



# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>ABOUT THE AUTHORS</b> .....	ix
<b>INTRODUCTION The Power of Networked Learning</b> .....	1
Right Here, Right Now .....	2
It's Not About Reform; It's About <i>Transform</i> .....	4
The Learning-Network Divide in Schools .....	5
Marrying Facebook to Fantastic Learning .....	7
Two Problems and a Challenge .....	8
How Can We Help? .....	11
What Are the Steps? .....	12
<b>CHAPTER 1 Understanding the Power of PLNs</b> .....	15
The Big Shifts .....	15
Rethinking Learning .....	18
It's Not as Easy as It Looks .....	19
Learning Networks .....	21
New Literacies .....	23
Changing Skills .....	26
Network Effects .....	27
Does It Work? .....	30
Looking Forward Versus Looking Backward .....	31
<b>CHAPTER 2 Becoming a Networked Learner</b> .....	33
A New Way to Look at Learning .....	33
The Path to Learning Networks .....	34
Guideposts for Learning in Networks .....	35
The Tools .....	37
Levels of Participation .....	54
Making It Work .....	55
<b>CHAPTER 3 Implementing a Networked Classroom</b> .....	59
What Changes .....	60
The Benefits of the Networked Classroom .....	62
What the Networked Classroom Looks Like .....	64
Strategies for the Networked Classroom .....	70

The Challenges of the Networked Classroom .....	75
Making the Move .....	80
<b>CHAPTER 4 Becoming a Networked School</b> .....	<b>83</b>
Our Kids Need Everyone .....	83
Making Change: The Three Cornerstones .....	85
The Pilot: A Case Study .....	109
Beyond the Pilot .....	112
Success Will Come .....	114
<b>CHAPTER 5 Ensuring Success of Learning Network Adoption</b> .....	<b>115</b>
Hurdle 1: Money, Politics, and Technology .....	116
Hurdle 2: Technical Support .....	127
Hurdle 3: School Policies .....	130
Hurdle 4: Resistance to Change—The “Yeah, Buts . . .” .....	133
Closing In on the Finish Line .....	138
<b>EPILOGUE The Future of Schooling</b> .....	<b>139</b>
<b>REFERENCES AND RESOURCES</b> .....	<b>143</b>
<b>INDEX</b> .....	<b>151</b>

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## CHAPTER 2

# BECOMING A NETWORKED LEARNER

There is no single moment that Tony Baldasaro can remember that made him realize he needed to radically change the way he thought about learning. But for the assistant superintendent of the Exeter, New Hampshire, school district, the 2009–2010 school year proved to be a transformative experience when it came to his own learning, the way he thought about student learning, and his role as a leader for his teachers.

## A New Way to Look at Learning

“I was a competent yet introverted school leader,” Tony recalls. He was willing to share his feelings about education with his close circle of friends but was uncomfortable making them known too widely. Over the course of that school year, however, things changed dramatically. “I became what I would call a transparent leader,” he says, a shift that he describes as “the most transformational event of my professional life” (T. Baldasaro, personal communication, August 13, 2010).

For Tony, that “event” centered on the online global learning networks and communities he chose to become a part of that year, networks that in just a short time gave him a voice and a perspective on education that he could not have imagined a year earlier. While no one reason drove him to learning networks, he did attend a three-day workshop on the topic and “couldn’t turn back.” He started a blog called *TransLeadership* (<http://transleadership.wordpress.com/>) where he wrote and reflected regularly on his role as a school leader. He became active on Twitter (@baldy7) and started following and participating with other educational leaders from around the world, people who pushed his thinking and deepened his learning around the changing landscape of education each step of the way. Before long, he had literally hundreds of connections willing to share their ideas, provide feedback, give advice, and on occasion, meet up for dinner. In short, this marked the beginning of his personal learning network, which now consists of the people and resources who contribute to his do-it-yourself professional development (DIYPD, as some call it) whenever he is connected to the Internet.

