CHAPTER 20

Social Media

Teachers engage with digital technologies to build professional learning networks, forge relationships with other educators, access and share resources, and collaborate to learn.

By Lynmarie Hilt

When Jay Cole began his career as an elementary principal in northwest Pennsylvania, he quickly realized that the role of educational administrator was a lonely one. “As the school leader, I longed to establish connections with others who were ‘living’ the role of principal on a daily basis. As the principal, you’re expected to be everything to everyone, and it’s overwhelming at times. I sought a support group of other educational administrators to help me grow in my profession. I knew there was a lot to learn, and not a lot of time to learn it,” Jay said.

Jay turned to social media, specifically the use of Twitter, to connect with other educational leaders. He noticed that teachers and principals across the country and beyond were communicating online via the social network to ask questions, share ideas and resources, and offer support to one another. Jay first heard of Twitter in 2007 at an educational technology conference, but at the time, he considered the tool to be a frivolous one, void of any educational value.

“I really didn’t think Twitter could help me perform my job better in any way,” Jay recalls. “I opened the account but didn’t use it. After all, did I really have a need to see what people were eating for breakfast? It seemed to me the things being shared on Twitter were trivial at best.”

However, after investing a few hours establishing connections and developing relationships with a handful of key contributors, Jay suddenly saw his role in terms of this medium in a new light. “My isolation quickly waned,” he said. “I was suddenly part of a larger community of educators who embraced and supported me and the work I was doing in my school. Through this network I was able to reflect on my role as principal, improve my practice, gain resources for myself and my teachers and students, and help serve as...
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a model for my school community as I interacted digitally 
with the global educational community.

Lindsay Edwards, a second-year middle school science 
teacher in Louisiana, knew that reflective practice was an 
important component of professional growth. She occasion-
ally used sticky notes, riddled with jottings she made between 
class periods, and stuck them to the pages of her teachers’ 
manuals to help her reflect on her performance and guide 
future instruction. She realized, however, that this system 
didn’t necessarily translate into improved teaching practice. 
Also, when asked to share her reflections with colleagues 
and administrators, she found the sticky notes didn’t 
provide the coherent or concrete evidence of reflection that 
she desired.

Through simple Internet searches, Lindsay located a 
number of blogs teachers had written to reflect on their 
experiences teaching and learning in the classroom. They 
described and reflected on their practice in detail and shared 
with the global community through various blogging plat-
forms such as WordPress, Blogger, and Edublogs. Lindsay 
found other middle school science teachers who shared unit 
and lesson plans, class resources and materials, and processes 
for helping students learn. Teachers openly and honestly 
reflected on their experiences, and through the comment 
threads on the blogs, other educators provided feedback 
and additional resources and support.

Lindsay said, “It was evident that these teachers were 
invested in helping one another learn more about best 
practices in science instruction, and through the work they 
shared, other teachers benefited. I was so impressed about 
how easy it was to share and reflect using a simple platform 
such as a blog.”

Lindsay decided that the use of a blog to post her 
reflections was a far superior method than using the sticky 
notes. She was able not only to organize and articulate her 
reflections but also to share her learning with an authentic 
audience who would provide her with feedback, additional 
resources, and support.

“I can’t describe just how meaningful blogging has been 
as part of my professional learning plan. I’ve learned more 
through my reflective writing and interactions with other 
educators in the blogging community than I have in many 
of the graduate courses I’ve taken,” Lindsay shared. Lindsay 
is now taking steps to incorporate student blogging into 
her classroom activities. While she is not a language arts 
teacher, Lindsay knows, through her personal experiences 
with blogging, that writing as a reflective practice can help 
her science students demonstrate understandings of science 
content explored in class.

Overview

Social media use is pervasive in daily work and play 
of adults and children alike. About 72% of adults are now 
active on at least one social network. Compare that to 
67% in 2012 and just 8% in 2005 (Pick, 2013, para. 4). 
News anchors scroll their Twitter handles onscreen while 
reporting. Television shows share hashtags so the pub-
lic can tweet about televised events in shared streams. 
Children, teens, and adults use Facebook to connect, share, 
and converse. There are estimated to be 31 million bloggers 
in the United States (Bullas, 2012). There are 60 million 
Instagram photos posted daily on average (Smith, 2014, 
p. 3). And YouTube reaches more adults than cable television 
(Scott 2013, par. 3).

Just ten years ago, the world was a very different place 
in terms of connecting, collaborating, and learning. The 
explosion of digital devices — suddenly available and 
affordable — combined with the ever-increasing use of social 
media tools to connect users and ideas around the world has 
the potential to revolutionize the way people communicate, 
which in turn can transform the way teachers and other 
educators engage in professional learning.

At first, educators battled social media, perhaps 
intimidated by digital advances or seeing them as short-term 
distractions from learning. Citing the difficulty of keeping 
students on task educationally, educational administrators and 
teachers prevented student use of personal cell phones and 
other devices when first introduced. Educators believed they 
needed to regulate students’ visiting sites such as MySpace, 
online chat rooms, and instant messaging during school hours. 
Instances of cyberbullying also convinced school personnel 
that these tools might do more harm than good.

