

## Cyberpipeline

# **Using Facebook, Twitter and Yahoo Groups to Increase Engagement among JALT CUE Members**

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Social networking tools such as Facebook (FB), Twitter, and others have impacted the way people in society network and communicate (Rennie & Mason, 2008). Educators now have the opportunity to create their own personal learning networks (PLN), groups of people they interact with online, using a variety of websites to communicate and share information. There are several reasons to create your own online network and connect with the JALT CUE Special Interest Group (SIG), its members, and other ELT professionals. In this article, we hope to introduce social networking sites such as FB and Twitter to the uninitiated and to convince readers of *OnCUE Journal* to consider using these tools as a way to become more involved in CUE.

Readers may already be familiar with the JALT CUE Members Yahoo Group, which has been maintained since 2008 (<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/JALTCUESIGmembers/>). Even though this Yahoo group will continue to operate, members are urged to participate on FB and Twitter; the social nature of these websites provide members with even more chances to make connections and to communicate about

topics of interest to them. One common criticism of social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter is that they take too much time, but the authors have found that the time spent on social networking sites offers some advantages for professional development such as learning new things, connecting with like-minded professionals, and engaging in dialogue about issues related to college and university education.

## **Facebook**

Facebook, the most popular social networking site with more than 550 million active users (eBizMBA.com, 2011), is often used to reconnect with old friends and family. Users create a profile page, connect with friends, family, colleagues and other FB users to share interests, join groups, upload photographs and videos, link to other web pages and so on. The "friend" relationships are mutually approved and there are privacy controls so that the users can decide what information is available to which group of people. In addition, separate FB accounts can be made for your professional and personal circles of contacts if preferred.

Facebook is ideal for communicating with like-minded colleagues and to keep informed as to what is happening within professional groups and organizations as well. For example, the JALT CUE Facebook group page contains information about events such as CUE conferences and other SIG conferences, professional discussions, interesting links, and comments on upcoming events and past ones as well. Just type "JALT CUE" into the search box, which appears at the top of the FB screen, and you will be taken to the JALT CUE Facebook group page. On the page a variety of posts by CUE members providing information about upcoming JALT events or calls for papers that might be of interest to members can be seen. If you would like to post a message or link for all group members who visit the page, then write in the status box at the top of the JALT CUE group page, and then click "share." Along the

left side of the screen, a sampling of members, plus photos and videos from past conferences are shown. A discussion tab can also be found at the top of the screen; by clicking there, members will be taken to a discussion forum space where asynchronous messages can be written. These are the basic functions on the JALT CUE FB group page so be sure to check the group page periodically for updates.

Additional connections with CUE can be found elsewhere on FB as well. Teachers can use FB to connect with colleagues across Japan, share links to articles about education, samples of student project work, online tools for educators, and so on through status updates. If you like what you read, simply click “like;” if you want to respond further, use the comment function to share your reaction. In turn, when you feel comfortable with the platform, you can share links of interest on FB with your friends and colleagues and enjoy hearing their thoughts.

## **Twitter**

Twitter, the third most popular social networking site (eBizMBA.com, 2011), is another way to keep informed and connected with CUE. However, Twitter differs in its approach from Facebook because it is used more for dissemination of information rather than discussions. Twitter users send out status updates of up to 140 characters known as “tweets” in the Twitter nomenclature. Following a Twitter user, that is, subscribing to their tweets, does not need to be reciprocated, and unless a user account is “protected,” it is not necessary to obtain permission to follow a user. Many journalists and celebrities have tens of thousands of followers while following fewer than a hundred back. When a tweet is sent, it is immediately available for all of the user’s followers to see. Tweets can be sent from computers, tablet devices (such as the iPad), smart phones and regular type cell phones. There are a number of Twitter applications on each platform with various features. In short, almost everyone has access to Twitter since all that is

needed is a cell phone or computer.

CUE has a Twitter account and tweets announcements that are followed by many CUE members. You can find many of these members by looking at the JALT CUE Twitter profile (<http://twitter.com/jaltcue>) and clicking on the "Followers" link at the top-right side of the page. When you click on these profile links, you have the option to follow those who follow CUE on Twitter. With a large membership, this is one way of connecting with many fellow professionals and communicating with them en masse and potentially in real time which is a great way to personalize your experience and possibly becoming more involved with the CUE SIG.

Similarly, educators can find new information via Twitter by following users who share similar professional interests. Because tweets often include links to interesting events, articles, resources, or lesson plans, users can learn new things and get new ideas for teaching and research. For example, @jaltcue on Twitter often posts information about upcoming conferences or events; also, during the JALT conference posts inform what is happening of interest to CUE members at the conference. Not only can you find CUE members with Twitter but you can use Twitter to follow a broader group of English teaching professionals on the list called "Japan based ELT teachers" (<http://twitter.com/osakajalt/japan-based-elt-teachers#>) maintained by Osaka JALT. As a further example, if you attended Nicky Hockley's plenary at JALT 2010, and were interested in learning more about technology and ELT, you could follow her on Twitter; she and her colleagues tweet via the handle @theConsultantsE. On January 5th, 2011, this account provided links to a variety of useful information, including iPad applications, digital storytelling tools, and ideas on teaching writing. By becoming involved in Twitter, users can engage in professional development every day, keeping their knowledge up to date and honing their digital literacy skills.

Following users and reading tweets is only the beginning of enjoying Twitter. Sharing information and interacting with other users is an important area. Writing your first tweet is relatively easy; from your home page, simply type your message of 140 characters or less under the heading "What's happening?" and click "Tweet." If you want to direct a tweet to a particular user, write @ plus the users name. Twitter can also be used as a fantastic resource for getting questions answered. Whether you are looking for resources to teach a particular unit or what book to read next, your Twitter network can be an invaluable resource. For example, if you are looking for the latest research findings about extensive reading, you can tweet out, "Anyone know any fresh research on extensive reading?" Since you are following and being followed by users with similar interests, you may receive a reply within minutes including web links. Of course, you could make the same request by email, but then you may need to find the addresses of each person and add some kind of greeting and explanation, which can be more cumbersome and time-consuming.

## **Summary**

One benefit of using FB or Twitter is making new friends within CUE in particular and JALT in general. Often connections are made because two people have a number of FB friends in common. Just click on the name of the person you would like to add as a friend and you will be taken to their profile page. From there you will see a box to click on that says "Add as a Friend." You can click that box to request that the person add you as a friend. It is important to note, however, that those who are hesitant to befriend colleagues do not need to take this step in order to participate in the JALT CUE FB group; users can fully participate in the group whether they are friends with other members or not.

CUE would like to further engage its members in discussions of articles found in the *OnCUE Journal* and other JALT publications. As

previously mentioned, there is a discussion space on the CUE FB group. Members can discuss ideas, reactions, and opinions about the *OnCUE Journal*, other articles, and English teaching in general. Also, this is an ideal space to discuss what was learned and experienced at conferences. Such discussions can be a great way to engage in conversations related to English language teaching in Japan that you might not otherwise have the opportunity to participate in. The more people who participate, the more interesting these discussions become. After you finish reading this issue of the *OnCUE Journal*, please visit the FB page and engage in a discussion about the articles in this issue.

## References

- eBizMBA. (2011). Top 15 most popular social networking websites. Retrieved January 21, 2011, from <http://www.ebizmba.com/articles/social-networking-websites>
- Mason, R., & Rennie, F. (2008). *E-learning and social networking handbook*. New York: Routledge.