

## DEVELOPING YOUR LOCAL NETWORK: FACE-TO-FACE OPTIONS

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As we've seen, personal learning networks (PLNs) can include both face-to-face and virtual connections. Developing collaborative face-to-face relationships with the teachers in your local area is an essential part of growing your PLN.

EFL teachers in an educational institution often know each other from passing in the halls between classes and through formal training sessions sponsored by their school or institution. Have you ever stopped to think about how you might extend these collegial relationships to meet your personal, informal learning goals? That is, how can you work together with teachers from your institution, district, or region to exchange ideas about topics that you all agree are important to your classroom practice or to your professional knowledge base?

While time is a scarce resource for teachers and the ideas below do require some effort to coordinate, the relationships you develop while collaborating with local contacts are priceless. Since the connections are local, these PLN members will be aware of the unique issues and challenges teachers in your area face. As you network, you will get to know these teachers and administrators on a deeper level, and you can provide each other mutual support and mentoring on a variety of topics during your careers.

### IDEAS: DEVELOPING CONNECTIONS IN YOUR LOCAL NETWORK

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#### 1. Lunch and Learn

Set up or attend a biweekly, monthly, or quarterly “lunch and learn” professional development gathering for EFL teachers. Participants bring lunch to enjoy while learning about and discussing a topic of interest that can range from classroom management tips, lesson planning ideas, current research findings, teaching with technology, or managing new institutional or governmental requirements. Group members can volunteer to lead a discussion or make a short presentation during future sessions. You will get to know other teachers and learn what types of expertise and experience they have – valuable information for building your PLN!

- Survey teachers in your school or area to see what topics they want to learn more about. You can collect this information via e-mail, conversations or a sign-up sheet in the teachers' break room, a newsletter article requesting feedback, or social media.
- One source of content for your “lunch and learn” discussions could be an article from [English Teaching Forum](#), a free journal for and by EFL professionals. Be sure to check out the new [Reader's Guide](#) section, available in the 2015 issues and beyond, which contains pre- and post-reading discussion questions for articles in the journal.
- Work with your institution's administrators to see if you can use an empty classroom or meeting room to host the event. If not, consider meeting in a local library or coffee/tea shop.
- Advertise the meeting through e-mail, your school newsletter, posters, or other means at least two weeks prior to the event. Be sure make any needed materials, such as readings, available in advance.
- Host the first meeting: present introductory information, give a short presentation about the featured topic, and guide the discussion. Ask for volunteers to sign up to facilitate future sessions.

- After the group is established, consider inviting guests, such as administrators or content-area teachers (e.g., mathematics or science teachers) to address specialty topics the group wants to know more about.
- If lunchtime isn't convenient for teachers, try setting up a regular "EFL Coffee (or Tea) Talk" group that meets before or after school.

## 2. Peer Observation Groups

Set up or participate in a group that conducts developmental peer observations. Unlike formal, evaluation-oriented teaching observations, these sessions are cooperative and allow teachers to work together to examine their beliefs, attitudes, and practices related to EFL teaching and learning. Participation is voluntary and the information participating teachers exchange is confidential. Goals of peer observation include improving learning outcomes, fostering experimentation and self-awareness, and encouraging collaboration. Members of a peer observation group develop trust and work together in a mutually respectful way. The teachers you work with can become members of your PLN.

For detailed information about conducting peer observations and setting up peer observation groups, see the 2014 *Shaping the Way We Teach English* webinar "[Teachers Helping Teachers: Peer Observation for Professional Development](#)" by Heather Benucci. "[Observation Tools for Professional Development](#)," a 2015 *English Teaching Forum* article by Kathleen Malu, is another helpful resource.

## 3. Action Research Groups

Action research is a reflection-oriented, systematic approach to identifying and exploring problematic areas in our teaching practice. The data that are collected and analyzed during the action research process allow teachers to make informed decisions about improving the way they teach. Action research can be carried out by single teachers or teachers working in groups to address a common issue. An excellent way to grow your face-to-face PLN is to participate in a collaborative action research project or to establish or attend a group in which action researchers (practicing teachers) share their experiences and findings.

For more information about action research, see this 2007 *English Teaching Forum* article, "[Reflection as a Necessary Condition for Action Research](#)," by Bettiana Blázquez. You can follow many of the steps described in the "Lunch and Learn" section above to establish a group of teachers interested in action research.

## 4. Mini-Conferences

Coordinate or participate in a small conference in your school or district to meet and learn from other local EFL teachers. You can think of mini-conferences as extended "lunch and learn" sessions in that they are less formal and lower-stakes than larger professional association conferences. This type of conference can last for as little as two hours to a full day and features short presentations (30 minutes or less). Apart from providing opportunities to meet new people or reconnect with existing PLN contacts, mini-conferences are a great way exchange ideas about locally important issues and for participants to build confidence to present at larger conferences.

For more about mini-conference benefits and a step-by-step guide to organizing a mini-conference, see this 2005 *English Teaching Forum* article, "[The Mini Conference: Creating Localized Opportunities for Professional Development](#)," by Brad Tipka.