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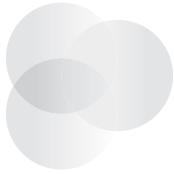
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# Introduction

Things do not change; we change.

—Henry David Thoreau

“Every time I go to school, I have to power down,” a high school student told researchers. This riveting statement, quoted by 21st century learning advocate Marc Prensky (2001, p. 7), has been cited thousands of times in magazine articles, books, blogs, speeches, and slideshows. Most of us would agree that kids *do* have to power down when they come to school. The most disturbing aspect of this quote, however, is that Prensky cited this cautionary message *more than a decade ago*. Yet it remains relevant in far too many schools right now. Do high school students feel any differently today than that student did at the turn of the millennium? In some trailblazing schools, yes, they do. But many observers, inside and outside education, still ask, as edublogger Ryan Bretag did in 2007, “Will we ever reach a point where students say, ‘When I go to school, I have to power *up*’?”

## The Disconnect

With the advent of social media, learning occurs anytime, anywhere, and students regularly pursue knowledge in networked and collaborative ways—with or without us. Emerging web technologies connect young people in ways never before possible. They learn from each other outside the classroom through smartphones, text messaging, and social networking sites such as blogs, Twitter, YouTube, Facebook, Google+, and Flickr—the list grows longer every day. The big question is, What impact does the growth of social media have on learning inside the classroom?

Think about it. Students are growing up in an environment where they control the flow of information, how they receive it, and the format in which it comes to them—all with the click of a few buttons. Today’s children have grown up with remote control everything, constant communication, and instant access to information in entertaining formats. It’s as if they are wired into existence through their mobile technologies, no longer tethered, but instead operating as free-range learners. They passionately consume media and are riveted to the things that

interest them online. Their world encourages connectedness. They expect a continuous connection with their family and friends and the world at large.

Everywhere they go, students are moving toward the future at full speed. For example, Sheryl's daughter has a new car that talks to her, adjusts the interior lighting when the brightness outside changes, and even parks itself. The global GPS network makes sure no one gets lost. She can simply tap into it using one of many devices, including smartphones. Then our kids get to school and find themselves locked in the past. Bells signal the beginning and end of class, cell phones must be off, desks are in straight rows, teachers lecture on and on, and paper textbooks are filled with preselected information presented in a convergent, linear format. No wonder students feel a disconnect.

Each year through its "Speak Up" surveys, Project Tomorrow documents the increasingly significant disparity between students' aspirations for using technology for learning and the attitudes of their less technology-comfortable teachers and administrators (Project Tomorrow, 2010). Students, regardless of community demographics, socioeconomic backgrounds, gender, or grade, tell researchers that the lack of sophisticated use of emerging technology tools in school is holding back their education and, in many instances, disengaging them from learning.

Although the technological revolution has permeated every other area of society, education—often viewed as a reflection of our culture and values—has been left largely untouched. Schools have mostly resisted the potential of wireless connectivity to shift away from teacher-centered pedagogy. The networked landscape of learning that is readily available to many students and adults *outside* of school challenges us to re-envision what we do *inside* our schools and classrooms—or risk a growing irrelevance in students' lives.

This book addresses where educators fit into the picture. What shifts do we need in education to make sense of learning in a world of constant change? What should professional development look like in the 21st century? What beyond traditional "sit and get" experiences can help us help children become conscientious global learners and leaders? When will every educator be able to say, "When I pursue professional learning, I have to power *up*"?

## Professional Development for the 21st Century

Although many national organizations call for schools to teach 21st century skills and for a shift to learning communities rather than traditional classrooms, few models exist to help educators become co-learners with their students.

As part of our own growth as teacher learners, we have used the web to develop and connect to a personal learning network—a group of knowledgeable colleagues and recognized experts who are also eager to learn and to share what they know.

