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## **Lurking and Linking: How I Built My Virtual Learning Network**

The National School Board Association's annual Technology and Learning Conference was set to begin in Nashville, and I was downcast. The event would take place just hours from my home in East Tennessee and would feature a week-long slate of speeches and break-out sessions with experts in digital learning, including my favorite edublogger, Will Richardson, but I was unable to attend due to a lack of time, finances, and credentials. (The conference is intended for technology directors, superintendents, school board members, district administrators, principals, and lead teachers.)

I was somewhat encouraged by the fact that, following his breakfast keynote on a Wednesday morning, Richardson would be available for a live one-hour chat session at the NSBA web site. Anyone in the world could log on and participate. I attended the chat in hopes of asking a question about developing school policies that encourage and facilitate use of web-based technologies by teachers and students. It was a question I was researching as part of my master's coursework in instructional technology at the University of Tennessee-Knoxville. In between questions from a Connecticut news reporter and a parent in California, I was able to submit my query along with a follow-up question, both of which Richardson responded to thoughtfully, even providing a URL address for me to continue my research.

At the end of the online discussion, as I logged off and shut down my computer, I found myself wondering:

- A) If I had been present that morning to hear Richardson's keynote speech in person, would I have even had the opportunity to address questions directly to him?

B) And, if so, would I have had the courage to do it?

I tried to picture myself seated in a crowded hotel ballroom, elbow to elbow with superintendents, principals, and school board officials, and I concluded that I would *not* have felt comfortable drawing that sort of attention to myself. While it would have been a treat to listen to Richardson's prepared remarks about the impact of web-based technologies on teaching and learning, my virtual encounter with him in the NSBA chatroom was far more gratifying. It involved an unrivaled degree of intimacy and interaction, one that could never be matched in a traditional information delivery format such as a lecture, and I received the precise answers I sought on a specific topic that was highly relevant to me.

### **Welcome to Teacher Professional Development 2.0!**

My experience in the NSBA chat room exemplifies three basic principles of online learning, what Downes (2007) has termed "interaction, usability, and relevance." The best virtual environments are simple, consistent, and accessible, facilitating "just in time" learning among communities of users who interact and communicate with each other on topics they deeply care about. These traits are not typical of structured online courses, traditional web sites, and formalized learning through the Internet. (They don't describe many physical learning environments, for that matter!) These traits emerge when the learner, not the content, is the center of the network.

Typically, learner-centered networks have depended upon email, electronic bulletin boards, and chat rooms, but that is all changing. A recent explosion of technological innovation is radically transforming personal learning environments and school-based learning communities. This new generation of information and communication technologies, sometimes referred to as "21<sup>st</sup> century tools," "the read/write web," "web-based tools," or "Web 2.0," is currently being explored as an area that affords much

promise for collaboration and community building among teachers and students alike. In *Blogs, Wikis, Podcasts, and Other Powerful Web Tools for Classrooms*, Richardson (2006) defined the new playing field:

*Creating content of all shapes and sizes is getting easier and easier. High-bandwidth Internet access and expanded computer memory and storage continue to grow, and developers are creating tools to publish text or photos or video or whatever else easily to the Web. We're in the midst of an explosion of technologies that will continue to remake the Web into the community space [Internet pioneer] Berners-Lee originally envisioned (p. 2).*

Downes, on the other hand, has a slightly different take on the new Web: "Web 2.0 is not about specific technology applications. Web 2.0 is rather about how we organize the web and approach the web."

However you define it, the emergence of Web 2.0 has amplified interaction, usability, and relevance in online learning situations, promising not only to enhance but to dramatically alter how learners of all ages and backgrounds manage their own social and intellectual development. Moreover, for teachers like me, Web 2.0 offers an alternative to time-intensive, cost-prohibitive professional development training delivered by high-priced experts. It has been my experience in the past that whenever teacher professional development (PD) and technology converge, the result can be quite anxiety-inducing. Numerous questions arise, such as "When?", "Where?", "How?", "How much?", and "At what cost?" Yet, the more I study Web 2.0 tools, the more I realize the questions, at least as they relate to traditional PD, are fading into the periphery. The new web tools simply do not require yesterday's PD model in order to achieve mastery.

The new equation for PD might look something like this:

**time + freedom - (expensive, sit-and-get training delivered by experts) = PD 2.0**

For some time now, the stage has been set for PD 2.0. Like the best classroom teachers, PD

providers have long espoused contextualized, learner-centered approaches. Here are the 2001 revised "context standards" for staff development set forth by the National Staff Development Council:

- Organizes adults into learning communities whose goals are aligned with those of the school and district.
- Requires skillful school and district leaders who guide continuous instructional improvement.
- Requires resources to support adult learning and collaboration.

The NSDC standards dovetail beautifully with web-based technologies, such as podcasts, blogs, social networks, and wikis. In their 2007 K-12 Online Conference presentation, "Building a Yardstick for PD Success," Peters and Jansen essentially took the context standards and made them "sticky," by suggesting an alternative PD model built on the keywords **focus**, **friends**, and **feel**. In today's environment, it is possible for teachers to receive PD with a **focus** on their individual needs and the goals of their school, delivered by their **friends** and colleagues, in an atmosphere where they **feel** safe and comfortable to experiment on their own time. (Consider again my fruitful, online interaction with Will Richardson juxtaposed with the image of his keynote speech delivered in a large and impersonal hotel ballroom.)

