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Tools FOR SCHOOLS

FOR A DYNAMIC COMMUNITY OF LEARNERS AND LEADERS

LINK UP & LEARN

*Use technology to create a personal learning network
to connect with experts and mentors everywhere*

BY VALERIE VON FRANK



Most teachers and principals believe technology enhances teaching and learning. That's according to the *MetLife Survey of the American Teacher: Past, Present, and Future* (2008). But the survey also found that while many educators are using the Internet, "far fewer are exploring the use of digital media for professional development and communication, including interaction with colleagues beyond their schools and districts."

That's the case more with teachers than principals, according to the survey, which found that 27% of teachers have communicated online with a colleague outside their own district at least once a month compared with 62% of principals. And 43% of teachers *never* have. It's a gap that school leaders may need to help teachers address as technology becomes ever more a part of daily life — and budgets strain to provide opportunities for professional learning.

"If you want to participate in the 21st Century, you're going to have to be more connected and have more access to those things around you, not just those in your backyard," said Lisa Pertrides, president of the Institute for Study of Knowledge Management in Education (www.iskme.org), which focuses on using technology to share information. "A lot of us can be connected in a greater way, not just for the sake of being connected, but for improving what we do on a regular basis."

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Link up & learn

Bill Ferriter, a 6th-grade language arts teacher in Apex, N.C., and frequent blogger (see his monthly column in past issues of *T3*), said connecting with experienced teachers outside of his school, district, and even state has increased his learning exponentially.

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Pertrides used this example: A teacher googles a topic for ideas for her lesson. She finds an activity and downloads it. Many teachers do this. But if that teacher develops the idea further and creates an additional resource from the activity, and then writes an assessment, she's moved the activity to a greater depth. If she then uploads her materials, others can do the same — continually sharing and refining the lesson with ideas from those teaching the topic around the country and sometimes the world.

“Why reinvent the wheel over and over and over again, especially in education where we have such a scarcity of resources?” said Pertrides, who currently is working with nations in the European Union to create just such synergies. “The proliferation of information everybody is feeling is here to stay. If you don't want to become stagnant in your own silo, social learning is a means to learn from others in a way that's just-in-time. You don't have to go to a hundred

conferences. You can integrate it when you need it, how you need it, from people who are doing similar things.”

Pertrides pointed out that people value information that comes from sources they deem most reliable, such as a more experienced teacher in the same subject.

NSDC'S BELIEF

Schools' most complex problems are best solved by educators collaborating and learning together.

Bill Ferriter, a 6th-grade language arts teacher in Apex, N.C., and frequent blogger (see his monthly column in past issues of *T3*), said connecting with experienced teachers outside of his school, district, and even state has increased his learning exponentially.

“When I get called into a meeting at our school and they bring in this expert, I always laugh because I think, ‘We're paying this person thousands of dollars, I have no idea whether they're actually good at what they do, I have no relationship with them, and I've never been able to track or follow their thinking,’ ” he said. “If you just let me open my discussion board, I can be interacting with some of the top thinkers in education and the most accomplished classroom teachers ever, but instead we bring in this outside consultant and we sit in a room and listen to them for an hour. There's no comparison. I learn far more online.”

Both Pertrides and Ferriter said Internet tools can be used to filter information, as well as find it, by focusing where one searches as well as capturing resources without searching. By creating a personal learning network, teachers can differentiate their professional learning and gain knowledge from experts and mentors anywhere, they pointed out. Digital networks allow professional learning that teachers can use individually or to deepen their conversations with their own learning teams in their schools, Ferriter said, to continue to improve their practices.

“At the beginning of my time with my grade-level learning team, my practice changed a ton because I was being exposed to practitioners with different ideas,” he said. “It was fun

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“First steps into the cloud are scary...

and that is why I can't feel impatient with my department colleagues, none of whom has run along side me headlong into this read/write web business. I am still awaiting the first dialog via web 2.0 tools with them, but they are making progress.

“Evidence of their willingness occurred in a collaborative team session today, where I was able to showcase a little of my use of voicethread, a popular web 2.0 tool for engendering, preserving, and extending discussions. Here is a [link to a provocative discussion thread](#) for Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*.”

