Proactive Professional Development: A Connected Educator

Vanaja Nethi
Nova Southeastern University

Adam Murray
Miyazaki International College

Reference Data:

Educators realize that they no longer have to wait for professional development opportunities. Although the idea of professional networking is not new to educators, advances in web technologies such as blogs, learning platforms, and social networks have enabled educators to form larger and more useful networks that would have been inconceivable even a decade ago. With these networks, called Professional Learning Networks, or PLNs, educators are able not only to find cutting edge information and resources but also to learn about opportunities for collaboration and professional development. This paper briefly describes PLNs and gives an overview of how educators in higher education are using Web 2.0 tools for professional development. A number of popular components that are used to construct PLNs are highlighted, along with specific examples. The paper concludes with practical suggestions and a list of resources that can be used when starting a PLN.

　教育者はもう専門的な能力の開発機会を待つ必要がない。専門家同士のネットワーク作りは新しくはないが、ウェブテクノロジー（ブログ、学習プラットフォーム、ソーシャル（社会的な）ネットワーク）の進歩は、教育者が更に大きくそして以前より有効な10年前には思いもよらないほどのネットワークを作ることを可能にしている。これらのネットワークは、プロフェッショナル学習ネットワーク（PLNs）と呼ばれる。これらにより教育者は最先端の情報、教材、および授業計画を見つけることができる。そしてまた、相互協力、専門的な能力の開発のための機会について学ぶことができる。本稿ではPLNsを説明し、高等教育の教育者が、どのように専門的な能力の開発をWeb 2.0で行うかという概要についても述べる。PLNの構成に使われる人気のあるいくつかの構成要素に焦点を当て、PLNsの具体例と共に示す。最後に、PLNを始める時に使える実用的な提案と教材のリストを提供する。

GENERALLY, FACULTY in higher education are keenly aware of the needs for continuous learning and for updating their knowledge and skillsets. To do this, it is necessary to be proactive in seeking out a variety of professional development opportunities. For example, educators can join professional organizations and participate in conferences and professional development talks, seminars, and workshops. This allows them to meet old friends and make new ones—people they can network with, bounce ideas off, and learn new things from. This contact is critical to prevent stagnation or boredom from creeping in.

However, how often do foreign language educators get opportunities to interact like this? The cost and the time away from teaching and other work-related duties make this a rather measured indulgence. Therefore, teachers need to find other ways to keep current and refreshed in the field in order to ensure that they teach in ways that keep their students excited and engaged. A proactive

educator can be engaged in continuous learning through various means, particularly those made possible via advances in technology called networking tools. By using these tools, an educator can set up his or her own professional learning network.

Professional Learning Networks and Professional Development

There is no clear, single definition of a Professional Learning Network (PLN). However, most definitions do have common elements. Trust (2012) describes a PLN as the connections and resources used for informal learning, collaboration, and the exchange of knowledge and ideas. A PLN can be used to locate resources and lesson plans, learn about technology (Klingen-Smith, 2009), or communicate with colleagues (Sakamoto, 2012). Advances in the World Wide Web, particularly what are referred to as Web 2.0 technologies, which "allow people to create their own web content (user-generated content)" (Duckworth, 2015), have made the Internet much more dynamic. Instead of only being consumers of content, it is now much easier for people to produce and share content. Also, Web 2.0 allows users to interact and collaborate with each other. In particular, social media, wikis, podcasts, and blogs have completely revolutionized the way that professionals, including foreign language educators, can continue professional development. Instead of relying on institutionally sponsored professional development sessions, they have a variety of options available, which makes a PLN, "a popular alternative to conventional models of professional development" (Visser, Evering, & Barrett, 2014, p. 396). To a great extent, individuals now have far more autonomy and flexibility, along with a range of strategies to choose from, when pursuing their professional development.
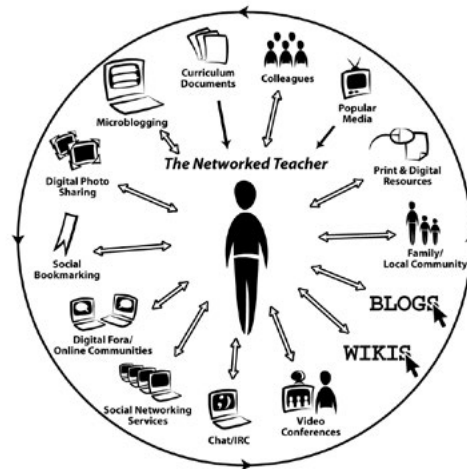