PD 2.0 is accessible and affordable and supports democracy of voice and collective, grassroots action, qualities that simply cannot be matched by traditional, formal learning models. Yet, a degree of debate is occurring among educational technologists about its implementation. Some advocate for safe places where teachers can practice with new tools and teaching concepts, make and learn from mistakes, share with colleagues, and build out personal learning networks. That is largely the intent of PD web sites like Tapped In (<http://tappedin.org/tappedin/>) and Classroom 2.0 (<http://classroom20.ning.com/>). In his

NSBA–sponsored chat Richardson (2007a) described this self–directed approach as follows:

*First and foremost, I would suggest that you help teachers understand the uses of these tools in their own learning practice. I really believe that until we understand the potentials and pitfalls of these shifts and these tools for ourselves, how they can connect us and transform our own learning, that it's difficult to understand the pedagogies that make their use successful in the classroom. Just as you wouldn't hire a math teacher who couldn't do math, you shouldn't ask teachers who don't use the technologies for themselves to integrate them into their curricula.*

Other leaders in the field of educational technology advocate for a more social–constructivist approach, with teachers learning alongside, and often from, students in the classroom. This is the model developed and promoted by Generation YES, which Generation YES President Sylvia Martinez described in her 2007 K–12 Online presentation, “Changing Assumptions about Technology Professional Development.” According to Martinez, the best technology PD occurs in context (the classroom) and must be accompanied by a pedagogical shift, not just a focus on learning new tools.

I'm in favor of a “both/and” approach, in which the two models are blended together. A teacher can follow a constructivist approach within the school setting among students and colleagues while simultaneously developing and nurturing a personal learning network (PLN) that extends beyond the classroom walls. Each practice would inform and enrich the other. And, unlike physical communities, PLNs remain vital and accessible for educators who find themselves temporarily displaced or removed from practical classroom contexts (like me). As Downes (2007) said, “These tools are your window on the world.”

One thing is for certain: PD 2.0 requires an attitudinal shift regarding technology. Technology must be approached with curiosity and a sense of play. In a 2007 post at his *Connectivism* blog, Siemens called this a “mindset of experimentation,” which dispels the

myth that tech savvy is determined by age, i.e. “digital immigrants” versus “digital natives.” Deep learning through and about technology can occur for individuals of *all* ages provided our efforts are anchored in communities of practice -- classroom communities, collegial communities, virtual communities, or a combination. Without these support networks, we are no better off than members of the younger generation, many of whom Siemens claimed only understand technology at a “utilitarian level.”

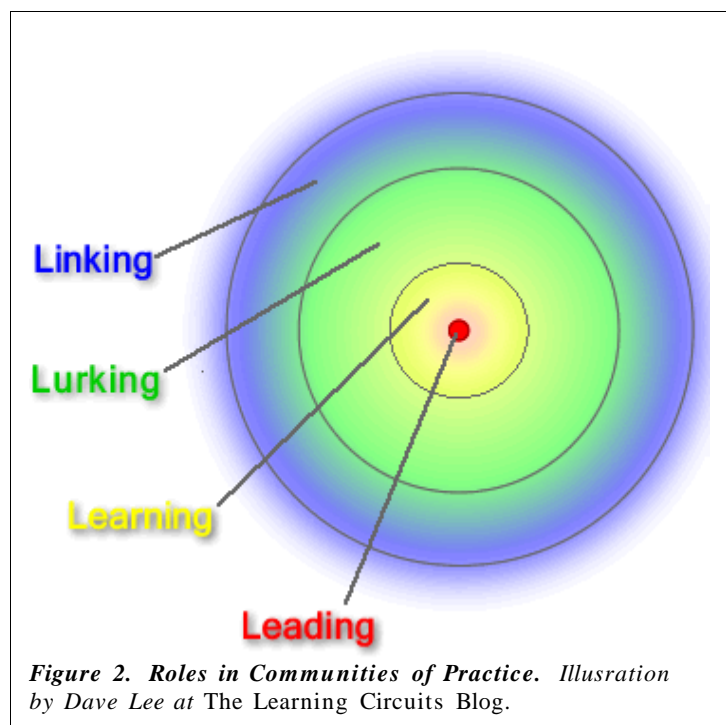
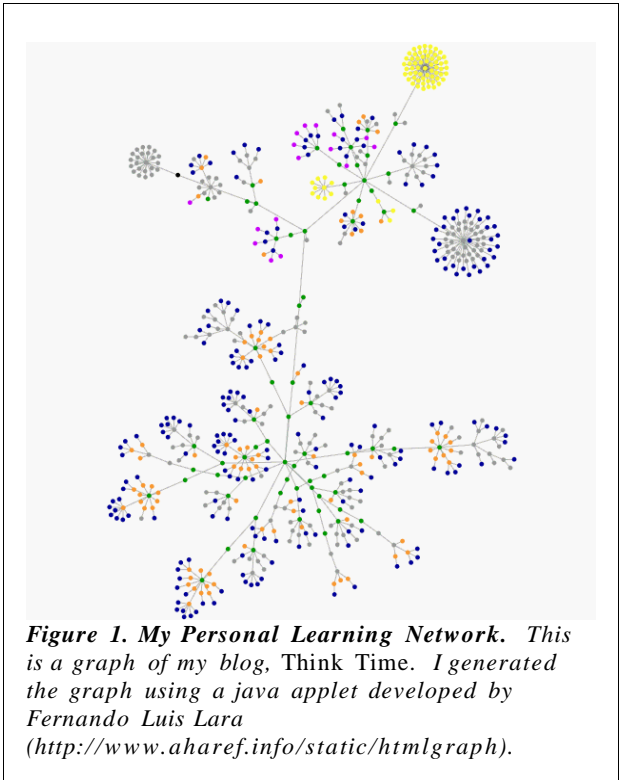
### Building a PLN, Step by Step

A personal learning network (PLN) is the natural outcome of PD 2.0. In some ways a PLN can extend and enrich formalized learning experiences, but more often, a PLN compensates for a lack of access to relevant,

usable learning opportunities when time pressures, limited resources, or physical/geographical boundaries isolate you from a professional learning community.