A. Bendelow, Elmhurst, Ill., high school English teacher, in a blog posting

4 ways to get started

SOCIAL BOOKMARKING, SUCH AS TWITTER

"Twitter is beautiful because (posts are limited to) 140-character messages," Ferriter said. "I can go to it and scan it quickly in about 10 minutes a day and find links to the information that's valuable without too much of a time commitment." Users begin by signing up at twitter.com, just as with Facebook, MySpace, or gmail. The next step is to find people to "follow," those whose posts you want to see. Begin with anyone you know personally, and then consider linking to contacts those people are following. Building a network requires building relationships by sharing resources as well as just viewing others' posts, and the benefit is, Ferriter said, that posting a question can engender quick responses with brief pointers or resource links from other Twitterers.

DISCUSSION BOARDS

"In a blog, you don't know whether you're going to get a response," Ferriter said. "A discussion board is a more interactive conversation. ... Particularly these days, when the money for outside conferences is drying up in schools and the amount of demands placed on teachers doesn't leave a lot of time in the school day to sit and reflect or read and write together, blogs, Twitter, and discussion boards are all easy to access when I want to. I can learn from people who are far more talented and far more accomplished than I am at any time, for free." One top resource is the Teacher Leaders Network (www.teacherleaders.org), an initiative of the Center for Teaching Quality, which networks teacher leaders nationwide.

BLOGS

A blog is a place to reflect about your practice through writing. Ferriter said, "When a teacher gets to the point where they can articulate what they're doing, they're thinking much more carefully about their practice. A blog makes that reflection transparent. By making my thinking transparent, I'm opening myself to challenge (from readers who post responses), and when that challenge comes, it's an opportunity for me to improve what I do." Start with blogger.com or www.edublogs.org, both free.

OPEN SOURCE LESSONS

Teachers can share and develop resources with other educators at Open Education Resource (www.oercommons.org). "Teachers, by nature, are sharers," Pertrides said. While retiring educators, for example, sometimes passed along their lesson contents to young teachers in their building, experienced teachers now can share and even improve on their content by putting it out on the web. "It allows us into each other's brains," Pertrides said.

The entire MetLife Survey of the American Teacher series is now available online at the ERIC (Education Resources Information Center) website: <http://eric.ed.gov>.

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and exciting and energizing, and it forced me to improve what I was doing. But there are only five of us, and we've been together for seven years now. The challenge is gone. We've worked through our practice to the point where we're comfortable with what we're doing.

"With digital communities, I no longer have a network of five. I have a network of 500 — and they're from all over the world!"

Former teacher Mary Anne Wolf noted in a blog on Huffingtonpost.com, "By using online resource hubs and other tools for collaboration, i.e. blogs and discussion boards, and including

virtual or in-school coaching and mentoring, schools, districts, and states are beginning to see gains in teaching quality and student achievement."

REFERENCES

MetLife. (2008, October). *MetLife Survey of the American Teacher: Past, Present and Future*. New York: Author.

Wolf, M.A. (2009, April 24). *The importance of teacher professional development*. Available at: www.huffingtonpost.com/mary-ann-wolf/the-importance-of-teacher_b_191259.html. ■

Get Connected With Today's (and Tomorrow's) Tools

Purpose: To engage participants in exploring ways to use digital tools and to increase their knowledge of free digital tools that can help improve their own professional learning.

Time: 45 to 60 minutes, depending on participants' previous knowledge and whether they will have computers available.

Preparation:

- For each small group (three to four participants), prepare a set of *What Do You Need?* cards by copying the chart and cutting apart the cards. Clip each set together.
- For each participant, prepare a copy of the *What Do You Need?* chart.
- Have available chart paper and a marker.
- If your school computer lab is available, consider having this meeting there so that teachers can begin investigating digital tools.

Steps

1. Facilitate a brainstorming session around what participants know and what they would like to know about ways technology can help in their daily work. Some opening questions to stimulate the group's thinking might be: *What are some of your own needs in managing information? What do you know about digital tools? How might digital tools help you in your work? What questions do you have about these tools? What terms do you want to understand? How can these tools be valuable for students? What would you like to learn about what's available digitally?* If the group is large, break into small groups and list responses on chart paper.
2. Give each group of participants a set of *What Do You Need?* cards. Ask groups to work together to match the Need cards with the Solution cards.
3. Invite groups to report out. As they do so, point out that a Solution card may match more than one Need card. For example, social bookmarking tools might be used both for organizing and for collaborating.
4. Distribute copies of the *What Do You Need?* chart to participants.
5. Lead participants to examine the Free Web Tools column. Explain that these are free digital tools that can be remarkably efficient in addressing some of the identified needs. Note that the tools and categories include overlap because many have multiple purposes. Also tell the group that these are just a few of the most common examples to begin — selected by the authors of this tool. Many more in each category are available.
6. Ask: “Who has already used one of these digital tools?” “What other needs has this tool met for you?” “What other digital tools have you used?”
7. List names of additional digital tools that faculty members suggest on the chart paper and suggest that participants add these to their charts.
8. Invite participants to go online and investigate at least three digital tools, keeping a list of each tool and their initial thoughts about how they might use it.
9. Suggest that teachers commit to learning to use at least one new digital tool and then meet to share their experiences.
10. Ask a staff member who is knowledgeable about digital tools to be a point of contact for teachers who have questions. Students are also valuable in this role. Many students use a variety of digital tools and would be enthusiastic coaches for teachers and staff.

