

Collaborator



Scenario

I am inspired by the connections that my colleagues have, and I am impressed by how they use these connections to find and implement new teaching strategies. I want to grow my personal and professional learning and teaching networks, but I am not quite sure where to start.

Watch the Collaborate Scenario Video (Ontario Extend, 2017) retrieved from:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WYLrSyz6hsk>

Overview



Using technology tools to build intentional connections with others, to pose and solve problems collaboratively, and to strengthen independent thought is key to building digital capacity for teaching and learning. This module explores tools for online collaborations. It offers ways to create and extend professional and personal learning networks (PLNs) through collaborations within, across, and between disciplines.

Outcome

Build PLNs to collaborate and share knowledge with colleagues within, across, and between disciplines.

Objectives

- Assess how your educational approach is currently enhanced by your collaborations.
- Explore ways to build, augment and nurture PLNs.

- Identify strategies to extend professional connections beyond your institution or peers.
- Experiment with digital tools that may be used to build PLNs.

Explore: Why Collaborate?

Being open to collaboration is a key to building personal or professional learning networks.

In his book, [Too Big to Know: Rethinking Knowledge Now That the Facts Aren't the Facts, Experts Are Everywhere, and the Smartest Person in the Room Is the Room](#), David Weinberger proposes that “knowledge is becoming inextricable from—literally unthinkable without—the network that enables it”. He goes on to say:

We used to know how to know. We got our answers from books or experts. We'd nail down the facts and move on. But in the Internet age, knowledge has moved onto networks. There's more knowledge than ever, of course, but it's different. Topics have no boundaries, and nobody agrees on anything. Yet this is the greatest time in history to be a knowledge seeker... if you know how.

Steven Johnson also contributes to the discussion of the importance of collaboration in the video Where Good Ideas Come From (Riverhead Books, 2010) retrieved from:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NugRZGDbPFU> noting that networks are needed to germinate and spread ideas.

Your own network of collaborators might be made up of dozens or even hundreds of people with different interests and areas of expertise. You probably engage with them through a variety of modalities: face-to-face conversations, texts, email or over a multitude of social media outlets. Consider all of them as members of your PLN.

While PLNs are not new, the platforms they are built on today have changed. Many teachers use social media to create their digital PLN. In these informal professional development networks, Twitter is often the platform of choice because of its immediacy in finding practical solutions, answering questions, and identifying resources related to teaching. Project collaboration tools such as RocketChat, Slack, and Microsoft Teams may also be used for more focussed, yet private, conversations and workspaces about teaching and learning.

Extend Community



From highlighting passages in a reading to scribbling notes in the margins, annotation has a familiar place in our roles as students and academics. Web-based tools such as hypothes.is provide a new level of collaboration to that process by giving us the ability to attach notes, commentary, and discussion to any document that exists on the web.

Visit the Extend Community Space [Annotation as Collaboration discussion area](#) (in the #collaborator channel) to share some thoughts below of how you might see a use of web annotation as a collaborative activity, or share what kinds of ways you already use tools like Hypothes.is (e.g. comments on Google docs is a form of annotation, as are things like [Vialogues](#) for annotating / discussing video).

Ways to Collaborate

In this module we focus on online opportunities to collaborate. The Internet distributes connections and ideas more effectively than most of us could have imagined just a few years ago. In fact, the [earliest online communities](#) shed light on the promise of how collaborative online spaces could become the locus of rich and vibrant experiences in learning together.

You can create an online space that allows for this exchange within a teaching and learning context in one of two ways: through participating in digital communities for learning that already exist, or by building your own learning network. In the meantime, you can visit the [Extend Toolkit](#) to learn more about options for online collaboration tools.

A good collaborative community may reflect the guiding principles found within a “community of practice,” which has been defined as a group “of people who share a concern or a passion for something (domain) they do and learn how to do (practice) it better as they interact regularly” (Lave & Wenger, 1998). To better understand the role of communities of practice, read the post from Dr. Tony Bates: [The Role of Communities of Practice in a Digital Age \(Tony Bates\)](#).

