Reform Support Network

Using Social Media to More Effectively Communicate Reform Efforts

A Case Study on the Ohio Department of Education's Use of Twitter

July 2013

Introduction

State and local educational agencies (SEAs and LEAs) are using new and more direct methods to communicate and engage with teachers, administrators and other key stakeholders on critical reform issues. According to a recent Reform Support Network (RSN) report, "Measurable Success, Growing Adoption, Vast Potential: Social Media Use Among State and Local Education Agencies," 80 percent of responding SEAs and LEAs are using or plan to use social media and other innovative communications methods to communicate about key reforms.

The Ohio Department of Education (ODE) is one of the leading State agencies embracing and experimenting with social media. ODE is moving beyond the traditional methods of communication like newsletters and mainstream media to leverage and expand on the opportunities social media offers.

As part of a concerted effort to increase awareness of and engagement in ODE news and issues over the last two years, ODE has gone from a lone account on Twitter to an ongoing dialogue with key stakeholders using the popular microblogging site (where users share short, 140-character posts). ODE now has multiple regularly updated Facebook pages for educators and parents, blogs, LinkedIn pages and YouTube channels.

Twitter has become a linchpin of ODE's efforts. ODE leaders say the measurable success achieved on Twitter came from utilizing it during large-scale events and with key strategic partners.

"One of the keys to success on Twitter is tweeting a lot — five to seven times a day — morning, noon and at night," said Michael Sponhour, executive director of communications and outreach for ODE, noting that ODE measures its success on Twitter by the number of tweets that are "retweeted" (a retweet is a re-posting of someone else's tweet) by ODE's followers. About 70 percent of ODE's tweets are retweeted, he said.

"Our retweet rates are among the best you'll find anywhere," he said. "There is hardly a tweet we send out that isn't retweeted."

This case study brief illustrates how ODE has leveraged social media to communicate about and promote reform efforts with stakeholders in Ohio. The brief details how the State used social media at a November 2012 statewide conference on education reform and through subsequent Twitter chats with teachers, principals, superintendents and other education professionals to build support and awareness around new State systems. This case study will be useful to SEAs interested in strategies for using social media tools to engage a broader group of stakeholders more directly in State reforms (see sidebar on next page on Social Media Promising Practices for SEAs).

Strategic Challenge

ODE regularly holds statewide conferences for educators but recognizes that work commitments and travel restrictions limit the ability of all educators to attend in person. The November 2012 conference for all State educators was intended to give all Ohio schools an opportunity to learn about the sweeping

overhaul to the State's curriculum, student testing and teacher evaluations. More than 2,700 educators including superintendents, principals and curriculum directors from across the State attended. To reach those who couldn't attend and better engage with those who did, ODE posted all conference information on the Internet and on social media.

ODE took a multi-pronged approach to sharing information from the event:

1. Creating an event-specific blog on WordPress (a blog publishing platform and content management system)
2. Recording and posting videos of pertinent breakout sessions on YouTube
3. Live tweeting highlights of speeches as they were made and breakout sessions as they occurred
4. Cataloguing information shared on Storify (See sidebar below on different social media platforms)

Sponhour said ODE leaders felt it was particularly important to engage educators in the conferences so they were a part of the ongoing conversation and, hopefully, engaging their peers to expand ODE's outreach efforts.

"The philosophy behind it was that we were bringing people from all around the State and unless we did something, all of that knowledge was going to be lost," said Sponhour. "It just seemed like letting the water run down the drain."

Preconference Engagement and Planning

In the days and weeks prior to the conference, the ODE communications and outreach department reached out to bloggers who focus on Ohio education issues, primarily educators, on Twitter and asked for their help live tweeting important breakout sessions at the conference.

Using social media sites such as Twitter and the conference WordPress blog helped generate buzz leading up to the conference. Through pre-event publicity such as email marketing and blog promotion, the event's registration grew from 1,448 to 2,778, including 417 at-the-door registrants. Officials had initially set a goal of 2,000 attendees. Preconference tweeting and blogging helped attract 480 more attendees than Ohio had at its spring 2012 statewide conference, Sponhour said.

