TEACHER'S CORNER – JULY 2015
PERSONAL LEARNING NETWORKS (PLNs)

EFL teaching is not solitary work. In addition to our interactions with students, we collaborate with peers, mentors, and other professional and personal contacts to ensure we continue to grow as teachers. This month in the Teacher's Corner, we will examine how to develop, maintain, and use this valuable group of connections – part of our personal learning network – for professional development purposes.

What is a Personal Learning Network (PLN)?
PLNs are an essential part of lifelong learning for teachers. A PLN consists of the people you informally learn from and share ideas with, as well as the resources, tools, and materials that support your learning.
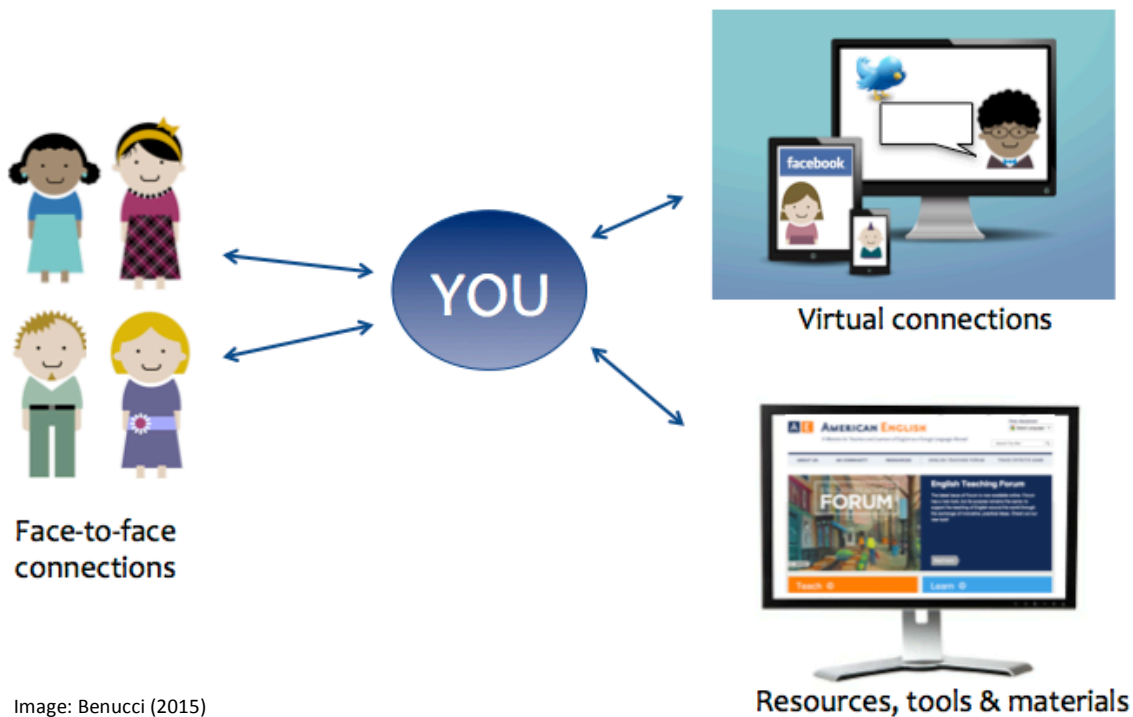

Image: Benucci (2015)

In the 21st century, an EFL teacher's PLN usually includes both face-to-face and virtual professional connections. Face-to-face PLN members might be people you know in your own teaching institution or from local, national, and international TEFL professional organizations. Meanwhile, your PLN's virtual components are not limited by time and geography. You can access parts of your virtual network at anytime from anywhere using a variety of internet-based media and social networking tools. These virtual tools allow you to instantly connect with teachers from around the globe and to access information you need to enhance your teaching.

A strong PLN can enable you to:

- Locate classroom resources and develop lesson ideas
- Find solutions to challenges you face in the classroom
- Locate research and news related to key TEFL/Applied Linguistics issues
- Learn from experts and colleagues in the TEFL/Applied Linguistics field
- Build your own digital literacy skills and learn how to integrate these skills in the classroom
- Establish collaborations to conduct research or set up professional development opportunities

Finally, it is important to remember the "P" in "PLN." Unlike formal, structured professional development contexts like graded university courses, you decide which people and data sources to include in your PLN, as well as which tools to use to interact with your connections. These decisions are shaped by your professional goals, the time you can dedicate to learning and sharing, and, occasionally, your access to and familiarity with different types of technology.   Therefore, your network will evolve as your professional development aims change and as new tools and resources become available.

How do I build and maintain a PLN?

This month we will look at ways to establish and maintain your PLN. In today's highly connected world, the number of ways to collaborate with other teachers can seem overwhelming! We will consider ways to be proactive about connecting with others in face-to-face settings, and we will also think about how to effectively and selectively engage with other teachers in virtual environments to meet your professional goals. Let's get ready to network!