In the five years since its inception, Twitter has evolved into a powerful social networking tool—the Arab Spring is sometimes known as the “Twitter Revolution” for the role the service played in organizing protests. For language educators, Twitter offers a novel way to connect with colleagues across the globe and an effective means of engaging students with authentic material.

“So many of us in our profession are isolated. I'm the only elementary language teacher in my building and one of three in my District. We are only able to meet once a month,” says Lynn Fulton-Archer (@dlfulton), an elementary Spanish teacher at Richmond Drive Elementary in Rock Hill, SC, and a member of the ACTFL Board of Directors. “Twitter gives me access to a lot of thinkers I wouldn't have known about otherwise. Through tweets, I know about articles and publications I may have never discovered.”

Howie Berman, Director of Membership for ACTFL, usually tweets at least once a day on @ACTFL. He looks for stories about language programs on a local level to share with the larger community and also tweets important ACTFL dates and announcements, such as the deadline for convention proposals. “I try to provide news that language educators might not find on their own,” he explains. “The idea is to give a flavor for what's going on in other parts of the country.”

Twitter, says Fulton-Archer, gives her access to a huge array of resources. “If I put out a question on Twitter—for example, asking if anyone can recommend a video applicable to a unit on farm unit animals—within a day I'll receive many responses with good suggestions,” she explains. “I no longer have to exert tremendous effort to find materials. That's a huge benefit.”

For Noah Geisel (@senorG), a high school Spanish teacher at Denver East High School in Denver, CO, Twitter means not having to reinvent the wheel. “I keep up with what other people are doing. When I'm looking to try something new, someone is usually already doing it very well,” he says.

Twitter's capacity for customization is virtually unlimited. Since users actively choose whom to follow, each person’s account reflects individual interest and needs. “It's huge for me to engage with the people I choose. Twitter allows teachers to create their own professional learning community,” says Geisel. “You choose who to follow, so you are conversing with and listening to people because you respect their opinions and share common interests.”

ACTFL Board of Directors Member Laura Franklin (@lfranklin), world language instructor at Northern Virginia Community College in Alexandria, VA and editor of MERLOT World Languages, uses Twitter to get ideas on the latest trends in French instruction, online learning, and language advocacy. In addition to following colleagues and leaders in the field of language education, she also follows @whitehouse, @BarackObama, and other government feeds to stay abreast of policies that affect language education.

Twitter helped Cristy Vogel (@msfrenchteach), a high school French teacher at Hammond School in Columbia, SC, create a class website. “It was something I’d been meaning to do, but I wasn’t quite sure how to go about it,” she explains. “Soon after I joined Twitter I saw how other teachers were using wikis and websites in many different ways. It is professional development, 24/7.”
Twitter (www.twitter.com) is an online social media service that allows users to send and read messages of up to 140 characters using a computer, tablet computer, or mobile device. These posts are known as “tweets.” When a Twitter user tweets, the messages go out to all of that user’s followers. The items a user enters into Twitter can be “private,” so that only friends you have authorized can see them, or “public” so that anyone who knows your Twitter ID can read them. For professional development, keeping your tweets public will reach the widest audience. Followers often retweet (forward to their list of followers) messages they find particularly compelling.

Hashtags, a topic identified with a hash symbol (#) in the front, harness the power of Twitter’s wide reach. When users put a hashtag at the end of their tweets, for example #langchat, those tweets are searchable using that hashtag. For conferences and events, this is a useful way to track tweets about the event; it’s also a way for users to organize themselves. Websites like monitter.com and Twitterfall.com can help you track tweets from a specific hashtag in real time. TweetDeck, HootSuite, and paper.li also use hashtags to organize content.

A Twitter chat works like a chat in other online forums. Tweets are typically a conversation between two people, but a chat allows you to see everyone who is commented on a specific topic. Chats are organized using a hashtag and an agreed-upon time.

Visit the chat section of Jerry Blumengarten’s website (www.cybraryman.com/chats.html) to see a list of education-related chats. Known as “cybrary man,” he is a retired teacher and writer who previously served on the New York Board of Education.

Twitter lists are a good way to organize the people you are following on Twitter or find new people. This allows you to easily see what other high school Chinese teachers, for example, are tweeting about. An easy way to get started with lists is to visit the profile page of someone you are following and look at the lists that following that person.