Figure 1. The networked teacher (Couros, 2008). Creative Commons license (BY-NC-SA).

In 2006, Couros introduced the idea of "The Networked Teacher". As Figure 1 shows, the networked teacher has many resources at his or her disposal. For some, the sheer number of options available can be overwhelming, especially for those who are considering starting or have just started a PLN.

Being a networked teacher includes both low-tech and high-tech tools. Although many may not consider it to be networking, most educators do not work in isolation at their institutions. For example, shared curriculum documents such as syllabi and grading rubrics can serve as the basis for informal discussions among colleagues on various aspects of their teaching. Other low-tech sources for interaction are family and the general community. Print resources such as *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, *Education Week*, *THE*

Journal and online sources like Inside Higher Ed can be excellent sources of news and information. Depending on the institution, there may also be additional print resources, as well as institutional access to a variety of academic journals.

Clearly, however, the majority of the tools shown in Figure 1 are technology enabled. Some of these tools, such as video conferencing, have been available for decades, but advances in Internet technology, particularly software such as Skype, have made teleconferencing available to anyone with a device connected to the Internet. Also Web 2.0 tools such as chat/IRC (Internet Relay Chat) and microblogging (e.g., Twitter) have made it possible to communicate synchronously. Tools such as blogs, forums, and social networking (e.g., Facebook) aid in the formation and maintenance of online communities. Finally, digital photo sharing, social bookmarking, and wikis make it possible to share resources. As these technology-enabled communication tools become more and more ubiquitous, it is easier for educators to start PLNs.

Technology-Enabled Resources Used by Higher Education Faculty

In 2013, Pearson Learning Solutions and the Babson Survey Research Group conducted the *Social Media in Higher Education Survey* (Seaman & Tinti-Kane, 2013), which investigated how and to what extent American university faculty members utilize social media. To be specific, the study focused on only the most well-known online sites and technology-enabled tools: Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, wikis, blogs, and podcasts. The study sample of 7,969 participants was representative of higher education faculty in the United States across the various disciplines and age groups. LinkedIn, the largest networking site with 300 million registered users, was the resource most used by 32.8% of university educators. Blogs and wikis (25.3%) and Facebook (23.4%) followed closely and to a lesser extent, podcasts (14.3%) and Twitter (9.4%) were used. 70% of the participants reported using the technology resources for personal use, as compared to 55% for professional use, and only 40% used it in their teaching. We infer "professional use" as being resources used for faculty professional growth and networking. The findings imply that some faculty members may have the technical skills, but lack the knowledge of specific technology-enabled resources to start their own PLNs.