Personally, I have been richly rewarded by my recent efforts to build my own “interaction network” (Downes, 2007), as I currently do not have a practical classroom context or collegial community in which to bounce off new ideas and to test new skills.

But creating and managing a PLN requires discipline, coordination,



risk-taking, and a whole new set of skills (Downes, 2007; Folkestad, 2007). By “skills” I am not referring to discrete sets of behaviors that lead to mastery of tools and gadgets; those kinds of skills are less and less a concern within Web 2.0, as many of the applications are highly usable and intuitive. I am speaking more of the affective domain -- “soft skills” acquired slowly through numerous synchronous and asynchronous interactions with other learners as you develop your PLN. As opposed to passive book learning where content is at the forefront, “You are the center of your own personal learning network,” Downes said. “To gain from self-directed learning you must be self-directed.”

What exactly does this look like in practice? I never set out to answer that question specifically; in fact, only until very recently was I even cognizant of the term “personal learning network” and how it applied to my activities on the Web over the last several months. Now, as I reflect on my own exploration of web-based technologies, I can clearly see the interactions, usability, and relevance afforded by building a PLN, and I can personally attest to how my PLN has enhanced my growth and development as a teacher/learner.

My recent involvement on the Web mirrors the progression of roles that Lee (2006) labeled “linking, lurking, learning, and leading” in a 2006 article posted at *The Learning Circuits Blog*. (See Figure 2.) Lee's terms describe what participants do in virtual communities. These are not strictly defined roles, and they are not mutually exclusive of one another. In fact, according to Lee, participants can simultaneously perform roles and switch in and out of roles depending on the different topics being discussed within a community. While Lee's model specifically addresses participants in a community, I like how the roles characterize the general “baby steps” that learners walk through as they explore Web 2.0. As a learner attempts each level of interaction, his or her PLN grows and expands. Using my own PLN as an example, I will show you how this works.

## Step 1: Linking

“Linking” is a primary behavior that characterizes first-time visitors who find communities by surfing and exploring. At this stage, the teacher/learner is in a “testing” mode to determine if a community or web site is worth your time and attention. You may bookmark the site, add it to an RSS reader, or link to it from your own site (Lee, 2006), and thus, your PLN is born!

Everyone who uses the Internet is a “linker” to some extent; Web 2.0 just offers some new tools and technologies that make your linking efforts more usable and fruitful. I

became a more thoughtful and deliberate linker when I set up a del.icio.us account and an RSS reader (more on RSS in a moment). Del.icio.us is one of many bookmarking services available on the Web. Web-based bookmarking, or “social bookmarking,” offers several advantages over browser-based bookmarks and is an essential tool for building a PLN. First, you can access these bookmarks from any computer with an Internet connection. Second, a variety of user features allow you to annotate, save, and categorize resources using special keywords called “tags.” You can tag a web page with as many unique identifiers as you see fit. Third, if you select the “share” option, your bookmarks are searchable and viewable by other members in the community.

Social bookmarking involves great potential for sharing and collaboration, making it easy to connect with users who will feed you relevant content much like an optimized



search engine. Richardson (2006) noted, “Suddenly, it's easy to find all sorts of other people who have the same interests or passions as you do. And in doing so, you're creating your own community of researchers that is gathering relevant information for you” (p. 91). At any time, I can click on one of my tags, such as “poetry” or “multimedia” or “censorship,” and browse through the latest sites that others in the del.icio.us community have saved. (See Figure 3.) When I locate a particular blog or personal web site that appeals to my needs and interests, I can check and see if the author has a public del.icio.us account, and I can follow his or her bookmarks as they are updated. Some blog owners take advantage of special sidebar tools that publish a scroll of their del.icio.us bookmarks directly into their blogs. I utilize a built-in del.icio.us feature that automatically sends a daily journal of my bookmarks directly to my blog, inviting my readers to comment on my bookmarks as well as to visit them firsthand. (See Figure 4.)

RSS readers and aggregators are online tools that allow you to subscribe to and read RSS feeds. RSS (“real simple syndication” or “rich site summary”) technology delivers new content directly to you as it is generated at your favorite sites (blogs, wikis, social networks, news services, and so on). Using RSS eliminates the need to continually visit your favorites to check for new content; it's all collected in one place so you never miss an

