'It's very very fun and ecsiting' – using Twitter in the Primary Classroom

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As part of focusing on the development of traditional writing and new literacies, Martin Waller describes how he has used the social networking system Twitter with his Year 2 class as means of engaging children in evaluating and reflecting on their own learning. Its use has created a greater understanding of real world literacy and helped develop digital literacy skills within this online community of practice.

New challenges

The role of digital technologies and the Internet in the school curriculum has been subject to intense educational and media debate in recent years. Digital technologies have presented new challenges to teachers and in recent years it has been recognised that literacy has become embodied in the communication systems that technologies and the Internet provide (Marsh 2010). However, as Lankshear and Knobel (2006) suggest, we are presently at a point in historical-cultural development of literacy where we do not fully understand how to deal with these new literacies educationally. What I aim to describe in this article is a process I have begun within my Year 2 children (Orange Class) to embed a social networking system into the everyday life of our classroom to develop competences with literacy and digital technologies within a meaningful and enriching context.

Why Twitter?

The social networking system (S.N.S.) that we use is one that has received an influx of media attention in recent months - Twitter. The S.N.S. is free to join and simply asks 'What are you doing?' Users are then invited to tweet up to one hundred and forty characters in what has been termed micro-blogging. Other users can follow and reply to tweets as well as sending private messages. In this sense literacy is embodied in the reflections and interactions of users of the site.

Various media sources have claimed that the recent review of the primary curriculum suggests schools should replace the study of traditional areas such as the Vikings and World Wars with the teaching of using social networking sites such as Twitter (Cohen 2009). However, the final report by Rose (DfES 2009) does not actually mention teaching Twitter explicitly but rather the need for children to become critical readers of an extensive range of texts, which should include online social and collaborative communications. Extending the range of texts that children study can only be of benefit in helping them to understand the vast array of domains that literacy embodies in our society.

Twitter fits in with the everyday routines of our classroom and is always available for the children to use on one of our computers. The children are encouraged to tweet when they feel it is appropriate to share their learning or when asked by a member of staff. They may write about anything that they like, as long as they adhere to certain rules (see below). Most of the children choose to write about learning activities they have been completing in the classroom, while others sometimes choose to write about interests from their own popular cultures. Twitter is their platform for sharing their learning and culture – it offers a window to the world.

Using Twitter

Before introducing Twitter to the children I had identified a group of struggling writers who were disengaged from

the writing process and found the prospect of writing more than four sentences very daunting. We, therefore, started using the system as a way of engaging the children in communicating their thinking with the rest of the class and reflecting on their learning. I began to display our Twitter feed on the interactive board which showed our tweets by class members. As time progressed the children began to develop an understanding that they were writing for an audience that extended beyond the classroom. They were beginning to take part in a network that had communicative practices at its core. Writing for audience and purpose finally began to mean something to them. The children enjoyed the fact that their thoughts were published for others to see and felt a sense of pride in their writing.

Figure 1: Orange Class Twitter Stream

Throughout the process I made the decision not to correct the children's spelling as I wanted the tweets to be personal and reflect their literate identities. However, this did not stop the children asking for support and trying to apply their phonic knowledge when tweeting.

As Twitter became embedded in the culture of our classroom the children started to become more engaged in the writing process. It was evident that the children began to use Twitter as a means of demonstrating their own knowledge of what we had been learning in class and then trying to guide others. Below is a tweet by a member of the class who decided to write a simple and complex sentence to demonstrate his understanding.

The child clearly understands that he is communicating with an audience that extends beyond the classroom walls and has tried to share his knowledge with the rest of the social network by demonstrating the effective use of simple and complex sentences. Twitter in this sense is offering the children the opportunity to celebrate and share their learning. In addition they are authentically engaging in literacy practices that are an integral part of the fabric of life for many people (Marsh 2010).

Another dimension of Twitter was opened up to us when we began to gain 'followers' who chose to read our day to day reflections. Some followers opted to reply to our tweets and offered feedback on the work that the children have completed. Others have chosen to support the children in developing their thinking about their class work. For example after the children had tweeted about watching a new version of the *Brer Rabbit* stories we received a reply asking:

This particular reply highlights how Twitter can be used as a means of developing intergenerational literacy where meaning is co-constructed and shared within a global literacy community (Marsh 2010). The tweet subsequently instigated a discussion in our classroom which then led to the children tweeting a reply.

