

Proposal: Creating Personal Learning Networks for Professional Development

I presently work at Heritage Hall, a suburban independent school who has just made a transition as a 1:1 laptop school using MacBook pros. The reasons for this initiative was to adapt to the digital realities of the lives of our students and to support more integration of technology in the classroom in order to improve student engagement. The steps toward change were primarily missional and far from being a push from the top-down, the move was fairly slow and deliberate which allowed many faculty to be involved in a shared vision and be prepared for this change. Although it was exciting to be part of this process and see many changes, what is lacking is continuing professional development and support for teachers to not only integrate technology in the classroom but really develop skills and fluencies students needed to be effective citizens in adulthood. The technology is just a tool, but tools need to be used effectively, and tools will change. How can we create a structure of learning and cooperation of teachers so they can be more effective in the classroom but also model lifelong learning. This proposal is just one part of this process which is to encourage and assist faculty to take advantage of online and face-to-face resources in developing personal learning networks and sharing with faculty in the school and elsewhere.

We begin with the mission of our school, “Inspiring in each child the curiosity to learn, the self-confidence to lead, and the compassion to serve.” This mission statement seems nice and obvious, but when combining that statement with a changing context as well as skills and knowledge our students needed to learn and live effectively in an increasing global and digital world. According to the International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE), skills and knowledge students will need include Creativity and Innovation, Communication and Collaboration, Research and Information Fluency, and Critical Thinking and Problem Solving fluencies. But why focus on teachers and their professional development? John Hattie in analyzing factors influencing student achievement writes that “what teachers do matters.” For our teachers, these new skills overlay content, pedagogical, and technology knowledge (TPACK). Moreover, our teachers need to provide structures and use tools that they did not use in their own education and backgrounds. ISTE goes even further looking at skills and knowledge and creating standards (NETS-T) for teachers. They explain, “As technology integration continues to increase in our society, it is paramount that teachers possess the skills and behaviors of digital age professionals. Moving forward, teachers must become comfortable being co-learners with their students and colleagues around the world.” Standards include 1) facilitate and inspire student learning, 2) design and develop digital age learning experiences and assessments, 3) model digital age work and learning, 4) promote and model digital age citizenship, 5) engage in professional growth and leadership. Helping faculty create their own personal learning networks for professional development will meet many of these standards and engage faculty so that they can, in turn, continue to engage their students.

With our 1:1 transformation came the upgrade of wireless connection and the suite of Google Apps which provide free cloud based tools of email(Gmail), productivity (Google Docs), and communication (Google Sites, Blogger), and research (Google, Books, Scholar, and

Reader). Moreover, we have seen, and will continue to see, a plethora of new applications for learning such as collaborative whiteboards, mindmapping, photo and video editing and sharing, digital storytelling, voice threads. Learning the benefits of these products take time to learn, which is difficult for many faculty. Just as most other initiatives of transformation, we see at Heritage Hall, different stages of adoption outlined by Everett Rogers: Innovators(2.5%), Leaders (13.5%), Early Majority (34%), Late Majority (34%), and Resisters (16%). How can we focus on the Leaders and perhaps some of the Early Majority so they can influence others of the Early Majority and the Late Majority so that the school can move forward? Faculty Personal Learning Networks provide opportunities for breaking down our classroom walls, for learning from others, and sharing with others both within and outside our own community. We should also develop structures for faculty learning and sharing.

What is a personal learning network (PLN)? A PLN consists of the people with whom a learner interacts and from whom derives knowledge. PLNs have been around a while, but with connectivity through the Internet, they can be as broad or focused as one wants with a variety of opportunities for connection and learning. The focus of this proposal is to keep it simple by helping educators subscribe to leading educators in their field through RSS feeds, social networks such as Facebook and Google+, and microblogging such as Twitter. This is not a strict requirement but to get teachers to be leaders and help each other. The benefits of PLNs are that faculty can learn from learning content specialists, locate resources for courses, learn about integrating technology while integrating technology, and even collaborate. What makes this professional development cost effective is that the applications we are focusing on is free, fairly ubiquitous, and easy to use. No new hardware or software is needed. What is also beneficial of this new initiative is that it will not be from the top-down but peer-to-peer. This structure should help school leaders enable others to act and become school leaders but also create, as Kouzes and Posner write, a shared vision.

Professional development should be sustained, ongoing, focused on student learning and meaningfully integrated into the life of the school. Currently, our structure for in-house professional development is all-school meetings at the opening of the school year, one day in October, one in January, and end of the years. We typically have Division (Upper School, Middle School, Lower School) meetings once a month and department meetings just periodically. This proposal is to change the format of the faculty meetings by encouraging PLNs and technology to change the face-to-face meetings. The following are some of the steps of this initiative: 1) Create a group of interested faculty administrators willing to meet regularly, discuss, share, and model PLNs. This group will also mentor faculty and mentor other teacher-leaders. 2) Devote time and web space for this group and other teachers to share during all-school faculty meetings, such as the Smackdown (about 45 minutes of several faculty members sharing an app or learning issue for 5 minutes each). 3) We will, however, need specific time for a group to discuss and introduce the concept of PLNs and apps such as RSS, social networks, and Twitter for professional development. 4) Create hashtags for sharing among faculty, but also separate hashtags to use with students. 5) Administrators model what we want in our classrooms by even “flipping” meetings as we may want our teachers to experiment. Notes, collaborative

documents will be shared ahead of time. Twitter backchannels may be used for continued discussion. Just introducing and having a greater number participate in PLNs and Twitter will help teachers meet the NETS-T standards and stay focused on student learning. This is not a one-stop approach, nor a one size fits all for professional development. Incentives are the benefits of participating in a learning community and access to new resources. Moreover, this is a cost-effective initiative that can evolve individually over time and creates a community of lifelong learners, an objective we want not only for our students but our teachers as well.

COMMUNICATION

The following is a video that is meant for administrators and teachers to use the technology given to them. This is meant to inspire faculty to take up the challenge of learning on their own and becoming leaders of change. It is on YouTube. Please let me know if the link or video does not work.

<http://youtu.be/tRjQDHDns7s>

or

<http://youtu.be/EagVumpHxZY>