“I’m still humbled by the readership of my blog and the number of people who follow me on Twitter,” Tony says. “These are people who now provide a tremendous amount of value to my life, people who impact me on a daily basis. The willingness of the community to welcome me to the conversation has been remarkable.”

## The Path to Learning Networks

Tony’s introduction to a networked learning life is no longer unusual. Each day, hundreds if not thousands of educators around the world take that first step to connecting online, to share ideas about the profession with other educators or to connect with other learners looking to deepen their knowledge around a particular topic—everything from cooking to politics to passions as unique as mountain biking on a unicycle. But Tony’s story departs from many others regarding the speed and scale at which his network has grown. Within a year, he had found not only a group of willing, passionate educators to interact with, but he had also found his voice in the conversation. Both have led to what he calls “amazing learning.” But here is the thing: you don’t have to be like Tony to experience some amazing learning on your own. There is a path for every person into this networked learning space, and all that is required to make good use of it is a willingness to participate.

And participate we must, if we are to fully understand the implications of these shifts at the curriculum, classroom, school, or systems level. It’s not enough to employ these tools and technologies with our students; we have to employ them in our own learning practice. Otherwise, nothing changes. The vast majority of classroom uses of blogs, for example, are little more than taking what has already been done on paper for eons and publishing it in a different medium. In these cases, nothing has changed because the person at the front of the room (or in the front office) doesn’t understand that a blog is not simply about publishing; it’s about connecting. The great opportunity these tools provide is that they allow us to interact with others out there, but it’s an opportunity that’s meaningful only if we experience the full potential that exists in those interactions.

As we move through this book to take a closer look at how we can begin to change our classrooms, our schools, and ultimately our districts and communities, remember that *it all begins with your individual practice*. These changes require a fundamental understanding of how learning networks work in your own practice. As Tony suggests, it’s difficult not to look at school practices in a different light once you’ve been immersed in these very different learning spaces. Those five billion people who will be on the Internet in 2020 are our potential teachers as well as our students (rich-howard, 2010). It’s hard to deny that this growth in numbers of users represents an amazing chance for all of us to be connected to a global community of learners. Most importantly, it also leaves little doubt that the learning future for our students resides in these networked spaces as well.

## Guideposts for Learning in Networks

Before we take a look at some of the specific ways to begin making these connections and building these networks, we'll clarify what networked learning environments and interactions look like by discussing the following:

- Passion to learn
- Sharing
- Quality, not quantity
- Well-developed sense of self-direction
- Balance
- Reflection
- Face-to-face networks

Learning in networks begins with our *passion to learn*, whatever the topic. Just because you are an educator doesn't mean you have to start by building your network around the subject you teach. The great news about being online today is that it doesn't matter what your passion is, someone else out there shares it. Whether it's making stained glass or the Liverpool soccer team, finding that person, making a connection, and learning with her may do more to inform your ability to eventually help your students along their own paths than just staying within the area of your classroom expertise. In many ways, what we learn about how to interact with others online is just as important as what we learn about the topic at hand.

Those connections start with *sharing*, which is the lifeblood of networked learning. Just as we seek those who add value to our learning lives, succeeding in these networked spaces requires that we give back as much if not more than we receive. Whether it's posting a great link on Twitter, saving a bookmark to Diigo, or publishing a video of a presentation at your school (all of which we'll talk about in more depth in a moment), the easiest way to enhance your own networked learning experience is to share as much of the valuable stuff you learn as often as you can. To whatever extent you are comfortable, these learning networks require a bit of our personal selves as well. It may mean a tweet or two about your vacation, posting a favorite recipe, or some other rich detail of your life, simply to remind us of your human face. Regardless, as Brigham Young professor David Wiley (2008) says, "Without sharing, there is no education." We couldn't agree more.

