



A Thousand Mile Journey

Siddhartha Guatama, Indian religious leader, and founder of Buddhism eloquently said, “*A thousand mile journey begins with one step.*” That quotation perfectly describes the journey of connected educators who have established networks of camaraderie never seen before in education. In fact, my first tweet (online *Twitter* message) was that quote from Siddhartha Gautama. We all start somewhere. It’s important to note that we, the connected educators, all had different reasons for embarking on the journey and becoming connected. Some saw it as an opportunity to learn and grow, others wanted to advance their careers, still others wanted to connect with like-minded educators throughout the world.

GETTING STARTED

Embarking on a venture to become connected could challenge the establishment that has been in place for hundreds of years. Prior to social media, educators connected at conferences, on the phone, by e-mail, or at the local coffee shop. It's only been a few years, but the term "connection" has taken on a different context. Although social networking is still in its infancy, there are already many trailblazers in our field who cleared the path to guide the rest of us. They explored all of the social networks, and as of this publication, narrowed it down to a few communication preferences: *Twitter*, *Facebook*, *Google+*, and *Pinterest*. Perhaps the most efficient and widely acclaimed of these social networks is *Twitter*.

Signing up for *Twitter* is extremely easy and only takes a few minutes. To use *Twitter* requires a few simple steps. Users choose a "handle" or name that they use to identify themselves to others. There are some educators who elect to use their own name, while others choose to use the name of their school, or district. The next step is for the new user to describe themselves in 140 characters or less. When prospective associates view the profile of another user, they establish if it is a match for them, and vice versa. In order to complete the profile, users then choose a profile picture. The connection possibilities are endless once the access to *Twitter* begins.

After developing your handle and a description of who you are, there are a few items to consider in the first few days:

- Follow as many educators as possible;
- Have a secure password with numbers, characters, and a combination of capital and lowercase letters; and
- Download the *Twitter* app, if you have a smart phone, in order to have the learning opportunities at your fingertips.

In the beginning, adapting to social networking can be daunting. Even when the user has access to thousands of educators,

professionals, or even celebrities, the decision of who to follow, when to follow, where to follow, and why to follow comes along with a whole set of additional questions. Check out my *Twitter* tutorial in the companion website. One of the most highly regarded *Twitter* experts for education, Eric Sheninger, principal of New Milford High School, recommends that

New users to social media must take time to lurk and learn. This means they should follow a few educators and hashtags to get an idea of the information that is flowing. This process could take weeks, months, or even years, but the most important part is that you become connected.

Eric has written two books on the power of connection and presented at hundreds of conferences; his *Twitter* following of 65,000 people is one of the highest for educators and a testament to his expertise.

As recommended, during the lurk and learn phase, the newly connected educator has the ability to sharpen their learning exploring information generated from respected educators in news sources, blog posts, conferences, or even podcasts. I suggest that you dedicate ten minutes a day, three to four times a week for the first few months during this phase, which allows you to become exposed to a wide range of information. As you sift through this information, you inevitably will find other resources, and may also choose to expand your professional learning network (PLN).

In addition to following specific educators, there is a whole interconnected network of educators who are sharing information through (#) hashtags; a word or an unspaced phrase prefixed with the number sign (“#”). It is a form of metadata tag that helps people label or specify their learning. For instance, if a principal wants to start hearing from and communicating with other principals, they can follow the hashtag #cpchat (connected principals chat). Following the #cpchat allows new users to not only “meet” more connected educators, but also to start building their professional knowledge. By searching the #cpchat, they can also ask questions

to fellow principals who may help by providing supplementary resources to explore, such as a blog or video.

In addition to following specific hashtags and connected trailblazers, new users also benefit from following organizations. All of the major educational policy, research, and professional organizations have established a *Twitter* presence. For instance, Corwin, one of the most recognized professional organizations dedicated to improving education through innovative books and research, has a social media presence. Through *Twitter*, Corwin promotes their books and conferences as well as blogs and videos designed for the connected administrator. By engaging with organizations on *Twitter*, the user does not have to wait to receive printed materials in the mail. Additionally, *Twitter* allows access and interactions with an organization to request materials and ask questions, and usually within minutes, an answer or resource is provided.

NAVIGATING THE WEB

Without social networks, navigating the Web can be next to impossible. For instance, many people use *Google* as their primary search engine. A search of “connected educator” yields about 11 million results. Is there anyone who has the time to sift through 10 results let alone 11 million results? I know that I don’t have time to sift through all of this information. This is an example of how social networking becomes a major asset in the information “sift.”

Using the *Google* example above, a *Twitter* search for “connected educators” directs you to the five most popular educators, recent tweets containing the term, and resources for blogs, wikis, and educational online materials. To the busy educator, the *Twitter* search results serve as both a life preserver and a catapult. Either way, there is the distinct possibility of entering another sphere of learning. I can honestly say that I can’t live without it!