Formal and Informal Branches in a PLN

Advances in technology and innovative technology-enabled learning opportunities have changed what a networked educator's PLN looks like. Instead of limiting a PLN to only technology-enabled resources (or social media as in the Pearson study), it can be argued that an effective PLN should have a balance of both informal and formal elements. Figure 2 shows *The Connected Educator 2.0,* which is the authors' revised version of Couros's *The Networked Teacher* (2008). On the left side are the five informal components: (a) LinkedIn, (b) Academia.edu, (c) Facebook, (d) Twitter, and (e) Blogs, wikis, podcasts, and YouTube. These are informal because the educator can use them when and as needed and will not earn any form of recognition or certification for mastery of these tools. On the right side are the formal components: innovative technology-enabled learning opportunities for which the connected educator will receive some form of recognition or certification. MOOCs or Massive Open Online Courses and a myriad of fully online or blended education degree programs fall into this category. Unlike the informal tools, MOOCs and continuing education programs have defined starting and ending dates, require sustained time commitments and, sometimes, financial commitments over a period of time and will provide some form of certification upon completion.
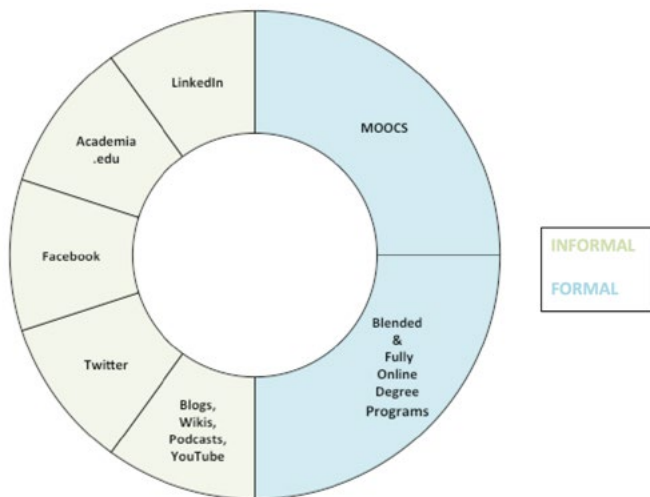
Figure 2. The connected educator 2.0.

Professional Networking

LinkedIn is the world's largest professional networking website with more than 300 million users. It can be used to find jobs and business opportunities. Each user makes a profile, which resembles a résumé, with sections on education and work history. Based on the information in the profile, the site will inform the user of which current and past colleagues are members of the site. These recommended users can then be selected to form a network. In addition, LinkedIn provides a platform for directly communicating with other like-minded professionals in the same field.

For example, there are numerous online communities for educators such as the EFL-English as a Foreign Language community (http://www.linkedin.com/groups/EFL-ENGLISH-AS-FOREIGN-LANGUAGE-761057), which currently has over 57,000 members, and ELT Professionals Around the World (https://www.linkedin.com/groups/ELT-Professionals-Around-World-3460329). For language educators in Japan, the JALT group (https://www.linkedin.com/groups/JALT-Japan-Association-Language-Teaching-99764) may be a useful group. In each of these groups, members can start and participate in discussions on a wide range of relevant topics.

Another networking community is Academia.edu (https://www.academia.edu/). As the name suggests, Academia.edu is a site specifically intended for educators and researchers. Like LinkedIn, educators can establish an online professional presence by uploading their curriculum vitae. In only a few minutes, a basic profile can be set up with professional affiliation(s) and research interests. Also, academic papers and conference handouts can be uploaded and labeled with keywords (called research interests), so that the research can be found by educators and researchers around the world. Like LinkedIn, connections can be made with other users who have Academia accounts. When a user logs into the site, a newsfeed of the activities of the people followed is generated. In addition to the updates, users are notified when papers that have been marked with keywords that match their expressed research interests are uploaded to the site. To give an idea of the scope of this website, there are over 47,000 educators who have expressed a research interest in second language education and links to over 4,000 documents.

Although many people see Facebook as a site for personal networking with friends and family, it is not limited to that. Like LinkedIn, Facebook has open and closed groups, which can be an easy and effective way to expand a PLN. For example, the JALT-CALL Special Interest Group has a public group in which CALL-related news, information, and resources are shared. Other groups are closed such as the TESL (Teaching English as a Second Language) group that requires approval from one of the group administrators to join. These groups can range in size from hundreds (English Teachers in Japan) to thousands (TESL-EJ: Teaching English as a Second or Foreign Language).

Online Communities

Another way to become a member of the global audience is to participate in online communities. In addition to the public and closed groups on Facebook, there are websites such as Ning.com that are dedicated to hosting online communities. Of particular interest for those who wish to start or expand their PLN is The Educator's PLN (http://edupln.com/), a community of educators with more than 17,000 members around the world.

