

# ELT Ireland bulletin



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# Developing a personal learning network can ensure ongoing professional development: My journey

by Laura O'Grady (Teacher and Junior Centre Director of Studies, Centre of English Studies)

What is a Personal Learning Network (PLN) and why should we as ELT practitioners try to develop one? The aim of this article is to outline the benefits of a PLN by sharing my own experience of how I developed my own PLN over the last two years and how, I hope, you can use them to inspire your ongoing development as a teacher.

For those of us who have never heard of a PLN, Michael Graffin (2015) provides us with a clear and concise outline of what it is and how to develop our own network, is in his article 'What is a PLN?'

P stands for personal. It is a way of building your personal relationships with fellow teachers, university and college professors, and academic managers within the English language teaching community by being able to ask questions, at any time, and receiving responses you are looking for from the relationships that you are building.

L stands for learning. Traditionally, as teachers, we are accustomed to learning within our own language teaching organisation (LTO) via conversations in the staff room, in-house workshops or undertaking action research projects to develop our skills as English language teachers. Using our PLNs we can tailor our learning and personalise it for our own professional development. Should a teacher want to learn more about using a dictogloss in lessons, for example, they simply ask the question they need the answer to and wait for a response.

**"Teachers value talking to each other about their professional concerns, so what is it about these staff room conversations that makes them so important?"**



Solid Rheingold tips:  
Actions for cultivating a personal learning network.

Pic by wikimedia  
labelled for reuse

N stands for Network. Simply put, a PLN allows teachers and academic managers to interact and exchange information with their peers in the industry. It allows us to communicate with our counterparts across the country and on a global scale using social media sites. You are connected immediately to your network where you can both share your ideas, resources, experience and expertise, and learn from others, having now gained access to a vast network of online resources that you can utilise any time you need them.

Using a PLN to develop as a teacher does not take away from or diminish the importance of staff room interaction as Watkins (2013) so accurately states "Teachers value talking to each other about their professional concerns, so what is it about these staff room conversations that makes them so important?" (Watkins, P 2013, p. 4). What a PLN does, is it enables the teacher to expand and build on those invaluable staff room interactions on a global scale while personalising their own learning. In short, the teacher chooses who to interact with, what area to develop and how to develop it.

Why should teachers and academic managers develop a PLN? It is an essential tool for them to ensure that they are up-to-date within an ever-changing working and teaching environment. New ideas, methodologies and requirements from accreditation bodies are constantly being rewritten, developed or adapted to meet the needs and requirements of the modern-day language learner.

There are numerous benefits associated with a PLN. We can gain access to an array of resources ranging from online lesson plans, participating in online webinars, such as ones held by IATEFL Special Interest Groups (SIGs), to how to begin the accreditation process for your LTO. ELT websites such as, Teaching English and EAQUALS provide insights and materials for all areas of English language teaching and highlight the necessary requirements to become an EAQUALS accredited organisation.

We in turn can be the resource by sharing our experiences and our knowledge online and this can be accomplished quite easily by tweeting which is a perfect example of how developing your PLN can benefit teachers. Using or participating in #ELTChat or #ELTChinwag ('live' online Twitter discussions) allows us to generate topic based discussions where these discussions then generate an online reference resource for ourselves and others. As Coutts (2015) says "The key is to think of Twitter as a fast flowing stream that you visit when you have time. You enjoy the ideas that flow past while you are there, you grab the best ones for use at a later date and you let the rest float by." Alternatively you can access these live chats afterwards as they are often storified (a way to archive Twitter chats so that anyone anywhere can access them as a resource) and there as an online reference resource for ideas and inspiration. An example of this can be found on the Storify website, under ELT Ireland, where teachers can access information from teachers by teachers related to error correction and feedback.

Make international connections and online support systems. As mentioned previously, staff room conversations and knowledge sharing are an important part of in-house professional development. What a PLN does, is expand on that by casting a wider net, figuratively speaking, using online social media platforms such as Twitter, LinkedIn, Open Forum (OUP), where we can ask and answer questions from our colleagues and peers on a global scale. Literally speaking, we can attend international conferences such as IATEFL or ELT Ireland annual conferences, or attend small-scale ELT events, such as attending ELTed events or free lectures given by universities, such as UCD or TCD.

I began with focussing on my professional development. In 2014, I decided to do the Delta (Diploma in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages for experienced teachers) and further develop my knowledge and understanding of what it is to be an effective teacher and how that, in turn, could benefit my learners. I was supported by my LTO throughout this process with more experienced teachers, who had completed the Delta themselves, and academic management becoming my in-house support system via staff room conversations, peer observations or more formal meetings where I could inquire, respond and develop.

Little did I realise that by participating in this programme that I had inadvertently started to develop my very own PLN beginning with my in-house support system. Further development of my PLN started by simply posting a question or query online on the Delta forum and waiting for a response. As Rossner (2017) states, 'Collaboration and a spirit of shared endeavour are key to successful teacher development (Rossner, R, 2017, p.17). I soon realised how valid that statement was. The value of contributing online in the forum and communicating with other Delta candidates, who were at different stages of their own professional development, became a valuable asset. It was there that Sandy Millin's blog was mentioned and so began a further learning stage within both my personal and professional development.