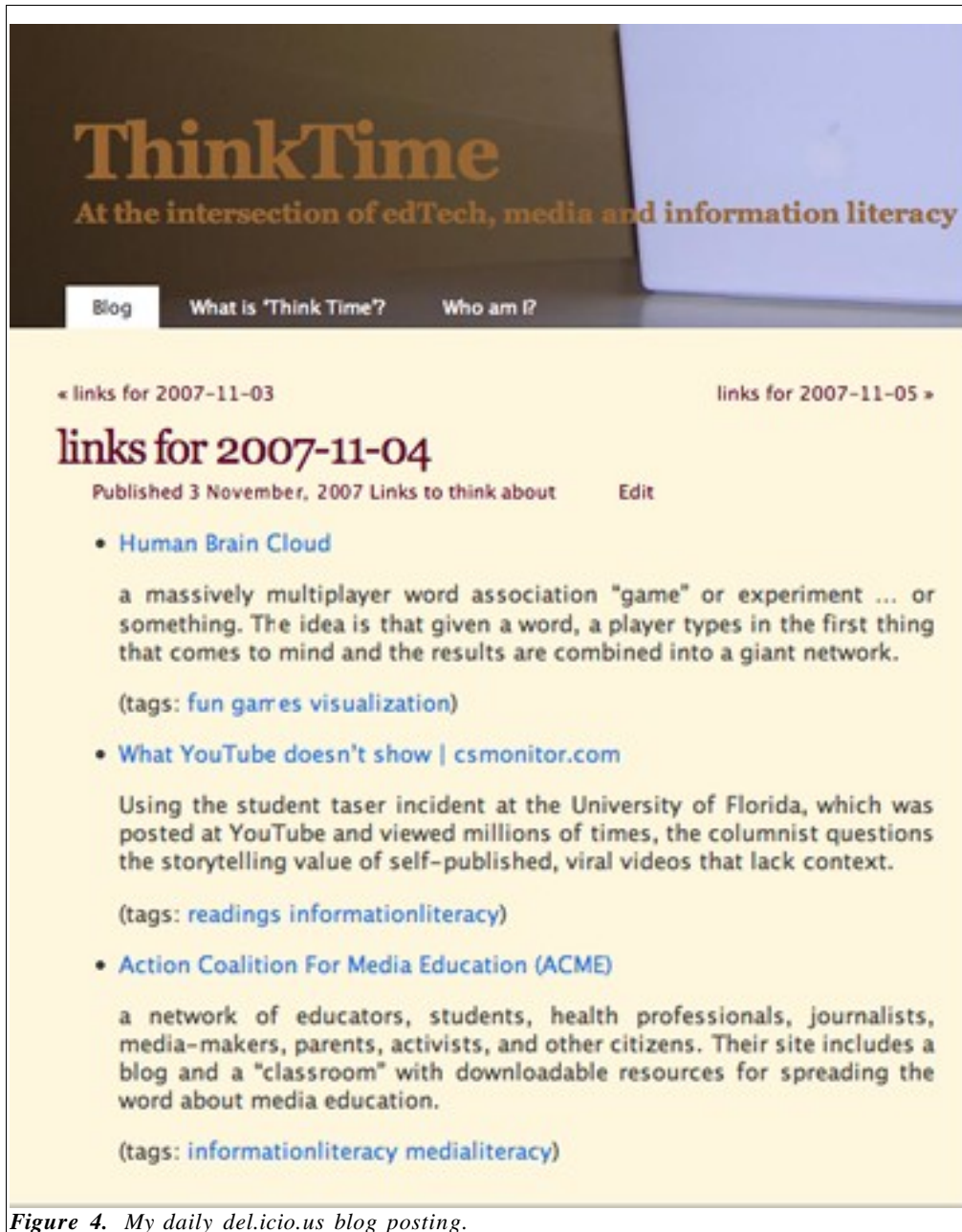


Figure 4. My daily del.icio.us blog posting.

update or breaking development. You can even use RSS to track specific del.icio.us tags.

I chose Google Reader as my aggregator and started with a few subscriptions to various edublogs that I found by conducting a blog search at Google using the term “instructional technology.” (I chose that search term because it is my academic major, but you can choose any term that applies to your personal and professional interests.) Once I

had a few feeds in my reader and began to develop the daily discipline of filtering, deleting, and reading relevant posts, I quickly discovered which blogs to keep, which to drop, and which to add. My favorite blogs all feature blogrolls in the sidebar. A “blogroll” is simply a list of the writer's favorite blogs. If you like a blog, chances are you will like the other blogs listed in the author's blogroll. You will also notice that authors of particular blogs within certain subject areas frequently reference and link to each other, creating an informal learning community. And when you link into one of these blog networks, you essentially become a peripheral member of that community.

To borrow a metaphor from Richardson (2007b), my aggregator became a “textbook” for me when I embarked upon an independent inquiry into computer-mediated mentoring for preservice and inservice teachers. In addition to poring over traditional, “scholarly” resources, I used RSS to channel the best-of-the-best blog posts on the subject. To achieve this, I tweaked my aggregator a bit to regain some much needed focus; I dropped some feeds (if only temporarily) to make room for others by noted scholars and teacher-leaders in the fields of PD, teacher education, and instructional technology. The aggregate was indeed a text to be studied, with the added benefits of being totally topical, customizable, and (the best part) free.

With several ways to organize RSS subscriptions, I wanted to learn more. So this summer I created a personalized Internet home page using Pageflakes, a free service that enables you to collect all your favorite Web content in one place, including email, music, videos, news, weather, calendars, and anything with an RSS feed. Each bit of content you add is called a “flake,” and you can further organize and categorize your flakes by adding tabs to your main page. (See Figure 5.)

