



Connected Learning

I learned more on Twitter in six months than in two years of graduate school.

The connections I've made because I am online are crucial to my success in the classroom.

I don't know what I did before I was connected!

These are statements we hear everyday. Educators from around the world, marveling at the fact that they are connected and how those connections carry a great deal of value to them professionally and personally.

Whether or not you believe in styles of learning, it is a fact that there are several ways that we learn. One way is through collaboration. Collaboration has been a component of education from the beginning; however, the way it evolves has changed dramatically with the advent of digital technology.

Historically, collaboration took place when two or more individuals occupied the same space at the same time and exchanged and revised ideas. There is a well-known saying, “In a room full of smart people, the smartest person is the room!” Now, with today’s current technology, there are no boundaries of time or space restricting collaboration. The ability we have to connect and work collaboratively, anytime from anywhere, has elevated collaboration from a limited mode of learning to a more prominent position. Benefiting by various applications, the technology we use for connecting people digitally and virtually has imparted to collaboration the label of “connected learning.”

Social media supplies many tools for educators to use in order to make and store their connections with other educators and thought leaders. This storage of connected educators can be accessed and used to personalize learning for any educator. The connected colleagues can serve as resources using face-to-face meetings on Skype, or share their knowledge and links to ideas, websites, blogs, videos, podcasts, white papers, webinars, and educational software programs, such as Google Hangouts, Shindig, or BlackBoard. This network of colleagues is referred to as a PLN or Personal/Professional Learning Network. It enables an individual to contact sources, specifically selected colleagues, to individualize personal learning.

The term PLC refers to a Personal Learning Community, usually formed with a closed community within a school, or a district, or a community of people with a common interest. It is not open to the public, since the applications used for collaboration restrict access to specific people. Educators with access to PLCs may also maintain PLNs.

Although many applications of social media are used to connect people or groups, the backbone of most PLNs relies on Twitter, an online social networking and microblogging service. This site is specifically designed to deliver short messages of 140 characters that can carry links, or addresses (URLs or uniform resource locators) to information. This technology is ideal and indispensable for the needs of educators. Additionally, the ideas shared are

in full view of the public eye, which gives a transparency to education that has never before been available. Ideas are exchanged for their worth and not by who delivers them. An idea is an idea—an idea from a teacher is given the same consideration as one from a superintendent. Consequently, titles of individuals are less important when the ideas are the focus. The term “thought leader” has developed to describe those people who are putting forward new ideas in education. Many authors and lead educators are connected and leading education conversations that they offer as sources to everyone. Access to these authors and leaders is available to anyone who contacts them. The culture of the connected community encourages and embraces the idea of sharing: collaboration is the rule and not the exception. This type of access was not possible a decade ago. Imagine if we had the ability to converse with people like John Dewey, the American philosopher, psychologist, and educational reformer, or Benjamin Bloom, an educational psychologist who made contributions to the classification of educational objectives and to the theory of mastery-learning. The technology of social media has enabled these connections, resulting in what is referred to as *connected learning*. It is collaboration through technology.

Since the authors and thought leaders are often the drivers of ideas, and they are connected, the discussions of connected educators advance those faculty meeting discussions by months or longer. The “Flipped Classroom” and “Bring Your Own Device” were ideas discussed in detail in connected circles long before general educators ever heard of the topics. The very discussions and chats currently taking place in the connected community of educators should be the discussions taking place in faculty and department meetings in schools everywhere, but they seldom are.

The connected aspect of learning also offers support to educators. They explore failures, as much as successes. Teachers are validated and respected, which is very important in the current atmosphere where teachers are often vilified and targeted. With connection, common problems are discussed and solutions that have worked for others are offered, examined, and applied. As part of the learning

process, failures are also analyzed and discussed. Technology provides educators with a means of connecting never before available. Connected educators have the ability to unite a community of educators to evolve the conversation of education that heretofore has been hijacked by politicians and profiteers, no matter how well meaning the intentions of some. Educators need to overcome their resistance to learning about technology and enter into the culture of connected learning in order to be relevant in our technology-driven society—the very world where we are preparing our kids to live. If we expect to better educate our kids for that world, then it is imperative that we first educate their educators.

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