As social media became more accessible and as teachers 
became more familiar with the platforms, educators around 
the world discovered the value of using social media for 
professional learning endeavors, both for their own personal
learning and for engaging students. These educators who have come to be known as “connected educators,” began to share with school leaders the importance of allowing students access to a number of open networks and social media platforms. These educators also willingly and openly shared their own learning via social media platforms such as Nings, blogs, Facebook, and Twitter. Connected educators made it their mission to collaborate with other passionate educators to learn, create, read, write, and share in the name of professional learning. Many also used established connections to bring global learning opportunities to their students and schools.

Learning Forward (2011) acknowledges the integral role of technology to support professional learning in the Standards for Professional Learning (Learning Designs):

Technology is rapidly enhancing and extending opportunities for professional learning. It particularly facilitates access to, sharing, construction, and analysis of information to enhance practice. Technology exponentially increases possibilities for personalizing, differentiating, and deepening learning, especially for educators who have limited access to on-site professional learning or who are eager to reach beyond the boundaries of their own work setting to join local or global networks to enrich their learning. (para. 5)

Anthony Armstrong (2013) of Learning Forward wrote that social media and other digital technologies can help districts provide meaningful professional learning opportunities for teachers by maximizing available funds and time.

Recent attempts to organize professional learning for educators via social media have been quite successful. For example, the Reform Symposium (RSCON) is a worldwide e-conference that has helped engage thousands of professionals in anytime/anywhere professional learning. The RSCON’s free, online conference has linked educators annually since 2010 using the Blackboard Collaborate webinar platform. Similar e-conferences, held yearly, such as the School Leadership Summit and the Global Education Conference, help provide professional learning for educators through the use of social networking platforms.

In 2012 the first-ever Connected Educator Month (CEM) organized by the United States Department of Education, linked thousands of teachers. CEM delivered “at least 90,000 hours of professional development to teachers and other educators.” The event was even more successful the following year (Connected Educators, February, 2013).

The online learning opportunities facilitated by Connected Educator Month demonstrate that “online social learning and collaboration can complement individual, school, district, and state efforts to improve professional excellence and, ultimately, student learning” (Connected Educators, 2013, p. 1).

The options for connecting, collaborating, and learning via social media are limited only by the imagination.

**Theories of social media learning**

Several learning theories help shape and explain the power of connected learning.

**Connectivism as a learning theory.** How do we learn? How do we interact with content, ideas, other people, resources, and networks to learn? How do we shape the creation of knowledge? What is more important, knowledge itself or the process the learner uses to engage in learning? These are the questions educator and researcher George Siemens (2012) addressed in his work on a connectivist learning theory. “Connectivism,” Siemens (2012) claimed, “is a learning theory for the digital age” (para. 1).

Siemens and Stephen Downes have researched and shared the ideas that comprise connective knowledge and connectivism as a learning theory. Both Siemens (2003) and Downes (2005) provide the background and rationale for the use of networked learning.

The foundations of connectivism are as follows: Learners have a need to externalize to make sense of what has been learned. They use structures and frameworks for doing so. Powerful learning occurs when learners socialize around knowledge. Learners’ minds use patterns to organize and assimilate new information. Finally, people have a desire to extend humanity through technology (Siemens, 2008).

Siemens (2008) identifies these key principles of connectivism:

1. “Knowledge is networked and distributed.
4. “Our networked experiences are increasingly aided by technology” (p. 8).
Neural/biological, conceptual, and social/external networks all play a role in connected learning. Learning is a process of connecting nodes of information sources. According to connectivism, in order to continue to learn, people must nurture and maintain connections. Understanding these connections will allow educators to improve how they design classrooms, create curriculum, teach, and learn (Siemens, 2008). Stephen Downes (2012) defined principles of effective e-learning experiences so that others could learn how to make the most of their informal learning experiences. While he is clear that the process varies for individual learners, he suggests that these three components help create a successful online learning experience:

- **Interaction** — the capacity to communicate with other people interested in the same topic or using the same online resource; this encourages human connection, collaboration, and shared creation.
- **Usability** — the tools should be simple in design (easy to access, understand, employ) and offer consistency in their approach to use.
- **Relevance** — the principle that “learners should get what they want, when they want it, and where they want it.” (Downes, 2012, p. 50)

**Rhizomatic learning and learning communities.** Dave Cormier, a Canadian educator with a wealth of experience supporting professional learning through communities, provides another theory related to professional learning via social media. In 2008 he developed the concept of rhizomatic learning that explores learning as a chaotic experience that can’t be controlled or even defined. A “rhizome responds to changing environmental conditions” (Cormier, 2008, para. 12). So, “in the rhizomatic model of learning, curriculum is not driven by predefined inputs from experts; it is constructed and negotiated in real time by the contributions of those engaged in the learning process” (Cormier, 2008, para. 12). This means that the “community acts as the curriculum, spontaneously shaping, constructing, and reconstructing itself and the subject of its learning in the same way that the rhizome responds to changing environmental conditions” (Cormier, 2008, para. 12).