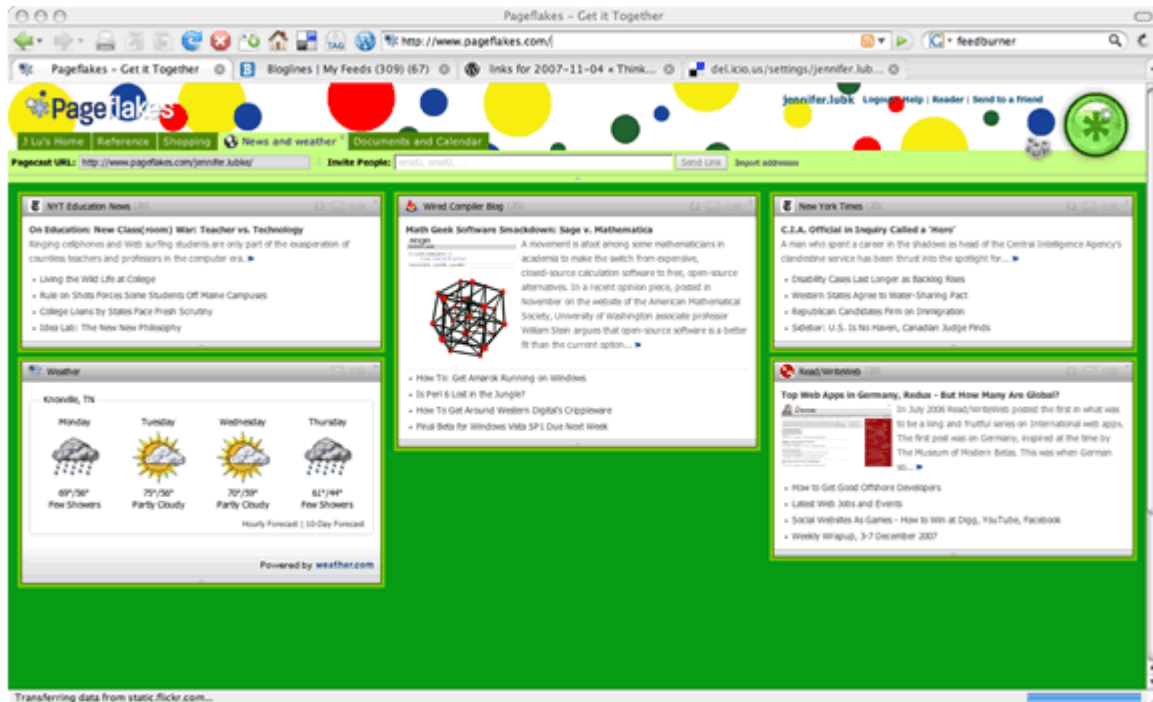


Figure 5. Example of aggregated feeds on a Pageflakes page.

Pageflakes tabs can be added and deleted easily, depending on the particular Web content you are tracking. This feature was especially handy for me during this summer's National Educational Computing Conference (NECC) in Atlanta, which I was unable to attend. For the first time in the history of the conference, organizers assigned a unique RSS feed to each of the 800 different breakout sessions, making it possible for individuals to “attend” virtually. I chose 14 sessions on various topics of interest to me and set up a temporary Pageflakes tab to aggregate all the news and posts generated by conference participants and speakers about those particular sessions.

Linking is an essential first step toward creating your PLN, and RSS and social bookmarking enable the teacher/learner to save, organize, share, and “feed” off links in a thoughtful and deliberate manner. These web-based technologies make it possible to “pull” content that is relevant and usable to you, rather than settle for what people “push” on you (Downes, 2007). They free you to dip into a community's shared knowledge base

as you explore potential nodes to add to your PLN. Richardson (2006) astutely noted how the two tools work in tandem to tame the read/write web: RSS connects you to what others are writing, social bookmarking connects you to what they are reading (p. 91).

## Step 2: Lurking

When you find yourself revisiting a particular site and paying close attention to the activity contained within it, you have officially become a “lurker.” Lurkers compose the largest segment of online communities. They occasionally participate but may not feel

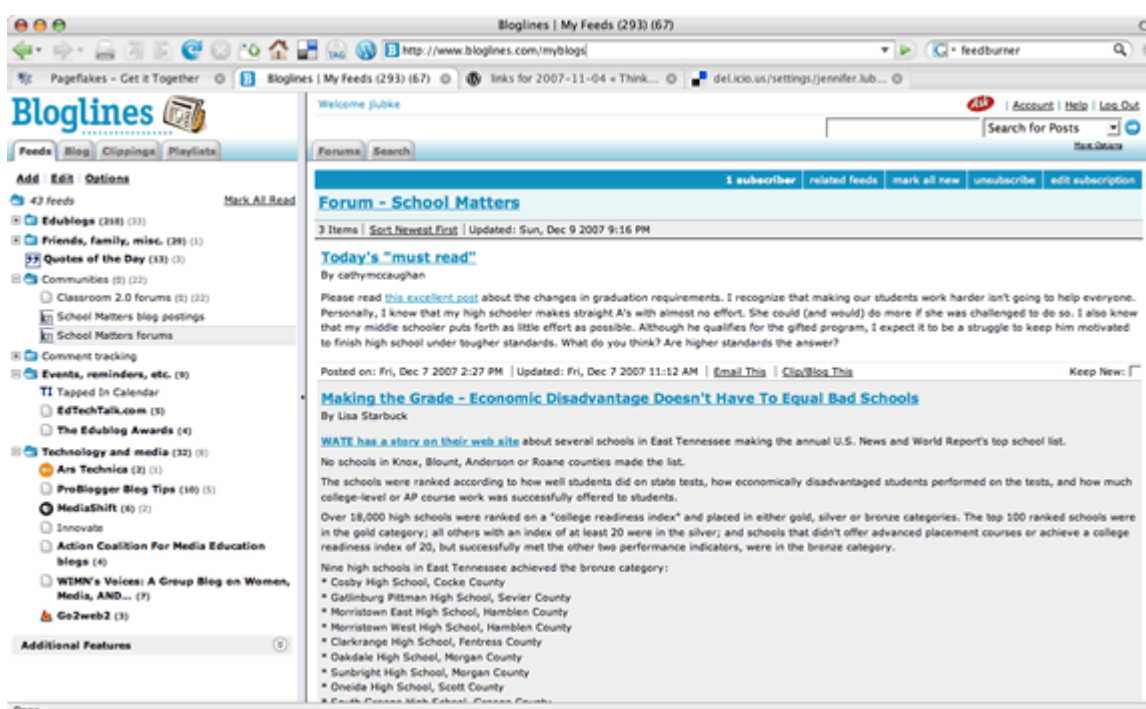


Figure 6. My Bloglines account.

worthy or knowledgeable enough to be regular contributors (Lee, 2006). For me, being a lurker is equivalent to being a “participant observer.” Through lurking I became more aware of important themes, questions, and debates that affected my discipline (instructional technology), I observed the norms and conventions of online communities, I learned the craft of blog authorship, and my PLN became more refined and reflective.

