



# TWITTERPATED

## I FOUND MY LEARNING COMMUNITY. YOU CAN, TOO

By Eric Celeste

**T**his issue is personal for me because the advice it contains about breaking out of silos and building networks is so relevant. As someone who has spent his career writing and editing, my most consistent coworker for more than a quarter-century has been my keyboard. It is always there for me, reflects my thinking — sometimes exactly! — works at the same pace as I do ... it's really a lovely colleague.

The fact that this was my most long-lasting professional relationship meant the opportunity for networking, creat-

ing workplace feedback loops, and challenging myself were too rare. Like teaching, writing and editing are professions where you are often left to chart your own course with little oversight. It was easy to feel adrift, unsure of my place in relation to my colleagues and my profession.

Until, that is, I discovered Twitter. As a tool for personal learning, I've found this social media platform to be astoundingly effective. As I transitioned from a general assignments writer into one focused on education, it provided me a way to dive deep into the newest research, monitor the latest ideas from thought leaders, see discussions of best practices, and be aware of relevant policy debates and industry trends — all from my computer (or, more likely, my phone). Once I got comfortable with entering into

back-and-forth discussions myself, I found I could create meaningful professional relationships not only with other writers but also with esteemed researchers, policymakers, and educators. These folks engaged in open dialogue and gave feedback because the medium is designed for an exchange of ideas among those who care deeply about a subject, whether that be professional learning in education or professional soccer in Europe.

The point here is not that social networks are the best professional networking outlet for everyone. (Although I think everyone should give Twitter a go.) The point is that it's crucial to find a way to break out of your silo and seek your own learning community, whether online or in person, across classrooms or nations, in person or on Skype. The stories in this issue give a snapshot of that concept, from using social media to online coaching and collaboration to bridging silos within the school itself.

The value of seeking various means of collaboration and networking is not new, of course. The Learning Communities standard in Learning Forward's Standards for Professional Learning (Learning Forward, 2011) identifies as necessary to high-quality professional development "learning communities committed to continuous improvement, collective responsibility, and goal alignment." And there have been countless blog posts, research papers, and books written on the value of high-quality networks.

Perhaps one of the best such works is *The Power of Teacher Networks* (Meyers, Paul, Kirkland, & Dana, 2009), which defines a teacher network as a group of at least 10 teachers (and as large as 50) that comes together at least once a month locally and serves as an affiliate within a larger nationwide network. I would argue, though, that social media has made that definition more flexible in terms of the number and frequency, and that, as we show in this issue, what matters more than numbers or frequency is an ongoing ability to inspire, solve problems, and increase student outcomes.

In fact, Learning Forward Executive Director Stephanie Hirsh wrote in her foreword to the book that effective networks "serve teachers and students by providing collegial support that builds and retains great teachers by improving classroom practice, spreading great practices across school and district boundaries, and offering teachers a vision for demonstrating leadership" (Meyers et al., 2009). That still seems like a good definition today.

How do they do that, though? In multiple ways.

Effective networks offer teachers a way to emerge from their silos, allowing for sharing and support between colleagues — as is described in our story on expanding the faculty workroom. An effective network offers opportunities for professional learning, as you'll see in our story on teacher labs. And the fact that such networks can break down walls between classrooms, districts, states, and countries means that "spreading great practices" occurs like a ripple in a pond. As well, these networks can serve "a moral purpose," as Hirsh noted — advocating participation in policy discussions. (For example, Learning Forward's Agents for Learning Competition promoted discussions on the most effective use of Title II funds under ESSA implementation. Read more about it on p. 68.)

Perhaps the most important reason such networks are important to professional learning is this: By their nature, they create a sense of collective responsibility and mutual accountability for shared improvement. Groups that come together in whatever fashion — in social networks, via online video conferencing, or around conference tables — share in solutions to problems of practice and therefore feel collectively responsible for the success of all their students.

This accountability toward not only a solution but also to improved outcomes is a fundamental element to the success of such networks. I know that if I share with my online network a problem I'm having, its members not only want to give me best-practice advice but also ask to be notified of the final result. That the networking provides this sense of collective purpose is its most important trait and the reason it deserves renewed exploration.

## REFERENCES

- Learning Forward. (2011).** *Standards for Professional Learning*. Oxford, OH: Author.
- Meyers, E., Paul, P.A., Kirkland, D.E., & Dana, N.F. (2009).** *The power of teacher networks*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

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