In an audio interview with connected educator Bud Hunt, Cormier elaborates: “Rhizomatic knowledge . . . is about that connection and the fact that when we connect, we create context with the people we’re connecting with, the knowledge we create there is contextual, and it matters that there are real people there” (Hunt, 2008, para. 1).

When educators make the decision to become part of a connected learning community, they are taking the initiative to make their own learning a priority. They do this to grow as professionals for the benefit of their students and school community. Sheryl Nussbaum-Beach and Lani Ritter Hall (2012) explore the methods by which one can become a connected educator. They provide an in-depth look at what connected learning communities do:

- Connected learning communities are designed to support the professional development goals their members have chosen to improve instruction and subsequently bring about increased growth and achievement for the 21st century learner. Members of connected learning communities collaborate and work interdependently to achieve high levels of student achievement, while also focusing on their own professional and personal learning goals. (p. 38)

So how can a method of professional learning be so very individualized, yet rely so heavily on the connections made with others? Enter personal learning networks.

**What is a personal learning network?**

In 1998, Daniel Tobin published *Building Your Personal Learning Network* on his Corporate Learning Strategies website. It is one of the earliest known mentions of personal learning networks (PLN). Tobin emphasizes the importance of ongoing, job-embedded development and the need for a network of people to support continuous learning. Tobin defines the personal learning network as “a group of people who can guide your learning, point you to learning opportunities, answer your questions, and give you the benefit of their own knowledge and experience” (Tobin, 1998, para. 1).

Personal learning networks not only provide the learner with sources of information, but also help the learner make sense of and apply the information in practice through dialogue and collaboration. David Warlick (2007) has shared some of the earliest work on PLNs as applied to the field of education. He provides this working definition:
A personal or professional [emphasis added] learning network (PLN) involves an individual’s topic-oriented goal, a set of practices and techniques aimed at attracting and organizing a variety of relevant content sources, selected for their value, to help the owner accomplish a professional goal or personal interest. (p. 4)

Educators tend to use the italicized terms interchangeably. The concept of personal learning environment has also been explored in depth; a personal learning environment (PLE) relates to a PLN in that the environment encompasses the interactive tools that individuals use to support learning as well as the personal learning networks they establish.

Steve Wheeler from Plymouth University in the United Kingdom created Figure 1 showing the relationships among personal learning environments and networks, as well as personal web tools individuals use to support learning. Also see Online Resource 20.1: Anatomy of a personal learning environment (PLE).

Alec Couros is another educator who has significantly impacted the open education and connected educator movement. Couros’s work was influenced by social learning theory, social constructivism, adult learning theory, and connectivism. Couros developed two images contrasting the “typical teacher network” with that of the “networked teacher,” demonstrating the improved connections the networked teacher establishes, connections that are not only more numerous but also reciprocal (see Figure 2 on p. 292 and Online Resource 20.2: Typical teacher networks and the networked teacher.)

Figure 1: Relationships Among Personal Learning Environments, Networks, and Web Tools

PLEs encompass not only personal web tools (PWTs) and personal learning networks (PLNs) (the people we connect with through our social networks). But PLEs are much wider than this, taking in experiences and realia, as well as learning through TV, music, paper-based materials, radio, and more formal contexts.

Learning content is not as important now as knowing where (or who) to connect to, to find it.

PWTs are any web tools (usually Web 2.0) used by learners to support their lifelong learning.

No longer are teachers influenced by antiquated forms of media, curriculum guides, and those in their local school settings. The networked teacher has access and the ability to contribute back to numerous learning communities and services via social networking. These connections, once forged, offer continuous sources of information, support, feedback, and ideas to the educator.

Researcher and author Kristen Swanson (2013) explored the concepts of the personal learning network and the use of social media for professional learning. She defines “user-generated learning” as:

learning acquired through active curation, reflection, and contribution to a self-selected collaborative space. This basically means that user-generated learning is something you do, not something you get. You have to actively participate in the process through searching, evaluating, and sharing. In user-generated learning, everyone has something to contribute. We are all experts in our own ways. This doesn’t negate the importance of educational research or vetted practices. Instead, user-generated learning reflects that all adults recognize their personal applications of ideas and strategies, and this synthesis and community are a valuable part of the learning process. (p. 5)

Swanson (2013) details the processes by which educators can embrace digital tools and social media networks to establish connections with other educators for professional learning. Through curation, educators collect relevant resources. Next, with reflection, educators assimilate new information with existing background knowledge. The last step in Swanson’s user-generated learning process is contribution during which educators share what they have learned with their learning communities.

What do adult learners need?