I have experimented with two RSS aggregators, Google Reader and Bloglines, and

both in my estimation are highly usable and friendly tools. I currently use Bloglines to subscribe to 42 blogs, forums, news groups, and calendar feeds. (Forum feeds keep me notified of new discussions at the various online communities in which I belong, and the calendar feeds alert me to upcoming events, chats, and discussions at places like Tapped In and EdTechTalk.) The number of feeds changes almost weekly as I drop and add subscriptions. Most are grouped in three major folders: edublogs, online communities, and media/technology. (See Figure 6.) Feeds that I read regularly include *Dangerously Irrelevant* by Dr. Scott McLeod, *Weblogg-ed* by Will Richardson, and *Ars Technica*, a group blog about technology.

Downes (2006) suggested that a PLN should become integrated into the learner's daily habits and discipline. You must make it a priority to manage information as it flows in and out of your network. Just as reading email is essential to managing a professional and personal life, daily reading and commenting on blogs is essential to growing and developing a PLN. I browse my Bloglines account every time I log into check my webmail (both are integrated into my PageFlakes home page). If you carry even a few dozen subscriptions in your RSS aggregator, it is possible to amass more than a hundred posts in a matter of days. That's why it is crucial to develop your ability to filter.

"Filtering" is the practice of scanning content to determine if it is relevant and usable to you at that very moment. If it is not, delete it. Most web content of value is easy enough to locate and retrieve should you change your mind later (Downes, 2007). Personally, when I stumble upon something interesting in my RSS reader that I don't have time to digest on the spot, I tag it with the keyword "read" and save it in del.icio.us.

After a few weeks or perhaps a month of reading, commenting, tagging, and lurking around others' blogs, you will probably get the itch to start your own blog. Such was the case for me. More than likely your blog will become the hub of your PLN. A blog can serve as a personal home page and, depending on which blog platform you choose, can also

function as a full-fledged web site with multiple page tabs for sorting and organizing your content. What sets a blog apart from traditional web page authoring is the amazingly flat learning curve, which Richardson (2006) described when he wrote:

. . . I will never forget the first time I posted my opinion, and the first time someone responded to it. There was something really powerful about *easily* being able to share resources and ideas with a Web *audience* that was willing to share back what they thought about those ideas. . . . Writing to the Web is easy. And there is an audience for my ideas. Those two concepts are at the core of why I think Weblogs have such huge potential in an educational setting (p. 17).

All I can say is after less than 30 minutes at Blogspot.com, I was up and running with a functional, interactive, highly customizable publishing space of my own. No specialized training, no expensive software, and no frantic calls to tech support. I consider the launch of my first edublog, *Analog Girl in a Digital World*, to be one of the most transformative moments in my journey as a teacher/learner. (I later relocated, redesigned, and renamed my blog at Wordpress.com because I wanted to learn a new blog platform and take advantage of some unique features and tools available through the Wordpress application.) (See Figure 7.)



Figure 7. My Wordpress blog, ThinkTime, located at <http://thinktime.wordpress.com/>

My plunge into the world of blogs has not been completely devoid of questions and doubts. For me, what blogs lack in technical complexity, they make up for in the kinds of practical and pedagogical concerns they raise for the teacher/learner. Here are some issues I still struggle with after nearly ten months in the edublogosphere:

- Should I maintain anonymity, cultivate an online personality, or just be myself?
- In addition to being a university student, I am also a parent, a part-time employee at a nonprofit with deep ties to our local school system, and a former employee of said school system: should there be a disclaimer on my blog in which I claim my opinion as my own and no one else's?
- Would my learning improve if I spent less time on my personal blog and more time interacting with users in communal spaces, such as high-traffic discussion forums and social networks?

Despite these questions, which I haven't yet satisfactorily answered for myself, I view my blog as a keystone of my PLN. Rather than try to enumerate all the ways a blog can support a PLN, here are three examples drawn from my personal practice:

- I use my blog to test new ideas and to invite response and feedback from potential readers. This is a great way to extend traditional learning experiences that may not offer interactivity or sociability. For example, I

posted an excerpt from an epistemological commentary I wrote about John Dewey for a philosophy in education class. I thought my insights might be interesting to those in the edublog community, and I wanted to get reactions from an audience other than my professor. That blog post generated a short discussion thread in which three visitors to my blog posted comments, and some of the comments challenged my thinking, rather than just rubber stamp it.

- Sometimes a post at another person's blog stimulates a reaction in me that cannot be sufficiently expressed in the form of a comment. In those cases, I compose a lengthier reflection and post it at my blog. When I do this, I credit the author whose original post inspired mine, and I provide a link back to his or her blog.
- A blog enables you to stimulate a dialog or conversation into a situation that lacks interactivity. Downes (2006) termed this a “guerilla tactic.” If no interaction is offered, create your own by writing a blog post and inviting the world to respond. When I was frustrated by an eSchoolNews columnist's dispassionate take on the use of mobile technologies in educational settings, I wanted to contact her or at least post a comment under her column, but the eSchoolNews web site did not offer a means to do so. Instead, I formulated a response at my blog with a link back to the offending column in hopes of engaging the author in a discussion. While she never responded, I did receive a reply from a Colorado educator who said he shared in my frustration over the reluctance of the educational establishment to integrate web-based and mobile technologies in education.

### **Step 3: Learning**

“Learning” is the behavior that characterizes visitors who contribute to a community regularly and who are, in fact, considered “members” of the community (Lee 2006). Within the context of a PLN, this stage signifies a new level of engagement. You are no longer just drawing information out of your network but are actively contributing new content and ideas of your own.

