



## Virtual relationships: Where and when do your best conversations take place?

Teacher leaders meet with classroom teachers regularly throughout the school year to gain insight on new practices, ideas, and perspectives; hone and refine skills; and discuss student needs. Some proponents of online networks declare that relationships established or sustained online can continue to support these types of connectivity, collaboration, and learning. Others have common objections — its disruptiveness, lack of authentic face-to-face interaction, and potential to overshadow what is labeled “real” life. At the same time, there is a clear understanding that social media are here to stay. In our current culture and economy, virtual relationships will increasingly connect people across media and influence how students live and learn.

In the popular book, *Wikinom-*

*ics: How Mass Collaboration Changes Everything* (2006), Don Tapscott and Anthony Williams outline four principles that characterize virtual networks: being open, peering, sharing, and acting globally. These four principles are inherent in successful educator collaborations. They demonstrate a new age where people can and are expected to become actively involved in their own learning. They also provide a powerful lens for considering how to best implement the Collaboration standard.

The standard for collaboration states that professional development that improves student achievement integrates three critical elements: social interaction, interpersonal support, and creative problem solving. The Collaboration standard focuses professional learning on the core elements of teaching, emphasizing that collaboration as well as new forms of

mass communication are essential to integrating these principles to produce the results desired. Districts, school leaders, teacher leaders, instructional technology specialists, and coaches have the opportunity to ascertain and develop the knowledge and skills necessary to improve the quality of collaborative work.

### Being open

Being open to new ideas, thinking, and tools moves teacher leaders into a new space for exploring and sharing with other teachers a wide array of possibilities for staying both current and relevant when meeting students’ learning needs. This self-directed, passion-driven approach to learning can be developed through online relationships by contributing or subscribing to blogs, wikis, and podcasts focused on a variety of education topics. Moving

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beyond conventional learning and viewing the use of online tools for the purpose of better connecting people can be a difficult shift for some. It is, however, this vulnerability to change that opens up the opportunity for interpersonal support among peers that will strengthen collegial efforts.

### Peering

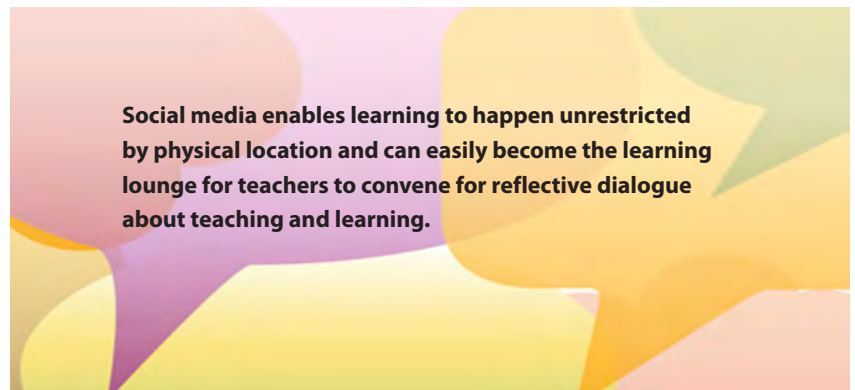
Harnessing ideas and opinions from a virtual peer group can be a non-threatening way for teacher leaders to express thoughts, challenges, and perspectives around topics while gaining perspectives and resources. Building an online professional learning network allows teacher leaders and coaches to enlist others in assisting and supporting their efforts to move classroom teachers beyond their own knowledge and skills and benefit from the expertise of a larger group of professionals. Educators can connect online in a variety of social network sites, including Twitter, Facebook,

YouTube, LinkedIn, and Flickr. At times, virtual relationships can transition into face-to-face relationships. Participation in area-sponsored or content-focused meetups and Tweetups are examples of opportunities for offline relationships to develop. These events are widely attended by conference participants who follow

the backchannel, a real-time online conversation that takes place at the same time as a conference session, typically on Twitter.

### Communities of practice

Online communities are popping up everywhere among professional and personal associations focused on a defined community with a common interest in a specified practice. They have been designed to build, engage,



and sustain communities of practice using Ning, Moodle, or other social web sites. These new platforms are customized to allow educators to capture and share best practices, collectively solve problems, cultivate professional development, and network with colleagues. Most sites are comprehensive and provide subscribers with a variety of opportunities to collaborate and share resources while also offering other learning opportunities, including webinars, virtual conferences, and discussion groups. These environments approach learning as a social endeavor, determining solutions and building innovations in common areas of concern. By collectively expanding the knowledge base of educators, these kinds of virtual relationships can assist teacher leaders in moving agendas forward and add value to current instructional goals.

### Acting globally

No longer do teachers need to feel isolated in their own classrooms or even limited to the knowledge of their own school or city limits. Internationally, educators are convening online to connect, collaborate, and create with one another out of a desire to engage with others with widely different perspectives. This social learning has allowed groups of educators, including superintendents, principals, teachers, and support staff, to meet weekly online to chat about specific topics, exchange resources, and discuss education dilemmas. This new opportunity

allows educators to collaborate beyond their schools with other professionals from Frisco, Texas, to Stuttgart, Germany, to Windsor, Ontario, to New Milford, New Jersey.

Apart from networking, marketing, and branding, virtual online relationships allow educators to contribute to the learning of others while acquiring social media competencies. Making time for teachers to participate in extended learning opportunities and engage in productive collaborative community continues to be an area in need of improvement. Social media enables learning to happen unrestricted by physical location and can easily become the learning lounge for teachers to convene for reflective dialogue about teaching and learning. By both harnessing and leveraging the use of virtual relationships and multiple forms of social learning, educators can continue to model and mimic the same innovative learning expectations we have for students, thus becoming 21st-century educators that serve 21st-century students.

### Reference

Tapscott, D., & Williams, A. (2006). *Wikinomics: How mass collaboration changes everything*. New York, NY: Penguin.

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### COLLABORATION STANDARD

Staff development that improves the learning of all students provides educators with the knowledge and skills to collaborate.