

Professional Development for Transforming Education



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Innovative, curious, and collaborative tech-savvy educators have wonderful opportunities for staff development through *personal learning networks* (PLNs). In this day of Web 2.0 tools such as blogging, RSS feeds, and Twitter, it is easy to imagine what a PLN is—using these tools to connect yourself to others and other information sources for professional and personal learning of interest to you. In the blogosphere, David Warlick is given credit for coining the term *PLN* from *personal learning environments*, systems that help learners take control of and manage their own learning.

Many students, as adept technology users and social networkers, have their own PLNs. We may question what they are learning, but it is certainly relevant and of interest to them. I would think that a transformed learning environment would exist when all students, teachers, administrators, and other school personnel are engaged in learning together in their own and intersecting PLNs to meet their learning needs.

PLNs are a powerful concept and tool that seem to be re-energizing teachers who are working on transforming their classrooms. But unless they are part of a district-wide effort, it is not likely to transform education.

It is a given that any technology implementation takes staff development, and most district-wide implementations seem to have a district-wide staff development component. At least that was true for the 27 district nominations for the Sylvia Charp award this year. This annual award sponsored by *T.H.E. Journal* and ISTE is for district innovation in technology and named in honor of Dr. Sylvia Charp and her groundbreaking

contributions and extended service to the ed tech community.

Many of the applicants' tech initiatives involved making every classroom an *intelligent classroom*, a term coined by Dell, but which more generically refers to classrooms equipped with projectors, electronic whiteboards, sound systems, document cameras, and response systems in addition to a teacher computer. These initiatives do seem to be engaging students and teachers, and the audio systems ensure that students do hear the lesson.

It is not clear to me yet that the intelligent classroom by itself is achieving a transformation into inquiry-based learning by increasingly independent, autonomous learners. Many teachers seem to be using electronic whiteboards to produce beautiful, larger than life, interactive worksheets that at best involve some on-the-spot problem-solving opportunities for students. *(Don't miss this opportunity to submit articles that prove me wrong! submissions@iste.org)*

But does all district-wide staff development transform education? It is hard to imagine how it can unless technology is a component, but technology without a process that includes PLNs and is embedded in sound learning theory is not likely to achieve the transformation we are seeking either. Teachers and other school personnel should engage in a process of using all of the tools and resources at their disposal in their own inquiry around how students learn and what learning environments and curricula look like that help students achieve deep inquiry-based learning and how that is supported by technology. And then work together to implement their vision. ■

By Anita McAnear

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