



# Personal Learning Networks

*You live in a world of technological miracles. You have access through the Internet to resources one cannot begin to imagine.*

*--Elder L. Edward Brown of the Seventy*

*"Bring Your Mission Home with You,"*

*Ensign, Dec. 2000*

- \* How can technology support efforts in lifelong learning?
- \* What tools are most useful for directing lifelong learning?

One of the aims of a BYU education to inspire lifelong learning and service among students. President Hinckley has counseled that we "have a mandate from the Lord to educate [our] minds and [our] hearts and [our] hands." The Internet provides more resources for lifelong learning than have ever been available at any other time in the history of the earth. Personal Learning Networks are a way of organizing the vast resources at your disposal.

## What are they?

According to David Warlick<sup>1</sup>, "A personal or professional learning network (PLN) involves an individual's topic-oriented goal, a set of practices & techniques aimed at attracting and organizing a variety of relevant content sources, selected for their value, to help the owner accomplish a professional goal or personal interest." By this definition, PLNs can exist without the Internet or digital technology. For example, if you wanted to master the art of French cooking, you might set a goal and then start collecting resources to help you achieve that goal. These resources could include cookbooks, recordings of cooking shows, and even the contact information for friends that share your interest.

Today, the Internet and digital technology increase the potential of a Personal Learning Network by allowing faster access to greater amounts of information. Additionally, today's technology can enable collaboration between learners around the world.

## Why use a digital PLN?

A simple answer to this question is to work smarter rather than harder. A digital PLN can rapidly progress your personal and professional development by bringing knowledge to you. For example, I have set up a PLN that caters to a specific professional goal. Since I teach a course on Instructional Technology in Teaching, I set a goal to increase my knowledge of innovative uses of technology in K12 settings. When I come across a good blog on educational technology, I add it to my RSS feed aggregator, Google Reader, so I can follow it consistently. I collect links to useful educational resources and share them with students and fellow educators using the Diigo social bookmarking application. Additionally, every day Google Alerts conducts an automatic search on "Teaching with Technology" and sends the results to my email address. Since my PLN is web based, I can access it from any computer

<sup>1</sup>Warlick, D. (2007) "The Art and Technique of Creating Your Own Personal Learning Network". Available at: <http://davidwarlick.com/wiki/pmwiki.php?n=Main.PresentationSlides>.

with an Internet connection. By contacting the authors of blogs and joining a social network of educators interested in using technology for collaborative projects, I've made many valuable professional contacts. I can honestly say that I have never learned as much in such a short period of time as I have since discovering the power of a PLN.

In your classroom, PLNs can give your students the opportunity to pursue individual goals, which can be highly motivating. Perhaps more importantly, by using PLNs in the classroom, you can teach your students the skills that they will need to take control of their own learning as they move through life. Instead of simply surfing the web, your students will be prepared to navigate the oceans of information that lie before them.

## How do you create a PLN?

Because a PLN is personal, there are no hard and fast rules for creating a PLN. However, there are a number of tools that can help you establish and organize your PLN. Two types of tools are common starting points for developing your PLN, RSS feed aggregators and social bookmarking sites. I've listed several examples of each type of tool below.

RSS feed aggregators:

- \* Bloglines
- \* Google Reader
- \* Netvibes
- \* Pageflakes

Social bookmarking sites:

- \* Connotea
- \* del.icio.us

- \* Diigo
- \* Simpy
- \* Furl
- \* Stumbleupon

Additionally, the value of your personal learning network can be increased by connecting more directly to other learners with similar goals through the use of social networking. You are probably familiar with MySpace and Facebook, two popular social networking applications that are frequently used for entertainment or to connect with family and friends. LinkedIn and Ning are two social networking applications that can be used for professional purposes. LinkedIn was designed for business networking while Ning allows users to create their own social networks. For example, if we wanted to, we could create a Ning network for members of this class only, or for all education majors at BYU. Several educational networks already exist on Ning. I've listed two that you might be interested in below:

Ning networks for educators:

- \* Classroom 2.0
- \* School 2.0

As you work towards your goal, you may find it useful to periodically reflect on your progress. At this point, you may want to consider using a professional blog to reflect on your progress. The advantage of a blog over a personal journal is that it is public, while retaining some anonymity, if desired. As a public forum, a professional blog is open to comment by your peers, who just might have the answers to the questions that are keeping you up at night. Some popular tools for blogging are listed below.

Blogging tools:

- \* Blogger
- \* Edublogs
- \* Wordpress

Beyond the tools mentioned earlier, Google has several applications that can enhance a PLN. One popular tool is iGoogle, a personalized homepage that organizes many of the other elements in your PLN. Another tool is Google Alerts, which allows you to set up automatic searches for the most recent news in any given subject area. A third tool is Google Notebook, which allows you to collect and organize webclippings from a variety of sources.

I've posted several documents, or links to documents on the course wiki that can guide through the process of setting up your own PLN. Throughout the semester, I will help you to identify goals that would be appropriate for a PLN and I will be available to help you find answers to your questions as they arise.

Good Luck!

1. We have a responsibility to become lifelong learners and to foster lifelong learning in our students.
2. A PLN can help organize the vast resources of information at our fingertips.
3. Common applications used with a PLN include RSS feed aggregators and social bookmarking sites.
4. The value of a PLN can be increased through social networking sites, blogging, and other tools.