



TESOL Connections

Keeping English language professionals connected

Professional Learning and Social Media 101

by [Ilene Winokur](#)

Perhaps you've heard colleagues talk about their professional learning network (PLN) or you've opened a Twitter or other social media account but weren't sure what to do next. This is how I felt about 5 years ago when I decided to explore the world of social media to grow my professional learning. I live in Kuwait, and professional development for educators is hard to find here.

I'm a globally minded person who has always enjoyed learning more about the world and the people in it. However, as I followed a few well-known accounts and lurked as I tried to figure out what to do next, I felt totally overwhelmed. Fear of technology was getting in the way of my professional learning, and I decided I must find a way to overcome that feeling. Five years later, I am here to offer my humble advice about how to get started and then grow your PLN without feeling like it is occupying all of your free time.

Effective professional development (PD) is ongoing; educators who are purposeful in their use of social media as a professional learning tool can supplement their existing professional development opportunities and connect with educators at any time to make their teaching more interesting and help them improve their instructional methods. It is truly a personalized learning experience.

Getting Started

It is best to choose one social media account at the beginning. [Twitter](#) has many advantages and [Facebook](#) has closed groups for specific professional sharing. [Voxer](#) is a great tool for those who want to be able to send voice messages, which can make the online experience feel more personal. [WhatsApp](#) is a tool also used by some educators to connect with an existing network, but note that for this app you must share your phone number.

I chose to use Twitter and setting up the account was easy. [Here](#) is a great resource for how to set up a Twitter account for educators. A tip: Try not to get too creative with the name/handle you choose, because it is the way everyone online will recognize you. (You can find me [@specsol](#).)

For Twitter or Facebook, once your account is set up, find like-minded educators/education groups by searching topics (hashtags) that interest you. Here are some hashtags and handles (Twitter names) for TESOL educators that I follow:

- [#ELLchat_bkclub](#)
- [@TESOL_Assn](#) (TESOL International Association)
- [@TESOLConv](#) (the TESOL Convention)
- [@andreahonigsfel](#) (Andrea Honigsfeld)
- [@MsSalvac](#) (Carol Salva)
- [@emilyfranESL](#) (Emily Francis)
- [@TanELLclassroom](#) (Tan Huynh)
- [@kruu_justin](#) (Justin Garcia)

Once you have followed a few accounts, start noticing who they are following or who is commenting and retweeting their tweets.

Don't Get Overwhelmed

Here are some tips to follow to make your social media manageable:

- Limit the amount of time you will spend on it each day, depending on your schedule.
- When you are adding/following accounts, check their latest tweets and see if they are tweeting professional advice or comments rather than personal tweets.
- When you are just starting, don't follow a lot of accounts. Stick to a handful.
- Pay close attention to how others, who have many followers, are tweeting and tagging (to tag is to list other accounts you think will be interested in the tweet or retweet). Try modeling your own tweets—style, formatting, topics—after theirs until you find your own voice and comfort zone.
- Start tweeting by retweeting other tweets that you agree with or commenting on someone's tweet; try doing this once a day.
- Be sure to check your account at least once per day. The more active you are, the more you will learn and the more people will react to your tweets.

If you are on Facebook groups, be sure to turn on notifications if you want to know when people post. If you prefer not to have notifications on, then make sure to check those accounts each day.

Enjoy Growing Your PLN

I find that I have to remain focused on a narrow set of interests to make sure I am able to manage my time on social media. I have to remind myself whenever I encounter really interesting educator accounts that they need to fit my criteria before I follow them.

A bonus to being on social media is you will find out about new books and resources, courses, and so much more. If you need help curating all of these, I suggest the Wakelet app, which even has a Google Chrome extension. This app allows you to save Twitter chats, resources, and lots more. They have a really simple guide for getting started and it's free!

Remember that your opinion and expertise are important to the "Twitterverse," so be sure to retweet (RT) and comment on posts that interest you. Then, add hashtags and/or tag people you are following to ensure others will read your comments.

Connecting and collaborating online with other educators will be one of the best professional learning experiences you will ever have. It's changed me and helped me gain confidence in reaching out to others to learn with them, and I hope it does the same for you.

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