Following the blog during the Delta acted as a springboard for my PLN, it was there where I could access experience and knowledge that was relevant to my current situation. I had a variety of resources readily available to me online: resources for Delta, tips for presenting, and a wealth of other EFL blogs, videos and classroom resources. Throughout the Delta year, my PLN proved to be invaluable, utilizing it when I needed assistance for particular modules or assignments, asking for advice from people who were focussed on their own professional development or who had completed the Delta, or if I needed help. I could do this at any hour, as my PLN had developed online, and get a variety of responses from experienced teachers and managers from all over the world.

Additionally, as I was studying the Delta through distance learning, it promoted the 'bottom-up' (Rossner, 2017) process of my own development, increasing my learner autonomy and pushing me to interact and collaborate online, expanding my knowledge and developing my online presence with my personal and professional network.

What did I do after the Delta?

When I finished the Delta, I no longer had access to the online forum, so I then needed to explore ways of how I could and expand my PLN. I discovered that not all PLNs have to be online, some can be face-to-face. I was encouraged to take part in an ELT Ireland article writing forum by one of my colleagues. At that stage in my professional and personal development I had no idea what ELT Ireland was or how this could cultivate my PLN. I was introduced to other teachers and academic managers, located primarily in Dublin, and we began sharing ideas and experiences, and by the end of the forum, I had agreed to write an article. I began to write my first article and as this process continued so did my learning. I found myself reading more and more articles from English Teaching Professional, The Pie News and the ELT Ireland Bulletin to find inspiration and ideas on how to write an article and what was expected of me. I found this process rewarding and I finally finished my article so it was now my turn to share my knowledge with other teachers and become a part of their PLNs.

The image shows three tweets from the #ELTChinwag discussion on Twitter:

- User 1:** Q1 What lesson structure/format/task do you tend to stick to (maybe too much!) in class? #ELTChinwag  
8:35 PM - 5 Sep 2016
- User 2:** @j\_s\_ I'll start with my over reliance on picture starters! #elchinwag  
8:39 PM - 5 Sep 2016
- User 3:** @j\_s\_ possibly using CCQs and ICQs too much- when my YLs start rolling their eyes I know it's too much #elchinwag  
8:38 PM - 5 Sep 2016

#ELTChinwag: A key part of a personal learning network

Pic by author

**“The key is to think of Twitter as a fast flowing stream that you visit when you have time. You enjoy the ideas that flow past while you are there, you grab the best ones for use at a later date and you let the rest float by.”**

Article writing is a lengthy process, if I wanted to continue to share my knowledge and experience with others and develop my PLN, I needed to find another method. This was when I tried Twitter, a concept and platform that I hadn't explored. Twitter is the essence of a PLN, it's immediate, you can tailor your searches and questions and you have a global audience. I started by participating in the #ELTChinwag or live chat with other teachers based on approaches and methods of teaching new language, a relatable topic that I felt confident I could share meaningful information with others based on my experiences doing the Delta and participating in action research within my LTO.

It was an intense hour of immediate responses, ideas and suggestions that resulted in a valuable online resource that I could refer back to when I needed it as it had been storified. People started following me and I them, further expanding my PLN using Twitter and my news feed as a reference for everything ELT. Twitter allows me to follow teachers on a global scale and use their knowledge and experience for my own development, you can follow live tweets from conferences that happen in different countries, you can read the storified tweets from seminars and you can read important news and events in the world of ELT. Using this particular platform has become a daily routine where I continuously find new ideas for teaching.

So, I was writing and tweeting and sharing my knowledge, could I be doing more? The answer is yes. As I mentioned previously, not all PLNs have to be online, so what next? The next logical step was to think about presenting and as daunting as that seemed, there was a nice easy way to do this. I decided to take part in the ELT Ireland ELTed events, which are short, half-day events held throughout Ireland, consisting of 15 minute TED Talk-like presentations. The experience took me completely out of my comfort zone, but I thoroughly enjoyed it. I was able to meet other teachers and academic managers and network during the break, exchanging information and contact details.

#### **What happens next?**

Reviewing the last two years and the actions I undertook to develop professionally and personally, I feel confident that I have chosen the right path to ensure that this development is continuous and that it will continue throughout my career in ELT. If any teacher is thinking about professional development, I recommend developing your own PLN. It encourages personalised learning while promoting collaboration with peers across the globe. It stimulates reflection and acts as an infinite online resource for those involved in all aspects of ELT, sharing knowledge, experience and expertise without being limited by time or distance. As Whitby (2013) states 'a PLN is a tool that uses social media and technology to collect, communicate, collaborate and create with connected colleagues anywhere at any time.' ([www.edutopia.org](http://www.edutopia.org), 18/10/2017).

As teachers who are working in an ever-changing profession, the question must be asked: why would we not want to develop our very own PLN?

#### **Further Reading**

- Rossner, R. 2017 Language Teaching Competences Oxford University Press
- Watkins, P. 2013 By teachers for teachers English Teaching Professional issue 84, January 2013
- Coutts, N. 2015 Why build a personal Learning Network? <http://thelearnersway.net/ideas/2015/9/20/why-build-a-personal-learning-network> 13/10/2017
- Whitby, T. 2013 How Do I Get a PLN? [HTTPS://WWW.EDUTOPIA.ORG/BLOG/HOW-DO-I-GET-A-PLN-TOM-WHITBY-NOVEMBER-18-2013](https://WWW.EDUTOPIA.ORG/BLOG/HOW-DO-I-GET-A-PLN-TOM-WHITBY-NOVEMBER-18-2013)
- TeachThought Staff , 2016 10 Reasons Every Teacher Needs A Professional Learning Network <https://www.teachthought.com/the-future-of-learning/10-reasons-every-teacher-needs-professional-learning-network/>

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