

Tech: Learning to Network, Networking to Learn

The first of two articles on Personal Learning Networks for educators

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I often begin my workshop on personal learning networks for educators by asking these questions: Who is in your learning network? Who do you learn from on a regular basis? Who do you turn to for your own professional development?

Some educators are lucky enough to learn from their co-workers or colleagues at their site. Far too many others feel isolated in their room or office, and need to meet with counterparts from other sites in order to have a professional learning experience. All educators (and learners) can benefit from extending their own personal learning network online - beyond the walls of their schools, the boundaries of their districts, and the limits of their experience.

I usually ask these questions at conferences, which are frequently only annual events - and rare treats for many educators. My goal is for workshop participants to leave the session plugged into a global network of like-minded professionals who will broaden their experience and challenge their thinking on an ongoing basis. In this first article, I will share with you tips for building your own personal learning network. Next month, we'll address networking tools and anecdotes.

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Connect - The growth engine of your learning network is your willingness to reach out and make connections with new people: Leave a comment on a blog post or podcast, reply to a question on Twitter, +1 a post on Google+, or like something on Facebook. Merely reading, listening or watching is not connecting. The more people you connect with online, the more you can take advantage of [the strength of weak ties](#).

Contribute - If you have something to share, post it online where it may be accessible to others. Your expertise and your struggles are valuable to others who don't have your experience. Anything you create for work (or your own schooling) might as well be shared because it might be useful to someone else. Making contributions offers value to the new people you are connecting with. Sharing online is even considered a moral imperative by many educators; sharing contributes to the greater good. It's one way we can pay it forward.

Converse - Over time the connections and contributions you make online will evolve into conversations as others respond to you as well. These conversations will in turn grow into relationships, if not friendships. Sharing something about your passions and challenges outside of work can also enrich your relationships. Someone you've connected with about baseball or raising a toddler might be more likely to respond to your questions about work as well.

Request - If you've made connections, offered contributions, and cultivated relationships over time, then when you make requests, they are more likely to fall on fertile soil. In circles of educators who connect online, making a request is welcomed. You'll find that you'll receive much higher quality answers and support by asking your network than by simply searching online.

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