How can social media best support adult learning? Andragogy, the art and science of adult learning, provides an answer. Andragogy operates under the assumptions that adults are self-directed and display an increasing readiness to learn. As adults mature, they become their own increasing resource for learning due to their accumulated experiences. Adults seek to apply knowledge practically, in a timely manner, and as part of the problem-solving process. An adult learner displays increased intrinsic motivation to learn (Queensland Occupational Therapy Fieldwork Collaborative, 2007, paras. 3–5).

Adult learning designs allow the learner to be actively involved in the planning and implementation of the learning. Learner autonomy is key. Adult learners should be encouraged to make mistakes and apply their own knowledge to new experiences and information learned. Learning opportunities for adults should be relevant, timely, problem-based, practical, and tied to actionable goals (Queensland Occupational Therapy Fieldwork Collaborative, 2007, paras. 6–9).

How can social media address adult learners’ needs?

The use of social media can support adult professional learning in the following ways:

• It puts the learner first. It is a highly individualized process; therefore educators can choose the best tools to support their unique learning goals. Educators have full control over the networks they establish and the communities in which they choose to engage.

• It promotes collaboration and builds relationships through the establishment of connections and networks. Through advances in digital technologies, educators can connect and communicate easily with other educators from around the world. Collaborative platforms such as Skype, Google Hangouts, and webinar software allow for synchronous collaborative learning.

• It is reflective. Social media platforms support reflective writing, reading, and sharing. Whether the user shares information using a microblogging platform in small increments or chooses to compose blog posts with more significant content, social networks support opportunities to reflect and receive feedback.

Rationale

Educators have several incentives to use social media: the needs of adult learners, the variety of ways a user of social media can interact with others, the transparency the process engenders in terms of learning, and the differentiation that is possible. These benefits accrue for educators as well as students.
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- It is timely, relevant, and practical. Social media interactions exist in real time. When educators submit a query via a social network, they are likely to receive feedback immediately and from users with practical experience. Because of the wide range of educators using social networks for learning, teachers can connect with those that specifically address their needs in particular content areas, developmental levels, and geographic areas around the world, making it a highly relevant learning experience for the user.

A variety of participation possibilities

Social media are important for professional learning because they provide a variety of ways users can interact. Every online community and network has its own norms of behavior established by users. For example, on Twitter it is appropriate to include the username of a tweeter when you re-share or “retweet” his or her content. It would be a faux pas to share the exact tweet of another user without giving credit for the original tweet. It is important to get to know how a social network works. This getting-to-know-you phase of social media use is an integral part of the PLN development process. For many users, the first step in participation in social networks is lurking.

Lurking, considered by some educators to be a form of “legitimate peripheral participation,” (Lave & Wenger, 1991) is often the first step in engagement with an online community or network. Legitimate peripheral participation refers to the process by which new members of a community of practice acclimate themselves to the community, and in doing so, eventually become established members of the group. As newcomers observe the practices of the established members, they learn about the functions of the community, how members interact with one another, and how ideas are shared. As new members begin contributing, they start fulfilling important functions that help the community flourish (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Steve Wheeler (May, 2013) explores lurking as a valuable exercise in his blog post, Just How Far Can They Go? He created the graphic featured in Figure 3 to display the levels of engagement within a classroom, applicable also to adult learners’ engagement in their networks.

While Wheeler considers the ultimate form of engagement to be “the ability to generate one’s own content and then add value to it for others,” he believes that lurking is an important precursor to the complex interactions that a more active contributor would demonstrate (Wheeler, 2013, para. 4). See Online Resource 20.3: Pyramid of engagement.

So, while many consider lurking to be an essential first step in the process of interacting with social networks, the eventual goal should always be to contribute and give back to the community as soon and as often as possible. The acts of sharing and contributing are essential to helping the community thrive.

As Kristen Swanson (2013) shares in her book’s chapter on contribution as part of the user-generated learning process, “There is a pronounced need for you to contribute to the learning spaces and people from which you learn. And while you might be asking, “What do I have of value?” the answer is simple: You have your experiences, your classroom, and your teaching to share. In essence, your voice is unique and it offers the network a different perspective. Regardless of your level of expertise, the simple act of contribution builds reciprocal learning relationships that prove very powerful.” (p. 64)
In all of its variations, social media is an informal learning process. According to Jarche (2010), when people engage in informal learning, they are engaged in a continuous process of “seeking, sensing and sharing” (para. 12). Consider Figure 4. It illustrates how a social learner moves along the continuum of acquiring new information, making sense of that information, and sharing with a learning network. Thus the learner grows as a professional while also contributing to the greater good of the learning network.

What is involved in each step of this model?
- **Seeking** – Finding out new information and staying up to date through the connections made in personal learning networks. Information is not only “pulled” by the learner but also “pushed” out by trusted sources.
- **Sensing** – How the learner personalizes and uses the information. Reflecting and applying to practice what has been learned. Requires learning by doing for the greatest impact.
- **Sharing** – The exchange of resources, ideas, and experiences with networks and through collaboration. (Jarche, 2010, para. 12). See Online Resource 20.4: Continuum for a social learner.

