

> To view Messner's complete Twitter proposal and a resource list, visit the online version of this feature at www.slj.com/twitter_in_classroom.