

All A-Twitter about Education

Improving our schools in 140 characters or less

By MICHAEL J. PETRILLI

Once upon a time, the education “war of ideas” was fought on the battleground of the nation’s op-ed pages. Then came blogs. But that was so two years ago (see “Linky Love, Snark Attacks, and Fierce Debates about Teacher Quality?” *what next*, Winter 2009.) Who has time for 400-word missives anymore? If you’ve got a point to make, tweet it!

If this sounds alien to you, clearly you haven’t signed up for Twitter. This five-year-old phenomenon allows individuals to dash off short comments to their friends, families, professional colleagues, and whoever else might be interested in their stream of consciousness. The technology has already been credited with bringing down oppressive regimes and creating whole new ways of reporting breaking news. It’s a truly open marketplace of ideas, with no editors, gatekeepers, or quality control. So what does it mean for the education debate?

The first thing to understand about Twitter is that most of its messages amount to, “Hey, check this out,” followed by a link to a newspaper article or blog post. It’s a handy device for

telling the world (or at least the people in your own world) about news or columns that you find compelling. It’s also a form of self-promotion; quite a few tweets announce posts the tweeter herself has written.

But in the hands of a gifted provocateur, Twitter can be so much more. Take scholar-turned-reform-apostate Diave Ravitch, who according to Klout.com is the most influential tweeter in the education policy space (see sidebar). As Alexander Russo, a freelance writer and blogger, remarked sardonically, “a 72-year-old grandmother has won the Internet.” She’s done it not only by linking to columns and articles she agrees with, but by offering bumper sticker-style statements that tend to set the web aflame. For instance, “Accountability is only for teachers and principals, not for students, families, elected officials, district leadership.” Or: “Last places to go to find out how to ‘reform’ schools: Congress/State Legislature/US Dept of Education.”

This might not exactly be H. L. Mencken, but it surely provides raw emotional relief for educators and others who feel besieged by the modern-day reform movement. They “retweet” Ravitch’s rants and, thanks to the multiplication effects of networks, soon tens of thousands of people receive them. In fact, Ravitch’s tweets are so influential that an anonymous someone has created the Twitter handle “@NOTDiane-Ravitch” to argue the positions held by the education historian before she changed her mind on most education policy issues.

Not that reformers don’t have their own Twitter heroes. Former District of Columbia schools chancellor Michelle Rhee is within striking distance of Ravitch’s influence and serves up a steady diet of can-do reform truisms. Tom Vander Ark, an entrepreneur formerly of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, offers an optimistic take on the burgeoning field of online learning. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan promotes his administration’s policies via @arneduncan. And @EdTrust offers its patented progressive take on education and social justice.

It’s hard to know whether all this tweeting adds up to anything significant. Of course, much the same was once said of blogs; now it’s well-accepted that a well-written blog post can be just as influential as a newspaper op-ed. Twitter offers a nonstop stream of views, ideas, opinions, and emotions; get yourself in the flow or be left behind.

About Klout Scores

A Klout score is the measurement of someone’s overall online influence. The scores range from 1 to 100, with higher scores representing a wider and stronger sphere of influence. Klout uses more than 35 variables on Facebook and Twitter to measure True Reach, Amplification Probability, and Network Score.

True Reach is the size of someone’s engaged audience. Amplification Score is the likelihood that someone’s messages will generate actions (retweets, @messages, likes, and comments). Network Score indicates how influential someone’s engaged audience is. The Klout score is highly correlated to clicks, comments, and retweets.

Diane Ravitch’s Klout score of 73 makes her the most influential tweeter in education, and she’s on par or close to it with other opinion leaders, including columnists Paul Krugman (@nytimeskrugman) at 73 and Ezra Klein (@ezraklein) at 76. Pop star Justin Bieber is the only individual with a perfect Klout score of 100.