**Benefits of participation possibilities**

The variety of participation possibilities results in several kinds of benefits to educator learners.

**The benefits of transparency.** When educators make the choice to use social media for professional learning, they become transparent learners. What does that mean? Educators who tweet, post links, share ideas, write, comment, and publish in open online spaces allow others to see and attempt to understand their perspectives. They assume a level of vulnerability that is not present when sharing privately or personally. They open themselves up to criticism and critique.

Constructive feedback is, of course, an essential element of the learning process. Transparent learners establish trust among colleagues and stakeholders by sharing their learning so openly and readily.

**Benefit of differentiation: Anytime, anywhere.** Another benefit of the use of technology and social media for professional learning endeavors is that they allow for an incredibly diversified and differentiated learning experience for all teachers and administrators. Social media technologies also embrace the notion of anytime, anywhere learning. Educators understand that teaching and the administrative life are not 9 to 5 professions. Despite their best efforts, educators still have work to do when they depart school for the day. Every educator has responsibilities outside of the school day, including commitments to families, friends, and other extracurricular endeavors.

The beauty of using social media to support professional learning is that the tools are generally accessible from any Internet-capable device. Mobile apps have made it exceedingly easy to access, reflect upon, and share information anytime, anywhere. Are you an early bird, awake in the early hours before the rest of the family? Check your Twitter streams and compose your blog drafts. Are you a night owl, preferring to read and work through the late evening hours? Perfect! Your personal learning network never sleeps. You may even find that new connections from other areas of the world can be established easily as you connect during the work hours of other time zones. You may even find that you can establish new connections in other areas of the world as you connect during the work hours of other time zones.

**Benefits of becoming a connected educator.** So just what are the benefits of connected learning?
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Can’t an individual receive equal benefits from participation in a local learning community, or through the stand-alone professional development sessions offered by a school district?

When teachers engage in professional learning, and model that process continuously to their students, they become lead learners in classrooms. It is powerful for adults to model and share how they themselves are engaging in professional growth as part of their commitment to lifelong learning. The quality of the teacher and that teacher’s commitment to professional growth has a profound impact on student achievement. See Online Resource 20.5: Examples of researchers who have addressed the relationship between professional learning and student achievement.

Using social media for learning can help educators address system-level goals and also support work in classrooms, on school teams, and within schools and districts.

Technology-enhanced learning designs can improve engagement with research-based models that improve learning results. On a macro level, incorporating technology into a system of professional learning requires alignment of goals on the individual, team, and system levels, helping ensure coherence in the learning. (Armstrong, 2013, para. 6)

The International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE) has identified a number of skills and competencies that today’s teachers should acquire in order to best meet the needs of modern learners. The ISTE standards “are the standards for evaluating the skills and knowledge educators need to teach, work and learn in an increasingly connected global and digital society” (ISTE, 2013, para. 1). ISTE believes “As technology integration continues to increase in our society, it is paramount that teachers possess the skills and behaviors of digital age professionals. Moving forward, teachers must become comfortable being co-learners with their students and colleagues around the world” (ISTE, 2013, para. 2).

Two of the ISTE standards, “Promote and model digital citizenship and responsibility” and “Engage in professional growth and leadership,” are especially applicable to achieving system-level goals. These include performance indicators such as:

- Promote and model digital etiquette and responsible social interactions related to the use of technology and information;
- Develop and model cultural understanding and global awareness by engaging with colleagues and students of other cultures using digital age communication and collaboration tools; and
- Participate in local and global learning communities to explore creative applications of technology to improve student learning (ISTE, 2008, paras. 4–5).

Educators must consider their current level of comfort and proficiencies with digital technologies and the impact these have on their students. Are there excellent teachers out there who do not use technology in the classroom? Sure. But could those teachers be better? Could they use technology to delve deeper into learning with communities about certain content areas and pedagogies? Could the skillful use of technology enhance and transform classroom practices, assessments, and student learning experiences?

As Swanson (2013) states:

If you are going to adequately prepare students for modern, technology-rich workplaces, you must be comfortable learning in online spaces yourself. Learning, making mistakes, and experimenting in the online space not only provides meaningful professional content, but also gives you the opportunity to experience successfully, technology-rich educational environments. (p. 13)

Finally, connected educators around the world have turned to their blogs and used Twitter to share how connected learning via social networks has positively affected their practice. Joan Young (2013), an elementary educator from California, recently shared a post titled 7 Ways My Classroom Is Better Because I Connect. Because she is a connected educator, Young and her students have developed new ways of solving problems. She’s learned from the collective wisdom of the members of her PLN, and she has developed a growth mindset as a result of her network interactions. Her students are able to participate in global collaborative projects such as The Global Read Aloud, and they benefit from the shared wisdom of experts from around the world. Because Young is connected, her students receive feedback on their work from an authentic audience. Lastly, Young is constantly energized by her network, and those important
interactions and inspiration help her avoid teacher burnout (Young, 2013, paras. 1–10).

Connected learners not only support their own learning, but through connections they also open up a world of collaborative experiences for their students. Teachers may connect with colleagues in another country and establish a collaborative project for their student groups. Global learning initiatives such as The Global Read Aloud, Quadblogging, and Mystery Skype have been created specifically for such powerful student learning endeavors.

Steps

So, you’re ready to become a connected educator? Fantastic! These steps will guide you through the process of using social media to enhance your professional learning. Remember that each educator’s experience is a personal one. Do not feel pressured to follow these steps exactly — what may work well for one educator may not for another.

Step 1: Set your learning goals and develop a plan to assess the outcomes

What do you hope to accomplish through your engagement in social media? What short-term results do you hope to see? What are your long-term goals? How will you collect evidence of your learning and assess the effectiveness of your efforts?

You can use Learning Forward’s Professional learning plans: A workbook for states, districts, and schools (Killion, 2013) to find tools and examples to use in developing professional learning plans. Consider adapting example designs to meet your exact specifications and needs or use the frameworks that your district or state provides. Be sure to plan specifically for how the use of social media tools will support your learning endeavors.

Step 2: Explore the available digital tools that will support your learning goals, choosing tools that are the best fit for you

This step can be quite an adventure as you look for digital tools that fit.

Link your plan and goals to possibilities. Educators’ personal learning networks are different. That’s what makes them personal! The nodes and communities that come together to build a PLN vary from individual to individual. What one person finds to be a valuable resource or community may be a waste of time for another educator.

Determine what you are looking for, in general, before examining possible social network tools. For example, are you looking to find short tidbits of information and links to resources? Delve deeply into blog readings and write reflectively? Connect with like-minded educators, or branch out to a diverse population to expand your horizons? Read and learn from the experiences of other educators? Be a member of a cohesive team of educators who regularly interact online via video conferencing and chat? Participate in a full-fledged course like a Massive Open Online Course (MOOC)?

Then, as you examine various tools, use the following criteria to determine if the tool is right for you:
1. Do I understand how this tool allows me to be part of a learning community or network?
2. Do I have time to commit to using this tool?
3. Do I have the technology necessary to access the community’s resources?
4. Will the use of this tool help me achieve my learning goals?

Explore tools and their communities. Twitter, Google+, blogging communities, and Facebook are examples of social media tools for developing a personal learning network. A number of social networks with descriptions and opportunities for use for professional learning are found in Online Resource 20.6: Social media tools commonly used to support professional learning.

Step 3: Make an engagement plan, forge connections, build relationships, and contribute

After you have identified the social networks you will use to build your personal learning networks, personalize the experience.

Establish an educational digital presence. If you will use social media primarily to support professional learning, carefully craft your online presence so others know you are an educator interested in connected learning. Your Twitter profile description and photo, the “About Me” page on your blog, and Google+ profile should clearly identify you as an educator.

This is not to say you can’t maintain your own personal Facebook profile for connecting with family and friends. Make decisions about how you will use each social media
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tool. For example, will you share educational resources via your personal Facebook page? Will you follow your favorite celebrities on Twitter in addition to educators who inspire you?

Some educators marry personal and professional social media accounts. Others elect to create separate Facebook profiles for personal and educational use. Others have two Google+ profiles or use Twitter for educational purposes only and save personal posts for a private Facebook page. Keep in mind that the more accounts you create, the more time you will need to invest in updating and maintaining those digital spaces. Consider also that, private accounts or not, educators should always be cognizant about the appropriateness and quality of the content they post via social media. Educators wish to instill in their students respect for the public medium and respect for selves. It is up to them, as adults in students’ lives and digital role models, to promote respectful creation and sharing practices.

Make connections. Establishing connections within the community is a vital step in the learning process. Even in educational networks, users will want to reveal some personal as well as professional characteristics; doing so helps them form the deep, lasting connections that build trust among colleagues and deepen learning. Educators using social networks will find that over time they become familiar with the names, faces, vocations, areas of expertise, and passions of the members of these networks. Begin reaching out to others in the network to build connections. The process to do so varies slightly for each social network.

During the lurking phase, an educator wishing to become a member of a social community should examine the following:
• How do people share information? What types of information do they share?
• What can I learn by reading the tweets/posts of some key contributors?
• Do I understand how this community functions? Do I feel as though I could be comfortable contributing to, and learning in, this community?

Contribute to the online community. It is important to be a contributing member of the communities in which you engage. Sharing and replying to tweets, retweeting tweets, posting helpful ideas and links to resources, asking questions, commenting on others’ blog posts, and sharing your experiences as an educator are ways you can help your personal learning network flourish. After you have created your accounts and become a connected educator, you must continue to converse with other users, respond frequently to queries, comment on others’ blog posts, and actively participate in the learning that emerges within the network. Failure to do so will certainly result in a less-than-ideal professional development experience. Remember, this is not professional learning that happens to you. It is professional learning for you, by you.

