

PLN

Creating a Personalized Learning Network for Professional Development and Growth

by Sharon Thompson Hirschy

- Developmentally appropriate practices?
- Developing curriculum for my classroom?
- Building partnerships with parents?
- Effective guidance techniques?
- Where can I go for help and ideas?

We often attend training that gives us only part of the answers we need. Technology gives us often too much information on a topic, but which information is appropriate and most useful? Personalized Learning Networks (PLN) (Whitby, 2013) can help! A PLN can guide your exploration and learning about child development and answer your questions and concerns.

A Personalized Learning Network (PLN) is a grouping of people, information, and resources that you can use to explore and gain a quick overview or an in-depth understanding of topics and issues. A PLN connects you not just to people in your organization or people you know, but people and resources all over the world who can answer your questions. A PLN gives you tools and assistance to problem-solve complex issues. For

example, when I had a concern about children's superhero play, I used my PLN resources, including NAEYC's website, for articles on this topic. I also found blogs by teachers who had dealt with the issue. I emailed someone who had addressed this issue at a conference and came away with ideas and strategies I could implement in the classroom and people I could contact if I had further questions.

There is a vast ocean of information available; some of it is good, but some not. How do you decide what to read and use? Who can you go to for questions and discussion of problems? Personalized Learning Networks narrow down your sources and provide help!

Personalized Learning Networks (PLN)

A Personalized Learning Network (PLN) provides professional development your way. You develop a network of people, social media resources, and professional sources that are specific to your interests and needs. You use your network to filter that mountain of information or get specific answers to one question.

A Personalized Learning Network is:

Personalized: You decide the topic(s) you want to explore and set your own learning objectives. How many times have you attended a workshop excited about a topic only to find the information did not meet your needs? A PLN offers professional development that is specific to *your* interests. You can share and discuss information with others or learn on your own.

Learning: You can choose larger topics, such as working with infants or directing a large child care facility, or specific topics or questions, such as how to help toddlers with biting, or how to bring art activities into the toddler classroom. You choose what you want to learn and how deep you want to go.

Networking: The network consists of places, resources, and people where you find your information. You develop a PLN for a specific topic or a general



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PLN that you can use for many different topics and concerns. You identify other professionals through social media and web resources from anywhere in the world who have similar interests with whom you can communicate, ask questions, and share resources. Your network will contain specific organizations, professionals, and websites on topics that interest you.

Why Create a PLN?

There are many reasons to have a Personalized Learning Network (PLN). For starters, it is the simplest way to get quality information and professional development. A PLN can provide:

- examples and ideas from other teachers and from experts in the field.
- opportunities to share and discuss issues and concerns.
- connections to other ECE professionals for support and friendship.
- information on any topic in which you have an interest.
- links to potential employers.
- collaborations.

Before I had a PLN, I already had a list of websites I used to search for information. So how is a PLN different? The key to a PLN is the word 'network.' It is a connected group of resources — people, web tools, social media, and websites — that gives you information that meets your specific needs and interests. It is built around a topic or idea, but as you meet your learning objectives, the network can change to meet new demands and needs. Your PLN may grow or contract or completely change as your interests and needs change. Most of us are used to asking people we know for information. But your best

resources are often people you haven't met who are doing similar work.

- Imagine collaborating with someone across the country (or even the world) as you develop a curriculum unit.
- What about asking the author of a blog you respect for advice on handling a challenging behavior in your classroom?
- Or maybe you are looking for a new job. You can turn to your PLN resources for help.
- Your PLN meets many needs!

Steps to Establishing a Personalized Learning Network

- **Establish clear objectives for your network.** What is its focus? To begin, choose one or two topics or areas of interest. Ask yourself: "What do I want to learn or achieve in using my PLN?" If I am struggling with issues related to guiding the behavior of three year olds, my objectives might be "to identify new strategies for addressing the behavior of three year olds in a classroom environment."
- **Use the Internet and social media tools to create a network unbound by time or distance.**
 - Choose 1-3 social media tools that you are comfortable using. All of these, as well as other tools, have early childhood resources: Twitter, Pinterest, Facebook, Blogs, YouTube, and Podcasts. To identify new ideas and resources, I turn to several blogs where I find useful information I value. And I often look at YouTube videos to learn how teachers are integrating technology into their classrooms.
 - Use the advanced features available with search engines to limit how

old information is, the domain, and the type of information (PowerPoint, pdf, etc.). You can also use search engines within a website or social media tool. Your favorite search engine is an important part of your PLN, so get to know the advanced features it offers. I love Google Chrome!

- Make a list of websites, organizations, webinars, and videos on topics that interest you. Some examples are TED talks, YouTube and iTunesU; NAEYC, Zero to Three, and the Head Start Early Learning Knowledge Center, and www.ChildCareExchange.com.

■ Learn to use your PLN tools.

- YouTube provides a wealth of tutorials on how to use social media, Internet websites, and apps.
- Conduct a web search for a tutorial such as "How to use Twitter in Education" or "How to use Google Drive as a Digital Notebook."
- Ask a high school or college student you know (or your own child!) for help. They are usually very familiar with social media, web tools, as well as Google; many public schools use Google Drive in the classroom and for homework.

■ Limit your sources.

- Use websites that end in **.gov** or **.edu** first (government and education, respectively). Sites that end in **.org**, run by nonprofit organizations, can offer excellent resources as well, but some are strongly biased. When using **.com** sites, choose those that are well-known and have a balanced, well-researched perspective.