In addition to *Twitter*, the connected educator can use platforms, such as *Facebook*, *Google+*, and personalized digital news sources to obtain information. Once again, instead of doing a *Google* search

that retrieves millions and millions of responses, narrowing (or specifying) searches through social media takes less time. Self-directed news sources, such as *paper.li* or *Zite* allow users to personalize and refine searches, and then similar to a traditional newspaper, this information is published daily. *Paper.li* helps users find, publish, and promote interesting news and articles posted on social media. Similarly, *Zite* seeks to create a unique, user-based news source that actually “learns” from its users. The more the user interacts with the self-directed news sources, the better the information. For instance, if a user “likes” an article on *Zite*, it searches for more articles that are similar or by the same author. As a result, each time the user opens their *Zite*, they are presented with additional information. As the user gets more comfortable or confident, they can share the information with others through *Twitter*, *Facebook*, or *Google+*. I started a *paper.li* a few years ago titled “#NJED Daily.” The “paper” is published every day at 8:00 PM EST and allows me (and anyone else who is interested) to read about all things concerning education in New Jersey. Since I published the first #NJED Daily, more than 3,000 educators have viewed and interacted with this paper. On the companion website, learn more about how to set up your own personalized newspaper.

Since content can be delivered to the connected educator either through a self-developed online newspaper, or by accessing information through social media outlets, less time is spent on resource gathering. All educators have increased demands on their time. By implementing timesaving methods like social media, educators increase access to trusted sources of information, and augment more time for content development.

THE DIGITAL FOOTPRINT

Imagine that everything you ever said or did was available for everyone to see? This can either be a scary or enlightening experience, especially if you don’t know it is happening. The digital footprint is the trail of data that is left behind by users on digital services and captures everything that is put on the Web. Once

users understand this, regardless of the platform used, it makes things a lot easier. Develop a positive digital footprint and it can help someone land the job or career they always desired. Develop a negative digital footprint, and it can prevent someone from achieving their goals.

In today's world, the digital footprint begins before birth. Prospective parents share their ultrasound pictures with families through *Facebook*, *Twitter*, or even on their own blog. Unlike people over the age of 30, children today are born already stamped with a digital footprint. Fortunately, adults can establish their own digital footprint. For educators, the digital footprint becomes the means whereby people see you, your school, or your district. If you want to uncover your digital footprint, google your name and list your current position and see what happens. Chances are that there is more about you on the Internet than you think. When I google my name, I find exactly what I put on the Web. I can find my personal blog, school blog, articles I wrote for other organizations, and any Board of Education materials where my name appeared.

As a digital footprint is built, it is important to be aware of etiquette and sharing strategies. For instance, George Couros, Canadian school principal, suggests these ten easy to follow guidelines for connected educators:

1. Sharing innovative strategies about your school
2. Education articles that influence thinking
3. Thoughts and quotes
4. Questions that will help the organization
5. Support other educators
6. Some personal information
7. Do not use profanity
8. Do not get into fights
9. Do not share inappropriate pictures
10. Lose the negativity (Couros, 2011)

By using George's 10 suggestions, the connected administrator can truly understand the far-reaching impact of his or her digital footprint. In addition, by following these easy suggestions you never violate protocol. Many administrators seek opportunities beyond their current position; after five to seven years, there is a natural tendency to seek out other jobs or positions. In today's world, these opportunities are available to those with a digital footprint.

Besides the potential benefits of a positive digital footprint, connected educators have the added responsibility of conveying their message to their students, teachers, and parents. Remember that there is already a generation raised on social media without any assistance from their parents or educators. These young adults were taught by educators who were told by their supervisors to not talk about social media outlets (back then it was *MySpace*, texting, and the early days of *Facebook*). Not surprisingly, schools and communities found out the hard way that the students in the late 1990s and early 2000s were sharing inappropriate images, messages, and videos. In their defense, no one told these connected youth about "pause before you post," or that this information would follow them for the rest of their lives. I can remember attending professional development sessions and talking about the Internet and social media and my administrators saying it was not a topic for educators. This arena was considered the devil's playground by educational administrations. So, we just stayed away from this frontier because we didn't want to see inappropriate images and information about our students. What that meant was that the kids had this Wild West frontier all to themselves, and we paid for it.

Thankfully, educators are no longer turning a blind eye to social media. In fact, even if they do not have an on-line presence, many educators are equipped to discuss the realities of a digital footprint. In my elementary school, we start talking to children in kindergarten about their digital footprint. We feel it is important to be as honest as possible with our kids and parents. Instead of removing students because of their posts, colleges and universities are now attempting to educate their undergraduates about their footprints. Most importantly, through their social media actions, connected

educators are now modeling the way for the on-line behaviors they expect to see from their teachers and students.

