

# Building Your Circle of Wisdom

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## Expanding Your Professional Learning Network with 21st Century Tools

It's no secret that many teachers operate as islands, in a world filled with students operating as interconnected continents. We must recognize that isolationist teaching in a collaborative era is undoing modern educational initiatives. Our world is demanding a new digital pedagogy, where we train kids for jobs that may not have even been invented yet.

An essential part of the middle school experience is the collegiality and teaming aspect that affects overall student achievement. When teachers develop consistency in vision and focus and share resources, they move beyond the "isolationist or island" mentality and become part of a "continent" of facilitators and learners that are directed at doing what's best for kids.

It's important to remember that "the challenge of ensuring success for all students requires teachers and school leaders to work and learn collaboratively, reflect on their practice, and continually expand their knowledge and skills" (Darling-Hammond, 1997). Middle school teachers, by nature, often work in grade level teams, sharing information and collaborating at the school level. Sometimes they are able to meet across grade levels or with multiple content areas to have further

discussions around curriculum resources and ideas. Sadly, though, for many the "continent" stops there.

Technology is making it easier and easier to "bridge the gaps" between teachers and making geographical location inconsequential to the ability to share, collaborate, organize, create, and network.



*Twitter mosaic by Michael Fisher*

When one speaks of their go-to group for enhancing their professional practice, they often refer to that group as a Personal or Professional Learning Network, or PLN. These groups, however, are usually face-to-face and may extend only as far as the school or district level. With technology, we can expand that PLN into a Digital Professional Learning Network or DLN /

DPLN that includes a worldwide audience. The DLN capitalizes on the many available networking tools to connect educational professionals in ways that have never happened before.

When you decide that you want to maximize your impact on student achievement, collaboration is the key. What you do alone may be good, but team efforts always yield a greater harvest. Additionally, developing your own Digital Learning Network directly aligns



to components three and five of ISTE's National Educational Technology Standards for Teachers (NETS) that describe modeling digital age work and learning as well as using technology to engage in professional growth and learning. (ISTE, 2008).

The first step is to build your "Circle of Wisdom." This is where you move beyond your box, your zone, your comfort space. You move into cyberspace and begin interacting. You share with a larger group. You both give and receive support. You create content, you respond to others' creations, you find a niche, a place to belong and feel welcome, and you expand your capacity and abilities by creating and growing your Professional Learning Network into the Digital Realm!

The evolution of your face-to-face network into the digital realm can be accomplished in a series of steps to increase your transparency on the web, which not only powers up your own connections but also allows others to connect to you.

The only limitations are your comfort levels with technology in general and deciding whether you want to wade into the pool or dive into the deep-end head first. To power up your digital network, you don't have to do everything at once. Doing just one thing will make a huge difference in the way you discover resources and will have a huge impact on student achievement and teacher effectiveness.

As former classroom teachers who are now in administration and staff development, we cannot tell you how important our PLN and DLN have been to us in regards to our professional growth.

We started with just one thing; we were introduced to Twitter in mid-2008 and it has proved to be our go-to spot for instant help, links, and ideas. We use Twitter daily to find support from our networks of teaching professionals, to ask advice, and to get instant links

to things we are currently working on. In one week alone, we've added over 100 links to our social bookmarking accounts through Twitter.

How can posting a comment or question of 140 characters be so useful? Here's an example: a member of our DLN, an instructional coach, was asked by a group of teachers to help them come up with some alternatives to book reports. She logged onto Twitter and asked if anyone had ideas and, well, she was pleasantly surprised by the number of links, ideas, and suggestions she received. When we saw the post on Twitter, we posted the link to our "BookReportAlternatives" bookmarks. Not only did our friend get the link, but all those who follow us on Twitter did too. This "virtual" colleague was able to use the information she garnered from her Twitter network to build a wiki with resources to share with other teachers.

In our experiences, our DLN, thanks mainly to Twitter, includes educators from not only our local area of Western New York but also incredibly talented and reflective practitioners from Michigan, Kansas, Massachusetts, Illinois, Montana, Utah, North Carolina, Canada, England, and Australia to name just a few. Imagine how powerful your circle of influence could be if you had such participants and perspectives to rely on!

Naturally, our local Twitter members are the most powerful people in our network because we share the common bond of NYS assessments and struggle with the same initiatives, but our out of state connections have proven to be as much if not more helpful in providing perspectives and approaches to addressing school initiatives such as assessment strategies, instructional coaching, and curriculum mapping that we have not been exposed to as of yet.

We've mentioned several different modes of connectivity so far, but we're going to go



through them one by one in this section so that it creates a virtual menu of options for creating your DLN. We are in a new era—a digital era that demands a new digital pedagogy. Remember, you don't have to be an expert. All it takes is doing just one thing.

The main tool you'll want to consider using is Twitter. Twitter is a microblogging platform based on brevity and connectivity. You can follow people that are doing similar things to you and have an infinite resource for discovering new methods, websites, lesson plans, or just dialogue with like-minded colleagues around the world. We liken it to 24-7 professional development that is focused solely on us and our needs, while fitting in with the needs of others in a giant PD puzzle!

Another tool we use regularly in our DLN is Wikispaces for educators. Wikis are basically free websites that you build yourself or in groups and are very easy to use. You can upload videos, files, documents, insert links, and utilize the discussion tab to foster engaging conversations about the work we do as educators, leaders, instructional coaches, and curriculum specialists. These wikis are active, living websites that allow collaboration, sharing, communication, discussion, and collegiality on a level most have never seen before.

By using social bookmarking sites, teachers can cut their internet resource "hunting" time nearly in half and find some innovative, engaging, and powerful ways to challenge their students by providing them with an endless collection of resources.

Go to Delicious or Diigo, set up a free account with an email address, and start searching for "tags" or phrases of the content you are working on. When you find good sites that you think you can use, save them to your own bookmarks and "tag" them with key

phrases so that you can find them quickly. Rather than creating a never-ending line of favorites on your desktop, use a social bookmarking site to tag these favorites, write a brief description of the usefulness of the site, and, most importantly, keep your favorites categorized, organized, and easier to find. Why waste time doing a traditional internet

search and getting over a million hits when we can go straight to our Social Bookmarking sites and find focused results that another educator has already found useful?

In addition, when you find someone's bookmarks helpful, become a "fan" by clicking on their username or befriending them, depending on the service. In this way your network begins growing and you begin sharing links with other like-minded professionals. Don't forget to give back; once you have an account established, teach a colleague how to do the same thing and then add each other to your networks. Now you're sharing bookmarks, building an enormous database of resources for unit building in your classroom, and saving yourself precious time in the process.

One thing you'll want to consider at the outset is how you'll keep up with many different applications. We use one of the popular Google Tools called iGoogle. iGoogle is a personal portal page, or personal home page



*Building Your Circle of Wisdom,  
a wordle by "Ellis Fisher"*



that allows you to create a page full of content, nested in modules or “gadgets” that you choose yourself. This way, all of your online activities can be housed in one spot making your digital footprint that much easier to follow.

You can add gadgets for each of the tools we’ve mentioned here in addition to gadgets for your email, other interests you may have, and other Google applications such as Google Reader, which gives you a daily feed of blogs that you subscribe to without having to visit any single site directly.

Once all of this is set up, the last thing you’ll want to do is jump in and get involved. Post your own messages, write your own blog thoughts, create a wiki, add links to your social bookmarks and invite others to see them. From there, become more deeply entrenched in your network by commenting on others’ blogs, continuing a conversation on Twitter or Facebook, contributing to someone’s wiki, and continuously searching for professionals to bring into your network, increasing its power with every addition. When you are looking for resources or help, your network may be able to provide you with just the opportunity you need at just the right time!

## Resources

<http://delicious.com>  
<http://www.diigo.com>  
<http://twitter.com>  
<http://www.google.com/reader>  
<http://www.wikispaces.com>  
<http://progrowing.wikispaces.com>

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