- Find blogs that are mentioned in several sources. Those with large followings that are written by professionals in the field or by teachers who encourage developmentally appropriate practices are most helpful. For example, I often find myself looking at Edublogs, a site where many teachers create their own blogs, and Edutopia for blogs on many topics.
- Respected companies in Early Childhood and many government agencies and professional organizations have blogs and web resources related to specific topics. Always check the source of their information. Good information is based on current research and developmentally appropriate practices. I regularly check the wide variety of articles available from *Exchange* magazine for ideas.
- Resources on specific ideas or topics should offer connections to other articles, and have references from which the blog or article was written. Teacher blogs that share specific experiences, examples and curricular ideas are also very helpful.

■ Check your network regularly.

- Many websites and social media sites allow you to set up email or text announcements so you are notified when new information becomes available.
- It can be time consuming to set up and use your PLN. Decide when and for how long each day or week you will spend on it. If you are researching a topic, you might set aside an hour — then stop! You can check in on your network tools 15 minutes a day, every other day, or once a week. It can be like Facebook for many of us: you plan to

take a quick look and two hours later you are still checking it! Limit yourself so you don't feel overwhelmed.

■ Ask questions and share.

- Most online resources allow readers to post comments and questions.
- Email authors of information you find online, as well as professional organizations that relate to your interests, to ask questions. Most professionals are happy to share additional information with you.
- Post your own ideas! Share what you learn. Remember to give credit to resources and professionals who have helped you. Blogs are easy to create with free sites such as Blogger, WordPress, Wix, and Weebly. Tweet a website you have discovered with those in your network. Tweets of groups such as [#ECEchat](#) and [@TEC_Center](#) have connected me with some wonderful websites.
- Sharing resources and creating a shared PLN with other teachers in your program can make your learning experience even more meaningful. Each participant can focus on one or two resources and/or topics and then share them with the group. Maybe you want to create a place online to share information with your colleagues. Many schools have shared drives; Google Drive, Dropbox, OneDrive, and other online sites allow you to do this.

■ Keep your resources and the information you gather in one place.

- There are many bookmarking sites that make it easy to keep up with your online resources. Look

at Diigo, Pinterest, and the bookmark option in your browser (all of them have one) to save bookmarks according to topic.

- Create a document, digital notebook, or file in which you keep track of websites, blogs, and the information you gather from them. OneNote, Evernote, Google Drive, and other free sites provide such help. Choose one that is 'in the cloud,' has a mobile app, and is not just on your computer so you can access it from anywhere.
- Store websites, emails, files, and copies of information you find, as well as pictures and audio files, by topic or issue.
- All of these sites are searchable. You can even search photos you have taken using specific terms. For example, at a conference, I may take a picture of a slide I see and place it in my digital notebook. I can then search for a word or phrase in the slide and easily find it.
- Install an extension in your web browser (look for 'tools' and 'extensions'). One click will capture anything on the Internet and place it automatically into your notebook. I have several notebooks in OneNote on specific topics for my writing. I keep notes from conferences, blogs, pictures, and even video- and audiorecordings of children and professionals. My Chrome browser extension lets me quickly capture pages or URLs from websites. When I want to refer back to the topic, it is easy. I also share my notebooks with others.

In Conclusion

A Personalized Learning Network allows you to swim in a small part of

Steps to Using PLN with Staff

Administrators often struggle to identify appropriate professional development opportunities for teachers. Personalized Learning Networks (PLNs) can be utilized to provide more personalized training. (Check your state requirements for what can count as professional development hours.)

- *Create a list of resources for staff where quality information can be found.* This list can be sent by email or posted online in a digital notebook or common folder. Ask your staff for their ideas for additional resources. You can find many lists online and through professional organizations.
- *Ask teachers to identify one problem, question, or concern they have for their classroom or the children they teach.* This could be done individually or within teams working with a certain age group.
- *Have the teachers identify 2 or 3 resources from those you provide (or others they find) where they can locate information.*
- *Ask teachers to keep a journal of the resources they use, what they find, and how much time they spend, as well as how they will apply the information.*
- *Follow up to see how the information is being used and record the teachers' progress.*
- *Ask teachers to share what they learned in staff meetings or through email or other digital communication.*

Sample Form for Staff's Documentation of PLN Searches

Name:	Date:
Question, problem, or topic of interest:	
Resource and Time Spent:	
Summary (Include what you found and how you will use the information in your professional practice):	

that ocean of information. You will have opportunities to find and use ideas and information and make connections with others. This all leads to your becoming a better teacher and creating a better learning environment for the children in your care.

Reference

Whitby, T. (2013, November 18). How do I get a PLN? Retrieved January 21, 2016,

from www.edutopia.org/blog/how-do-i-get-a-pln-tom-whitby

Resources

General resources and tutorials:

■ **Connected Educators:**
www.connectededucators.org/

■ **Connected Educators:**
The Power of PLN:

<https://sites.google.com/site/educatorpln/home>

■ **Parent Communication: Using Social Media**
<http://goo.gl/fn3TDK>

■ **The Teacher's Guide to Twitter:**
<http://goo.gl/H8XjO>

Blogs and Twitter Chats:

■ **Hatch Early Learning Blog:**
www.hatchearlylearning.com/blog/

■ **Tech and Young Children NAEYC Interest Forum:**
www.techandyoungchildren.com/blog/

■ **Twitter Chats:**
#ECETechChat, #ECEchat

Organizations and Centers:

■ **Erikson Technology in ECE:**
<http://teccenter.erikson.edu/>

■ **Fred Rogers Center:**
www.fredrogerscenter.org/

■ **Head Start:**
<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc>

■ **NAEYC:**
www.naeyc.org

■ **Zero to Three:**
www.zerotothree.org/

Professional Learning Communities and Webinars:

■ **Early Childhood Investigations:**
www.earlychildhoodwebinars.com/about/

■ **EdWeb:**
<http://home.edweb.net/professional-learning-communities-with-free-webinars/>

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