



## 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 network 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 or augment 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, 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.

## Ways to Collaborate

In this module we focus on online opportunities to collaborate. The Internet diffuses 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.

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.
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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.

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

## Extend Activity



Think about the past year of your professional life. List the projects or ideas that you have collaborated on with others.

- On a piece of paper, or using graphics software, draw a dining table.
- Choose one of the projects you identified (successful or otherwise) and draw 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.
  - Identify anything that is missing from the table—anything you need to consider for future collaborations.



- Take a photo of your “collaborative dining table” and tweet it to [@OntarioExtend](#) using the hashtag #oextend.

## 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 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 basket-weaving techniques, 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’re 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.

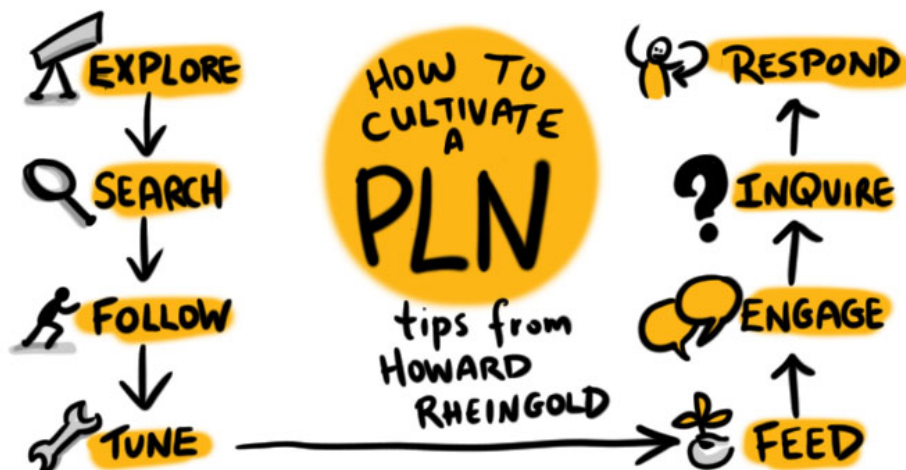
Watch the video [Overview of Connectivism](#) (USC Blended Learning, 2014) with Dr. George Siemens, who is the Canadian higher education teacher and researcher who coined the term “connectivism.”

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: Cultivate a PLN

A personal learning network, although often emergent and continually developing, doesn't 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 Peeragoria, How to cultivate a personal learning network. CC BY SA 3.0



## Other tips for cultivating your PLN

- **Find a professional group that aligns 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, or Instagram. We'd love to be a part of your PLN. Here's a [Twitter list of our accounts](#) for you to choose from.
- **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".

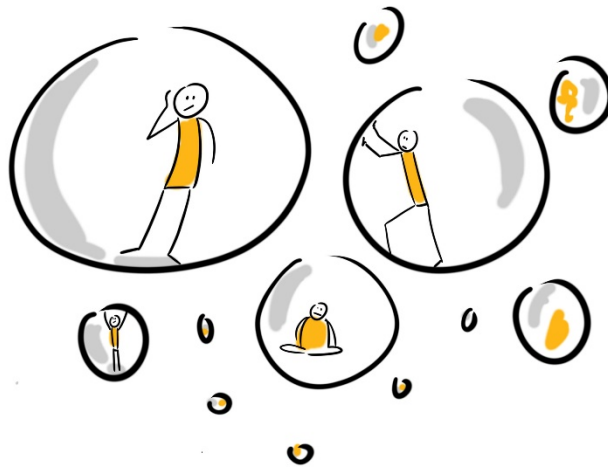
(Source: <http://insideteaching.grad.msu.edu/becoming-a-connected-educator-building-your-personal-learning-network-pln/>)

- Always use "netiquette"; acknowledge the contributions of others.
- Think before you share, 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’s important to include people you don’t 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

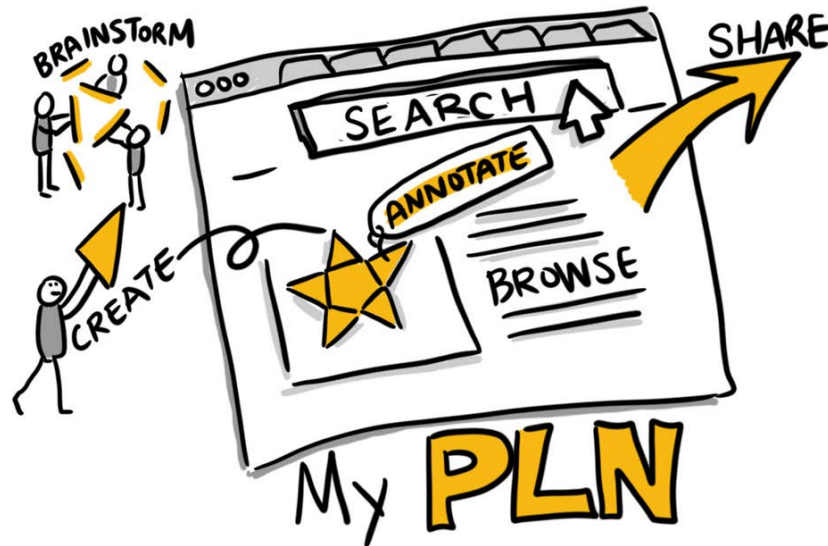
There are many tools and social media platforms that you might use to build your PLN. Leveraging the affordances of digital technologies means that the tools and activities you can engage with and use to build your learning network can take on vastly different forms. You might share something you’ve authored within your network and get feedback on what you’ve 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 aren’t 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 Dr. Alec Couros and Dr. George Veletsianos.



## Extend Activity



- Add your name to the [“I Was Here”](#) list to connect with other Extenders
- Write a blog post on the topic “Extending your PLN,” and tweet the link to it to [@ontarioextend](#) with the hashtag #oextend. Include some specific activities that you can engage in 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 Drawings](#), [Coggle](#) (for mind mapping), or PowerPoint 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.

#### 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).

# extend

- 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 to an image format and share it with your colleagues and with your PLN. You can also tweet it to [@ontarioextend](#) with the hashtag #oextend.

## Module Checklist



I have:

- Explored the resources: read the information and watched the videos about the impact and value of collaboration.
- Signed up for Twitter and explored how to use it to engage with others to extend my PLN.
- Engaged with people who, and groups that, align with my professional interests.
- Listed some activities that I can engage in to cultivate and expand my PLN.
- Blogged about “Extending Your PLN”.
- Mapped my PLN and posted it to my Domain.

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