Source: Klout.com

what next

Top 25 Education Policy/Media Tweeters (Figure 1) (as of June 2011)

	Name	Handle	Klout Score	Followers
1	Diane Ravitch	@DianeRavitch	73	14,746
2	Education Week	@educationweek	72	50,283
3	U.S Education Department	@usedgov	65	56,625
3	Huffington Post Education	@HuffPostEdu	65	6,611
5	Michelle Rhee	@m_rhee	64	20,223
6	ASCD	@ASCD	62	13,366
6	Justin Hamilton	@edpressec	62	9,808
8	Alfie Kohn	@alfiekohn	61	9,093
8	Arne Duncan	@arneduncan	61	5,773
10	Dana Goldstein	@DanaGoldstein	60	5,880
11	Leonie Haimson	@leoniehaimson	59	1,358
12	Mike Klonsky	@mikeklonsky	58	1,638
13	NEA Today	@NEAToday	56	18,303
13	Students First	@StudentsFirstHQ	56	7,775
13	Randi Weingarten	@rweingarten	56	2,308
13	Michael Petrilli	@michaelpetrilli	56	1,506
17	50CAN	@fiftycan	55	9,603
17	Education Sector	@educationsector	55	9,235
17	The Education Trust	@EdTrust	55	2,418
20	The Hechinger Report	@hechingerreport	54	2,801
20	Tom Vander Ark	@tvanderark	54	4,229
23	Education & Workforce Dems	@edworkforcedems	53	7,644
23	Patrick Riccards	@Eduflack	53	7,014
23	EdReformer	@EdReformer	53	5,490
23	Alexander Russo	@alexanderrusso	53	3,661

Source: Author's research; Twitter followers from Twitter.com; Klout scores from Klout.com—the highest score recorded between late May and late June 2011.

Top 25 Educator Tweeters (Figure 2) (as of June 2011)

	Name	Handle	Description	Klout Score	Followers
1	Vicki Davis	@coolcatteacher	Teacher, IT Director	75	20,525
2	Tom Whitby	@tomwhitby	Education Professor	74	10,492
3	Steve Anderson	@Web20classroom	Teacher, IT Specialist	71	26,158
4	Eric Sheninger	@NMHS_Principal	Principal	69	11,521
5	Shelly Terrell	@shellterrell	ESL Teacher	67	14,129
6	Larry Ferlazzo	@Larryferlazzo	Teacher	66	10,340
6	Ewan McIntosh	@ewanmcintosh	Education Technology Consultant	66	9,899
6	Lisa Nielsen	@InnovativeEdu	Author	66	6,675
6	Sheryl Nussbaum Beach	@snbeach	Educator, Founder of 21st Century Collaborative	66	6,617
10	Wesley Fryer	@wfryer	Educator, Author	65	9,198
10	Lucy Gray	@elemenous	Ed Tech Consultant	65	8,422
10	Kyle B. Pace	@kylepace	K-12 IT Specialist	65	7,720
13	Howard Rheingold	@hrheingold	Educator	63	23,338
13	Will Richardson	@willrich45	Parent, Author, Blogger	63	17,142
15	Deven K. Black	@devenkblack	Teacher, Librarian	61	4,607
15	Bill Ferriter	@plugusin	Teacher, Author	61	3,708
17	Steve Dembo	@teach42	Online Community Manager for Discovery Education	60	8,850
17	Milton Ramirez	@tonnet	Education Blogger	60	6,676
17	Jonathan Becker	@jonbecker	Education Professor	60	5,016
20	Pam Moran	@pammoran	Educator	59	3,259
21	Josie Fraser	@josiefraser	Social and Educational Technologist	58	7,671
21	Kevin Honeycutt	@kevinhoneycutt	Educator, Technology Integration Specialist	58	4,373
23	Lyn Hilt	@L_Hilt	Principal	57	3,313
24	Kevin Jarrett	@kjarrett	Technology Teacher	56	7,808
24	Silvio Tolisano	@langwitches	Education Consultant	56	7,118

Source: Author's research; Twitter followers and description from Twitter.com; Klout scores from Klout.com—the highest score recorded between late May and late June 2011. This list includes only educators working primarily on K-12 education.