

On becoming connected

A wired principal writes about his introduction to a wider world and how his connectivity enhances his educational role as leader and learner.

by Chris Wejr

When I first began promoting the use of Twitter and blogging as a tool for professional learning, I heard all of the comments like “Twitter-boy that is Twittering, Twittling, and Tweetering” and “we have no time for this.” Since then, however, the number of BC educators both using Twitter and blogging has increased and through this, my personal learning network (PLN) has grown exponentially. Social media (in particular, Facebook, Twitter and blogging) has lead me to connect with others and is now the most effective professional learning in which I participate; it has helped me to become a connected leader and, in effect, a connected learner.

I realized my addiction to learning during the first class of my Master’s program; the professor challenged our cohort’s views on education in a way that left me continually pausing to reflect. The 20 students in the cohort developed into what I now know was my first PLN away from my school district. While still in my program, I had the privilege of being offered the chance to be a part of the BC Educational Leadership

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Council (BCELC) cohort program for two years that additionally expanded my network of educators who challenged me and offered support when needed. Through these networks, I had the opportunity for continual dialogue and ongoing professional learning.

By the end of 2008, I had completed both of these programs and was left feeling slightly isolated from the professional dialogue that helped me grow as learner and as a leader. We met as a staff for meetings and other informal discussions and we met as an administrative team for meetings but these were often single events and did not fill the void of the ongoing learning and collabora-

tion which I had grown to love.

In early 2009, my wife and I met with a good friend, Kye Grace, *@kyegrace*, a bit of an online marketing guru, about how we could use social media to help market my wife’s dance studio. About halfway through lunch, while listening to Kye describe how using Facebook and Twitter could help my wife’s business, he stated “I am sure there are a few educators on Twitter you could network with and learn from ... and I think the parents of your school might like a Facebook page to read about all the good things happening at your school.”

Following this meeting, I created a Facebook page for my wife’s business and I played on Twitter for

about a month; I followed business folks, organizations, sports reporters and a few authors. I then took the plunge — I spoke to the staff and created a Facebook page called *Parent Info For Kent Elementary* (www.facebook.com/KentElementary) and opened a professional Twitter account, *@MrWejr*, that I would also use to send messages to parents. Little did I know that this new Twitter account would lead me on a journey to meet passionate and inspiring educators from around the world.

The first real connection I made was with a teacher from Alberta, Joe Bower, *@Joe_Bower*. I came across Joe's article *For the Love of Learning* (www.youblisher.com/p/7617-For-the-Love-of-Learning/) and he basically described the journey I had gone through during my Master's program; I, too, began to question the use of grades, rewards, and punishment, and many of the current structures of school. Joe and I began to converse through email and he recommended I read books by Alfie Kohn, Sir Ken Robinson, Carol Dweck, Daniel Pink and Seth Godin. These authors, along with the resulting conversations with people around these books, have helped to develop my evolving philosophy of education.

My purpose, or social media strategy, was twofold: (1) to develop relationships, network and learn with others who are passionate about education and (2) to connect with and engage parents of our school in a different way. I determined that blogging was going to be a key part of this strategy as it would provide me with feedback around dialogue in areas that I felt were important to my growth. After about a year of tweeting and reading other educators' blogs, I jumped in and nervously created my own. A few

months after I began writing, our school made a decision to end our current awards ceremony; I followed this meeting with a blog post titled *Death of an Awards Ceremony* (<http://chriswejr.com/2010/06/02/death-of-an-awards-ceremony/>). Up until this point, getting 100-200 views on each post was about the norm. When checking the analytics of the site on this post a week later, I had more than 1000 views in a single day and I then realized that Alfie Kohn, *@AlfieKohn*, had tweeted my post to all his followers and then it had been re-tweeted a number of times. Not only was this exciting, but it also led me to connect with many other educators with similar thoughts; more importantly, it helped me to gain confidence in being challenged as an educator as many people did not agree

with our school's decision. Getting challenged online has significantly helped me in face-to-face dialogue; I have realized that getting challenged helps me grow as an educator and it is important to respond professionally rather than to react defensively.

During the rest of 2010, I began to realize how social media could power my PLN. I joined the *Connected Principals* blog site, created by George Couros, *@gcouros*, and Patrick Larkin, *@bhsprincipal*, that helped me network with many other administrators from other parts of the world. I read and was inspired by George's post on *Identity Day* (<http://georgecouros.ca/blog/archives/791>) so I stole this idea (a huge benefit of a PLN is stealing great ideas) of having students complete a project on themselves and presented this to

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Editor Richard Williams

I have tapped in to my PLN to help plan staff meetings and workshops around motivation, literacy and assessment. I have also used it to continually collaborate with other passionate educators to help me grow not only as a leader but also as a learner. Twitter has become my own personalized human search engine as I am able to plug in to people with experience who can answer my questions. Through this, using social media actually saves me time.

the staff; because this aligned well with our school goals, we hosted our own *Identity Day* (<http://chriswejr.com/2011/04/27/identity-day-pride-in-who-we-are/>) in April 2011 (and will have another one February 2012). The fact that I had connected with George led our school to host this inspiring event that left me watching every student in our school (K-6) proudly present on a personal strength or interest. Our students have also grown through connecting with other classes through teacher-assisted email, posting blogs and using Skype. Not only has connecting with other educators benefited my learning but also the learning of the students in the school.

