

Twitter as a Professional Learning Community

by Catherine Trinkle

My professional network spans the entire United States and includes a diverse group of colleagues. I communicate with techies whose knowledge far surpasses my own, public librarians who are facing budget cuts, and school librarians who come from a variety of backgrounds. My professional development needs are being created and met simultaneously by people I have never met.

You, too, can create your own Professional Learning Community (PLC), which webbies call PLNs: Personal Learning Networks. I talk about my PLN with teachers in my teaching community and explain why such online communities as Twitter can introduce them to information and options to enhance their teaching. Richard DuFour describes the characteristics of Professional Learning Communities in his tenth anniversary edition of *Revisiting Professional Learning Communities at Work*, and he states that Twitter turns out to be the perfect PLC (2008).

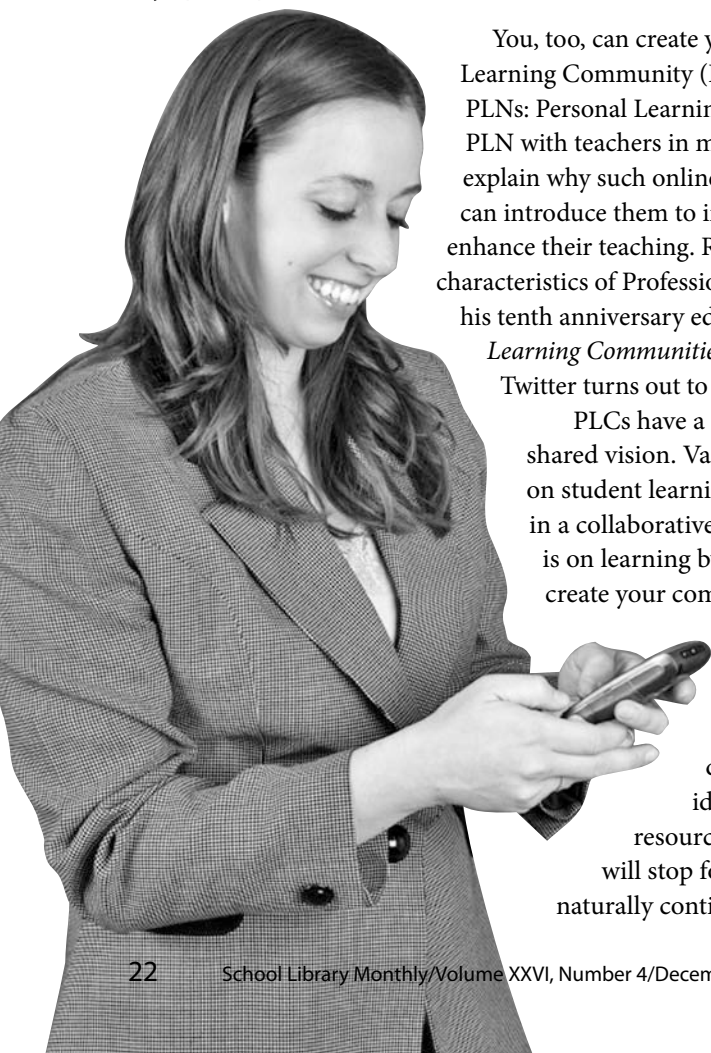
PLCs have a common purpose and a shared vision. Values and goals are all focused on student learning. Members of PLCs work in a collaborative environment and the focus is on learning by doing. On Twitter, you can create your community by choosing whom to

follow and allowing others to follow you. Because of this, you are encouraged to tweet only the highest quality information, thoughts, ideas, questions, links to resources, etc. If you don't, people will stop following you. Likewise, you naturally continue to follow those tweeters

who offer information and resources you can use and who cause you to think, question, and explore.