As we thought about changes for teacher learning, in March 2010, Sheryl used the microblog Twitter to pose this query to her personal learning network: "How

would you describe professional development in the 21st century?" Within minutes, a variety of interesting responses poured in—all using 140 characters or less.

- "I can tell you it needs to be available any time, anywhere, on a variety of platforms . . ." *Steve Anderson, @web20classroom*
- "PD in the 21st Century? Highly personalized." *Beth Still, @bethstill*
- "Necessary, invigorating, available, active, connected, complicated." *Mel Hutch, @melhutch*
- "No more sitting in rows and chairs. It no longer comes to you, you MUST search it out and be involved in FINDING best practice." *Carol Broos, @musictechie*
- "I'd describe PD in the 21st Century as an integral and defining part of almost any job. It's also part of being literate today." *David Warlick, @dwarlick*
- "PD in 21st Century—learning from a PLN, putting that learning to use and documenting it—sharing with others as you grow." *Leslie Maniotes, @lesliemaniotes*
- "PD in 21st C: targeted, personalized but communal, active, action research, transparent . . ." *Derrick Willard, @derrickwillard*
- "As personal pd—a shift away from state/district/school pd with the onus on accessing multiple inputs using variety of platforms." *Cory Plough, @mrplough07*
- "For me PD is customized, immersive, ubiquitous, self-constructed, community based, empowering, & connective (I know . . . many adjectives.)" *Wendy Drexler, @wendydrexler*
- "It's available 24/7 if one wants it. Its reach is regional, national, and global." *Hiram Cuevas, @cuevash*
- "21 Cen teacher PD is blended, ongoing, relevant, job-embedded, collaborative and a combination of self-directed + informed by data." *Tania Sterling, @taniasterling*
- "Unattached. No rooms, few boundaries. Blend of the old ways (for those that can't let go) and the new ways (for those that need to jump ahead)." *Tim Holt, @timholt2007*

## The Need for Change

Professional development needs to change. We know this.

A revolution in technology has transformed the way we can find each other, interact, and collaborate to create knowledge as connected learners. What are connected learners? Learners who collaborate *online*; learners who use social

media to connect with others around the globe; learners who engage in conversations in safe online spaces; learners who bring what they learn online back to their classrooms, schools, and districts.

The digital era puts us in a position to collectively reimagine learning and to transform education into an experience with lasting relevance to the 21st century student. The potential to form global networks of digital learners has barely been tapped. Virtual learning communities have the potential to transform professional learning to produce progress and innovation on behalf of our students and ourselves.

Technology and the virtual universe are transforming the way we do most tasks in our daily lives. The time has come to reject incremental change and to radically *transform* education to reflect the current global community. Teachers must learn to model connectedness and enable students to develop personal learning networks, made up of people and resources from both their physical and virtual worlds—but first teachers must become connected collaborators themselves. The need for teachers to fully exploit the transformative potential of emerging learning technologies—and to do it within a global framework—is the focus of *The Connected Educator*.

## **Join Us**

To all learners—educators, teachers, administrators, curriculum developers, parents, and students—who have not yet considered the benefits of network and community participation, who have just dipped a toe into the torrent of opportunity, or who are already immersed in digital tools, we ask you to explore with us the power of connected, self-directed professional learning.

Help us remix the concepts of professional learning communities, personal learning networks, and communities of practice to support lifelong learning. Make use of and extend our suggested applications. Commit with us to develop a shared wisdom that supports *teachers and leaders as learners first*. As we offer our expertise to each other and work to solve problems collaboratively, we will build collective intelligence. This new way of learning will set our children on the road to a life of passion-driven, connected learning.

## **What Is Different About This Book?**

This book is a journey into what it means to be *a learner first* and an educator second. It is a book about you, about your professional learning. It's also about us—the collective *us* in education—and how our own learning can transform student learning through a systemic vision of professional development.

