

A Twitter Guide for Schools

Policy – Liability – Safe Use

This guide is intended for schools considering or already using the social networking service, Twitter, in the school. It does in no way constitute legal advice but is to be used as a guide for further discussion within the school.

This is version 1.1 amended on 20th Sept 2012. If you have any comments or think anything else should be included please email me:

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Introduction

Social networking tools are a great collaborative learning resource in education for both students and their teachers. Twitter has fast become one of the tools of choice.

I'm not a teacher, so if you are and you're not yet convinced about using Twitter in the classroom I will default to the experts; have a look at these two great resources:

<http://goo.gl/d1YJU>

<http://goo.gl/h8asX>

This brief guide is written to help you with your understanding of the safe use of Twitter from the perspective of policy, school liability and most importantly child safety.

Policy

When I say policy schools can apply different names; the ICT policy, internet policy, acceptable use policy or e-safety policy. Although some schools do have separate policies generally these all refer to the same thing - the appropriate and inappropriate use of ICT equipment within school (whether school or personally owned), plus the appropriate and inappropriate use of school owned ICT outside of school.

Within any policy there will be the "Acceptable Use" section; invariably this will be the page that is put in the home/school agreement or put on the school wall. The wording in this part needs to be written concisely and clearly in a manner appropriate to the age of the user.

If a school starts to use social networking whether by staff or by the children it would be advisable to create a social media policy or embed it into your current policy. Again, there doesn't need to be anything complicated about this; a clearly written and concise page will suffice which can then be used as a school agreement between school/staff member and school/student.

School Liability

There are certain liabilities on any school when you open up new services such as internet use, email facility or social networking. The easiest way to explain this is to use an example. A teacher is using Twitter in the classroom; the children

are working collaboratively using a particular hashtag each sat at a computer. Out of the blue one of your followers posts a particularly nasty tweet

and includes the hashtag, it also has a link to an inappropriate image. The children click the link and are horrified. They go home and tell their parents and some of the parents decide to group together and sue the school. Not only that the media are outside the front gates the next morning. Who is liable, the teacher or the school? Ultimately it is the school (there is a slight difference with academies but that's not for here). That example may sound a little extreme but it isn't outside the realms of possibility (a hacked account?). The point I am making is that the school has facilitated a service and children (or staff) have been subjected to emotional distress. You could also think of this in terms of cyberbullying, harassment, malicious communications. It doesn't matter, the school holds the liability.

Child Safety

Aside from education the most important part of school life is that of safeguarding the child. In the context of using services such as the internet, social networking etc. we are talking about e-safety. By opening up these channels you are potentially allowing communication on a 24/7 worldwide basis therefore it is vital that e-safety is considered.

Many will try to complicate this but actually the advice surrounding any service is essentially the same. Risk assess and mitigate, if you can't mitigate the risk is there another way to achieve something similar? If the risk is high and you can't mitigate or do something similar, you can't do! This is what puts many schools off using ICT services, the apparent fear of the unknown or the incorrect assumption that they're not "techie" enough.

The bottom line is this (in my opinion): children cannot be wrapped up in cotton wool. The dangers of the internet, Facebook, social networking in general are sometimes blown way out of proportion. Using the analogy of driving, there are real dangers on the roads. These dangers don't stop us from driving, neither do they stop us from taking the children in the car. Whether consciously or sub-consciously we risk assess, we drive safely, we don't use our mobile phone, we don't drink and drive. By applying some simple rules we are as safe as we can be.

For the vast majority of Twitter users the same is true, they will have a trouble-free digital life and by the application of some simple "lifeskill" rules the safety of the child and the liability upon the school will be a low risk assessment.

Using Twitter Safely

In terms of child safety and school liability of using Twitter there are limited but

effective options; a locked (non-public non-searchable) account or an unlocked

(public and searchable) account. By default Twitter is a social networking service and is therefore unlocked (public).

By locking your account you can prevent people from following you automatically. In effect you are “vetting” users. It also means that your tweets are not public and are not searchable. The tweets you post are only viewable by the persons you have approved to follow you.

Here are a couple of important tips:

1. Twitter states in their Privacy Policy that their service is not directed to persons under the age of 13. Therefore accounts can be created, providing the child's parent has consented and the child's account does not reveal any personal information.
2. You are what you tweet!
3. Although you (or the school, see below) owns the account, Twitter retains the right to use, copy, reproduce, process, adapt, modify, publish, transmit, display and distribute" your tweets. However, they are your tweets and they belong to you (or the school).

To learn more about using Twitter safely see here - <http://goo.gl/zl35O>

Which Type of Account

Actually, there is only one type of Twitter account, it is more how the account is used; a personal account, a personal account endorsed by the school, or a school account. It is important to discuss what the account/s will be used for as this will also direct the wording of your policy and/or user agreement.

1. There are clear differences in each of those three account examples which I will briefly explain below. Your school policy should state what type of account is allowed (in terms of b and c) :
 - a. Personal account - as it says on the tin. It is a personal account, you make no reference to the school or of school business.
 - b. Personal account endorsed by the school - probably the most popular type of account. Your school is happy for you to tweet, promote the school, reference the school website and the great work you are doing. You will also use the account for "chit-chat" with others and generally use a social networking service for exactly that - being social.
 - c. School account - either a single account or multiple accounts. You are using a school account to encourage collaborative working

within the school or with other schools etc.

User Agreement

So, after all that, what we need is a user agreement. A simple document (or page) that outlines the dos and don'ts. If the children are going to be using Twitter I would recommend spending 30-40 minutes letting them come up with the user agreement with a little steerage from you. This builds in a sense of empowerment and trust.

What you will see is that there are many similarities between what you have already (hopefully) in your home/school acceptable use agreement and therefore you don't actually need a separate document.

It could be that you are only using a school Twitter account within the school, however by coming up with an agreement you are empowering the children to be good digital citizens rather than "here are the rules for Twittter".

Here is what you should be considering; each of the points should be discussed with the children so that they understand them:

1. Never post any personal information (give examples such as age, hobbies, phone numbers, where they live, photographs etc).
2. Never post anything that you would find upsetting (bullied/bullying).
3. If you find anything upsetting, don't reply, tell an adult you trust.
4. Be careful who you talk to, not everybody is who they say they are.
5. If somebody asks you to meet them in the real world, tell your parents or an

In terms of adults using Twitter the above would be common sense however the school policy should go a little further in order to mitigate any risk of liability to the school. For example:

1. You will never be derogatory to any person or bring the school name into disrepute.
2. You will never engage knowingly with a pupil outside of school.
3. You will retain a personal/professional boundary at all times.
4. You will never post pictures of the children or refer to them at any time.

Summary

There are plenty of schools that are using Twitter as a fantastic teaching and learning tool - safely! Whilst there are risks of safety and liability you are able to

mitigate these risks with some very simple steps:

1. Carefully consider what you are going to use the Twitter service for and also what type of account you want (personal school endorsed or school owned).
2. Ensure that the appropriate use of these accounts are written into the school policy.
3. Empower the children with the knowledge to become safe and responsible users, in other words good digital citizens.