“A chat can be overwhelming with so many people weighing in at once,” says Geisel. “A list acts like noise-canceling headphones. If you follow a chat with a list of people who are particularly relevant to you, then you see what is most important to you. You can get a gist of the general conversation vis-à-vis the people on your list.”

Need help with Twitter terms?
Visit Twictionary (twictionary.pbworks.com/w/page/22547584/FrontPage) or Twitternary (twitternary.com).

Tools for organizing and managing tweets include:
TweetDeck (www.tweetdeck.com), HootSuite (hootsuite.com), paper.li, and FlipBoard for iPad and iPhones (flipboard.com).

A few hashtags to get started:
#langchat, #ACTFL, #flteach, #wlteach, #edchat, or search for any specific language (#German, #Spanish, for example).

A few organizations and people to follow:
@ACTFL, @thelangeducator (The Language Educator),
@tonitheisen (ACTFL’s President-Elect, Toni Theisen),
@MERLOTorg, @tmsauc1 (Thomas Sauer, world language coordinator for Louisville Kentucky Schools and a member of the ACTFL Board of Directors),
@cybraryman1 (Jerry Blumengarten), and @edutopia—as well as all of the educators mentioned in this article. Also search for your state-specific professional associations, such as the Oklahoma Foreign Language Teachers Association (@olita) or language-specific professional organizations such as the American Association of Teachers of French (@AATFrench)
Here are a few example tweets from the first #langchat in January on how to develop students’ higher-order thinking skills:

### Sara-E. Cottrell @SECottrell
A couple of questions to get us thinking – what about teaching languages requires critical thinking? #langchat

### Toni Theisen @tonitheisen
Critical thinking involves solving problems. Think of our situational prompts. #langchat

### SECottrell
Also, do common traditional assessments encourage critical thinking, why or why not, and how to tweak them? #langchat

### Erica Fischer @CalicoTeach
RT @SECottrell: What types of question words prompt critical thinking? #langchat

### CalicoTeach
RT @tonitheisen: Why, how, what if…#langchat I especially love “what if?”

### tonitheisen
I think when we look at Bloom’s tax and think of analyzing, synthesizing and evaluating #langchat

### Lauren Scheller @Lauren_Scheller
Is creating with the language critical thinking? Taking words you’ve used in one context and putting them in another #langchat

### cadamsf1 @cadamsf1
What about compare or imagine?

### Lauren_Scheller
Is determining why cultures are different critical thinking? Products practices etc. #langchat

### tonitheisen
@Lauren_Scheller yes critical and creative thinking #langchat

### Ken Lewis @kc_lewis
Do you think applying newly learned concepts to previously learned concepts is a higher order skill? #langchat

### tonitheisen
with cultures the critical thinking part comes when the perspectives are analyzed #langchat

### CalicoTeach
@Lauren_Scheller Yes, I think so. Anytime you are comparing and analyzing. #langchat

### tonitheisen
I see CT as not having a right or wrong answer, but inquiry #langchat

An excellent summary of this complete Twitter chat can be found at blog.calicospanish.com/2012/01/06/how-to-develop-students-higher-order-thinking-skills.html.

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**BE THERE—VIRTUALLY**

Twitter provides a means for teachers to access content at conferences and meetings that they don’t have the time or resources to attend. At many professional conferences these days, attendees and participants tweet frequently about subjects being discussed. Question-and-answer sessions can go on virtually rather than interrupting a presentation with a side discussion.

Recently, Vogel won an iPod Nano for following a regional education conference in Texas. “The conference entered into a drawing everyone who tweeted, except board members,” she says. “I had no idea it was going on until I got a direct message from a conference organizer asking for my mailing address. I was just following the conference because I was interested in some of the presenters.”

Every Thursday night at 8:00 p.m. EST, language educators across country meet up for a stimulating discussion on a wide range of topics on all things related to language education. That conversation, naturally, takes place on Twitter. Anyone who teaches a world language can join in, weekly topics are chosen by popular vote. Search #langchat to peek at the conversation.