Because each platform varies slightly in its composition and the ways in which users interact with content and with one another, it’s useful to share some step-by-step instructions for starting to build your personal learning network. See Online Resource 20.7: Quick-start guides for Twitter, Google+, and Blogs. See also Online Resource 20.8: Additional resources to help you get started.

Step 4: Get organized and manage your information flow

Upon embarking on the connected learning journey, educators will quickly experience what some deem information overload. Through the connections made via social media, users become inundated with resources, links to articles and blog posts, commentary, images and graphics, and other forms of media at an almost overwhelming pace. Educators who use social media for learning must develop strategies for navigating and making sense of this rapid influx of information.

Determine time commitments. Educators who are introduced to professional learning through social networks are often reticent to engage because of perceived time commitments. It’s true: You need to be committed and devote time to build and maintain a social network (PLN). However, once your network has blossomed, it may actually end up saving you time. Through the connections established in your trusted network, resources and information will come to you, thus saving you time in finding them for yourself. The more effort you put into developing your PLN and making logical connections that will add to your learning, the more reward you will see in the long run.

Committing yourself to connect for learning may
mean you make some sacrifices, such as not watching as much TV or playing computer games. Simply substituting 30 minutes of blog reading or tweeting for one 30-minute sitcom viewing could have a profound impact on your professional growth!

**Get organized: Tools streamline information flows.**
Many services help streamline and organize digital learning networks. These tools will help you engage in a *seek-sense-share* process. Educator Bryan Alexander describes this as his “daily info wrangling routine.” Alexander’s process includes the following steps:

*Seeking.* Alexander’s information input comes from email, his RSS feeds, social networks such as Twitter, and print materials.

*Sense-making.* Alexander looks for patterns and repetitions among stories and posts he reads. Drawing upon his own experiences and contexts, he reflects both while immersed in the digital world and during offline hours.

*Sharing.* Alexander shares questions, comments, and reflections via comments on others’ blog posts, Facebook and Google+ posts and tweets and by using social bookmarks and writing his own blog posts.

As Alexander (2013) indicates, this is a living process, and it is constantly evolving as new apps and technologies appear and disappear:

Final thoughts: seeking, sensing, sharing. I developed this routine over nearly a decade, trying out many strategies and often discarding them. It requires some time to monitor and tweak: adding and subtracting Twitter followees, checking time spent on a resource versus rewards gained.

(Alexander, para. 19)

The *seek-sense-share* process of managing information and using it for learning will vary by individual. It can be an overwhelming process for a newly connected educator to read, organize, synthesize, and attempt to share the steady stream of information flowing through social networks.

Consider the use of time-saving tools that help automate and synchronize information intake and output. See Online Resource 20.9: *Tools for managing social media* for social media tools designed to help the busy connected educator connect, curate, and comprehend efficiently.

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**Step 5: Apply learning to practice**

As you spend more and more time engaged in learning within your social network, you will find countless examples of ideas and resources to use in your teaching or administrative role. It is important that you not only locate, evaluate, and curate information and resources, but also that you apply the ideas to classroom and school practice.

For example, Jane, a teacher in California, learned via her Twitter stream that other teachers have begun experimenting with a “Genius Hour” model in which they set aside an hour per week for their students to engage in passion-based project work. After reading the initial tweets and following the links shared within, she connected with Nick, a teacher in Indiana, who had successfully incorporated Genius Hour in his classroom for the past several months. He freely shared his organizational methods and resources so that Jane could apply similar strategies in her classroom. Nick also informed her that a weekly #geniushour Twitter chat was held for educators to converse about Genius Hour practices and related topics.

After gathering resources and making her plan, Jane implemented Genius Hour into her classroom for the first time. While not without its hiccups, the strategy worked in the classroom, and Jane credited her PLN for sharing the information with her. Jane took time to reflect upon the experience and posted her reflections on her blog. She tweeted the link to her blog post and asked other educators who use Genius Hour to read her thoughts and provide feedback so she might improve her implementation of the strategy. Within a few days she received constructive feedback that helped her improve the experience for all involved. She even was able to video chat with another educator via Google+ Hangouts, and they scheduled a time in the future when their classes could present the results of their Genius Hour project work with one another.

**Step 6: Assess the effectiveness of the learning experience**

Learning via social networks should be as results-oriented as any other professional learning experience. By collecting evidence of change and growth as a result of interactions with their personal learning networks, educators can begin to assess the effectiveness of their engagement plans and interactions with their networks. Are they receiving
adequate resources, support, and feedback through their networking efforts? Are they making strides toward achieving their personal learning goals? Is there a noticeable, positive impact on educators’ collegial relationships, both online and offline? Has learning through social networks helped educators make constructive changes to their classroom practice, thus resulting in enhanced learning experiences for students?