The system enhanced the teaching and learning in our classroom and opened up new opportunities for the children to engage in authentic literacy practices. Another example was when representatives from the birthplace museum of Joel Chandler-Harris, who collected the *Brer Rabbit* stories, read our tweets and sent us a special message from the USA saying how impressed they were with our work. This sort of communication would not have been possible had we not shared our work with a global community where our learning could be documented and shared in such an open and accessible way.

The Twitter rules

The fact that Twitter is open and accessible to anybody with an internet connection means that we have developed strict guidelines for use in our classroom. Before any children have access to the system they are made aware of the following rules:

1. children must not mention their name or any of their friends by name in tweets under any circumstances
2. children must not check for replies (to prevent them from seeing any inappropriate material that may be viewable)

3. children must not navigate away from our Twitter Stream page and look at other people's profiles (in case of inappropriate language use).

These rules have always been followed by the children and they clearly understand the e-safety implications of not following them. Even at this very young age the children are starting to become aware of the need to be cautious when working online and know not to share personal information with people they do not know. Similarly, it is important for an adult to check for replies from followers before sharing them with the children as there is the possibility that inappropriate replies may be received due to the open nature of Twitter. This procedure should not deter practitioners from using a social networking site in the classroom, but rather consider it as an additional safety measure when embedding any Web 2.0 system.

Twitpic

The use of Twitter has also allowed the children to develop other digital literacy skills such as photography. In recent months we have been using the 'twitpic' (www.twitpic.com) service to upload photographs of what we have been learning about in class. We recently drew pictures of fish and were asked:

> **librarybeth** @ClassroomTweets great fish! can you twitpic one of your drawings?
> 1:56 PM Oct 14th from web in reply to ClassroomTweets

We then used our digital camera to take a photograph of one of our drawings and then uploaded it to the website, which automatically added it to our Twitter stream.
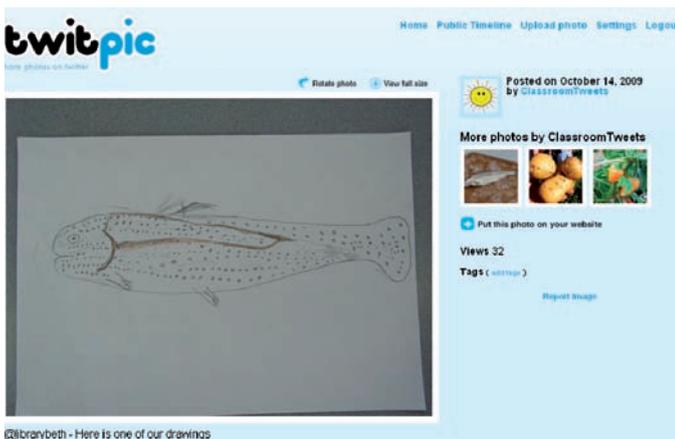

Figure 2: Using twitpic

We then received feedback from our follower:

> **librarybeth** @ClassroomTweets what a wonderful drawing! I love all the spots. Thank you for sharing that with me! Your tweets make me smile.
> 2:17 PM Oct 14th from web in reply to ClassroomTweets

While the children developed their traditional literacy skills of writing they also had the opportunity to develop digital skills in a motivating context while also gaining informal assessment on their work. The children felt a great sense of achievement by seeing their work appear in our Twitter stream and were excited to receive feedback on their work – especially since it had made one of their online friends smile!

Conclusion

Twitter has allowed the children in Orange Class to engage in using meaningful literacy that is relevant to the world that we live in. It is too early at this stage to argue fully that it has a positive impact on writing attainment. However, what is clear is that it has allowed the children to understand that literacy does not happen within the bubble of a classroom and that it permeates into all areas of life and can be constructed with other people, not just of their own age but of a different generation. I think the use of Twitter is best summed up by one of the children who had negative views of the writing process before using Twitter:

> I like writin
> 12:08 PM Apr 21st from web

We are looking forward to further developing our use of Twitter in Orange Class. If you would like to be part of it, please visit us at www.twitter.com/ClassroomTweets.

References

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