**GETTING STARTED**

For teachers getting started with Twitter, Fulton-Archer recommends they create an account and just watch for awhile. Begin by following four to five people. If you really like what someone has to say, look at who they follow and begin to expand your own list. Franklin suggests that teachers begin with tweets from websites that they already visit frequently. Give yourself some time to adjust to Twitter. It can seem overwhelming at first. Vogel first tried Twitter at the recommendation of ACTFL President-Elect Toni Theisen, a dedicated user. “She told me to give it a month, but I was hooked by the end of the first week,” Vogel says.

Use a profile picture, image, or avatar to give your account more legitimacy. Also include a short bio and your reason for using Twitter. As an example, here is Vogel’s Twitter bio: “High school teacher of French who loves facilitating the learning experience with technology and collaborating with great educators around the world!”

One of Twitter’s strengths is its ability to cast a very wide net. “I can pose a question to my followers and one of them may retweet it to another person who can help,” says Fulton-
Archer. “With Twitter, I can reach far beyond my own network of colleagues.”

Retweeting also means users shouldn’t feel compelled to read every single tweet. The really good stuff, says Fulton-Archer, will rise to the surface as it is retweeted over and over.

Tools like FlipBoard for the iPad (which Time magazine named one of the 50 best inventions of 2010), HootSuite, paper.li, and TweetDeck can help teachers organize and search their Twitter feed. With HootSuite, Geisel schedules his tweets to best connect with colleagues on different schedules and in different time zones. HootSuite also creates a unique link when a user shares a link. “I sometimes look at how many people accessed links that I shared,” he says. “That lets me see what my followers are interested in.”

**TWITTER IN THE CLASSROOM**

For current events, such as the upcoming French Presidential election, Franklin uses paper.li to create a snapshot of the latest buzz from relevant Tweets. Paper.li allows users to view their Twitter feed in newspaper format.

“I can give my students access to authentic opinions on a culture other than their own. Twitter is the words of real people, more like a conversation than a newspaper article,” she explains. [For an example of what paper.li can accomplish, visit the Laura Franklin Daily (paper.li/lfranklin/1311295389).] Franklin creates a daily aggregate of topics of interest to her—education, technology, world languages, French culture, health—as well as a few humorous Tweeters.

Geisel has a Twitter list that follows some 400 athletes, artists, actors, and other notable Spanish personalities. His students can earn class credit by responding to a tweet from that list. “I look through this list regularly for comprehensible tweets using target vocabulary. I may have my students read tweets from Daddy Yankee [a Puerto Rican reggaeton artist] while listening to one of his songs,” he says. “Twitter posts have an authenticity that really engages some kids.”

Vogel recently began a project with her advanced French students in conjunction with Lara Lomicka Anderson, an associate professor of French at the University of South Carolina. Starting in January, Vogel’s students are required to tweet three times a week with a specific hashtag. Lomicka Anderson’s students and a group of French students who will visit South Carolina in the spring are also joining the conversation.

“Our goal is to help our students become more engaged in French and start using it more frequently,” she says. “So far, it seems to be working. I’ve already got a few students going over the weekly minimum.”

She also uses Twitter as a means of back-channel communication in class. Vogel will pose a question that students have to answer in French via Twitter and then she displays their answers using a screen projector. Or she will allow students to ask questions in English via Twitter—although they can only speak in French in her classroom—so Twitter allows students to clarify without interrupting the flow of the classroom.

Twitter has a great deal of utility that was not necessarily apparent when it was first launched in the summer of 2007. It is true that the technology has at times suffered from a reputation of frivolousness, in part due to celebrity tweets that do not seem to serve any real purpose. But, the reality is that many language educators today are finding Twitter extremely useful both in the classroom and in their professional collaboration.

“People are tweeting in so many different languages, so the possibilities for educators are endless,” says Franklin. “Twitter is another medium that we, as educators, need to pay attention to and use to make our teaching more effective.”

Patricia Koning is a freelance writer and regular contributor to The Language Educator based in Livermore, California.

**TO DISCOVER LANGUAGES, TUNE IN ON TWITTER**

This February is a great time to get started on Twitter and read what ACTFL (@ACTFL) and your other colleagues are tweeting about in honor of Discover Languages Month. Search for #dlmonth and #ACTFL and be sure to add these hashtags to all your tweets about languages!