If the answers are “yes,” educators should continue along the designed course, paying careful attention to the quality and breadth of the network interactions. If the answers are “no,” educators should re-examine how they are engaging with their social learning networks, and what change(s) they can make to ensure the experience is more beneficial. This may mean ceasing to use a certain platform and trying an alternate service. It may mean devoting more time to establishing connections or pursuing different avenues through which to do so.

**Variations**

Development of a PLN and engagement in online communities is a personal journey; therefore, the tools and techniques, level of transparency, and action steps taken toward achieving learning goals will vary tremendously among individuals.

Regardless of their personal choices, connected educators will find that any one tool may cease to serve its purpose as the journey continues. Learners should constantly assess the effectiveness of their engagement plans to ensure time is spent toward achieving learning goals and that the tools help serve the tasks at hand. They may need to pursue different networks and communities to achieve desired outcomes. When learning with social media, educators must be flexible and willing to adapt often because technology changes rapidly, and tools come and go.

**Challenges and how to address them**

Educators who wish to include the use of social media to support professional learning may face a variety of challenges, none of which is impossible to overcome.

In some school districts, school leaders and administrators do not acknowledge the value of using social media or truly understand its transformative properties. For that reason, they may be unwilling to acknowledge teachers’ efforts to learn via social media. Teachers may find that their administrators fail to provide continuing education credits, professional learning hours, etc. to help fulfill their contractual requirements.

The Connected Educator Month team makes the following recommendations for school administrators and district leaders wishing to validate online professional learning:

1. Make participation count by developing ways to assess how participation fulfills local, state, and national standards for professional learning and teacher quality; convene state, district, and school leaders, experts in job-embedded professional learning, and online social learning practitioners to discuss and further develop tools, templates, and examples, as well as to examine alignment with professional standards; develop and encourage the adoption of digital badging systems that guide and document development of professional knowledge, skills, and dispositions through online social learning and collaboration.

2. Make participation easier by creating maps and tools that organize online offerings in ways that enable educators to navigate the landscape and make learning plans appropriate to individual needs; build in time for connecting.

3. Broaden and deepen efforts by engaging a diverse group of organizations in planning and collaborating to provide connected online learning opportunities and pushing the boundaries for participation.

4. Strengthen research on the impact of online social learning and collaboration with systematic studies of the impact of online social learning and collaboration on educators’ professional practices, attitudes, and effectiveness (Connected Educators, 2013).

Many schools across the country and beyond use their Internet filtering systems to block social media services and do not allow teachers or students to access these sites from school. Blocking these sites sends a message that social media are not valued in supporting the learning process. The message creates a negative impact on teachers and students who could find meaningful connections and collaborative learning opportunities online. District leaders need to familiarize themselves with the benefits of social media use while continuously working to
make certain that school policies and infrastructures are in place to ensure the safety of students and teachers who use technology for learning.

Educators who use social media for professional learning may also be challenged by a fear of transparency. Educators are held to a high moral standard because of the work that they do. For that reason, many choose to maintain high levels of privacy in their personal lives. They are uncomfortable with the thought of publicly sharing information via Twitter, Facebook, or other social media networks because they fear sharing will reveal too much about their lives to the public. Educators need to use common sense about what they share, with the expectations that what they post publicly will be read by people who know them personally and professionally.

Others are fearful about contributing because they feel what they have to share won’t be useful to anyone else. New Twitter users often think, “Who would want to read what I have to share?” The answer is, everyone. Dean Shareski, a Canadian educator and Discovery Education consultant, stresses the importance of sharing in his work, *Sharing: The Moral Imperative*. He quotes Ewan McIntosh, founder and CEO of NoTosh, an innovative educational consulting organization: “Sharing, and sharing online specifically, is not in addition to the work of being an educator. It is the work” (Shareski, 2009, 2:53–3:00). He goes on to cite the work of researcher David Wiley who asks educators to consider the fact that, if teaching is sharing, and there is no sharing, then there is no education (Shareski, 2009, 3:36–3:42)!

As with any professional learning endeavor, teachers may find it difficult to sustain focus and commitment over time. It is natural for someone who engages in social networking for learning to experience an initial thrill upon successfully connecting and collaborating for the first time. This rush will energize educators to the point where they feel almost addicted to the tools and the constant information flow. After several months of these interactions, they may find that initial excitement has waned, so it’s important for educators to stay grounded and focused on their learning goals. It’s natural to want to take a break from social media now and again, to focus on face-to-face interactions, book reading and reflecting, and other offline commitments. The key to making social networking a substantial contributor to a professional growth plan is to find a healthy balance between online and offline time.

**Conclusion**

Educators today are asked to do more, be more, and achieve more, often with constraints on budgets and time. Educators are asked to grow professionally and continuously, all the while attempting to meet federal, state, and district mandates and support the academic, emotional and social well-being of the children in their care. The use of social media to support professional learning is a practical, time- and cost-effective practice that supports collaboration and respects the autonomy of the adult learner.

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