



A Little Birdy Told Me

The sky is the limit for twittering history teachers on #histedchat

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Increasingly, teachers from all over the globe are harnessing the power of social media to create online professional learning communities (PLCs). A plethora of 'virtual' PLCs exist on limitless topics. The beauty of these PLCs is that participation is free and is not limited by either place or time. Additionally, these PLCs bring new meaning to the adage 'working smarter not harder' as they are a veritable goldmine of shared ideas, resources and opportunities. This article documents the emergence of one PLC – a Twitter based PLC called #histedchat – and invites readers to consider the potential benefits to their practice and to consider joining this growing community.

What's All the Fuss About?

Twitter is a social media platform which involves a person tweeting messages of no more than 140 characters at a time. It is referred to as 'micro blogging' as users often tweet about what they think, or are doing, or resources they find useful on a given topic. #histedchat is used in a tweet as a 'hashtag' or conversation topic to make it part of a stream of tweets on the same topic. In this case, it relates to history education and research. Discussion can be asynchronous – any time, any place – or synchronous, as in the case of the fortnightly #histedchat sessions. Interested 'tweeps' (Twitter users) around the world now search for '#histedchat' when they want to find or share ideas and resources.

What does this mean for educators? To answer this question, eight keen #histedchat tweeps from Australia and the United Kingdom participated in a synchronous chat about #histedchat and what it means to them. The stream of tweets documenting this discussion was archived using Storify (available at <http://storify.com/vanweringh/histedchat>) and this paper was collaboratively constructed via Google Docs – not bad for eight history teachers and historians of varying age, career stage and disposition who had never 'met' six months ago; and most of whom will never meet face-to-face.

So What Can Twitter and #histedchat Offer You?

INSIGHT AND EXPERTISE

#histedchat offers free access to the collective research power and experience base of #histedchat tweeps all over the world. Relevant research and pedagogy are discussed, as are related philosophical issues. For educators, this means being able to share ideas, pose questions, engage in discussion and share resources – quickly, easily and whenever suits them. Tweets are broadcast around the world, so the potential connections are endless and powerful.



FOCUS



Negotiating the opportunities that Web 2.0 tools offers educators is for most people mindboggling – never mind the emergence of Web 3.0 tools! #histedchat focuses this stream of consciousness into something more useful for teaching and learning history.

Simon (via email): *"Twitter, by its very nature focuses our attention and the limitation of 140 characters demands an economy and precision in language. It is the same "think before you write" maxim that I so often place before my students"*

This is particularly the case with the 'live' #histedchats which take place fortnightly on Wednesdays 8.30-9.30pm (AEST). A twitpoll allows participants to vote on a preferred topic, and anyone can offer to moderate a session (i.e. devise four or five relevant questions and keep participants to time). A broad range of topics has so far been canvassed including teaching twentieth century wars, gender and history teaching, technology in the History classroom and the list goes on. Those who are unable to attend a live chat can take part afterwards by accessing the Storify archive and/or share resources via the #histedchat EDMODO site or Wiki (<http://histedchat.wikispaces.com/>). In this sense, professional learning is both focused and continuous.



COLLABORATION

#histedchat increases the number of colleagues you have available for collaboration beyond your own classroom.



You will find that participants are willing to share their resources and their time to build connections which in turn might result in you completing global history projects. For example, perhaps a school in Turkey wishes to debate the merits of the Gallipoli campaign. Or maybe a school in Vietnam would like to explain why the 'American war' was doomed? Such collaboration can also be scaffolded through a Flatclass or Quadblogging project.

ENCOURAGES CRITICAL REFLECTION

You can take part in #histedchat as frequently or infrequently as you like. The day-to-day demands of the school setting do not always allow teachers to step back and reflect upon practice. Twitter as a social media tool is designed for constant movement in and out of the space, so often a spare five minutes is all it takes to read or access something of relevance, and this encourages reflexive practice.



CONFIDENCE AND REINVIGORATION

#histedchat is an inclusive community – whether you are a pre-service teacher or a beginning teacher, a historian or a researcher, a mid-career teacher or a former techno-phobe like many of us – our experience of creating #histedchat has been a positive one as the tweets and email excerpt below show:





James (via email): *'I'm not a teacher but rather a student with aspirations to be a teacher at a later stage... it's the very fact that I am to become a teacher that has drawn me to #histedchat. What the chat does for me personally is allow me to draw ideas from the experiences of teachers who are teaching at present in terms of both techniques and resources, not only from Twitter direct but also EDMODO and Dropbox.'*

How Can You Get Started?

To join in the conversation, you need to join Twitter (www.twitter.com) and then begin searching for the #histedchat hashtag using the search function. There are many websites and YouTube videos explaining how to join Twitter, so these can teach you the process; it should take you a few minutes.

Once you have joined Twitter and found the #histedchat conversation, you may like to 'follow' the teachers who are involved. If you click on the user icon, there should be a 'Follow' button or a small bird with a tick next to it. Once you follow someone, you will receive all their tweets in your news feed. Check the feed as often as you like, seeing what people are tweeting about and the resources they share.

If you are considering 'taking to the skies' of Twitter Ilja offers the following useful tips in getting started:

- Follow other history teachers. A good way to start is this list: <https://twitter.com/vanweringh/histedchat> which contains past #histedchat participants. Almost all of them are History teachers.

- Try 'lurking' for a while: this means just following people and seeing how the conversations work.
- Don't forget to add a #tag to your tweets. You can use #histedchat for any history related tweet. Other good tags to try out are: #edchat, #sschat (social studies chat), #twitterstorians, #history, #edtech and #historyteacher.
- Your tweets are public and can be read by anybody or can be re-tweeted to a large audience. Always be professional in tone, content and context.
- Don't worry about followers, that will come later. It's about following interesting people and interesting hashtags.
- Sharing is caring. The strength of the teacher community on Twitter is that people share their teaching ideas and resources, so don't tweet about the contents of your lunch box, let us know about your favourite classroom activities and links, it will be appreciated.

Twitter is not for everyone, indeed your first Twitter chat can be overwhelming, or as Ilja has stated 'it's like taking a drink from a fire hydrant.' One thing is for sure, you will not know if Twitter is for you if you don't give it a go. When contemplating whether #histedchat is something you might like to try, consider the experience of Jan (who began teaching in 1975):

'It took me over two years to bite the bullet and send a tweet.... I am totally engrossed now and take every opportunity to extoll the virtues of #histedchat and the wonderful learning space that Twitter can be, please join us.'

If you would like to know more about #histedchat, you can email Catherine Hart on chart@brightongrammar.vic.edu.au