

Building Your Own Personal Learning Network

~ BY WILL RICHARDSON

CONTENTS

- 1** Building Your Own Personal Learning Network
- 5** Modern Language Instruction in the Web 2.0 World
- 8** Mobile Digital Storytelling
- 11** A Snowball Dance, Networks, and MassCUE
- 14** The Educator's Guide to Copyright and Fair Use
- 15** The Copyright Quiz
- 16** Copyright and Fair Use Guidelines for Teachers
- 19** Can a Laptop Make a Difference?
- 22** Another MassCUE Mini-Grant Success Story
- 23** Improving Collaboration in Object-Oriented Computer Programming
- 24** Answers to The Copyright Quiz
- 29** MassCUE Conference Speakers

Let's face it. In a world where anyone can publish anything to anyone with an Internet connection, there's too much to know and not enough time to even begin to know it all. We need some knowledge reinforcements to help us do the heavy lifting so we can devote what little learning time we do have to editing out all but the most relevant, most interesting, and most useful information out there around whatever it is that we are interested in learning. We need, in other words, a network.

The idea of being networked has been around for a long, long time, obviously. The earliest humans compared notes on the best hunting spots and techniques, and we've always relied on the local knowledge that our physical space connections can bring us. Today, however, our potential networks are of a different scale; we can be connected with others around the world, at any time

when it's convenient, sharing ideas and resources about whatever passions we have. And whereas in the past the idea of being "well connected" had all sorts of business and career connotations, today, the primary benefit is all about being smart and learned.

Creating these "Personal Learning Networks" (PLN), as they are called, is a skill set for the 21st Century, a literacy grounded in reading and writing and editing and rooted in the best of constructivist learning theory. In essence, when we create our own PLNs, we are creating our own classrooms, our own curricula, and our own textbooks for our study of whatever it is we are passionate about. In a world where jobs and careers will be constantly shifting and in flux for many of our kids, this ability is an absolute requirement for our students. In fact, I think every school district should consider listing among its goals that every graduate

be able to "build, grow, and balance a personal learning network in safe, ethical, and effective ways."

Why is this such an important undertaking now? As George Siemens says in his work on "Connectivism," in this world where currency of information is paramount, learning IS the act of network creation and facilitation. Our assumptions of knowledge are "continually added to, updated, or replaced," and we need a network of people and information sources that will continually be scanning and filtering that information for us. It has become too much for any one person to do by herself.

As with anything else, however, before we attempt to imbue our students with these literacies, we need to learn them for ourselves. We need to experience the transformative nature of these connections in order to fully

Continued on page 2.

A former public school educator for 22 years, Will Richardson's own Weblog (Weblogg-ed.com) is a leading resource for the creation and implementation of Web 2.0 technologies on the K-12 level, and his is a leading voice for school reform in the context of the fundamental changes these new technologies are bringing to all aspects of life. On November 19, Will will present 4 workshops at MassCUE's 2008 conference.



Building Your Own PLN

Continued from page 2.

make sense of their roles in our classrooms. And that means that we have to get ourselves networked. Here are a few hints on how to get started.

Creating an effective personal learning network is in large measure dependent on the level of engagement and enthusiasm you have for the job. And to that end, probably the most important aspect of any of this is creating and connecting in the context of your passions. No matter what you are into, no matter what you want to learn about, there are others “out there” who share that passion and are waiting to learn with you. Even something like mountain biking . . . on a unicycle. One day when a teacher in a workshop told us that that was his passion, I wondered if he was going to be able to grow his network around it. But sure enough, we quickly found a host of “municyclists” for him to potentially connect to.

Assuming that you’ve identified your passion, the first step is to find others who might share it. While a standard Google search may generate some leads, I think it’s better to focus on the blogosphere as a starting point. Google Blog Search (blogsearch.google.com) or Technorati.com are great places to begin. In both, use the advanced search to look for blog posts that mention your passion. For instance, there are a surprising number of posts that contain the words “mountain,” “biking,” and “unicycle.” Usually, the short descriptions

on the search results page give you a sense of what you’ll find if you click on any of the links, so you may want to do a quick scan to see what looks most interesting.

At some point, you’ll find something that looks worth clicking on, and you’ll land on a blog post that might pique your interest. When you do, you’ll need to exercise some of those editing muscles that living in the information age requires. To determine whether the author is really someone you want to make a part of your network, do some research. Look for the blog author’s name and background. (Try the “About” link first if you can find one.) Do a Google search on her. Look to see how often the blog is updated, and read through the last ten or twenty posts to see how many comments there are and what the level of the conversation is. The quality of the comments is just as important, if not more so, than the quantity. Also, if you didn’t find the post through Technorati, go there and do a search of the blog address to see what, if any, “Authority” ranking it has. Just like Google, Technorati counts the number and frequency of links to a particular blog to judge its



value. You can use all of these indicators to get a sense of the relevance, quality, wisdom, and effectiveness of that potential node in your network.

If your research leads you to think you’ve found a great potential teacher or connection, your first option might be to respond to her blog with a comment. Make sure you use your real name and offer the address of your own blog (if you have one) if appropriate. Remember, you want to make connections, and strong connections are built on transparency and honesty. Your second option is to take the ideas expressed in the post that you found and write a response in your own blog (again, if you have one) that links to the original post. The link you create will most likely create a “trackback” entry on the original blogpost that the blogger will find. Thus, your personal learning network begins.

Obviously, doing keyword searches isn’t the only way to find relevant bloggers to learn from. There’s no question, just like many other aspects of life, that sometimes the best way to find the good stuff is word of mouth. In the blogosphere, that means mining the blogrolls or link rolls of the blogs that pass muster. And it means following the links they will invariably offer in

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We are currently soliciting submissions for our fall 2008 issue of *on Cue*. We welcome submissions on all topics related to instructional technology. Submissions may include action research, interviews, opinion pieces, and articles that contribute to a greater understanding of the integration of technology into all levels of education. Deadline for submissions: **June 15, 2008**. Please read

below for submission specifications.

We prefer to publish original articles not previously published in other journals. In the event an author wants to submit an article that has already been published to *on Cue*, s/he should make the managing editor aware of this. The article will not be reviewed by the editorial committee until the author has gained copyright permission from the original journal for it to be republished.

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Continued on page 3.

Building Your Own PLN

Continued from page 2.

their posts. One of the primary ways that I find new teachers is by way of a linked introduction from someone already in my network. And in most cases, if someone I already trust recommends a node in her network, I'll give that new person a second or third look. Finally, it's not just about bloggers, obviously. We can tap into many other types of content creators for our networks as well.

Remember as you build — that a diversity of voices is a crucial aspect of a successful PLN. This may be, in fact, one of the most difficult parts about learning in networked spaces. With anything you are passionate about, once you connect to others who share that passion, it's easy to fall into the somewhat beguiling trap of just conversing with the people who agree with you. But I have to say that the moments when I learn the most from my network are those moments when someone challenges me to reconsider what I have said or see things from a different point of view. It may not be the most comfortable moment, but the dissonance is almost always good, regardless of whether I eventually come to change my thinking or not.

Once you have begun connecting these nodes and have begun collaborating, sharing, and learning from these new teachers, you'll begin to see the importance and potentials for our students. You and your network will constantly be finding, filtering, and sharing the most relevant information out there from which you can learn and share some more. Together, you'll create your own texts and curriculum for whatever your passion is and, most importantly, you'll be able to model this important new way of learning for your students. Have fun! ▲▼