The ODE communications team also filled the conference's venue, the Greater Columbus Convention Center, with signs reminding attendees to tweet using the hashtag #ohedconf during the conference. Using hashtags allows Twitter users to quickly collate and view tweets on certain topics.

Topics discussed at the conference were complex and critical to the State's reform efforts, including implementation of the Common Core State Standards and the development and use of Student Learning Objectives (SLOs) to measure teacher effectiveness. The ODE communications team coordinated closely with the content leads planning the conference to ensure that social media would work effectively to share information. The team made sure each conference room at the convention center had live Wi-Fi to make sharing information easy. The ODE staff set up a "juice bar" for conference attendees to recharge their technology or log on to a computer.

Active Engagement During the Conference

Ohio technology coordinator Ron Rogers tweeted this from the Columbus Conference Center as he was watching staff set up Wi-Fi, "Watching convention center staff install wireless access point so @OHEducation can bring you coverage from #ohedconf today."

Christina Hank, a secondary curriculum coordinator in Medina, Ohio, was one of the teachers live blogging from the conference. Hank sent out tweets throughout the conference about the upcoming education reforms in Ohio to update her followers, including fellow teachers. Among them: "OH has until June 30, 2013, to decide on the new report card."

Each member of Sponhour's 10-person team was assigned a task, including tweeting from one of the conference's 100 breakout sessions, shooting video of important sessions or writing summaries for the event's WordPress blog site. Summaries of each session were posted within 90 minutes after it ended. To further solidify the message to conference attendees, PowerPoint slides used for presentations included reminders to tweet using the conference hashtag.

> "Watching convention center staff install wireless access point so @OHEducation can bring you coverage from #ohedconf today."
>
> —*Tweeted by Ohio technology coordinator Ron Rogers from the Columbus Conference Center*

Each staff member also fed information to the Word Press page. Team members periodically checked in with each other at the "command center" to monitor social media traffic on the WordPress and Twitter pages in real time and plan which breakout sessions to attend. The staff also had a running Storify (see image below) page throughout the event that merged session write-ups and tweets from the event.

The ODE communications staff created a communications command center in an otherwise empty room at the convention center and created a detailed cross-editing process for the blog entries being created from sessions. Team members edited each other's pieces before Marsha Berkeley, the Race to the Top communications director (who manages the WordPress site) reviewed and posted the blogs.
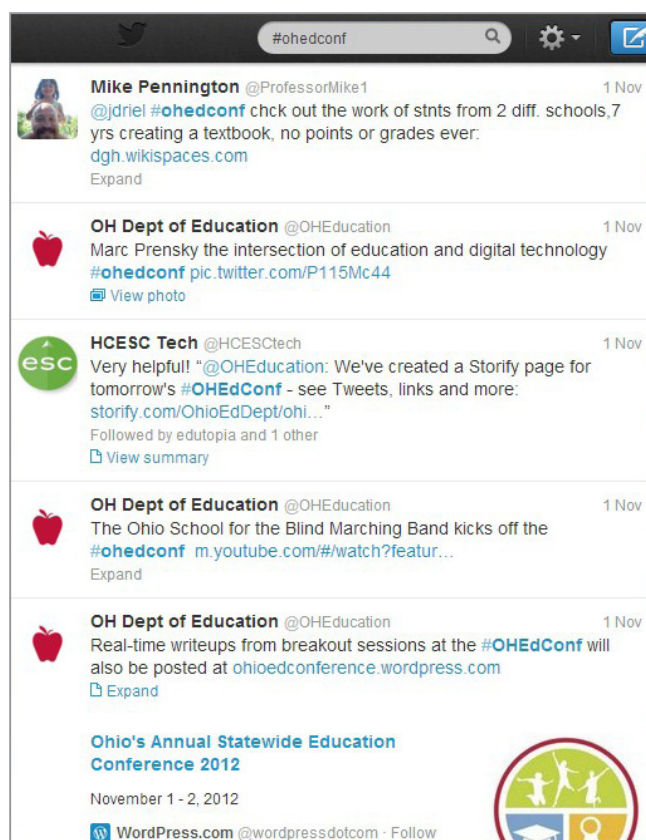
Berkeley also took photos at the event and used those to make the postings more visually appealing. The team used the command center as a communications home base where, between sessions, staff could write and share information at designated work spaces.

