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# Connected Learning

## One Day That Changed Everything

During my first couple of years as principal, I was in a rut and didn't know it. I led my school in a way that I was brainwashed into thinking was the only way. Education had become more about schooling than learning. Then it happened. My epiphany came in 2009 when I begrudgingly decided to give Twitter a try to improve communications with my stakeholders. Little did I know that this moment in time would totally redefine my purpose in education. As my behavior shifted from communicator to learner, I immediately discovered how blinded I was by a system so entrenched in methodologies and practices designed for a period in time that had long passed. I learned how to unlearn and then relearn through conversations I began having with passionate educators across the globe. These conversations empowered me to begin the process of taking my school in a better direction for the sake of my students.

My connected colleagues provided daily inspiration, support, feedback, resources, ideas, and strategies that I used to

grow as an educator and leader. As my fixed mind-set evolved into one more focused on growth, the seeds for change were planted and began to take root. With a diligent focus on modeling, changes to school culture slowly began to be embraced by teachers and students alike. This was not an easy journey. During the beginning years I felt more isolated from my colleagues across my district and state than ever before. They did not see nor care to hear about the inherent value in connected learning. Excuses often followed as a bunker mentality overshadowed the potential value that lay in using social media to become a better leader and learner. The only thing that kept me going was that once I had experienced the value for myself, there was no turning back.

At this point I feel the results speak for themselves. New Milford High School (NMHS) became a globally recognized model for what is possible in education during my tenure as principal, and it all started when I became connected. After that my role in the transformation process was placing my teachers and students in a position to experience the value for them. Change became a collaborative and collective process that resulted in a school more focused on learning and one that worked better for kids than adults. With all the challenges brought about by current education reform efforts, we moved forward with a bold vision for growth and innovation. Even though learning across all spectrums looked different, achievement rose in virtually every area. More importantly though was the fact that students appreciated the changes. Had I not become connected, I can say with certainty that my school would not have changed.

## PERSONAL LEARNING NETWORKS

At the heart of a connected model of learning is the concept of a personal learning network (PLN). The concept of a PLN has been around for a very long time. PLNs back in the day consisted of individuals with the same professional interests

engaging in mostly face-to-face communication. Fast forward a good amount of years, and enter the Internet. No one can argue that the evolution of the real-time web has dramatically altered how we communicate, gather information, and reflect. The construction of a PLN enables educators to harness the power inherent in 21st-century technologies to create a professional growth tool that is accessible whenever, wherever. In particular, a PLN can provide any educator with a constant supply of resources, thought-provoking discussions, knowledge, leadership strategies, and ways to successfully integrate technology. An educator's PLN provides the fuel for uncommon learning both in and out of the classroom.

The power of connected learning is that we become the epicenter of our learning and determine what, where, and when we want to learn. This makes the learning process meaningful, relevant, applicable, and convenient. With these structures in place, the foundation is established to unleash passion, creativity, and a pursuit of innovation to do what we do better. Connectedness and control of our learning provide each of us with the ability to determine our own path and to differentiate to meet each of our diverse learning needs.

This type of learning is fueled by intrinsic motivation, which is the most pivotal ingredient essential to lifelong learning, growth, innovation, and sustainable change. Each connected educator has access to a wealth of free resources. Using tools to share and acquire resources expands our horizons. Many educators, including myself a few years ago, didn't even know these tools existed, let alone how they could enhance the teaching and learning process. A PLN establishes a two-way mechanism for constructive feedback, support, and advice. In my mind this is priceless. No longer do we need to feel like we inhabit isolated islands in our respective positions.

Cost is at times a prohibitive factor to learning, but you do not have to pay for this powerful opportunity to grow. All it costs is an investment of time, which you ultimately determine. This meaningful investment of time will provide you

with the ability and means to connect with the best minds in the field of education. One of the most amazing attributes associated with social media is that it makes the world a much smaller place. You can now connect with world-renowned educational researchers or experts from your living room. Possibly even more powerful is the ability to learn from actual practitioners doing the same job as you. Accessibility to these ideas, strategies, and collective knowledge from both of these groups will ultimately make you a better educator. Silos of information become a thing of the past.

## Developing a PLN

It is important to understand what tools are available to build a PLN. After all it is the tools that allow for like-minded educators to connect and engage in conversations that have the potential to radically transform professional practice. The following is a quick list of tools that can be used to begin building your own PLN (Sheninger, 2014):

- **Twitter (http://www.twitter.com).** A microblogging platform that allows educators from all corners of the globe to communicate in 140 characters or fewer and allows for the sharing of resources, discussion of best practices, and collaboration.
- **LinkedIn (http://www.linkedin.com).** A professional networking site that allows educators to connect, exchange ideas, and find opportunities. Educators can join a variety of groups that cater to their individual learning interests and engage in discussions as well as submit, read, and comment on articles.
- **Blogs.** Incredible sources of information that allow educators to reflect, share opinions, and discuss various topics. This is a common medium with which to discover best practices, examples of innovation, and professional experiences of both novice and veteran educators. Common blogging applications include

Blogger (http://www.blogger.com), WordPress (http://www.wordpress.org), and TypePad (http://www.typepad.com).

