

DEVELOPING YOUR VIRTUAL PERSONAL LEARNING NETWORK (PLN)

As our world becomes increasingly interconnected through web-based technologies, it is important for EFL teachers to think about how virtual resources and online connections can support their lifelong learning efforts. This week we will examine virtual components you can include in your PLN, as well as how to overcome some of the challenges teachers face when trying to navigate today's ever-growing number of virtual learning opportunities and resources.

THE BENEFITS OF A VIRTUAL PLN

As a busy teacher, you might ask, "Why should I develop a virtual PLN? Isn't face-to-face networking good enough?" While face-to-face networking is invaluable to your PLN, virtual engagement offers many benefits:

- **Connecting anytime, anywhere, with anyone:** using the web can help you overcome networking barriers related to time, place, and social distance.
- **Opportunities to reflect:** online discussion forums, blogs, and courses can encourage you to reflect on and comment on your teaching practice.
- **Finding information or support:** as a consumer of information in your network, your virtual PLN can help you solve classroom challenges, learn about new methodologies and teaching techniques, locate resources, and find mentors who might not be available locally.
- **Sharing your expertise and ideas:** as a producer of information in your virtual network, you can help others by talking about your experiences, classroom lessons learned, and research findings. You can also mentor others.
- **Modeling how to be a master learner:** building an online presence and learning how to work with e-tools shows your colleagues and students that you are intellectually curious and willing to invest time in your own professional learning.
- **Developing your professional reputation and identity:** establishing an online presence and participating in virtual discussions and e-courses helps others in our field get to know you. Depending on the media you use (blogs, social media tools, collecting e-certificates from online courses, etc.), you create a visible record of your commitment to professional development and lifelong learning, information that may be of interest to colleagues and prospective employers.

YOUR VIRTUAL PLN – THE BUILDING BLOCKS

Now that we know why developing a virtual PLN is beneficial, let's examine some potential components you may choose to include. The tools and platforms listed below allow you to build new connections with other educators, develop your professional knowledge base, and share your expertise.

As you review this list, note that the tools and platforms offer a range of options for depth and duration of contact with others in your network. For example, you might get to know other participants and engage deeply with content during a webinar series, whereas you might have shallow but wide contact with people using a social media platform like Twitter (e.g., you share a little bit of information with many people).

Possible virtual PLN components

- Blogs – short for “web logs,” web-hosted sites that teachers use to share reflections, ideas, and resources
- [Webinars](#) (short for “web seminars”), [Massive Open Online Courses](#) (MOOCs), other online courses
- Established online PLNs for educators, such as Edmodo
- Social media platforms
 - Social networking sites, such as [Ning communities](#), [Facebook](#), and [LinkedIn](#)
 - Microblogging platforms, such as Twitter
 - Social bookmarking sites, such as Diigo and Delicious
 - Content sharing sites, such as [YouTube](#), Instagram, and Pinterest
 - Collaborative content development platforms, such as Google Drive tools
- E-mail – direct messages and listservs (e-mail lists that teachers can subscribe to)
- Instant messaging, chat rooms....and more!

Notes: (1) Names of networking platforms may vary by region or country; some resources may not be available in all areas.
 (2) Links to resources related to American English programs are provided above when available.

BUILDING YOUR VIRTUAL PLN – ADDRESSING COMMON CONCERNS

Here are two common concerns shared by teachers who are starting to build a virtual PLN.

Concern 1: “There are so many options. Where do I begin?”

As we saw in the previous section, your virtual PLN can contain many elements. The amount of choice can seem overwhelming. Here are a few tips to help you get started:

- **Define a purpose:** Think about what your short-term and long-term learning goals are, who the related experts are, and where you might find the information. For example, do you want to locate data to solve a classroom problem tomorrow, try out a new tech tool, or learn about a general topic over time?
- **Connect - start small:** If you want to start following blogs, start with 3 or 4, not 20. If you want to experiment with social media, pick one platform for the academic term, get to know it well, and start connecting with/“following” a few people or organizations to start with.
- **Observe:** Sit back, watch, and learn. Observe how people share information on your chosen platform, and enjoy and apply the ideas and resources you discover.
- **Spiral:** Once you connect with people or organizations related to your interests and goals, try to find out whom they are connected to and add those second-level contacts or resources to your network if appropriate. This process is called “spiraling out” because you start from one point and then expand your network’s reach in bigger and bigger circles. For example, if you follow a helpful TEFL blog, check out its “blog roll” (a list of other blogs that the blogger follows, usually located on the right or left side of blog’s home page). Visit those blogs and determine if any of them are good fits for your PLN. You can repeat this process with the blog rolls on the newly located resources.
- **Share and participate:** As you become more comfortable with a media type or tool, start contributing your expertise and experiences. All EFL teachers know something worth sharing! This action could take many forms such as writing your first Tweet, writing reflective comments in the chat box during a webinar, commenting on someone’s blog, or posting on a professional Facebook account.

- **Curate:** Add new contacts and resources as you spiral out from helpful members in your PLN. Occasionally review your network's content and remove sites, resources, and contacts that don't contribute to your current learning goals.

Concern 2: "I don't know the tools, and I don't know the rules."

Try these three suggestions to overcome this concern:

- **Find a tutorial:** The internet offers countless self-directed tutorials for people who want to learn how to use e-platforms and social media tools; many of them are designed with teachers in mind. Put your internet search skills to use to find online courses, videos, or text tutorials to help you get started with a new branch in your virtual PLN. You'll be surprised how many results a simple search like "Twitter for educators" will return!
- **Find a mentor:** Use you PLN to expand your PLN! Make use of your face-to-face and virtual connections to find a mentor that can help guide you as you learn to use a new platform. Mentors can point out helpful resources, review your contributions, offer support and advice as you experiment, and increase your exposure on a platform by "liking," "favoriting," "sharing," or "retweeting" your work to their PLN, which can help you develop new connections.
- **Learn the social norms (rules):** Each networking platform has its own culture and rules. As you join a new e-community, be sure to spend time observing interactions before you contribute. This tactic is called "lurking" or "lurk and learn." Make note of:
 - **Levels of formality** – How do people address each other? Do people use slang, informal language, abbreviations, and emoticons when they write? Is the language more formal or academic?
 - **Amount of content shared** – How long are effective posts or contributions?
 - **Interaction patterns** – Do people respond to all members or a group or to specific individuals (e.g., When do people respond/comment publically and when to do they private messages)? If you "like" or "follow" someone or their work, are they expected to reciprocate? If someone comments on your contribution, are you expected to reply? Do these behaviors depend on the type of content being shared?
 - **Content sharing** – Are people expected to provide references, hyperlinks, or attachments when they contribute something?

In sum, learning to how to use the connections and tools in your virtual PLN can take time and patience, but investing this time will help you maximize the benefits your network can offer. Be sure to try the tips listed here, work with others, and set realistic goals to get your virtual PLN off to a great start.

Disclaimer: Names of non-U.S. Department of State websites and social media platforms mentioned in this Teacher's Corner resource are provided for illustrative purposes only; their inclusion here should not be seen as an endorsement of their content, views, or privacy policies.