On Twitter, staff members engaged directly with the online audience, but Sponhour said he monitored all social channels throughout the day, retweeted positive posts from other attendees and built the Storify threads of sessions.

"There were maybe one or two people tweeting and then [the rest of the ODE communications team] would attend a session and write a 250-word description about it as if we were trying to tell someone the big nuggets of what they missed," said Patti Grey, associate director of ODE's Office of Communication and Outreach. "Our Twitter feed just continued to go on throughout the conference. So, statewide that was a great service."

The live tweeting social media component of the statewide conference allowed attendees to connect with others there and discuss, among other topics, which sessions to attend and the topics discussed.

Ohio teacher and education blogger Jeremy Evans wasn't able to attend the conference, but he said that, thanks to the pre-event promotions, he knew to follow Twitter.

"Following the hashtags was helpful. I was able to get a sense of what was being discussed," Evans said.

Measuring Success After the Conference

ODE's social media impact lasted well beyond the two-day conference. The conference generated 748 tweets with the dedicated hashtag before, during and after the event such as tweets like this one from Ohio teacher Eric Yetter: "What will my 2yr old (who is proficient on an iPad) do with a text book? Time to prepare for these students. They are coming! #ohedconf."

Teachers eagerly shared the policy changes as they developed and, in some cases, offered analysis. Napoleon, Ohio technology teacher Josh Riedy sent this tweet: "Check out @OHEducation TWEETS today for big changes in #OhioED – Yes end of course exams are coming." Tom Kitchen, a curriculum and special education supervisor for Ross County Schools in Ohio, retweeted this tweet from the Mansfield Ohio Instructional Technology Department: "The

expectation is for each tchr to write 1 SLO this year and 2–4 SLOs in subsequent yrs #ohedconf #rpesd."

During the two-day conference, ODE's Twitter handle (@OHEducation) received 145 direct mentions on Twitter, 220 retweets and 141 new followers — all records since ODE began using Twitter in 2010, ODE officials said in their post-event measurement report. ODE saw its Twitter followers grow by 141 during the event and draw an additional 161 new followers in the week following the conference. ODE was receiving an average of 34 retweets per day, more than four times the average rate received prior to the event. For instance, in June 2012, about five months prior to the conference, 60 of the 109 tweets ODE sent out during the month were retweeted.

By watching closely which comments generated commenting and feedback on Twitter, ODE was able to learn the level of knowledge and interest its audience has in a given topic, Sponhour said.

As planned, the conference also generated chatter on Twitter and on the WordPress blog from educators who were unable to attend. The ODE communications team said they saw a number of tweets from those who weren't at the conference. They encouraged those who were unable to attend to follow along by sending out tweets about it prior to the event, several directly to regular Twitter users who might be interested in the content of the conference.

Data collected by ODE shows that educators continued to visit the conference's WordPress blog site after the two-day conference ended. The site's visits totaled 40,000 for the months of October and November. This includes 6,000 visits from the week following the conference, showing that attendees and followers visited to use the information given at the conference. The site has stayed active since the November conference and visits to it in the six months since then total 5,444. The numbers and outcomes were so positive that ODE decided to incorporate social media again in March 2013 during its spring statewide education conference. Visits to the WordPress blog site for the March conference totaled 22,392. There were 11,596 visits in March, and 10,796 combined in the months of January, February, April and May.

"Social media allowed people to participate in the conference virtually," Grey said. "This was a big step for Ohio in our communications outreach."

For Sponhour, ODE's effort at the conference was important because it "showed the way forward for how we can maximize the impact of events and content that we are generating."

Sponhour said education organizations have long been and, still are, heavily focused on in-person events, which he said do work well. But, in 2013, he said, the ready availability of new tools enables SEAs to share content far beyond those who can attend events.

Statewide Education Conference Tweets on #ohedconf

	Oct. 30	Nov. 1	Nov. 2	Nov. 3
	25	375	272	44
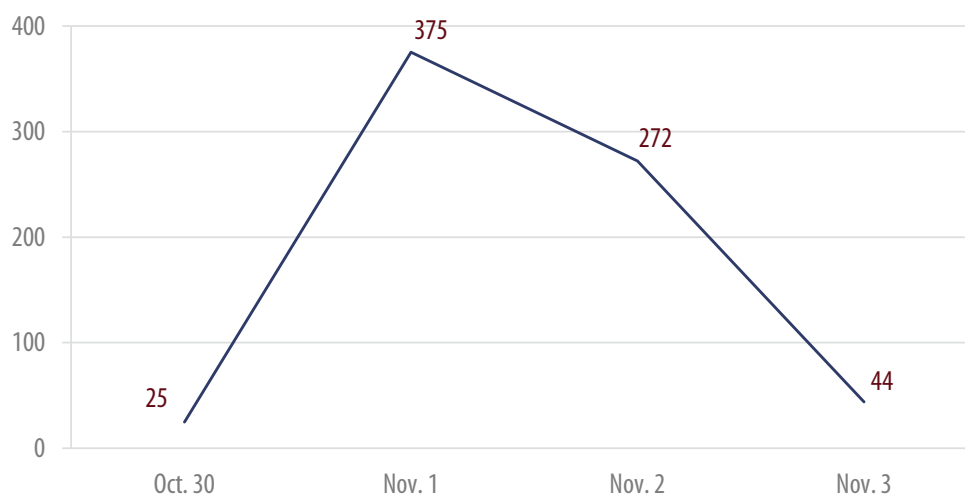
"What is exciting is that we learned that there is truly a market developing among educators who want to engage in this new way," he said.

Sponhour said that he expects the number of educators who want to engage with each other through social media to increase, as new generations of young teachers who were raised on social media join the profession.

Weekly #ohedchat

The networking that ODE did with bloggers and others on social media before and after the statewide conference helped lay the groundwork for a new weekly education Twitter chat.

After following Twitter education chats in Wisconsin and New Jersey, Evans, a fifth-grade language arts teacher in Ohio, tweeted to ask if Ohio had an education Twitter chat yet. That caught the attention of Molly Bloom, an education reporter for Ohio Public Radio. Bloom, who covers education policy for State Impact Ohio, worked with Evans and others to set up Ohio's first weekly Twitter chat in January. Their outreach was supplemented by ODE's questionnaire on its October conference.

ODE staff actively participates and promotes the Twitter chat, but these chats are not sponsored or led by ODE and were born out of a grassroots collaboration by Ohio education bloggers Evans and Hank. ODE staff also creates a log of the weekly chats on Storify, so others can easily view them after the chat has ended.

"What they [ODE] did in the fall was they provided lists of big bloggers and who to follow on Twitter, so I think that allowed the networking to get in place," said Hank. "Had I not gotten so many followers from being listed on their social media stuff in November then I probably wouldn't have known who to go to for the Twitter chats."

The inaugural Twitter chat (called #ohedchat) was hosted by Bloom and Evans, and was held on Jan. 28, 2013. Each week since then, a group of teachers, superintendents, principals, technology specialists

and other education professionals have joined the discussions. The topics are chosen each week through a Google Docs questionnaire Evans posts and promotes to ed chat participants on Twitter.

"It brings a lot of people, who might not have otherwise had the chance to talk together," said Bloom. The Twitter chats have included as many as 70 participants and as few as 10, recent statistics show.

While the discussion and topics are teacher-led, an ODE official follows along and sometimes chimes in with an answer to a question, Bloom said. Both ODE and Ohio Public Radio promote the weekly Twitter chats through their own Twitter handles and Websites.