- **RSS Readers**. A Real Simple Syndication (RSS) reader is a tool that allows leaders to keep up with educational blogs, news, wikis, and podcasts all in one convenient location. By subscribing to various RSS feeds, leaders create a customized flow of information that is continually updated and accessible through the use of mobile devices or the Internet. Leaders can even create their own RSS feeds! Popular RSS readers include Feedly (http://www.feedly.com) and RSSOwl (http://www.rssowl.org).

- **Tablet and Smartphone Apps.** Free apps for iOS (Apple) and Android devices tap into existing RSS feeds and social networks to create customized sources of educational information. The Flipboard app (http://www.flipboard.com) will tune any leader's social networks and RSS feeds into a digital magazine that can be navigated with the flip of a finger.

- **Digital Discussion Forums.** Communities of educators interested in similar topics. One of the most popular sites is called Ning, where educators can create or join specific communities. Ning sites offer a range of learning and growth options such as discussion forums, event postings, messaging, news articles, chat features, groups, and videos. Popular educational Ning sites for leaders include the Educator's PLN (http://www.edupln.ning.com) and Classroom 2.0 (http://www.classroom20.com). Some other fantastic digital discussion forums are ASCD Edge (http://ascdedge.ascd.org), which you must be a member of ASCD to use, and edWeb.net.

- **Social Bookmarking.** A method for storing, organizing, curating, and sharing bookmarks online. There are no better tools out there than social bookmarking tools, which allow busy leaders to make order out of the chaos

that initially emerges with access to the amazing resources made available through PLNs. Social bookmarking tools allow educators to store all of their resources in the cloud, which are then accessible from an Internet-connected device. Popular sites such as Delicious (http://www.delicious.com) and Diigo (http://www.diigo.com) allow leaders to add descriptions as well as categorize each site using tags. Educators can even join groups and receive e-mail updates when new bookmarks are added. Diigo has expanded features that allow users to highlight and annotate the Web sites that they bookmark.

- **Facebook.** A social networking site that allows people not only to keep up with family and friends but also to connect and engage with professionals. Many national and state educational organizations have created Facebook pages as places for leaders to congregate online, engage in conversations on professional practice, and share resources. Each customizable page or group provides a variety of learning opportunities and growth options for educators.

- **Google+.** Within Google+, users can create a profile page similar to Facebook, group people in circles (organize people into categories), and set up free group video chats called hangouts. Each hangout can include up to nine different people from anywhere in the world.

- **Pinterest (http://www.pinterest.com).** The best way to describe this tool is as an electronic bulletin board where users can "pin" images from around the web. For visual learners, it is a great way to curate resources and other information. Images that are pinned are categorized into various user-defined boards on one's profile. Images are linked to Web sites, and pins can be shared and searched for.

- **Voxer (http://www.voxer.com).** Voxer is a simple-to-use push-to-talk app that has been embraced by the education community. With Voxer, educators can participate in private or group voice conversations that are

threaded. The functionality of Voxer also allows users to send images and text, including web links.

- **Periscope (https://www.periscope.tv/).** Periscope is a free, live video streaming app for iOS and Android devices. As a live video streaming platform, educators can transmit live recordings of themselves to Periscope and Twitter followers. Because Periscope is owned by Twitter, it automatically links to your Twitter account. Users get a notification anytime the educators you're following do a live transmission. Periscope is great for catching glimpses of live presentations at conferences or sharing knowledge instantly using the power of video. You can re-watch any video from your followers for 24 hours after the live broadcast, but after that they disappear and are not permanently archived.

## IMPLEMENTATION TIPS

- Pick one tool mentioned in this chapter for the foundation of your PLN. Once mastered, begin slowly to add others.
- Make time each day to engage in learning activities that are important to you.
- Watch how other educators use the tools to develop your own strategy for use.
- Add and remove both people and tools that comprise your PLN based on their return on your time investment.
- Eventually move from a connected lurker to willing participant and collaborative learner in online spaces with your PLN.

## SUMMARY

Your PLN will provide you with the seeds of change, but it is up to you to plant, take care of, and cultivate them to witness

their growth and development into transformative culture elements (Sheninger, 2014). If you do, it will not take long before these seeds of change mature and begin to bear fruit by becoming embedded, sustainable components of the school culture and your professional growth. With the tools that are now available, connectedness should be the standard, not just an option in education.