Source for tools on pp. 4-6: Anne Jolly and Walter Olsen.

NEED	SOLUTION	FREE WEB TOOLS
<p>NEED: I need an efficient way to locate and organize web sites and information I find online. I might do this at home sometimes, so I want to be able to access this information from any computer.</p>	<p>SOLUTION: <i>Social bookmarking</i> is a way to collect and save bookmarks to a public web site and “tag” them (link them to key words).</p>	<p>SOCIAL BOOKMARKING TOOLS:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Del.icio.us • Digg • Diigo
<p>NEED: I want to capture, locate, share, and use video to captivate and engage my students.</p>	<p>SOLUTION: <i>Digital video</i> tools allow you to view and download videos you see on the web.</p>	<p>WEB-BASED VIDEO TOOLS:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Easy Web Video • Teachertube • Zamzar
<p>NEED: I'd like to connect and collaborate with other educators on common projects.</p>	<p>SOLUTION: <i>Online collaboration</i> tools provide online spaces to work together with others in real time or asynchronously.</p>	<p>WEB TOOLS:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Google Apps • Skype • Wikispaces
<p>NEED: I'd like to access photos, clip art, and other images to share with colleagues or use in my classes.</p>	<p>SOLUTION: <i>Photo sharing</i> sites provide millions of free images and allow you to upload, store, and share your own photos.</p>	<p>WEB TOOLS:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Flickr • Photobucket • Webshots
<p>NEED: I need to unite with colleagues to interact, learn, and build new understandings and friendships.</p>	<p>SOLUTION: <i>Virtual learning communities (VLCs)</i> allow you to interact regularly with colleagues and enjoy learning while building relationships.</p>	<p>WEB TOOLS:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Moodle • Ning • Tapped in
<p>NEED: I need to manage my time better. I don't want to spend a lot of time looking for information online.</p>	<p>SOLUTION: <i>Real Simple Syndication (RSS)</i> is a way to build and organize a database of easily accessible information.</p>	<p>WEB TOOLS:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bloglines • Google Reader • SharpReader
<p>NEED: I need to spend time reflecting. I want a different way to journal, and I'd like to get comments on my thoughts and opinions on various topics from others.</p>	<p>SOLUTION: A <i>blog</i> is a web site that allows you to keep an ongoing commentary or diary for reflection and feedback.</p>	<p>WEB TOOLS:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Blogger • Word Press • Windows Live Spaces
<p>NEED: I want to meet and interact with colleagues beyond those I see every day. I would like to access new sources of expertise.</p>	<p>SOLUTION: <i>Social networking sites</i> facilitate connections among people who share common interests or professional goals.</p>	<p>WEB TOOLS:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facebook • LinkedIn • Twitter

