

5 Reasons Why Educators Should Network

By Tanya Roscorla

ON JANUARY 22, 2010 [WORKFORCE](#)



The period of isolationism in the United States ended during World War II, but while political isolation is no more, educational isolation is still prevalent in public schools today.

Many teachers go to school each day, teach their students and leave. If they're struggling with how to teach a lesson that will engage their students, they might ask for advice from the teacher down the hall, but a lot of times, they struggle alone.

That's not the case for educators who have built a network of people who share resources, advice and techniques, whether they call it a personal learning network or something else. Here's why educators should start a personal learning network, or PLN.

1. To learn with others

Teachers cannot know everything, so they should learn from one another, said Jerry Blumengarten, who spent 32 years teaching and retired from the New York City Board of Education in 2002. He's doing his part to help members of his network by posting more than 20,000 links to useful resources on Cybrary Man's Educational Web Sites.

They also cannot educate their students alone, said K-6 computer teacher Mary Beth Hertz, and that's why they need to develop a personal learning network.

"It's one of the most important things that you can have as a teacher, whether it's online or in a school," she said. "I don't think teaching is something you can do successfully in a vacuum all by yourself, at least not these days."

2. To serve your students

Hertz is the only computer teacher in her Philadelphia school, so she doesn't have anyone to bounce ideas off of, which is why her network is made up of educators she meets on Twitter or other online spaces.

"Sadly, within our own buildings, sometimes it's hard to find that kind of network," Hertz said, "and if you have it in your building, you're definitely blessed, and use it to your full advantage."

Her personal learning network is a support group where she can vent, reach out to others and trade ideas. Her network also provides a way for her to make sure she's being the best teacher that she can be and serving her students in the best possible way.

3. To access a dynamic resource

Since the Internet started, educators have been able to easily learn from people throughout the world, not just in their area. Tools including Twitter, Skype, nings, wikis and blogs give them instant communication that changes constantly.

"It's incredible," cybrary man Blumengarten said. "I need something, and boom, you're globally connected to people who can share resources, ideas, their lessons with you. It's wonderful; I wish I had this when I taught."

These tools give teachers an opportunity to see what other people are doing, what's worked for them and what problems they're facing, said David Peter, director of the Center for Teaching and Learning at Vincennes University in Indiana. The knowledge that members of the network share constantly increases and expands, which makes it valuable.

A personal learning network is "really the best investment of time a person can make considering the demands on education today," he said.

4. To extend your learning base

When a high school reading instructor in Missouri, Steve J. Moore, finished his education degree, he didn't feel like he had the skills that he needed to be an effective teacher. He had the content knowledge, but didn't have as much knowledge about teaching methods, so he started talking to other educators both inside and outside his state.

Through Twitter and various blogs, he had constant access to other people's opinions, suggestion and encouragement. He started trying new techniques to improve his teaching, and reflected on what he was doing on his blog after he saw other educators sharing their experiences in an authentic way on their blogs.

"I would have probably said on an evaluation, 'Sure, reflection's important,' meaning I will think about it and talk with you about it," Moore said. "But it completely took on a new meaning for me when I learned to write reflectively and share it with people online."

He also learned more about what other teachers experienced as they taught science or worked in elementary or special education settings.

"It really helps me get a better picture for education as a field and not just me, little Steve Moore in my English classroom."

5. To stay engaged in education

Some teachers do burn out, but personal learning networks help recharge them and give them the ideas and support they need to keep going, Hertz said.

"The only way you can become a better teacher and stay engaged with what you do is by learning," she said.

Educators need to grow, listen to others and support each other, Blumengarten said. If they have a problem or a question, they can receive responses quickly, and that's the beauty of Twitter and other online tools that allow educators to work together.

"We have to find better ways to inspire teachers as well as our students," Blumengarten said, "and networking is a great way to do this."