

A Conversation About “The Relevant Educator”

With Tom Whitby

Jerry: Do you have colleagues that seem to be able to stay on top of the latest issues, trends, and resources in education? They make networking look so easy and you're wondering, "Where do they have the time to do this, and where are they getting all this information?"

If you're like me, I didn't know really where to begin. It seems as though you can find anything on the internet these days, but that makes it even more overwhelming. I was given a book recommended by a colleague a couple of months ago which helped me begin to work through these challenges. After being introduced to this book, those same colleagues connected me to the author and today, I would like to introduce you to him.

Tom Whitby, who is an educational social media consultant, is also the founder of seven educational groups on LinkedIn including the largest one with over 12,000 members. Tom has presented at many local, national, and international conferences on social media. He writes for several educational journals including, "Learning and Leading." He's also the author of "The Relevant Educator" which focuses on drawing awareness to educators on the choices they have when it comes to social media, and where to go and find the best information for their needs.

My name is Jerry Pettigrew, a global professional manager at Crisis Prevention Institute, and I will be conducting today's interview. Good morning, Tom. How are you doing?

Tom: Good morning, Jerry. Doing very well, thank you.

Jerry: Good. Tom, can you start by telling us a little bit about your professional background, and where your interest in and expertise about social media comes from?

Tom: Well, I actually started out as an English teacher. For 34 years, I was a secondary teacher, and then the last 6 years after that, I was an adjunct professor of education for St. Joseph's College here in New York. So it gives me 40 years' experience in the classroom. I never was an administrator, and I think that gives me a somewhat unique perspective on the profession as it were.

I got involved in social media probably 2004, 2005. I was initially involved with LinkedIn which is a professional social media networking application. LinkedIn, many professionals go on there and put their profiles up seeking other jobs or connecting with other people in their industries, and that was my initial experience.

And in doing that, I started about five different groups on education within LinkedIn. And at that point, I started connecting to more and more educators with many discussions that

were going on. And I noticed that people kept coming up with ideas and references to sources using very small URLs, and I couldn't understand where they were getting these from. Actually, they were Bitly URLs. I know now that it's a way of taking a very long URL address, putting it into an application and making it a much smaller address.

In asking these people where they were getting this information from, Twitter was what kept coming up. So I started to explore what Twitter was and like many, many people probably about 85% of all the people out there, I got on Twitter and I was on it for maybe a couple of weeks. I had no idea what it was, couldn't get a grasp of it so I dropped off for a couple of months. Then after that, somebody actually sat me down, explained to me exactly what was going on, realizing that the only people who will see what I put out are the people that I am connected to. Once I understood that, then I started connecting with many, many people, and Twitter began to grow for me. So today, I think I've got well over 70,000 followers on Twitter.

One thing led to another, and after that I started on Twitter the first successful chat, education chat called Edchat. Many people are familiar with it because Edchat itself has become a hashtag that people just put on to any educational tweet these days, and it extends the range. So if you've got 10 people following you and you put a tweet out, only those 10 people see it. But if you put a hashtag on it, anyone following in that hashtag will see that tweet and there are literally thousands of educators who follow the Edchat hashtag.

Once we established Edchat, which is a weekly chat that educators get involved with, we started out probably with a thousand educators back then, involved in that chat, and then things just started growing from there. That's when I found out about Ning, which is a place where you can go and develop communities. And I developed what was called The Educator's PLN, PLN standing for Personal Learning Network. And I established that community for any educators interested in finding sources, in strategies to create a PLN, and that was called the Educator's PLN. That's still active today with about 18,000 educators from around the world.

And then from there, I developed a blog. I started blogging, and that's called My Island View, and that's on WordPress. So if anyone wants to access that, that would be tomwhitby.wordpress.com, and you can pretty much see my entire educational philosophy through those blogposts.

And then after that, I was involved with BAM! Radio which is a network of educational radio shows, and that's totally internet based. So you can download podcasts of your favorite radio shows, and I've been doing the Edchat Radio show for about three years now, which just discusses each of the Edchats which come out weekly. So there are three years of weekly Edchat analyses on that. And that's pretty much how I got involved with social media.

Jerry: That's amazing, and it sounds like you have an incredible amount of experience not only in education but now also with social media.

I think another good place for us to take this conversation is in your book you talk about the profound effect that technology has had on education in the last 10 years. Can you give a little bit more of your perspective on that effect for us?

Tom: Yeah. I think the two things, the two biggest influences social media has had on education is, number one, through collaboration; number two, through transparency. The idea that collaboration...the best thing I can do is give you an example. When I was an English teacher and I had 11 people in my department, if I wanted to teach something in Shakespeare, I could simply turn to the 11 people in my department and say, "Has anybody got any great ideas that I can work up a lesson on Shakespeare?" and those 11 people would all help me do that.

But if I said to them, "Colleagues, I need to do a lesson on Shakespeare, but I want to incorporate some technology into that," they couldn't help me because many of them were not technology based. What they would do is they would come to me for the technology ideas. So I had no one to turn to at that point. I was limited to the people that I had in my building, and limited to the skills that they had.

Now, with the advent of social media and connections I can make through collegial sources, I now have access to anybody in the world that I want access to. So I've expanded my network of sources, collegial sources, to a point where I don't need to depend on those 11 people anymore. I can go to other experts in the area, not even in the area, anywhere in the world.

Jerry: In your book, "The Relevant Educator," you dispel myths about social media. Can you speak to some of the common misconceptions that I know that I've had before, and explain briefly why they're false?

Tom: Oh, god, there are so many. Number one, I think the biggest problem people have is this whole idea of privacy, and the other problem is everyone feels that they're going to be attacked by somebody on the internet who's going to hurt them in some way. I think the worst thing, especially from a parent's point of view, the worst TV show that was ever on TV was "To Catch a Predator" where each and every week, they would come out with another predator that lured somebody or connected with somebody on the internet and then went in to sexually abuse them.

Sexual abuse on the internet, yes, it is a terrible thing, and yes, it does happen but quite honestly over 93% of all sexual abuse happens face to face. It has nothing to do with the internet, and it's family members or close family friends or clergy that are involved with it.

So the idea that many, many schools banned the internet for as long as they did to protect kids was kind of foolhardy when we didn't ban family picnics, we didn't ban people going to church.

Jerry: Also in your book, you start talking about this Personal Learning Network or what can be referred to as a PLN. It really helped me wrap my mind around what one looks like. Can you give our listeners the idea behind the PLN?

Tom: Yeah, again, a PLN is very simple. It is a network that you actually develop on your own. You pick and choose the people who you want to connect with. Twitter is usually the backbone for a PLN because it gives you very easy and quick access to your collegial sources, and you're limited in the number of things that...characters that you can use so you have to be very succinct in contacting people. So it cuts out a lot of the usual nonsense that goes along with educators talking to each other. They get wrapped up in more than they have to. So you have to be to the point asking very specific questions and getting very specific answers.

So in using this, you develop colleagues on Twitter that you can go back and forth with. But it's more than just Twitter because what you'll find out is that as you're involved with this network of sources, people will ask you if you can get on a Skype call or if you can do a Google Hangout. These are all things that you begin to learn about that gives you more fact-to-face connections with people. So you're expanding your own knowledge of technology and digital collaboration.

And it's a process to get up here and talk about this. You've got to remember, I've been doing this for several years now, and because I've been doing it for several years, I've been able to accomplish a great deal. And I could talk about that but that kind of scares somebody who hasn't done anything at all which is one of the reasons why we wrote the book.

The worst advocates for connected learning are connected learners because they tend to talk about all the wonderful things that they're doing, and it scares the hell out of people who think, "Oh, I'll never be able to do all of that." So you've got to remember that the whole key to this is directing your own learning.

So you use the Personal Learning Network to direct your learning, and you determine what it is you need to know to move on. But the beauty about that is that not only can you direct what you need to know, you also find out that which you don't know. You're being exposed to things that you've never been exposed to before. You're talking to teachers who may be doing the same thing in completely different ways that you're starting to look and get a different opinion about or a different viewpoint. And that helps a great deal in learning your own profession.

Jerry: Yeah. I know that you mentioned Twitter and Google Hangout. Are there any other specific sources for people to get started?

Tom: Well, Twitter, I think, is the best because it is so simple to learn. Other sources would be...what I generally do, how...a very good way to build up the people that you follow, if you go to the chats for instance that take place on Twitter because there are chats covering every aspect of education. There's the third grade chat, the fourth grade chat, the fifth grade chat. Every state has their own chat for educators. There's the California Educator's Chat, there's the New York Educator's Chat, and also specific subjects, English chat, Social Studies chat.

If you go to these chats, what you have the ability to do is to involve yourself in these chats and then follow the people who are putting in worthwhile comments within the chats, people who are adding value to the chat so you can follow them on Twitter.

Another way to do it is once you find an educator, you go to their Twitter profile and you see who they follow so you can follow more and more people that way. Many people have what are called lists when you go to their profile. For instance, I have a list on my profile called My Twitter Stalwart List. These are about 150 people who I follow on Twitter who I've been following many of them for seven, eight years, and they're the real stable of people that I go to for ideas.

You could simply go to that list and follow everybody on that list. And then what begins to happen is that on your Twitter feed now, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, you start getting education tweets coming through from all of these people. And you can pick and choose those that you want to access.

I follow probably about 3,000 people but I don't read every tweet that comes out. I do have people who I recognize right away, and I'll follow those tweets. And I peruse all of the tweets and pick up on the ones that interest me. That's it. You just keep building your Personal Learning Network through these methods.

Following bloggers is another good thing. Following authors on Twitter is another good thing. You get to access the thought leaders in education, and actually interact with them which is something that we've never been able to do before. I can't begin to tell you all of the people that I've been connected with and had conversations with; real giants in the profession which is astounding to me. And it's something that also got me to write a book to offer those things that I had. I was encouraged by other authors who I had contact with.

The other thing too is once you get yourself involved with this, people...it's not just getting information. It's also giving information. People start to ask you for information and your ideas on things. The best part about Twitter is that people are accepted for their ideas not necessarily their titles.

Jerry: Mm-hmm.

Tom: Which is one of the things that's always drawn me to Twitter. Just because you're a superintendent doesn't mean that you are a great educator. It just means that you're a superintendent. It gives you the ability to be accepted for your ideas rather than who you are. It's what you know which is to me...

Jerry: Well I...

Tom: ...very important.

Jerry: Yeah. I wish I would have been introduced to you about 5 or 10 years ago and had all this information because probably like a lot of our listeners sometimes I feel like I'm a little late in the game.

But there was a really interesting quote that you had in the book that I really enjoyed, and it said, "All connected educators are collaborative but not all collaborative educators are connected." You go on to say that, "Technology makes a difference. It has the ability to connect people regardless of time or space." However, you also say that, "The same necessary component is what is slowing down the process of connected learning." Can you give us an idea of what these roadblocks might be?

Tom: Yeah. The biggest obstacle to change are comfort zones. People don't like to leave whatever it is they're comfortable with, and most educators today were not necessarily brought up or educated with the use of technology and integrating technology into what it is they do. So it's like another level of thing that they have to learn and that is...it's a problem.

People often say that many teachers are fearful of technology so therefore they're not going to do that. I've really come to believe that it's not a fear of technology because technology isn't going to hurt anybody. It's just a fear of change. Everybody wants change but nobody wants to change which is one of the big problems we have in getting people involved with any kind of digital collaboration because there are things that you have to learn in order to make it effective. I think these things can be learned in a step-by-step basis. As you get involved, you tend to take on more and more.

For instance, if you spent 20 minutes a day just looking at Twitter, you're going to learn a great deal for your own profession, and that's all it takes is 20 minutes a day. The real secret to that though is that you're going to enjoy what you're doing and you will spend more than 20 minutes a day at some point. And it will begin to consume more and more of your time.

But the payoff is great because of the change that you have in your own profession, the way you deal with things, the way you reflect about things, the way you approach lessons. Because you're getting input now not just from the people within your building but you're getting input from people virtually all over the world who can add to what it is you do.

Jerry: Okay. Before we move to closure, some of our listeners may still be thinking what I used to think that we know other professionals that seem to be able to keep up with networking and have their pulse on current resources, trends, etc. Can you give any other practical tips for those of us that may still feel a little overwhelmed by trying to stay in the loop?

Tom: Yeah. I think taking things on...directing your own learning is very important. So you take things on as you can handle them, and what will happen is that will begin to grow exponentially as a matter of fact. The more you learn, the more you're going to want to learn and the more time you're going to spend doing this. But you've got to take those first steps. In your mind, you've got to understand that you need a growth mindset. You've got to say that, "I'm going to take the time to learn. I'm going to take the time to expand what it is I'm doing." And the time that you spend will be short to begin with, and that will begin to grow.

But it takes a commitment on the part of anybody to open up and to say, "Look, I'm going to leave my comfort zone. I'm going to start to explore what other people are doing, and I'm going to start applying it to what it is I do. And realize that, again, failure is part of learning which is something that has been drummed out of the heads of educators. They've been programmed completely different. They've been programmed against failure. You don't make a mistake in front of your class. You can't fail. You have to plan everything out so it's all right. This is the way teachers have been programmed to train.

But you have to understand that things that you're going to do, you're going to fail with. The difference though is once you fail, you look at the reasons why you fail. You go back and you make it better. And keep in mind that failure is part of learning. Without failure, we don't learn. So once you accept that and begin to explore things with a more open mind, you begin to develop a completely different philosophy on the way you handle things. You become much more collaborative and much more transparent.

There are so many things in education that we were told this is the only way it can be done, and then we find out through social media that other people are able to do things that we're not able to do. So you start to question things, and you start to see what it is they do that's different that allows them to do things that you have not been allowed to do.

We've never had that kind of transparency before. In education, everybody took for granted that there were administrators telling them exactly what it was that they needed to know and there was no war out there. And quite frankly, there's plenty more out there.

It's just a question of being exposed to it, and social media gives us the ability to do that. I hope that answers your question.

Jerry: Yeah, it definitely does. Any other closing comments, thoughts, or any projects or conferences that we can look forward to in the next few months?

Tom: Well, I generally go to as many national conferences as I can. We've got ISTE coming up so I'll be in ISTE in Denver in the end of June.

Right now, I'm working on another book with my partner in writing, Steven Anderson. We're working on one beyond the relevant educator. We're really talking about the whole process of change in education and how to deal with change using technology and social media. So that's a big project that we're working on. We don't even have a title for the book yet, other than something like "I Hate Your Father's Teacher."

Jerry: I like it.

Tom: It's probably going to be something like that. We've got a couple of companies, publishers right now that are looking at it. We've been asked to do the book so I'm certain that it will be coming out.

The other thing too is Edchat Radio. I've been working on Edchat Radio through the BAM! Network. If anyone wants to understand what the chats are like, what we do each and every week on the Edchat Radio show is we discuss the chat, the Edchat that went on that week. And as a matter of fact, there are three years' worth of that show in 10-minute podcasts that are free. So you can go to BAM! Radio and just go to Edchat Radio and, download any of those shows and listen to them on the way to work.

One of the advantages of doing this is that you have an international exposure so you actually get invited to other places to speak. I've been to Doha, Qatar probably four times now. I'm looking on going back a fifth time. I've spoken in Dubai, in the Bahamas, in Canada. It truly is a global endeavor and many, many...as much as people say, "American education is horrible compared to everything else," it's amazing how many people want to know what's going on in American education from all over the world. So there is that global perspective that changes the way you look at things, too.

Jerry: Thank you for that, and I look forward to keeping up with what you will be doing and that new book coming out. I would like to thank Tom Whitby for sharing his valuable time and insights. Thanks for giving us some practical strategies for educators and how they can stay connected.

We were really only able to skim the surface today. You can find much more information about the topics we discussed by reading Tom's book, "The Relevant Educator." It can be

found by visiting Corwin Publishing, and it is also available on Amazon. You can also check out Tom's blog, My Island View by going to tomwhitby.wordpress.com. That's T-O-M-W-H-I-T-B-Y.wordpress.com.

Also, feel free to contact me directly, Jerry Pettigrew, at 414-865-2306 or by email at jpettigrew@crisisprevention.com. Good luck to all of our listeners and wrapping up this school year, thank you for making a difference in the lives of others. Have a great summer.