

## 5 Easy Steps for Creating an Online PLN

by Amy Pascucci

Millennials often get mocked for being unwaveringly attached to their electronic devices, specifically their phones. This has caused concern about their interpersonal skills and their overall ability to have meaningful connections with other people. I am going to argue that we can take a cue from this form of connectedness and use it to our advantage in a professional capacity.

Part of who we are as teachers are advocates for access. We don't only teach irregular past-tense verbs, bilabial fricatives, or vocabulary strategies. We advocate for our students on a daily basis. We help them negotiate the daily life struggles of something as easy as determining the difference between nickels and quarters to the more academic refinement of college personal statement essays and dissertations. We also advocate for their rights within the school, especially if dealing with a marginalized population. You may have even helped students advocate for themselves in their workplace against unfair employment practices. This all relates to access. Helping our students access not only language, but information and opportunity.

So why then, if we are so quick to advocate for our students, do we sometimes forget to advocate for each other? If I have access to helpful information, why would I not want to share it with the most people possible? Why would I not want to crowdsource information from my professional network to solve a professional, teaching-related problem?

Technology, and specifically web-based technology, seems like it might be both the answer and the problem to this collegial collaboration. It can be the one tool to equalize access, if of course access to the Internet is available. Yet, even those with access are sometimes overwhelmed, and therefore don't utilize web-based technology to their benefit.

Think for a moment about the last teaching question you had. Maybe it was about grammar, communicative pronunciation activities, or even the flipped classroom. Now think about where you looked for information and support. Was it within your department? Your administration? A website or blog? Once you had this information, did you store it or share it in any capacity? Did you bookmark the site, add it to a folder on your computer, or make it a shortcut on your desktop? How did you share it and with whom? These are all questions that become important as our access to information increases. We want to devise a personally tailored system to organize, prioritize, and even disseminate good, helpful, and time-sensitive information and ideas in the most effective way.

This is where a professional learning network (PLN) can assist in organizing, prioritizing, and disseminating information and provide a platform from which collaboration can flourish. A PLN is not necessarily a tangible network. It's more of an abstract term that we use to describe the medium through which we accomplish all of the things just mentioned.

How do you start a PLN?

Here are five easy steps. Steps one through three may happen sequentially or simultaneously, depending on your level of comfort with different applications and the amount of buy-in and

interest your colleagues have in collaborating online.

**1. Start with identifying an aspect of social media with which you are already comfortable using or are willing to spend some time exploring.**

Platforms like [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), [Instagram](#), [LinkedIn](#), [Edmodo](#), and [Google+](#) are all great for different reasons. It also depends on which platforms your prospective collaborators appear and participate. For example, many people in the United States have a Gmail email account, making Google+ easily accessible, but not everyone is as familiar with Google+ as they might be with Facebook. If colleagues are not on Facebook, Edmodo might be a great way to go, as its purpose is precisely in line with collaborative discussion and information sharing. You can start a group on Facebook or Edmodo, a circle on Google+, or a hashtag on any one of the sites. If you are working with a group of people less tech savvy, then put on your teacher hat and scaffold and model how to participate.

**2. Invite a few colleagues to join or follow you.**

Choose people that you admire and respect because you will value their ideas and input as your discussions grow and progress online. Keep it professional. Determine some of your own priorities for collaboration. Do you want diversity in experience or experts in a specific field? Do you want the group to focus on a specific teaching context, content area, proficiency level, or geographic location? These decisions will affect who you invite to participate.

**3. Determine the goal of your group.**

Do you want to share information, collaborate on a specific project, discuss and problem solve current concerns, or even just give each other the opportunity to reflect and receive feedback? Be transparent about your expectations. Many groups write guidelines that include dos and don'ts, and ask all new members to read the guidelines before participating. However, depending on the group members, you may be able to be looser with your guidelines. If it's only a few colleagues whom you know well, then you will probably be able to make the group less formal and more spontaneous. Whereas if it is a large group of people who don't necessarily know one another, you might want to make the parameters more defined. Also, encourage each member to either complete a profile or provide an introduction if there are multiple people who don't know one another. This helps you create community online, especially for those who may not already have that community offline.

**4. Make a commitment to yourself, or more publicly to the group, to post a resource or comment on a discussion on a regular basis.**

This might be once a day or once or twice a week, but make it regular. This keeps the group and the purpose present in everyone's mind, and maybe something you post will inspire someone else to post or comment. Content can help to drive collaboration. If, for example, you don't have a question or something you personally have done that you want to share, then sharing an article or suggestion from somewhere else can ignite the conversation. It

also encourages cross postings from or to other groups. If you see something in one group that has fostered great virtual conversations, why not share it with your group? If something produces great collaboration within your group, you could share it on your personal Facebook page for others to share with their networks. Be responsible for the access and dissemination of information.

## 5. Finally, reflect and change.

Be prepared to reflect at different points, such as 2–3 weeks into the collaboration and then every 2–3 months. Think about things like participation, types of content, and the effectiveness of the collaboration. Can you quantify any benefits or drawbacks? For example, the article I posted last week on my PLN sparked a conversation on synthesis writing and caused me to change the project I am about to start with my students. Ask the group members to weigh in as well. You can make it an informal discussion thread or a more formal survey. Determine what is working and what could be improved. Be open to change. This might mean changes in your goals, guidelines, or even platform. Applications are constantly being updated and modified to better fit the needs of users, and there is always a steady stream of new applications becoming available. If you start hearing of a platform that might be more effective, do some investigating, and ask your network what they think of making a change.

Creating a PLN will take time and effort. You need to be willing to make the commitment. However, the possibilities are endless and the benefits are limitless. Enjoy the journey.

## Resources

- Crowley, B. (2014, December 31). 3 steps for building a professional learning network. *Education Week*. Retrieved from <http://www.edweek.org/tm/articles/2014/12/31/3-steps-for-building-a-professional-learning.html>
- Myer, E., Paul, P. A., Kirkland, D. E., & Dana, N. F. (2009). *The power of teacher networks*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.
- Litherland, C. (2011, October 24). Professional learning networks taking off. *Education Week*. Retrieved from <http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/201110/26/09edtech-network.h31.html>

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