Once we do start connecting, it's all about the *quality of the connections you make, not the quantity*. This idea pertains to choosing connections carefully as well as choosing diverse connections. While we have always needed to



## CHAPTER 3

# IMPLEMENTING A NETWORKED CLASSROOM

Seventh-/eighth-grade teacher Clarence Fisher has an interesting way of describing his classroom in Snow Lake, Manitoba. As he tells it, it has “thin walls,” meaning that despite being eight hours north of the nearest metropolitan airport, his students are getting out into the world on a regular basis, using the web to connect and collaborate with students in places around the globe. The name of Clarence’s blog, *Remote Access*, sums up nicely the opportunities that his students have in their networked classroom.

“Learning is only as powerful as the network it occurs in,” Clarence says. “No doubt, there is still value in the learning that occurs between teachers and students in classrooms. But the power of that learning is more solid and more relevant at the end of the day if the networks and the connections are larger” (C. Fisher, personal communication, November 23, 2010).

Without question, Clarence exemplifies that notion of the “networked learner” that we talked about in the last chapter. Aside from reflecting on his life and his practice on his blog, he uses Twitter to grow his network, uses Delicious to capture and share bookmarks, and makes other tools like Skype and YouTube a regular part of his learning life. In other words, he’s deeply rooted in the learning networks he advocates for his students.

“It’s changed everything for me as a learner,” he says. “I teach in a small school of 145 kids, so I don’t know what it’s like to have a lot of colleagues. I can’t imagine closing my door and having to generate all of these ideas on my own.”

Clarence helps his students create these networked interactions at every turn. A few years ago, his students collaborated with a classroom in Los Angeles to study S. E. Hinton’s novel *The Outsiders*, using Skype for live conversations and blogs to capture their reflections on both the story and the interactions. More recently, his students studied *The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak with a class of Ontario students, listening online as their teachers read parts of the book aloud while conducting a chat in the background filled with questions, reflections, and predictions as to what would happen next. Over the years, his students have worked with kids in Australia, Brazil, Argentina, and China, just to name a few.

But here's the thing: while Clarence may initially be the one to make these connections, most of the networking quickly starts coming from his students. As he was beginning to explore the idea of the "thin-walled" classroom back in 2006, he wrote the following on his blog:

The connections have had very little to do with me. I've provided access, direction, and time, but little else. I have not had to make elaborate plans with teachers, nor have I had to coordinate efforts, parceling out contacts and juggling numbers. It is all about the kids. The kids have made contacts. They have begun to find voices that are meaningful to them, and voices they are interested in hearing more from. They are becoming connectors and mavens, drawing together strings of a community. They are beginning to expect to work in this way. They want to know what the people in their network are saying, to hear about their lives and their learning. They want feedback on their own learning, and they want to know they are surrounded by a community who hears them. They make no distinction about class, about race, about proficiency in English, or about geography. They are only interested in the conversation and what it means to them. (Fisher, 2006)

That's a very different picture from what happens in most traditional classrooms, but it captures the essence of what student (and teacher) learning can look like in schools these days. Thin walls expand the classroom, and in the process deepen our understanding and practice of all of those 21st century skills that we referenced earlier—the critical thinking, the problem solving, and the rest. As students begin to experience the powerful pull of connections to other students and teachers outside of their physical spaces, they also begin to see the world writ large as a part of their daily learning lives. Just as Clarence says these networks "changed everything for me as a learner," they also change our interactions with the kids we teach, the way we think about classrooms, and the way we see the world. Those are big statements, we know, but we see these shifts being played out every day in profound ways. More and more, they reflect the real world of learning that our students will graduate into, whether we help them get there or not.

## What Changes

As always, the change starts with us. If we truly commit to the idea of creating a networked classroom, we also need to commit to changing the way we think about our roles in those classrooms. To put it plainly, as George Siemens suggests, "social and technological networks subvert the classroom-based role of the teacher" (2010). When students can find content from many different sources, and when we can literally bring scientists and researchers into the classroom to interact directly with students, the traditional "teacher as expert" model is turned on its head (Siemens, 2010). We're talking about a shift in roles. Instead of being the smartest people in the room, we need to be effective connectors for our students, able to sift through all those potential teachers online, find the most relevant ones, and effectively use

technologies such as blogs, Skype, or others to bring them to our students. As Siemens says, we also need to be transparent about the process by modeling safe and effective techniques for connecting and learning with others. That all comes with being networked learners ourselves.