A feature of PLCs that Twitter exemplifies better than many face-to-face communities is the "collective inquiry into best practices" (DuFour 2008). By choosing whom you follow, you choose the best practices for your personal interests. This means that if you are interested in a PLC of economics teachers, you can build that community, or if you are interested only in technology in education, you can create your own TIE community. If you are an elementary teacher, your PLC will lead you to different information than that of a high school teacher. All of these communities, however, are engaged in collective inquiry: What are the best Web pages? Who are leaders in the field? Where can I find a ready-to-implement lesson plan on a particular topic? What are the great examples from my profession? DuFour says "schools cannot achieve the fundamental purpose of learning for all if educators work in isolation" and educators who Twitter, though spread out across the globe, are working together in a collaborative community for their professional development (2008, 18).

A Professional Learning Community is committed to continuous improvement. DuFour says members of a PLC have "persistent disquiet with the status quo," a sentiment found amongst educators who use Twitter to find resources that make them better educators and more able to reach digital natives (2008, 17).



Profile of a Mini-blogger

There are many amazing school librarians/information specialists on Twitter. Stephen Anderson, District Instructional Technologist for Stokes County Schools in North Carolina, is one (twitter.com/web20classroom). He has spent the summer of 2009 directing his diverse group of followers to amazing educational resources. An easy way to move from Web 1.0 to Web 2.0 is to follow Stephen.

Tweeters are real people and, to find out more about Anderson, I sent him a direct message asking him to chat with me about Twitter. Stephen says he loves helping teachers learn what the kids are doing at home, i.e., phones, Facebook, etc., and it is clear that teaching teachers, including his network on Twitter, is his passion. He says, "Teachers need to know about all the cool stuff out there. Use these resources to go beyond the textbooks." Of all the Web resources Stephen has explored, it is Twitter that he says "has truly blown me away. I can't tell you how many people that I've had deep educational discussions with that I would not have been able to do. There's a guy on there who said it's like a technology conference twenty-four hours a day. You get so excited at a conference and want to go back and explore more deeply what you learned but you get back into your routine and get away from that motivation—but not with Twitter" (phone call to author, August 5, 2009).

References:

- DuFour, Richard. *Revisiting Professional Learning Communities at Work*. Solution Tree, 2008.
- Trinkle, Catherine. <http://readinginstruction.pbworks.com/> (accessed September 10, 2009).
- Twitter Glossary*. <http://www.helpviaTwitter.com/Twitter/Twitter-glossary.html> (accessed September 10, 2009).◀

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Twitter and Tweeting Tips

- ▶ Twitter from your phone. Warning: This can be addictive!
- ▶ Twitter is the ultimate portal because you are taken to countless amazing sites. The problem is TMI... too much information. You are led to more Web resources than you can possibly keep up with, so keep track of amazing resources on a wiki. I cut-and-paste URLs and add a descriptor on my wiki so I can find and use the resources at the appropriate time throughout the school year. See readinginstruction.pbworks.com for more information and other tips for using Twitter.
- ▶ Reach out to your staff. Alert teachers to sites and resources specific to their grade level or individual interests and needs.
- ▶ Follow the recommendations of #followalibrarian and #followfriday hashtags to find great professionals to follow. These are recommendations by your peers who take the time to recognize tweeters worth following.
- ▶ Do a search to find information about topics you are interested in pursuing. The real beauty of Twitter, though, is that you are taken to places you didn't know you even needed to explore. I had no idea about Wordle, but when I found it by following a link from someone I follow, I knew instantly that I would use it in my teaching.
- ▶ Retweeting (RT) is important for finding people to follow. An intriguing RT will take you to a tweeter's page and if you like what you see, you can follow that person.
- ▶ To shorten URLs so you don't use up your 140 characters as fast, use *Threely*, 3.ly (<http://3.ly/>), which seems to give you the shortest URL. I don't know why anyone would use a different service, as others do the same thing and the goal is to get the shortest URL.
- ▶ To find a list of common terms used on Twitter, simply type "twitter glossary" in your favorite search engine and you will find several up-to-date lists. The Twitter help page (<http://help.twitter.com>) gives the novice user quick tips to make using twitter both easy and fun.
- ▶ Most importantly, respond to requests by the people you follow. Twitter is best when it is interactive and collaborative, so when you are asked for a resource or other assistance, reply. Your followers will return, in kind, to your requests for information, and your Twitter experience will be truly collaborative.

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