Commenting on others' blogs and publishing your own blog are important first steps in creating and contributing content, but blogs are not the best way to stimulate conversation. Blogs are deeply individualized and provide a space for personal reflection and expression that in the long run may or may not win an audience of readers. To really enter into a two-way conversation with other teacher/learners it is important to add one or two social networks to your PLN.

A social network is a web site that provides its membership with a variety of tools to help them construct personal home pages and locate and connect with other members with similar interests and backgrounds. Common features of social networks include user names, user profiles, original content created by users, and contact lists (often referred to as “friends”). Precursors of social networking include Usenet and bulletin board systems, in which people networked within closed environments that lacked interactivity and visual appeal. The mid-90s ushered in a new wave of web-based social networking sites that members to customize a personal web page and share content such as photos and videos with “friends.” Today, MySpace.com and Facebook.com are perhaps the most famous examples of social hosts networks, with millions of users, but hundreds of small, specialized networks link individuals with specific backgrounds and areas of interest.



Figure 8. The Classroom 2.0 main page, located at <http://classroom2.0.ning.com/>

For the teacher/learner, a carefully selected virtual community/network greatly expands a PLN. Unlike blogs, these communities offer a built-in audience that ensures an

extra layer of transparency and accountability for each member. When you post a question or observation to a high-traffic discussion board or forum, you are more likely to receive prompt feedback than if you were to post it in your blog. (This assumes, of course, that you desire a response. Sometimes, you don't, in which case a blog may be the appropriate medium for you.) Conversations flow and evolve through discussion threads that more closely resemble synchronous dialog than do the comment sections on most blogs. Some threads remain active for days and even weeks, and, depending on the site, these discussions may be tagged and archived so future members can search them for relevant resource material.

I joined Classroom 2.0, a network built on the Ning platform. (See figures 8 and 9.) Classroom 2.0 is open to anyone interested in Web 2.0 and collaborative technologies in education. It is especially intended for beginners who seek a supportive community and a comfortable place to experiment with new web-based tools. Since joining the community, I have engaged in a number of interesting discussion threads with topics ranging from “nature deficit disorder” to video games. I also initiated some discussions on topics pertaining to my own studies. In addition, to build traffic at my personal blog, I have experimented with cross-posting entries at both locations using the built-in blog tool at Classroom 2.0. I only do this when I have a blog post that I think will be of interest to the Classroom 2.0 community.

Most of all, I use Classroom 2.0 as a research tool. For example, when I had to choose a wiki platform for a project, I searched the Classroom 2.0 forum for all discussions tagged “wiki.” I found many posts by educators using wikis in their classroom practice. At Classroom 2.0 people talk openly about their likes, dislikes, successes, and pitfalls. After reading the forums, I narrowed my choices down to two wiki applications and felt much more confident when making my final choice. My first foray into social networking has

been a wholly positive experience because of this amazing virtual professional development community nurtured and maintained by a staff of volunteer moderators.



Figure 9. Example of a Classroom 2.0 personal home page.

#### Step 4: Leading

Lee (2006) defined “leading” as the behavior of individuals who comprise the core of an online community: “Leadership is a matter of commitment and willingness to contribute on a consistent basis.” Within a formal virtual learning community this means coordinating events, facilitating discussions, and drawing in and inducting new members. Often the role of coordinator or organizer is shared among several members within a large community.

But it is also possible to become a leader within your own PLN. This happens when others start taking notice and feeding off of and linking back to your content. Web-based tools such as Technorati and FeedBurner provide blog owners daily statistical summaries, including the number of users who are subscribing to or linking to their site. Some individually authored blogs become so immensely popular they literally serve as hubs

connecting hundreds of learners with overlapping PLNs. In the edublogosphere, top blogs include Dave Warlick's *2¢ Worth* and Richardson's *Weblogg-ed*. Both blogs have Technorati ratings nearing 1,000, which represents the number of users who currently link to them. When Warlick or Richardson post a provocative article about some aspect of instructional technology, it is possible several dozen lurkers will comment, with many more writing and posting personal reflections on their own blogs.

Leading and knowing how to measure the impact of my leadership are skills that I am only starting to develop. A certain amount of technological savvy along with some old-fashioned self-promotion is required. While my own blog has never garnered the attention of more than two or three people at a time, I have used my blog to go on the stump and to try to push content to the forefront of the collective blogosphere conscience. For example, I recently dedicated my blog as a platform to discuss issues pertaining to media literacy during Canada's Media Education Week. The Media Awareness Network sponsors this annual event every November to promote media literacy as a key component in the education of young people, and to encourage the integration and the practice of media education in Canadian homes, schools, and communities. Since the U.S. does not have a similar week, I decided to celebrate along with the Canadians, posting a three-part



Figure 10. A post about Media Education Week at ThinkTime.

discussion about media education with links to numerous online resources available through the Association for a Media Literate America (AMLA), the Center for Media Literacy, and the Media Awareness Network. (See Figure 10.)

My efforts did not go unnoticed. I caught the attention of media education advocate Elizabeth Thoman, who contacted me to discuss the future of AMLA's web site, which is currently undergoing a major overhaul. Thoman asked me to consider the possibility of serving as a guest blogger at the new AMLA web site when it launches in early 2008. By using my blog to stimulate and facilitate discussion about a topic I am passionate about, I added an important contact (Thoman) to my PLN and stumbled upon an opportunity to further expand the reach and impact of my blog.