Recent topics have included student learning objectives, differentiated instruction, professional development for educators and the upcoming transition to a new assessment system as part of the 22-State Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC). In the assessment discussion, two questions — about review of sample questions on the PARCC Website and how districts are preparing for the new tests — each had more than a dozen responses from tweeters which included teachers, principals and more.

"These discussions have not been high level," Sponhour said. "They tend to be very detailed and very specific."

The chats have continued to grow week after week and often continue with tweets after the allotted time for the #ohedchat ends.

"It literally took off, with people all across the State," said Hank, a curriculum coordinator in Ohio.

Hank said she thinks the chats have become so popular because it's the first time educators have had the opportunity to share how they are tackling new requirements.

"On a personal level, teachers at my district have just been touting the ed chats like it's a week's worth of professional development," she said.

Evans said he attributes much of the growing interest in the Twitter chats to educators' thirst for information about the new State reforms.

The success of the #ohedchat has led to an in-person meet-up of the #OHedchat tweeters, or a "TweetUp," in June. Both ODE and Ohio Public Radio helped promote the get-together.

"You say, 'Are we really connecting with people when we're on Twitter?' But now we are leading to a face-to-face connection," Evans said. "Now all these educators and teachers involved in this want to take time out of their day in the summer to come meet and extend the conversation."

Sponhour said ODE has learned a great deal from the weekly chats already.

"We have redoubled our efforts to communicate around specific issues concerning our new teacher evaluation system when we saw a lot of confusion on a recent chat," he said. "I think we have also seen how eager the participants are to connect with each other and share very specific ideas as far as classroom practice [goes]."

Although Ohio's teacher outreach was previously limited to a single monthly newsletter sent to 12,000 recipients, ODE now has multiple outlets it can use to engage with stakeholders. In addition to using social media at its conferences and doing weekly Twitter chats, ODE has transformed its newsletters to a WordPress format. What's more, by reaching out to entities that provide email services to schools and beefing up its newsletters with more newsworthy content, it has expanded its address book to 100,000 recipients.

HOME   ABOUT

#OHEdCHAT

BY MICHAELDROUSH | JUNE 12, 2013 · 9:10 AM

6/10/13 #OHEdChat Archive (Content Area Literacy)

The archive of the 6/10/13 #OHEdChat twitter chat on the topic of Content Area Literacy is now available, via Storify.

View the 6/10/13 archive.

Have you registered yet for the June 29 #OHEdChat Tweetup Flyer (PDF), sponsored by StateImpact Ohio? There's still time, and there's still room! Rumor has it that plans for a great after-party are "brewing" as well!

The rest of the Summer Schedule for #OHEdChat is as follows:

Search

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RSS
RSS - Posts

Recent Entries
- 6/10/13 #OHEdChat Archive (Content Area Literacy)
- 5/20/13 #OHEdChat Archive (Students Creating Textbooks & Digital Literacy)
- 5/13/13 #OHEdChat Archive (Ten Trending Topics)

Looking Toward New Opportunities

Sponhour said there is a powerful lesson in the Ohio experience for other States to experiment with Twitter and other forms of social media to communicate to and engage with key audiences.

Ohio is already looking at what's next. Much like the Twitter experiment, the communications team plans to look at new efforts with a critical eye and thoughtful planning as it seeks to deepen ODE's existing social media channels. Their next addition will likely be the start of discussion groups on LinkedIn on specific topics. "I want us to guard against getting spread too thin by having a presence on every new channel that comes along," he said.

Sponhour said he views social media in general as a tool that can "dramatically expand the reach of an educator."

"Never has it been easier to connect with peers beyond the teachers' lounge in a way that can actually change how teachers do their jobs," he said.

Additional Resources from the Ohio Department of Education

Official ODE Social Media Pages

ODE's Twitter page

ODE's Storify feed

ODE Facebook page for teachers

ODE Facebook page for families

November Statewide Education Conference

WordPress blog site

Breakout session summaries

Additional Ohio Social Media Links

Ohio Twitter Ed Chats

35 Ohio educators to follow on Twitter via State Impact Ohio

Teacher Jeremy Evans' blog

Teacher Christina Hanks' blog