A huge *aha* moment came for me when I attended Edcamp Vancouver later that month. This Edcamp experience demonstrated an additional benefit of an online PLN — the relationships formed online would significantly impact my learning off-line at workshops and conferences. My previous professional development experience went like this: I would attend a workshop, sit in the back and take notes, come back to the school, try to implement some of the ideas in a school or class-

room and usually after a few weeks, the excitement would fizzle out and I would go back to doing what I had always done. For Edcamp, I found out about the (un)conference through some key members of my PLN (teacher David Wees, @davidwees, in particular). I then started to get excited by chatting about potential discussion topics with other educators who were planning to attend. When I arrived at the school, not only was I excited about continuing the discussions, but it was almost like meeting old friends for the first time. I felt I knew so much about these people — their philosophies, their classrooms and schools, even their families — yet I had never met them. The day was spent with endless passionate dialogue around how we could create positive change in education; in addition, these conversations have carried on in blogs and Twitter and continue to this day. This

excitement remained as I attended the Edtech BC conference, key-noted by George and Alec Couros, @courosa. At that point, I had never met George in person but through a variety of means, had spoken to him on a weekly basis. I was able to spend a few days (in between and after the sessions) with George and Alec chatting about learning and education reform; you can imagine how hanging out with the conference keynote speakers enhanced my conference experience. The attendance at these professional development events demonstrated that my whole professional learning experience, both online and face-to-face, has significantly improved since this journey began.

Not only has the development of my PLN helped me as an educator, but it has also helped me to create more avenues to communicate with parents. Engaged parents and educators whom I have met online have helped me to meet parents where they are. At our school we now use



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Facebook, Twitter (@kentelemschool), Remind101 (a text messaging service), Flickr (photo-sharing), YouTube and Animoto (video creation, sharing), WordPress and KidBlogs (blogging) and many other tools to help us connect with the families in our school community. The key for me is to use tools to develop communication *with* parents rather than only *to* parents. Instead of only handing out our newsletters in paper form (*to*), we now also have them in blog form so parents can continually offer feedback and ask questions (*with*).

My PLN used to consist of our school staff, the district admin team and the odd list serve; it was effective but primarily local. Now, not

only do I have my local PLN, but through the use of Facebook, blogs and Twitter, my PLN also consists of thousands of educators and is now global. I have tapped in to my PLN to help plan staff meetings and workshops around motivation, literacy and assessment. I have also used it to continually collaborate with other passionate educators to help me grow not only as a leader but also as a learner. Twitter has become my own personalized human search engine as I am able to plug in to people with experience who can answer my questions. Through this, using social media actually *saves* me time.

This learning journey is just beginning for me. I encourage you to tap into the resources at your finger-

tips. Use social media to become a connected leader and a connected learner.

When beginning your social media journey, know your purpose; develop a social media strategy. Be patient. Observe. Build relationships. Maintain balance. Seek out intellectual collisions by challenging others and being challenged. You will have that *aha* moment and after you do, your professional learning will never be the same. 

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Upcoming EdCamps in BC

Edcamp is an organic, democratic, participant-driven professional development model for people interested in education. There are no keynote presentations, there is no formal pre-set agenda, and participants set the course of the day. Participants at Edcamp are encouraged to contribute ideas in workshops and are invited to share a short presentation or propose a question. Workshops are interactive, conversation-driven and not typical lecture style presentations.



EdCamp **Coquitlam** • January 14
<http://www.subproximus.ca/edcamp43/index.php>


EdCamp **Delta** • January 14
<http://edcamp.deltasd.bc.ca/>

EdCamp **Courtenay** • March 3
<https://sites.google.com/a/online.sd71.bc.ca/edcampvancouverisland/home>

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Cherokee people were marched to Oklahoma by the U.S. government over the infamous Trail of Tears and they carried bean seeds with them, he related. You can still find and grow Cherokee Trail of Tears beans.

Stewart is undaunted by the scope of this initiative. He sees a parallel between the anti-smoking campaign of decades ago and the nutrition programs of today. "Twenty years ago, the parking lot was full of smokers—teachers and kids—my oh my!" But education over time has worked. "It's the same with these initiatives." He said he's gratified to hear students talking about organic food.

School start up his fall, with financial constraints and a labour dispute, has been difficult for the Aldergrove high school and all schools in the province. Stewart's been relieved to have the Farm to School Program because it's provided so much good news. 

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