Twitter

Unfortunately, many blogs are updated infrequently. For more timely information, microblogging (Twitter) is a popular way for educators to share information and resources. As of April 2015, there were approximately 288 million active Twitter users (About Twitter, n.d.). Twitter is an information network that allows users to send messages, called Tweets, up to 140 characters in length. These messages are accompanied by hashtags such as #elt which make it possible for the writer to find an audience. An easy way to keep abreast of general trends, rather than specific individuals, is to follow a specific hashtag (e.g., #JALT or #elt) on the popular social networks such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and Vine. Without registering for each of the individual networks, it is possible to follow one hashtag on all of the popular social networks with a free account at #tagboard (https://tagboard.com/).

Although messages can be written at any time, near-synchronous conversations, called Twitter chats, also take place. Typically, a Twitter chat is announced in advance and runs for a specified duration of time. For example, #ELTChat hosts a weekly 1-hour discussion every Wednesday on a variety of topics such as feedback, motivation, and grammar (http://eltchat.org/wordpress/).

Another way in which Twitter is used is live tweeting at conferences. Instead of a traditional presentation in which the typical audience is passively listening, live tweeting in the form of back-channeling allows the audience to interact with the presenter and the audience in real time. For example, the presenter can conduct audience polls and audience members can share their thoughts not only with those physically present but also with colleagues around the world.

Despite only 9.4% of educators in higher education using Twitter for professional development (Seaman & Tinti-Kane, 2013), researchers have found that Twitter could be a useful tool for professional development. The top five ways K-16 educators used Twitter were (a) resource sharing/acquiring (96%), (b) collaboration (86%), (c) networking (79%), (d) Twitter chats (73%), and (e) back-channeling (30%) (Carpenter & Krutka, 2014). K-12 educators also use Twitter primarily for professional development and to discuss classroom practice (Visser et al., 2014).

Blogs

There are many useful blogs that are written by and for educators. Unlike popular education websites such as The Chronicle of Higher Education and Inside Higher Ed, most education blogs are maintained by individuals. For this reason, it can be difficult to find good blogs that are updated regularly. One excellent source for finding quality education blogs is Teach100 (http://teach.com/teach100), a daily ranking of education-related blogs hosted by the University of Southern California. As of January 2015, 810 blogs were ranked using an aggregate score consisting of four components: (a) social (40%), (b) activity (20%), (c) authority (20%), and (d) teach score (20%).

Wikis, Podcasts, YouTube

Most educators are probably familiar with wikis, websites that allow the users to add, delete, and edit content. Because the focus of foreign language educators has been on the use of wikis for classroom use rather than on the sharing of resources and professional

development, wikis for teachers have not become popular. With the exception of *TEFLpedia* (http://www.teflpedia.com/), there seems to be a noticeable absence of specialized wikis.

Although it seems that the popularity of podcasts has waned in recent years, there are still relevant podcasts for language educators; however, it can be difficult to locate them. Apple's podcast directory in iTunes has a large directory of both audio and video podcasts. For example, *Two Teachers Talking* and *TEFLology: 'Teflologists' Discussing TEFL* may be of interest to language educators in Japan.

YouTube, the enormous video-sharing website, has an education channel that features the most popular educational videos on the site (https://www.youtube.com/education). To make it user friendly, it is subdivided into subchannels: primary & secondary education, university, and lifelong learning.

MOOCs

Massive Open Online Courses, or MOOCs, are a relatively recent phenomenon resulting from advances in technology and online instruction. MOOC providers offer a wide range of online courses for free. These are usually short courses, ranging from a few weeks to a few months, for which certificates are awarded upon successful completion. However, these courses are not credit bearing and do not lead to a formal university degree. Two well-known MOOC providers, Coursera (https://www.coursera.org/) and EdX (https://www.edx.org/), offer courses such as *University Teaching 101*, *Assessing and Teaching of 21st Century Skills*, *Teaching Character and Creating Positive Classrooms*, and even specific courses for second and foreign language educators such as *Shaping the Way We Teach English.* MOOCs have tremendous potential for focused, needs-based professional growth of educators but it is suspected that, given the discipline and commitment necessary to successfully complete these courses, they are currently underutilized for this purpose. Nethi and Murray (2014) provided a general description of MOOCs along with specific examples for language learning and teaching.