We draw on the research base and the demonstrated success (including our own) of learning in networks, communities, and teams to propose a powerful,



collaborative concept we call *connected learning communities*, an idea we will develop more fully in chapter 2 and throughout the book. The book draws heavily on our experience as members and leaders of connected learning communities for nearly a decade—and from work with numerous learning communities through Powerful Learning Practice, a professional development company cofounded by Sheryl and educator and author Will Richardson. At the time of this printing, Powerful Learning Practice has served more than four thousand educators in schools around the world.

In this book, we integrate what is currently working in schools with a new model of professional development. This model shifts the locus of control to you, the connected learner, rather than vesting it in outsiders, higher-ups, and professional development consultants who may have good content but lack your school context. Our intent is to help you, as well as the partners, parents, and policymakers who support you, improve learning and teaching in and beyond the classroom walls.

## How to Get the Most Out of This Book

This book is an interactive professional development journey that not only shares best practices, dynamic examples of network and community creation, and the development of meaningful connections but also seeks reciprocity in sharing from you, the reader.

If connected learning is new to you, this may be the type of book you want to first scan through, and then go back and read chapter by chapter while you ponder, take notes, and think deeply. It's OK to travel slowly, if need be. However, passively reading this book will not give you the same learning opportunity as active involvement. We encourage you to jump in and try the suggested activities as a way to begin building your own connectedness as a 21st century learner. Also, visit [go.solution-tree.com/technology](http://go.solution-tree.com/technology) for live links to the URLs mentioned in text and other materials associated with the book. You do not have to take on all the tasks at once—just start somewhere!

Each chapter is divided into three sections that explain the concepts associated with connected learning and give hands-on practice suggestions.

1. Each chapter begins with Our Stories in which we share a personal example based on our experiences in leading and learning in networks and communities.
2. A content section follows that unpacks the ideas being developed. We offer a few takeaway points or questions to consider in the Where Are We? and Where to Now? sections.
3. Finally, we ask you to Get Connected by participating in an authentic application that completes each chapter. This is a *crowdsourcing activity*,

take a risk and share transparently; from that sharing, learners become connected. How can connected learning communities lead to instructional improvement? Often, the confidence or self-efficacy developed online leads to a commitment to continuous improvement among and with colleagues in the local context.

We provide a more extensive understanding of the research behind elements of connected learning communities in appendix A (page 153).

### **Putting It in Practice—Connected Learning Communities**

For Mary Rochford, superintendent of Catholic Schools for the Archdiocese of Philadelphia, the connection between learning together online and instructional improvement is obvious. “We are all in this together,” she said. “We need to be better at connecting and collaborating. I am seeing the leaps the world is taking, and they are not minor leaps. We need to take advantage of opportunities, and bring our students in it, or we will find ourselves being left behind” (M. Rochford, personal communication, May 2, 2010).

## **What Connected Learning Communities Do**

Connected learning communities, the new model of 21st century professional development, enable individual educators to create their own online learning networks of local and global colleagues. Technology allows us to create a virtual think tank of professional experts, students, parents, and many others, all learning forward as we determine what’s best for children in this fast-changing world.

Connected learning communities are designed to support the professional development goals their members have chosen to improve instruction and subsequently bring about increased growth and achievement for the 21st century learner. Members of connected learning communities collaborate and work interdependently to achieve high levels of student achievement, while also focusing on their own professional and personal learning goals.

Because connected learning communities are built on the rich empirical foundation of what works in professional learning communities, personal learning networks, and communities of practice, their ability to achieve their purpose is strengthened by interactions and learning experiences taking place at many levels and in many contexts. Members of connected learning communities learn by making and developing connections (intentionally or not) between ideas, experiences, and information. They also learn by interacting, sharing, understanding, accepting, commenting, and creating—by defending their own opinions and viewpoints and reflecting on their current situations and daily experiences both in and out of the classroom (Aceto, Dondi, & Marzotto, 2010). Connected learning communities provide the context, resources, and opportunities to expand learning in