FREE WEB TOOLS

http://delicious.com	Del.icio.us: a popular social bookmarking tool that allows you to store and share web bookmarks and to look at bookmarks on specific topics that others have shared.
www.blogger.com	Blogger: a free blogging tool for sharing your thoughts and ideas.
www.bloglines.com	Bloglines: a web-based news aggregator that brings together information that you want to read and delivers it to your computer.
www.deskshare.com	DeskShare: a web site that allows you to turn pictures and video footage from your camera into a video slideshow.
http://digg.com	Digg: a social news site where people share content by submitting links from anywhere on the web.
www.diigo.com	Diigo: a social bookmarking site that allows you to bookmark and share web sites, as well as highlight and/or attach sticky notes to parts of web pages.
www.facebook.com	Facebook: a social networking site organized by city, workplace, school, and region that you can join to connect and interact with other people.
www.flickr.com	Flickr: a site that allows you to post and share images and videos and also provides social networking.
www.google.com/apps/	Google Apps: a site that allows you share and work with others in real time on documents, spreadsheets, and other office suite applications.
www.google.com/reader/	Google Reader: a web-based aggregator that will bring your favorite feeds to you and allow you to share these items with others.
www.linkedin.com	LinkedIn: a social networking site used mostly for professional networking.
http://moodle.org/	Moodle: a virtual learning environment that specializes in online learning and online communities.
www.ning.com	Ning: a web site that allows you to create your own social networks around specific people or interests.
http://photobucket.com	Photobucket: a site that allows you to upload your photos and videos and share them with friends and family.
www.sharpreader.net	SharpReader: a feed reader that organizes news and blogs logically and lets you store them in virtual folders.
www.skype.com	Skype: a collaboration tool that allows you to both see and talk with another person over the Internet, and to share instant messages and files.
http://tappedin.org	Tapped In: an online community of educators who gather to learn, collaborate, share, and support one another.
www.teachertube.com	TeacherTube: an online community for sharing instructional videos.
www.twitter.com	Twitter: a social messaging tool for communicating and staying connected in real time.
www.webshots.com	Webshots: an online site for uploading and sharing videos and pictures and creating personal online photo albums.
www.wikispaces.com	Wikispaces: a site with simple web pages that you can quickly set up and collaboratively edit and update with others.
www.windowslive.com/Online/Spaces	Windows live spaces: a web site that functions as both a blogging and a social networking site.
http://wordpress.org/	WordPress: a web site that provides free blogging along with other services.
www.zamzar.com	Zamzar: a site that allows you to convert files and videos from one format to another without downloading any software to your computer.

Links to provocative blog postings to start thinking about your practice

Is It Okay To Be A Technologically Illiterate Teacher?

<http://thefischbowl.blogspot.com/2007/09/is-it-okay-to-be-technologically.html>

“If a teacher today is not technologically literate — and is unwilling to make the effort to learn more — it’s equivalent to a teacher 30 years ago who didn’t know how to read and write.”

— *Karl Fisch, Arapahoe High School, Littleton Public Schools, Centennial, Colo.*

What I learned from Twitter today

www.teach42.com/2007/09/28/what-i-learned-from-twitter-today/

“There is nothing more important to teach educators about technology, than how to network.”

— *Steve Dembo, Online Community Manager for the Discovery Educator Network*

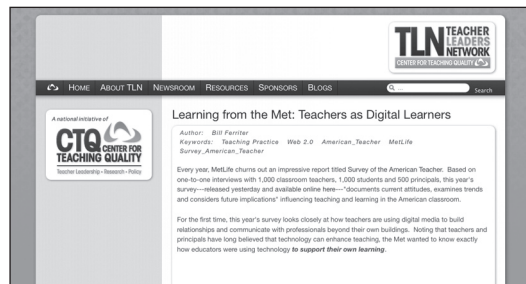
In which the whole world is all atwitter

www.worldatways.com/2009/03/17/in-which-the-whole-world-is-all-atwitter/

“... (W)hy should we language educators

concern ourselves with something that, according to some, has jumped the shark?”

— *Barbara Lindsey, director of the Multimedia Language Center at the University of Connecticut*



Learning from the Met: Teachers as Digital Learners

www.teacherleaders.org/node/3260

“Our schools will continue to fail students until we see teachers embrace digital opportunities for their own learning and growth — and then begin to pass that knowledge on to their pupils.”

— *Bill Ferriter, 6th-grade language arts teacher, Wake County, N.C.*

Sites to get you started building your personal learning network

Twitter for Teachers

<http://twitterforteachers.wetpaint.com/?t=anon>

An ebook being written by teachers that details how Twitter can be used to improve professional development and to improve teaching and learning.

Twitter for Teachers Warehouse

<http://twitter4teachers.pbwiki.com/>

A wiki that lists hundreds of teachers who are using Twitter by subject area and grade level. A great source for finding people to follow who have shared interests.

Blogging

<http://supportblogging.com/Links+to+School+Bloggers>

A wiki that lists hundreds of teachers and classrooms that are blogging by subject area and grade level. A great source for finding blogs worth reading.

Classroom 2.0

www.classroom20.com/

Probably the most active teacher discussion forum online. Focuses on using digital tools to improve teaching and learning. Literally thousands of members. Lots of different types of content.

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THE TECHNOLOGY GAP

The *Metlife Survey of the American Teacher: Past, Present and Future* (2008) found that most teachers and principals value technology and use the Internet frequently. As technology receives more emphasis as a resource to improve teaching and learning, however, educators might consider these survey findings:

EDUCATORS WHO HAVE:

