

## The Networked Teacher: Making PLNs work for you

### TEACHER'S NOTES

#### NOTES

The following materials are based upon 'The Networked Teacher: Making PLNs work for you', a session delivered by Karen Benson and Sophia Khan at UECA PD Fest 2013 in Sydney, and it also draws on similar sessions given by Michael Griffiths, Kyle Smith and John Smith in Queensland, and Lesley Ciocarelli and Andrea Wade at CamTESOL 2013.

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#### ABSTRACT

***NB: This is the abstract that was used for 'The Networked Teacher' workshop at UECA PD Fest. It is included in case workshop presenters are required to submit something similar in their context.***

'This interactive workshop explores the notion of a community of practice tailored to the evolving needs of the individual teacher, trainer or manager, whose interests and interactions in turn contribute to the strength of the community. Drawing on the concept of 'the networked teacher' (Couros, 2008), participants will have the opportunity to reflect on their own personal learning network (PLN) and collaborate on ideas for how a more fully 'connected' environment could benefit them in terms of professional support and development. Using a range of online platforms, participants will explore a real community specifically geared towards helping ELT professionals from Australia and beyond to connect, share ideas and learn from each other ('AusELT'). Attendees will participate in a live demonstration of how the AusELT community interacts on social media, and will be able to contribute their ideas for future 'chat' topics and projects within the community. They will leave the workshop with an expanded PLN and a number of 'meeting points' to help them continue to access the network in the way that best suits them.'

## **OUTCOMES FOR PARTICIPANTS**

- explore the notion of a PLN as a personalised 'community of practice'
- identify your current PLN
- understand how developing your PLN can benefit you personally and professionally
- explore a PLN in practice via a range of online platforms
- experience how these platforms work and discuss the issues involved
- identify specific ways in which an online PLN can help you
- leave with fresh ideas for continuing developing your PLN in ways that suit you

## **TIME**

45mins-1.5hrs

## **MATERIALS**

- Powerpoint presentation with projection capabilities
- Wifi or BYOD with Internet access
- Sentence heads (photocopied)
- Summary handout (see separate PDF)

## **GENERAL NOTES**

- Feel free to use, select and adapt the materials as you wish. Not everything will be suitable for or relevant to all groups.
- If possible try to find out the level of tech awareness of your group, perhaps by offering an online survey prior to your session. Unless you know otherwise, don't assume any knowledge of technical terms, apps or sites, or tech 'how to' knowledge – be prepared to gloss everything.
- Make it seem achievable and avoid overwhelming the group with terminology, stats, etc.
- Go slowly - less is more. Try to spend as much time as you can getting participants to look at and try out the online PLN platforms.
- Emphasise the human and personal aspect - what a PLN has meant for YOU, and brought for YOU and consequently what it can bring for them.
- Emphasise the PLN, rather than the media it uses - encourage participants to find a platform for connecting that suits them (small things can lead to bigger things!)

## WORKSHOP OUTLINE

### 1. What is a PLN?

- Defining a PLN
- A typical PLN
- A 'networked' PLN

### 2. Why develop your PLN?

- Personal reasons
- Learning reasons
- PLN stories

### 3. Explore

- A PLN via Blog and Facebook
- What is Twitter?
- Using Twitter for professional reading
- Accessing the PLN on Twitter
- Finding what works for you

### 4. Developing your PLN

- What do you want from a PLN?
- Where to go from here

## WORKSHOP NOTES

### 1. What is a PLN?

- **Defining a PLN**
  - What is a PLN? Option to use gapped definition on SLIDE 2. To discuss in pairs/groups, then whole group feedback.
  - If SLIDE 2 used, point out that the Wikipedia definition is not gospel, e.g.: does it have to be informal? Can it only consist of people?
  - Summarise what a PLN is for teachers
- **A typical PLN**
  - Elicit ideas for and draw up (or show Couros' diagram of) a 'typical teacher network' (SLIDE 3)
  - Point out how a network can consist of both people and 'things', e.g.: curriculum documents, websites. (NB: Some prefer the term PLE [Personal Learning Environment])

- Get Ts to draw their own network diagram – monitor. (SLIDE 4)
- Discussion (SLIDE 4): In pairs or small groups, Ts discuss their current PLN and ways to expand it – they may be able to get good ideas from each other
- **A ‘networked’ PLN**
  - Show image of a networked PLN/PLE (SLIDE 5, or your own, or many more images online)
  - Briefly discuss some of the key features/differences

## 2. Why develop your PLN?

### ▪ Personal reasons

Networking is something we need to do in this day and age. Sum up some of the personal benefits (SLIDE 6), e.g.:

- Find what you need, when you need – e.g., *\*that\** lesson plan
- Be supported by people who know what you are going through
- Be inspired by those around you
- All tailored exactly to your individual needs and context
- No one has to feel isolated – you can find like-minded teachers

### ▪ Learning reasons

*[NB: This gives some theoretical backdrop. You might want to omit it depending on your aims/group]*

Point out that despite great personal reasons, many people just don’t feel they have the time to invest in a social networking platform, such as Twitter or Facebook. Maybe they see it as a fad/bandwagon, or just too troublesome (many participants will be agreeing with you here). But there are other ‘learning’ reasons which make it almost essential (SLIDE 7):

- We live in a time when knowledge is increasing at an exponential rate. People’s roles, jobs and skills change many times over a lifetime - so the ability to keep learning essential. **Learning is more critical than knowing.** ‘Our ability to learn what we need for tomorrow is more important than what we know today’ (Siemens)
- This is a basic principle of **connectivism**, an influential theory of learning for a digital age first put forward by George Siemens.
- He also said **‘the network is the learning’** - new knowledge can be found in many places, distributed across a network of connections, so in order to learn we need to be able to ‘construct and traverse those networks’ (NB ‘network’= the **pipeline** (how you connect), **people** (who can tell you what you need to

know) or **things** (e.g. websites, corpus data)

- In the 'old' days, new knowledge was only available through universities, conferences or articles. Nowadays this know-how is available to EVERYONE, we just have to know where to look - or who to ask.
- SLIDE 8: We can't just stay at the level of our classroom/department. We can't ignore these changes in learning. We all need to learn to travel the network, to gather the knowledge that we need, as individuals. We can feed this greater knowledge back into our wider world to improve practice in classrooms, organisations, the EFL industry, policy-making . . . This is one of the main ways we can increase the professionalism of our industry.

- **PLN stories**

(SLIDE 9) Make your own page of 'PLN stories' here. Talk about how you were affected personally, professionally, and in terms of learning (there will be crossover!) The important thing is, to convey the fact that you care about it and see value in it – if participants can see how it is relevant to you, they will start to see how it could be relevant to them.

### 3. Explore

- **A PLN via Blog and Facebook**

(SLIDE 10) Divide into group A & B: A looks at <http://auselt.com> (the #AusELT blog), and B looks at <https://www.facebook.com/groups/428684860500896/> (the #AusELT Facebook page). What kind of content can they find? What do they find useful/interesting? Monitor throughout, and conduct brief feedback.

- **What is Twitter?**

Show a tweet and explain briefly how it works (SLIDE 11). Keep it simple and point out @names ('address') and #hashtags (keywords or groups, for our purposes)

- **Using Twitter for professional reading**

Before the session, set up a dummy Twitter account. In the session, log in and show how to type keywords/hashtags into the search bar to find useful tweets. Emphasise that if you follow teachers/teacher hashtags you will not be reading about people (a common preconception is that Twitter is people tweeting about what they had for lunch) – you're reading things they think is worth reading (articles, research, news etc.). Elicit something group members are interested in and search for that, e.g.: *Scott Thornbury, ELT, pron etc.*

- **Accessing the PLN on Twitter**

Demonstrate how hashtags can be used to enable specific whole communities to

connect and share relevant info and emphasise #AusELT and #ELTchat. If possible, send a tweet to the PLN the day before asking for a 'hello/what do you get from your online PLN?' – remember to ask them to reply using your session hashtag. In the session you can show participants some of the responses. Mention Twitter chats.

▪ **Finding what works for you**

If time allows participants can talk about some of the things they like the sound of or have their doubts about so far. Emphasise that Twitter and Facebook aren't essential:

- some people prefer to just read a blog – can still read the summaries of the Twitter chats, and can comment if wish
- can join Twitter and just read – no need to tweet, or even to follow people
- can join Facebook group, read and/or contribute to discussions without needing to be 'friends' with anyone, or sharing any personal information
- may find prefer other ways to connect – EA PD update, LinkedIn, Google+ etc.

Emphasise that it doesn't matter how you connect/access new information, just find a way that suits you, and give a few pointers to ease the way, e.g., start small rather than get overwhelmed and give up; find a 'mentor'.

#### 4. Developing your PLN

▪ **What do you want from a PLN?**

Hand out slips of paper with the following sentence heads:

- I want to learn more about . . .
- I want to talk to people who . . .
- I want feedback/advice on . . .
- I want to be able to . . .

Participants can choose which/how many to complete. Set a time limit for the task. In the next stage participants can compare in pairs/small groups and try to help each other with their target areas, or suggest another person/site/course etc. who can. This is a microcosm of how a community of practice starts working together.

▪ **Where to go from here**

Encourage participants to start small and set some realistic goals within the coming week or month, e.g.:

- Follow the #AusELT blog and/or other useful ELT blogs
- Join the #AusELT or #ELTchat Facebook group
- Join Twitter and do some reading, or follow some ELT people
- 'Lurk' at an #AusELT or #ELTchat chat.