Communities of practice generally have three main characteristics:

- **Domain:** a shared knowledge and skill within a focused area.
- **Community:** individuals converging and learning together.
- **Practice:** sharing strategies, tools, resources and examples through a knowledge exchange.



Based on Allan, B. (2008). Knowledge creation within a community of practice

The aim is to broaden your network to include cross-disciplinary skills and insights, and the online world affords just that. You will find that you can often meet peers and potential collaborators through chance online meetings in discussion groups or by using social networking tools such as Twitter.

Extend Activity



The Power of Twitter

Watch the video [Using Twitter Effectively in Education](#) (Teaching and Learning in Southern Australia, 2013), with Alec Couros who is a professor at the University of Regina. He is a leading thinker about digital skills for educators and the development of PLNs. Couros explains his

thinking about Twitter in the video and why you might want to “follow” particular educators or monitor specific hashtags.

If you do not have a Twitter account, we urge you to sign up for one (<https://twitter.com>) and to spend some time exploring and experimenting. If you are not sure who you should follow as a Twitter user, ask your colleagues for suggestions. [Here are some guidelines](#) to get started.

Tag @ontarioextend in a tweet commenting on one thing you learned with regard to using Twitter effectively in education.

As evidence of completion, please plan to provide the web address to your tweet in the Collaborator badge submission form.

Extend Activity



Think about the past year of your professional life. What types of projects or ideas have collaborated on with others? Now, on a piece of paper, or using one of the [image tools in the Extend Toolkit](#), draw a dining table or modify an open licensed image of one.

- Choose one of the projects you identified (successful or otherwise) and draw or indicate a place setting for each person involved at the table. Describe each person you worked with. Consider the following questions:
 - Were they part of or outside of your discipline?
 - How did your skills compare with theirs?
- At the centre of the table list the modes and communication tools you used to collaborate. Note which ones worked better than others.
- Identify patterns and gaps:
 - Highlight the type of people and processes that you know work well for you and which ones do not.
 - Identify anything that is missing from the table—anything you need to consider for future collaborations.
 - Take a photo of your “collaborative dining table” or export it as an image file. Then share it on twitter with a mention of [@OntarioExtend](#) and the hashtag #oextend.

Include the web address for your tweet in your response to the [Collaborative Dining Table](#) activity. As evidence of completion, please plan to enter the web address for your response in the Collaborator badge submission form.

Engage: What Is a Personal Learning Network?

Marc-André Lalande offers a straightforward look at the attributes of a personal learning network (PLN) in the video [What is a PLN](#) (DevPro PD Flipped, 2012), retrieved from:

The video distinguishes between a professional learning network and one that is more personally relevant and driven by your own needs and aspirations.

Now take a look at [Understanding and Creating Professional Learning Networks](#) (Miles MacFarlane, 2013).

This video presents some of the research associated with PLNs, including research by Dr. [George Veletsianos](#), Canada Research Chair in Innovative Learning and Technology at Royal Roads University in Victoria, BC.

PLNs are personal, or more accurately, personalized. They might be organized around personal or professional learning interests, but they are uniquely yours. For example, you may have a shared interest with someone else around a particular topic, perhaps home-brewing or scrapbooking, but the intersecting zones of your PLNs would be different because your own network is based on connections that you form yourself and conversations that you have with others. *You* determine who is in your network and how you engage with them.

PLNs are also formed around the goal of *learning*. They are made up of nodes, or the people and organizations that you recognize as being important to your learning, and the connections between them. Connections between the nodes in the network are built and strengthened through shared interests, conversations, and other interactions, like posting links to useful articles or offering insights from your own experience.

You might communicate with your learning network through the same tools you use for primarily social purposes, but PLNs are, at their core, meant to promote your own growth, development, and understanding in an area that is meaningful to you.

Personal learning networks do highlight the social nature of learning, though, revealing that the ways you interact with your network might blur the boundary between your social identity and your identity in academic or professional spheres.

Connectivism

The idea of a PLN, as presented here, emerges from the theory of connectivism. The foundational concept of connectivism is that your network provides the *context* for your learning, not necessarily the *content*. It's a teaching approach that recognizes the agency of learners in determining the direction of their own learning, but at the same time emphasizes that learning is not a solitary or individualistic pursuit, and that we learn as part of a community.