### **Tips for Self-Directed Learning**

A lot of discussion is devoted to the role of the community organizer and moderator, but vital communities also depend on good followers (“linkers,” “lurkers,” and “learners”). As I developed my PLN, I became versed in the traits of a self-directed learner. Just to be clear, I am not referring to codes of conduct, “netiquette,” or guidelines for appropriate use. Those are more formal conventions that you typically agree to once you sign on as an active member and contributor to a community. Rather, self-directed learning within a PLN depends upon the cultivation of certain daily habits and attitudes to ensure a meaningful experience (in addition to a safe, ethical, and responsible one). Followership requires a certain amount of practice, commitment, and discipline. According to Folkestad (2007) these are the “survival skills” of collaboration and collective action that lead to improved competency in organizing, navigating, and managing risk in electronic learning environments.

What are those habits and disciplines? Based on my own observations and practice as well as the recommendations of others (Downes, 2007; Folkestad, 2007; Lubke, 2007), I

have compiled a set of “soft skills” for building a PLN:

- Cultivate an online presence and maintain it. Decide if you want to use a screen name or your real name, and then be consistent with it when joining and participating in online communities. This is the name that will appear on your membership profiles as well all your posts and comments. (I use my real name.)
- Create an email account using a web-based service such as Hotmail, Gmail, or Yahoo. Your webmail address is also part of your online presence and will maximize the just-in-time learning afforded by your PLN. As opposed to an email client, which is usually institutionally based (at a school or work site), your webmail account provides anytime, anywhere accessibility from any computer with an Internet connection. You can keep this account separate and use it exclusively for your PLN, or you can consolidate your accounts using email forwarding.
- Many interactive web sites and learning communities admit users to develop personalized home pages and membership profiles for free. Take advantage of these opportunities because an attractive membership page with visual elements increases the likelihood of members interacting with you.
- Create an avatar or edit a thumbnail photo of yourself that you can upload with your profile when you join a new community. Save and re-use this image as often as needed. (I use a real mugshot of myself, closely cropped to meet size requirements, which are usually 48 X 48 or 128 X 128 pixels.)
- Write a short (100 words or less) biographical sketch of yourself and, when the opportunity is available, upload it along with your photo or avatar. Your bio should emphasize the themes, topics, personal interests and passions that drive your PLN. This is another way to build your online presence, and it encourages other learners to connect with you.
- A blog, ePortfolio, or personal web site, is a great way to anchor your PLN. Your virtual identity (screen name, webmail address, thumbnail photo or avatar, and bio) should also be used consistently within these environments.
- As you begin linking and lurking at sites, look for and read FAQs, help forums, or tutorials. This will familiarize you with the various user features and potential pitfalls that you may encounter at the site.
- In addition to FAQs and help forums, another way to evaluate the quality of interactivity and usability at a site is to look for forums or discussion boards where you can post questions and engage with others with similar interests and backgrounds.
- The best virtual communities archive forum topics and make them searchable. Before posting a question or adding a new topic, search the archives to see if someone else has already started a similar discussion. Sometimes you can revive discussions simply by posting a new comment and inviting a response from the membership.
- When you begin posting comments and questions at various sites and communities, check to see if email notification or RSS is available to help you track others' reactions to your posts. Use these features to stay engaged in

forum and blog discussions.

- Produce and share without fear! Referring to the love of learning that best characterizes toddlers, not adults, Folkestad (2007) stated, “We need to regain our natural, innate curiosity and love for sharing. We need to get back to our origins when we are not afraid to make mistakes.”

## **No Pain, No Gain**

Webmail. Blogs. RSS aggregators. Social networks. Wikis. Online forums. These are the building blocks of a PLN, but to a beginner, these web-based tools may seem less like “blocks” and more like an intimidating “avalanche of change” (Folkestad, 2007). It is easier to settle for formalized learning opportunities as they are made available by the powers-that-be (and as you can afford them) in familiar formats such as workshops, lectures, videos, books, and even traditional web sites and online courses. And as incidents of abuse and excesses within virtual environments continually make local and national headlines, it is even more tempting for the teacher/learner to just opt out for fear that his or her professional integrity might somehow be compromised or violated.

Richardson called the new technology “disruptive” in the way it shakes up the process and places so much responsibility back on the learner (2006). Confession: some days I long to be a passive, mouth-breathing student again! It’s a juggling act between reading my feeds, trying to compose thoughtful and timely responses to others’ great ideas, documenting insights and A-ha’s on my own blog, and managing the demands of a full-time graduate course load at a bricks-and-mortar university. What is troubling (and ironic) is my linking and lurking in the blogosphere is a totally self-driven, self-directed effort that runs parallel to my “formal” education within an IT master’s program. Maybe I wouldn’t be so scattered if these two endeavors intersected more often instead of existing on separate planes. Seldom, if ever, the twain shall meet.

But the risks and headaches are well worth it when balanced out by the

unprecedented levels of affordability, accessibility, sociability, and usability you gain from a carefully constructed and managed PLN. At the opening keynote of the NSBA's Technology and Learning Conference, Lyn Heward, former creative director of Cirque du Soleil shared an enlightening anecdote that illustrates the value of managed risk. Heward told of one Cirque member who was burned while practicing a fire trick before an important performance. Despite receiving third-degree burns all over his back, he managed a perfect performance the next night before a live, televised audience. Heward said, "He told me something that day that I will pass on to you now. He said that you have to leverage your credibility to take risks. Even if you're burned, try again, and your credibility will grow" (Stansbury, 2007).

A circus is a showcase of skills *and* artistry, perfected by a community working individually and collaboratively through countless hours of behind-the-scenes practice. Similarly, self-directed learning within Web 2.0 requires a blend of practical knowledge and passion that develops from hands-on experience and the reawakening of child-like curiosity and fearlessness. It may get messy, but ultimately you are in control -- the ringmaster. So often the term "three-ring circus" is a pejorative, but it may be time to re-evaluate the metaphor, at least as it relates to how we manage our learning.

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