Blended and Fully Online Doctoral Programs

Faculty in higher education who have not achieved a terminal degree do at some point explore doctoral programs as a route to professional advancement. Recent advances in technology and online instruction have led to not only fully online doctoral programs but also innovative blended programs that combine online and onsite instruction for effective learning. For example, Nova Southeastern University offers a blended Doctor of Education (http://www.fischlerschool.nova.edu/) that provides higher education faculty residing in Asia with a flexible option to earn a doctorate while working full-time. Pursuing a doctoral degree requires a much longer commitment in terms of time and a substantial financial outlay. However, those who enter a doctoral degree program will agree that it quickly becomes a critical component of their PLN as it provides them with invaluable resources, knowledge, skills, and contacts for their professional growth.

A Roadmap to Establishing Your Digital Footprint—Starting Your PLN

The first step in starting a PLN is to establish an online presence (for specifics, refer to the Appendix for useful resources and how-to guides). Depending on the user's level of computer skills, there are several ways that this can be done, such as creating a professional homepage. However, the easiest and quickest way is to register on a professional networking site such as Academia.edu.

The next step is to become aware of conversations between educators with similar teaching and research interests. In addition to reading the current news stories on the education websites, a good starting point is to regularly read highly ranked blogs on the Teach100 website. Also, join several online communities such as LinkedIn and Facebook. A final way to keep abreast of the field is to follow hashtags of interest on Twitter.

The next step is to become an active participant in the discussions. Instead of being a consumer who passively reads blog postings and discussion threads in the online communities, begin participating by leaving comments and asking and answering questions. At some point, the need or desire to initiate conversations may arise. Naturally, it is possible to create new discussion threads in existing online communities. Unfortunately, over time, discussion threads can become difficult to locate or even be deleted by community administrators. For this reason, an educator may be interested in maintaining a professional blog, which requires larger amounts of effort and commitment. Fortunately, there are a number of free hosting sites available that are suitable when first starting out, such as Blogger (https://www.blogger.com/) and Word-press.com (https://wordpress.com/). Another alternative platform is Edublogs (https://edublogs.org/), which has directories that will help bloggers find their audience.

Conclusion

In this paper we introduced our model of The Networked Educator 2.0, which has evolved from Couros's (2008) model. We believe that the rapid advances in technology and online instruction should be harnessed to enable higher education faculty today to build sophisticated PLNs comprising of both formal and informal elements. And there is a need for empirical research to explore the extent and type of PLNs of faculty in different disciplines, for example among foreign language educators. It would also be interesting to replicate the 2013 Seaman and Tinti-Kane study in countries outside the US.

Bio Data

Vanaja Nethi (PhD, Cornell) is Program Professor/Regional Liaison for Asia with the Abraham S. Fischler School of Education, Nova Southeastern University in Florida, USA. She can be reached at <nethi@nova.edu>.

Adam Murray teaches at Miyazaki International College. He recently completed his EdD with a specialization in Instructional Technology & Distance Education at Nova Southeastern University. His research interests are listening instruction, materials development, and assessment. He can be reached at <amurray@edu.miyazaki-mic.ac.jp>.

References

About Twitter. (n.d.). Retrieved from https://about.twitter.com/company

Carpenter, J. P., & Krutka, D. G. (2014). How and why educators use Twitter: A survey of the field. *Journal of Research on Technology in Education, 46*(4), 414-434. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15391523. 2014.925701

Couros, A. (2006). *Examining the open movement: Possibilities and implications for education* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Regina). Retrieved from http://www.scribd.com/doc/3363/Dissertation-Couros-FINAL-06-Web-Version

Couros, A. (2008). *Networked teacher diagram—Update*. Retrieved from https://www.flickr.com/photos/courosa/2922421696/

Duckworth, S. (2015, March). *Social media and Web 2.0 tools in the FSL class*. Paper presented at the meeting of World Congress of Modern Languages, Niagara Falls, Canada.