PLNs with a connectivist context exemplify the thesis that [learning is a social and collaborative activity](#). It is the process of your own learning through discussions and other kinds of interactions with community that creates strength in your PLN.

Unique to connectivism—and the formulation of PLNs within it—is that it speaks specifically, inseparably about how these connections between learners take place in a digital space, and how they are fundamentally transformed by interactions with and through digital technologies.

Watch the video [Overview of Connectivism](#) (USC Blended Learning, 2014) with Dr. George Siemens, who is the Canadian higher education teacher and researcher who coined the term “connectivism.”

The video presents an overview of connectivism and the insights that Siemens pursued in his research by reflecting on his own learning and how it was influenced and affected through the affordances of digital technologies and networks.

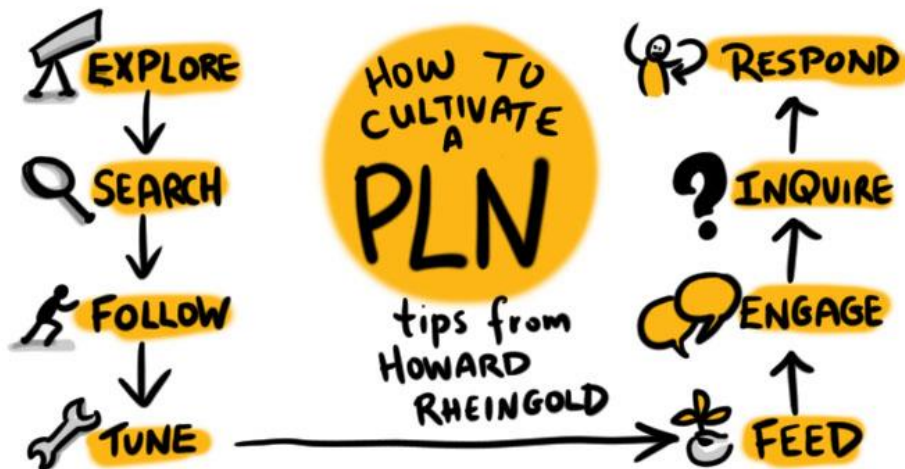
Your work in this module will replicate some of the pathways Siemens explored.

Extend Activity



Extend: Cultivate a PLN

A personal learning network, although often emergent and continually developing, does not just happen. It requires cultivation. To begin your thinking on how to cultivate your PLN, read [Howard Rheingold’s Advice on Building a PLN](#).



Based on image by Peeragogia, How to cultivate a personal learning network. CC BY SA 3.0

Start cultivating your PLN

- Find a professional group or individuals who align with your professional interests.** Start by reviewing [Twitter EdChat calendar](#) and [Inside Higher Ed's Twitter Directory](#). Find the virtual places that feel most comfortable and sustainable for you. Go where your people are, be strategic, and take your cues from people in your network. For example, if you notice at a conference that several presenters are posting their Twitter account names, then Twitter is likely the place where others will be found. Or perhaps the common gathering place for your discipline is something other than Twitter, such as Facebook, LinkedIn, Instagram or a Slack workspace. See also the [Twitter list of people and organizations related to Ontario Extend](#) for possible accounts to follow, as well as [a visualization of the Extend Twitter Network](#).
- Represent new additions to your PLN.** Now, using the [Extend Toolkit](#) find a creative visual way to showcase/illustrate which professional group aligns most to your professional interests.

Share your visualization as a response to the [Cultivate Your PLN activity](#).

As evidence of completion, please plan to enter the web address for your response in the Collaborator badge submission form.