In turn, all of this changes the classroom culture itself. Instead of the teacher “teaching” and the students “learning,” teachers and students become co-learners as well as co-teachers in the process. The classroom begins to become a community of learners in which each person takes some responsibility for achieving curricular goals and outcomes. In some cases, students become classroom “scribes,” as Vancouver math teacher Darren Kuropatwa called it, rotating responsibilities for taking notes on the daily lessons and adding links, graphics, discussion questions, and other content to the class blog after class ends. As Darren explains it, “Over the course of the semester, the scribe posts will grow into the textbook for the course; written by students for students” (Kuropatwa, 2006). In a similar scenario, students work collaboratively to capture notes and other resources on a wiki page or in a shared Google Doc, taking what might otherwise be a linear, text-heavy book and turning it into a compilation of videos, virtual tours, interviews, blog posts, journal articles, and a whole host of other connected resources for further study related to the topic at hand. In the process, students find other potential teachers that may be suitable to bring into the classroom for live discussions or collaboration.

In other words, we need to unlearn much of what teachers historically have done, and instead begin to craft new roles and expectations for ourselves in the classroom. As Siemens suggests, we are now one of many teachers in our students’ networked lives, though no doubt a prominent one among other people or resources. In that respect, our role becomes one of helping students organize their own learning and navigate the complexities of finding and connecting their own nodes of learning in ways that serve them well. We also must act as expert filters, demonstrating the fundamental literacies around information as we find, sort, synthesize, save, and share the most relevant resources in our own learning. And we must be transparent models of learning in these networked spaces. Our students need to be able to access our contributions, interact with them, and learn from them online.

We know the shift to the idea of “classroom as node” is not an easy one. As much as we hope we’ve made the case for teaching our students to be self-directed learners who can take charge of their own education, we also know they must still pass the test and achieve in traditional ways. The good news is that passing the test and becoming literate, modern learners are not mutually exclusive. We can help students achieve both goals. For those teachers who have no personal context for networked learning, getting started requires a leap of faith, but we’re confident that once you’ve taken the time to create your own learning connections and networks, you will see a path to achieving important outcomes for your current students.

## The Benefits of the Networked Classroom

Before we look at some case studies of teachers who have turned their classrooms into networked learning spaces, we want to give you some idea of what those classrooms look like. When you do eventually find yourself teaching and learning in a networked classroom, you'll also find that classroom looks and feels very different from the one that came before. In fact, there are a few qualities of new learning environments that particularly stand out. Networked classrooms are:

- Transparent
- Collaborative
- Learning centered
- Accessible
- Communication based
- Supportive of problem- or inquiry-based learning
- Driven by authentic assessment

First, networked classrooms are *transparent*. Just as individual learners need to share openly in order to foster connections, classrooms also need to open up to the world online. Why? For one, classrooms that share provide great opportunities for students to learn about participation, publishing, safety, and network building in real ways (as opposed to the fairly contrived opportunities in traditional classrooms). Instead of the project that gets displayed on the hallway bulletin board, student work can be published to a larger audience that, depending on the age and circumstance of the students, might be encouraged to interact with the work by commenting on it or perhaps even participating in the creation of improvements. Additionally, transparent classrooms are more apt to create connections with other classrooms around the world, increasing opportunities for collaboration and cultural awareness. In the same way that we need to be findable to others in order to learn with them, sharing our work and the work of our students can lead to many dots on our classroom maps.

Second, networked classrooms by their very nature are *collaborative*. At a time when we have so many potential others with whom we can learn and create, the adage “do your own work” doesn't make much sense any longer. If we remember that “none of us is as smart as all of us,” we can begin to tap into the expertise of both those around us and those outside the school. Students can become teachers, helping both the adults and the kids in the room learn. Students and teachers together can begin to create meaningful things together, artifacts that have relevance and use far beyond the end of the school year. In this way, too, the primary activity