Klingen-Smith, K. (2009). PLN: Your personal learning network made easy. Retrieved from https://onceateacher.wordpress.com/2009/05/05/pln-your-personal-learning-network-made- easy

Nethi, V., & Murray, A. (2014). Potential for MOOCs in foreign language teaching. In N. Sonda & A. Krause (Eds.), *JALT2013 Conference Proceedings* (pp. 659-667). Tokyo: JALT.

Sakamoto, B. (2012). What is a PLN, anyway? [blog]. Retrieved from http://www.teachingvillage.org/2012/01/03/what-is-a-pln-anyway/

Seaman, J., & Tinti-Kane, H. (2013). Social media for teaching and learning. Retrieved from www.pearsonlearningsolutions.com/higher-education/social-media-survey.php

Trust, T. (2012). Professional learning networks designed for teacher learning. *Journal of Digital Learning in Teacher Education, 28*(4), 133-138.

Visser, R. D., Evering, L. & Barrett, D. E. (2014). #TwitterforTeachers: The implications of Twitter as a self-directed professional development tool for K-12 teachers, *Journal of Research on Technology in Education, 46*(4), 396-413. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15391523.2014.925694

Appendix

Some Useful Resources for Starting or Expanding a PLN

Blogs

Sources for recent news:

- The Chronicle of Higher Education (http://chronicle.com/section/Home/5)
- Inside Higher Ed (https://www.insidehighered.com/)
- Rankings of education-related blogs:
- Teach100 (http://teach.com/teach100)
- Edublog Awards (http://edublogawards.com/)

Communities

The Educator's PLN (http://edupln.ning.com/)

EFL Classroom 2.0 (http://community.eflclassroom.com/)

Classroom 2.0 (http://www.classroom20.com/)

How-to Guides

- The Beginner's Guide to LinkendIn (http://mashable.com/2012/05/23/linkedin-beginners/)—A detailed guide with screenshots that explains how to set up a LinkedIn account.
- Edublogs Teacher Challenge (http://teacherchallenge.edublogs.org/pln-challenge-1-what-the-heck-is-a-pln/)—This guide covers Twitter, Twitter Chats, Blogs, Curation Tools (e.g., Diigo, Evernote, Scoop.it etc), Webinars, and communities (e.g., Classroom 2.0).
- Make a profile on Academia.edu (http://blog.impactstory.org/impact-challenge-day-1-academia-edu/)—A blog posting with screenshots showing the basics of Academia.edu.
- Teacher's Guide To Twitter (http://www.edudemic.com/guides/guide-to-twitter/)—A thorough guide with 100 tips for using Twitter for professional development and in classes. Also includes a list of popular hashtags for second and foreign language educators.

MOOCs

These are some of the most popular providers with a wide range of offerings from well-known institutions around the world:

- Coursera (928 courses) (https://www.coursera.org/)
- EdX (410 courses) (https://www.edx.org/)
- FutureLearn (113) (https://www.futurelearn.com/)
- OpenLearning (21) (https://www.openlearning.com/)
- Class Central (https://www.class-central.com/)
- An excellent database for locating MOOCs from more than 40 MOOC providers.

Podcasts

These are some regularly updated offerings available on iTunes:

- TedTalks Education
- Trends & Issues in Instructional Design, Educational Technology, and Learning Sciences

For language educators in Japan, these Japan-based podcasts may be of interest:

- *Two Teachers Talking* (http://twoteacherstalking.com/)

- *TEFLology: 'Teflologists' discussing TEFL* (http://teflology.libsyn. com/)

Wikis

- *Teflpedia* (http://teflpedia.com/)