Remember to:

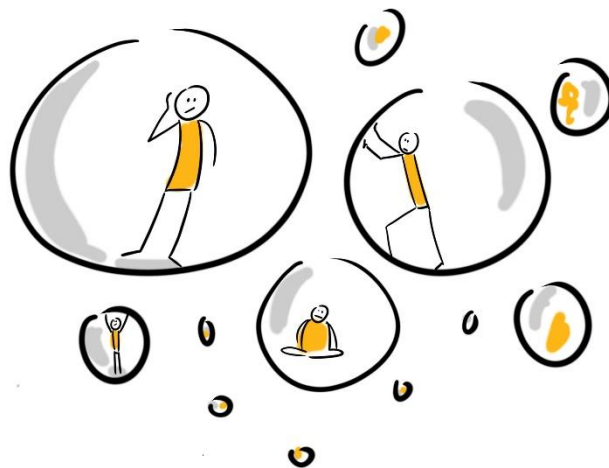
- Strengthen your connections. Comment on and share the work of others and contribute your own work or ideas. Gather and follow the people and organizations that push you to extend your thinking and move out of your comfort zone. That is key to creating a sustainable PLN—one that will help you develop and feel inspired
- Limit your ‘follows’ to topics you are passionate about. Cull your follows once in a while to refocus your stream.
- Consider the identity that you are creating within the network. In a post about "[Becoming a Connected Educator](#)" Mary Wever (@WeverWorld), Director of Certificate Programs for Michigan State University’s MA in Educational Technology suggests that you:

“Consider the professional identity you want to project on social media and in your PLN. What you post, share, or like online becomes part of your identity in a way. Some people feel more or less comfortable with using their personal accounts for professional activities, and vice versa. It is a good idea to think about what you envision your PLN to be like before diving into it”.
(Source: <http://insideteaching.grad.msu.edu/becoming-a-connected-educator-building-your-personal-learning-network-pln/>)

- Always use “netiquette”; acknowledge the contributions of others.
- Think before you share; be consistent with the identity you are projecting

Beware of filter bubbles

The term “filter bubbles” was coined by Eli Pariser. Read the [Wikipedia article about Filter Bubbles](#) or take a look at his TED Talk, [Beware of Online Filter Bubbles](#) (TED2011) perhaps even more relevant now, six years later.



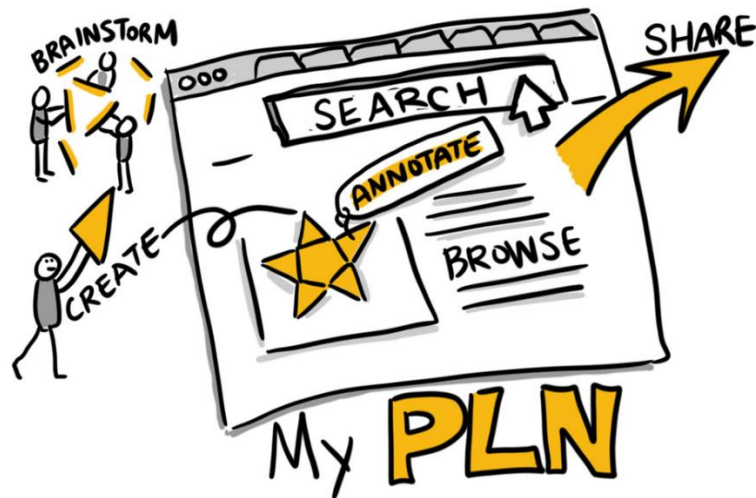
It is important to follow and connect with a variety of people and organizations. Because you will choose who you want to follow—usually like-minded individuals—social media can give you an unbalanced view. It is important to include people you do not agree with. Doing so will make your PLN more diverse and will challenge your thinking.

In their book [The Power of Pull: How Smart Moves, Smartly Made, Can Set Big Things in Motion](#), by John Haigel, John Brown, and Lang Davison stress the importance of reaching outside your usual areas of interest and expertise. Doing so will stretch you and help you avoid the insularity that can come from too much time spent in your own milieu, with only those who share your own interests.

Building your PLN

There are tools (see the [Extend Toolkit](#)) and social media platforms that you might use to build your PLN. Leveraging the affordances of digital technologies means that the tools and activities you can engage with and use to build your learning network can take on vastly different forms. You might share something you have authored within your network and get feedback on what you have done from a variety of perspectives. Or you might be inspired by a provocative blog post that someone else in your network has posted. Or you might put out a call for collaborators on a new project, or join a group discussion, or remix someone else's work as a way of extending their ideas—and the conversation about it. While digital technologies are not required for these learning activities to happen, they enable you to engage with them in novel and more expansive ways.