PERSONAL STORY FROM CONNECTED EDUCATOR BRAD GUSTAFSON

Brad Gustafson is the principal at Greenwood Elementary in Minnesota. He believes in collaborating with others to foster conditions that create a highly relational and 21st-century learning environment where creativity is nurtured and student and staff learning is revered. After only a few short years of connection, Brad has made a big impact.

At Greenwood Elementary, Brad Gustafson's journey as a connected educator began with a defining moment. A defining moment is typically a point in time that alters life's trajectory. Sometimes these moments are serendipitous and joyful; other times they are derived from significant loss, are difficult, and touch the soul. Regardless, a person's perspective and journey is forever altered after experiencing any type of defining moment.

Brad's defining moment was far from grandiose. He signed up for *Twitter* and initially questioned its utility. It wasn't until he began personally connecting with others via weekly educational chats that he realized the value. This was a transformational process involving several iterations.

Becoming connected completely unleashed his love of learning. With every blog post, tweet, and resource that he read, a learner's mind-set was being forged. The process is difficult to explain, but assuredly transformed Brad into a networked version of his previous self. His work now involves a perpetual process of collaborative conversations that draw on the authors and educators he's connected with and the phenomenal teachers at Greenwood. When Brad pulls up his *Twitter* account, he's not

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looking for the latest Hollywood update. He's connecting with others to discuss innovation, to schedule a *Google Hangout* session, or to read a colleague's blog. Brad forwards articles from *Twitter* with short e-mails to teachers encouraging them in their efforts; nurturing their individual interests is important to him.

The idea of having access to a global cadre of collaborators was previously unfathomable to Brad. Now he's living it every day. His online interactions directly impact his work. For example, he read a blog post that discussed personally telephoning parents of new staff members at the beginning of the school year. Brad had just hired several new teachers and after reading about the idea he knew that he wanted to call his teachers' parents to express his sincere appreciation. He gave it a shot not knowing how profound the impact would be of a few simple telephone calls. To this day, the telephone calls are an experience that Brad cherishes, and he attributes them to being connected with their families.

At Greenwood, one of the art teachers created a stunning student art gallery in the main entry of the school with framed museum-quality prints. Some of the student artwork features augmented reality (AR) content so that viewers can experience interviews with the student artists explaining their compositions. These projects would not be possible without the amazing teachers at Greenwood, and the support of this type of cutting-edge work is enhanced because of Brad's connections.

After class walk-throughs and teacher observations in his school, Brad always felt humble reverence for the amazing work he witnessed. Occasionally, he even telephoned district administration to share how inspired he was based on those classroom visits. However, to him it still felt like something was missing; he did not believe that these conversations should end inside his school walls. The student learning experience was undergoing truly innovative changes and very few people knew

about this extraordinary process. Becoming connected changed everything for him. Now when Brad is conducting classroom visits, he often brings his iPad to photograph student work. He relies on technology to generate an era of greater transparency. He's using some of the impactful images he captures to advance a powerful narrative. When people read Greenwood's *Facebook* and *Twitter* posts, they're interacting with Brad's vision for education: promising practices and lessons incorporating inspiring global connections are shared using social media.

This transformation runs deeper than the integration of technology. Brad is on a mission! He exudes passion when he talks about how becoming connected helped him find ways to amplify student voice. He keenly understands that the 21st century educational experience must provide students an authentic audience, and he firmly believes that leveraging strategic partnerships enhances student learning.

Brad wholeheartedly agrees with the mantra of George Couros that change is not a top-down or bottom-up thing: it's an "all hands on deck" thing. Brad's method is to be the number one fan of his teachers, supporting them as they take risks, experiment, and develop their students' skills and global awareness. He believes that a connected ethos has the potential to transcend the role of principal and permeate a school.

He encourages staff to work closely with students to create classroom blogs, podcasts, or other projects that incorporate higher-level thinking and creation coupled with foundational skills. Here are some examples of this ideology: students worked with their teachers to create a digital project-based learning blog with the goal of creating a global hub for student-generated challenges; other students work with Brad on a regular principal podcast as a means to communicate with the school community; still others are creating Greenwood's version of Kahn Academy on *YouTube*. The list goes on!

Brad's journey is just one example of how the defining process of becoming connected can translate into a transformational experience that is not only personally rewarding, but one that makes a difference for students and communities. Brad is committed to finding time, telling his school's story through social media, and building capacity for his teachers to take risks.

 **REFLECTION**

Reflect on Brad's journey to becoming a connected leader.

- How does his experience enhance his professional growth?
- What role does social media play in the development and empowerment of his teachers? His students? His school?