

Can Your **PLN** Replace Traditional **PD**?

Yes

Traditional professional development is by nature founded on a “just-in-case” model. I’m talking about the typical time-constrained, geographically limited, tool-based “workshop” that has been the norm in our field since—well, at least since I’ve been in it, and that’s a decade and a half. You all know the drill:

1. Show up, usually after school hours or on an inservice day.
2. Watch a PowerPoint preview of what you’re going to “learn.”
3. Watch someone demonstrate a tool or teaching technique that a committee or office has deemed

the next new salvation for teaching and learning.



Scott Merrick

4. *Maybe* get some time to practice using it.
5. Hear the presenter encourage you to use it.
6. Leave, knowing you won’t have the time, energy, or support to incorporate it into your regular practice.

No

I teach a social media course at a community college, and my subject relies on informal networks for continued learning. I have a PLN, and that fact surely lends some sparkle to my résumé. But if I did not have further learning via workshops and conferences, my job would have gone to someone else with more proof of expertise in teaching social media. And I have no problem with this. I would not want to visit my dentist either if his continuing education consisted solely of his learning network at ipullteeth.net.

A PLN does not constitute a full professional development plan. Instead, educators must view their PLNs as a complementary tool they use to sharpen their practice.



Rurik Nackerud

PLNs are definitely a powerful way to broaden horizons, develop ideas with peer feedback, and receive answers to queries. Every day, thousands of education professionals take advantage of the bright minds of potentially thousands of other educators to get ideas, check out new websites, or

Contrast that to the just-in-time approach to gaining knowledge a professional learning network (PLN) provides: I need to know the best tool to convert my digital camera's AVI movie to an MP4 file that my kids can pick up from my classroom webpage so that they can preview something we'll be working on in computer lab next week. As I write this at 8:15 a.m. on a Sunday, I'm sending out the tweet: "Quick! For an experiment for an article I'm writing. Reply with the best (and hopefully free) tool I can use to convert .avi to .mp4?"

Twenty-three minutes later, I've received nine replies, including three retweets that broadened my call for help to others' networks. Here are the suggestions I've received so far:

ronhoutman: OK - I'll bite - try AVC <http://bit.ly/drCaRl> - works great and it's freeware. 2 minutes ago via TweetDeck

I don't know everything, but I am in touch with others who are likely to know what I need to learn.

Struggle2Learn: I use Youtube Downloader! 2 minutes ago via web

paulrwood: keepvid.com 2 minutes ago via Twitter for iPhone

aelloway: <http://bit.ly/d0WfST> Not sure if it's the best - but it's free! :) .avi to .mp4 3 minutes ago via TweetDeck

monk51295: convert.avi to .mp4? <http://www.convertavitomp4.com/> 3 minutes ago via Seismic twhirl

blairteach: zamzar.com 4 minutes ago via TweetDeck

Now I have a number of options to choose from. Voilà. And this is just using Twitter. If I posted on Facebook, I'm sure I'd get more options. But I don't think that's necessary, do you? I've demonstrated the efficacy of the

tool. Can you do that for the last three PD sessions your school has provided, however well meaning?

I often hear the comment, "I just don't get it. Why should I bother?" from colleagues. I usually respond, "I have built a modest PLN of mostly educators, administrators, developers, or educational technologists, and many are now friends I never would have met otherwise. I don't know everything, but I am in touch with others who are likely to know what I need to learn. That's why."

—Scott Merrick is a virtual learning curriculum specialist at Metro Nashville (Tennessee) Public Schools' new Virtual Learning Program and "Lowly High Grand Poobah" of ISTE's SIGVE. His username on his blog (<http://scottmerrick.net>) and on most social media sites is "scottmerrick," and he cordially invites new friends and colleagues to join his PLN.

get answers to questions. Twitter, blog feeds, Facebook, virtual world groups, and listservs also connect educators to the activities and ideas of the greater educational community.

Unfortunately, these activities are unlikely to gain credit with any but a few administrators or licensing agencies, and with good reason. PLN interactions are usually not structured around a single concept or development activity, so they're not easily quantifiable or trackable, and administrators can't guarantee that all teachers are getting the PD they need. Educators and education researchers use data to determine how to approach student learning; it makes sense that someone needs to track data to determine professional learning needs as well. Based on that data, district administrators can decide if a PD program should lead to a staff meeting or workshop, or to helping teachers grow their PLNs.

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Although I have sat through my share of less-than-informative staff meetings, I have also been repeatedly surprised by innovative content I never knew I needed that was designed by people who have been observing my field in ways my PLN and I cannot. These moments of staff-meeting zen, when they occur, are reminders that my tweeting and blogging friends might not be providing everything I need to grow as an educator.

Likewise, PLNs also complement formal PD by helping us coordinate and discover opportunities beyond what our districts and colleges offer locally. Traditional face-to-face PLNs consisting of local colleagues, professional associations, and school leaders can highlight local or subject-specific needs, while digital PLNs can expose

educators to ideas from all over the world. Sometimes I need further research to understand how to use the tools my PLN tells me about, and I can get this through attending webinars, conferences (virtual and real), and workshops.

PLNs and traditional PD are not, then, separate activities but different components of the same activity. By coordinating them well and making sure they complement each other, we can become better educators for our students, our community, and ourselves.

—Rurik Nackerud, who is finishing his graduate degree, looks forward to working with secondary students again while collaborating with the Center4EduPunx as K-12/emerging technologies coordinator working on virtual worlds, augmented reality, and open online learning projects.