

BUILDING YOUR PLN THROUGH PROFESSIONAL SUPPORT NETWORKS AND ASSOCIATIONS

So far this month, we've examined how to expand your personal learning network (PLN) through local face-to-face connections in your school or district. This week we will look at how involvement in professional support networks and associations can contribute to your PLN. Many of this week's ideas are drawn from Alice Murray's 2010 *English Teaching Forum* article "[Empowering Teachers through Professional Development](#)."

Professional support networks for EFL educators often include teachers from several schools or organizations in a community, region, or country. These networks may vary in terms of size and specific goals, but they are all designed to help EFL teachers exchange ideas, share information, and mentor each other. Over time, if membership grows and the network is well organized and governed, these support networks may become formal professional associations. These associations can apply to become professional associations that are affiliated with (recognized by and linked to) major national or international TEFL organizations.

Larger professional associations operate at regional, national, and international levels. Two well-known international organizations for TEFL educators are the TESOL International Association (TESOL) and the International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language (IATEFL). Membership in international or national-level professional associations can help you connect with and learn from a diverse set of teachers from many locations, making your PLN truly global! PLN connections made through these groups can be both face-to-face and virtual. (Note: Joining a professional association usually involves a fee, but most organizations offer financial aid options, reduced fees for university students or new teachers, and travel grants and scholarships to ensure that all can participate regardless of income.)

IDEAS: USING PROFESSIONAL SUPPORT NETWORK AND ASSOCIATION MEMBERSHIP TO DEVELOP AND MAINTAIN YOUR PLN

1. **Join a professional support network or association and attend meetings, workshops, or conferences**

There are free several online resources that offer tips on how to get the most out of attending a workshop or conference. Search for these online recommendations or attend a conference with an experienced member of your PLN to enhance your learning and networking opportunities at these events.

Attending network or association events enables you to:

- Learn who the international and local experts are on certain topics in the TEFL/Applied Linguistics field. You will usually have the chance to meet these individuals, receive their contact details, and learn about their publications and online presence (blogs, social networking details, etc.). You can then choose if and how to incorporate them into your PLN.
- Sample current information on a variety of TEFL topics, focus on what interests you and affects your classroom practice, and network with those who share your interests. You can follow up with these potential PLN members after the event.

- Reconnect with members of your PLN that you haven't seen or interacted with in a while. You may also get to meet people that you have only interacted with online. These face-to-face events are a great way to refresh and maintain your network connections.
- Learn about new tech tools and resources that can help you connect with other teachers.
- Develop expertise you can share with members of your PLN who did not attend the event. Perhaps you can lead a Lunch and Learn session, write a blog post or a newsletter article, or develop a mini-conference presentation about something new you learned at the event.

Note: For tips on how to follow up with people that you meet at conferences or association events, check out Amy Pascucci's 2015 *Shaping the Way We Teach English* webinar, "[Networking: Making Connections that Last.](#)"

2. Take on an active role in your network or association

As you become a more confident, experienced network or association member, consider taking on a more active role. Apart from the professional development benefits that come with accepting additional responsibility, you put yourself in a more visible position in the organization. Therefore, other teachers may seek you out to become part of their PLNs (which also expands your personal network!). Many of the opportunities listed below can be collaborative or involve interacting with organizational leaders, which provides additional chances to grow and maintain your PLN.

Consider:

- Sharing your expertise and classroom experiences by presenting at a conference or workshop
- Writing an article or a teaching tip for an organizational newsletter
- Participating in online or face-to-face discussion groups hosted by the organization
- Volunteering at an organization event
- Being a presentation proposal reader (evaluator) for a conference
- Joining a committee or special interest group ("SIG," a group focused on a TEFL specialty topic like Computer-aided Language Learning, Academic Writing, ESP, etc.)
- Taking on a leadership role in the organization

3. Encourage your association to make connections with other organizations

You can also develop PLN contacts across regional or national borders and subject areas by encouraging your TEFL association to collaborate with other organizations:

- Work with EFL teachers from other regions or neighboring countries by establishing association partnerships. Partner TEFL organizations can share resources and host in-person or virtual joint conferences and events. These exchange opportunities allow you to learn about shared or unfamiliar challenges and successes teachers experience in other places. You can keep in touch with these new PLN contacts virtually and at future face-to-face joint events.
- Collaborate with non-TEFL organizations that may have a shared interest in a key issue facing your organization. For example, perhaps your country has announced a national initiative that requires university students to take all science courses in English. Your TEFL organization could collaborate with a professional association focused on science education to develop standards and goals to support the new national program. Contacts you meet through partnerships with other subject-area organizations could become members of your PLN that provide assistance as you develop materials for future English for Specific Purposes courses.