You might seek out specific venues where you can build your PLN, like conferences, or you might join social media groups related to your discipline to get started. Twitter is particularly valuable for building a personal learning network, as noted by in [Starting a PLN on Twitter: A Quick Guide For Teachers](#) by Common Sense Education.



Extend Community



Visit the Extend Community Space [Expanding Your PLN discussion area](#) (in the #collaborator channel) to share strategies that you have tried to cultivate and expand your PLN.

Empower: Map your PLN

Earlier you reflected on the informal PLNs that surround you, and indeed, these networks are meant to be informal. But as you explore PLNs in greater depth, you will want to think about how you can use digital technologies to build and develop your network to breathe new life into your professional growth and better support your teaching. You can do this by mapping your own PLN.

The Mapping Your PLN activity below asks you to consider and then represent who belongs to your PLN.

Extend Activity

Mapping your PLN



To map your PLN, use a tool such as [Google Draw](#), [Coggle](#), or even [PowerPoint](#) (see [more Visual Organizer Tools in the Extend Toolkit](#)), to create a visual diagram of the people, organizations, collectives, and others who are in your network. If creating a visual diagram presents a barrier for you, you can map your PLN by creating an audio, video, or written reflection. Whatever the format, be prepared to upload your work or provide a URL to its location in your response to this activity.

Activity Guidelines

- Identify a focus of your PLN. It could be your academic discipline or professional area, a topic on which you've already done some research or work, or a learning interest that you're passionate about.
- Place your topic somewhere on your map. (You might put it in the central node, but remember, you are the centre of your learning network!)
- Identify a few people who already belong to your network as it relates to your interest or topic. These will be your nodes. They might be colleagues, influential educators, mentors, or people you've met at conferences or events. They could also be members of professional organizations. Then think of a few more nodes that you may not yet know personally but who you would like to include in your network. Who are the noted scholars or experts in your area of interest that you might follow?
- Map the nodes (names) that you've identified onto your diagram. (Using one of the mapping tools mentioned above will allow you to move nodes around easily without having to redraw the connections.) Your diagram should include at least 5 nodes by name (i.e., specific individuals and organizations).
- Add details to each of the nodes in your PLN. Review your map and rearrange the design as you see patterns emerge. For example, you might indicate any of the following in the design of your diagram (e.g., by grouping, or by using different colours, symbols, or text labels):
 - Their role (e.g., educator, science researcher, blogger).
 - Their role in your network (e.g., collaborator, mentor, provocateur, consultant).
 - The relative weight of the connection (e.g., strong tie, weak tie).
 - The reciprocity of the connection (e.g., one-way, dialogue).
 - The technologies you use to connect to your network.

- The relationships between the different nodes (i.e., identify clusters of nodes who may interact).
- Anything else that helps to illustrate your interactions—past, present, or future—with your network.
- Export your diagram (or other) to an image format. Upload it or use a link to the image in your response to the [Mapping Your PLN](#) activity.
- As evidence of completion, please plan to enter the web address for your response in the Collaborator badge submission form.

Module Checklist



I have satisfied the following criteria and will submit evidence in the requested fields when applying for the Collaborator badge. Your profile page in the [Activity Bank](#) provides links to all the responses you have submitted.

Criteria and Evidence Required for Badge Assessment – I have:
<p>Created a Twitter account and explored how to extend my Personal Learning Network (PLN) by engaging with others. Evidence: Enter the web address to your tweet regarding using Twitter effectively in education.</p>
<p>Created and shared the collaboration attributes of one recent project, represented as an image of a collaborative dining table. Evidence: Enter the web address to your tweet for your response to the Collaborative Dining Table activity.</p>
<p>Thoughtfully expressed why it would be important to nurture my PLN and identified specific activities I could engage in to cultivate and expand my PLN. Evidence: Enter the web address for your response to the Cultivate Your PLN activity.</p>
<p>Mapped my PLN as a diagram. Evidence: Enter the web address for your response to the Mapping Your PLN activity.</p>
<p>Reflected on the module experience. Evidence: Enter your reflection statement into the space provided on the badge submission page.</p>

[Apply now for your Collaborator Badge](#)

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