Before and after Twitter: Personal Learning Environments

(e-conference on the use of PLE / PLN in English Language Teaching presented at IATEFL Harrogate 2010)

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A Personal Learning Environment (PLE) is a system that helps people take control of and manage their own learning. The rise of Twitter (www.twitter.com) and other social networking tools has made it easier for teachers to manage their own learning and professional development, and communicate with others in the process. How can we help learners to do the same?

Introduction

We live in a very interesting time. It's a time of rapid change in technology. For many language teachers, the change is happening in the classroom too, as computers, interactive whiteboards and the Internet have started finding a place in our teaching context. For those teachers yet to experience this, the change in our learners, in what they do outside of class, reflects a new way of doing things. Changes in technology also mean many of us have a new world of information and contact with people all over the world. Many practitioners have started to wonder how best to take advantage of these changes. A good place to start is through online networks.

The power of online networks means so much that we are just beginning to take advantage of as teachers: we have a new world of information and recommended resources at our fingertips; we are always just a short step away from being able to share our ideas with colleagues from around the world; we can turn to a variety of other people from many different backgrounds and countries for help, advice, and opinions. And this is surely just the beginning. As Kevin Kelly (2010) writes in his new book, 'What Technology Wants' :

> "I saw online networks connect people with ideas, options, and other people they could not possibly have met otherwise. Online networks unleashed passions, compounded creativity, amplified generosity...Online they collaborated, cooperated, shared, and created in myriad unexpected ways."

This is all very well, but how can you get started? One of the easiest ways for teachers to start is by using a *PLE* and by building a *PLN*.

PLEs and PLNs

A *Personal Learning Environment* (*PLE)* is a flexible system that helps people take control of and manage their own learning. It consists of a number of different tools (a blog, wiki, social networks, etc.) that a teacher or learner chooses, around which he or she builds a group of people that can be turned to for knowledge, help, advice and support. This is the teacher's or learner's *Personal Learning Network* (*PLN*) . There has been a considerable rise in the number of English language teachers using the micro-blogging service *Twitter* (www.twitter.com), which is an online social network where people express themselves through brief statements (called *tweets*) of no more than 140 characters. This tool has started to make it easier for teachers to manage their own learning and professional development, and communicate with others in the process. There are fewer English learners who are using *Twitter* at the moment, but I believe teachers can help learners help themselves through building their own *PLE*.

Teachers who *tweet*

In Malcolm Gladwell's book *The Tipping Point*, the figure of 150 (*Dunbar's number*) is mentioned as representing the maximum number of individuals with whom a person can have a genuine social relationship. Gladwell says, 'putting it another way, it's the number of people you would not feel embarrassed about joining uninvited for a drink if you happened to bump into them in a bar.' Some people are now questioning whether this number is being changed by today's social media. The interesting thing about Twitter for teachers is that it's bringing people together who wouldn't normally ever meet online. Unlike previous specialist email groups and *communities of practice* which are usually private and centre around groups of teachers with special interests or from specific countries or areas, the PLN that teachers build around the people they know on Twitter is public, more general and monitoring of keywords (called *hashtags* in Twitter because they are usually prefaced

by #) means that through serendipity your *PLN* can include strangers who provide answers to questions and/or links to resources.

Appealing to teachers in my PLN before this article, and asking them to describe how thing had changed since Twitter was illuminating, a wide range of responses were received. Here are a selection:

- *#beforetwitter I didn't know your whole life story, #aftertwitter I know where you live, what car you drive and the colour of your socks*

- *#beforetwitter I had a limited network, #aftertwitter I have access to my network's network*

- *#aftertwitter suddenly many opportunities have opened, resources are plenty*

- *#beforetwitter I used to go on the web, #aftertwitter the web is brought to me*

- *#beforetwitter my staffroom consisted of 15 teachers, #aftertwitter it has spread across the globe with 100s of colleagues*

- *with Twitter you get much quicker feedback, much more immediate than with blogging*

- *#beforetwitter cold, boring, stressful #aftertwitter warm, reassuring, engaging, energising, motivating, creative*

- *life #aftertwitter means having a constantly updated global resourceand a motivated staffroom*

What became clear from the many comments is that building a *PLE* with *Twitter* at the centre has given those teachers who have done so a very useful network of people they can turn to, for all manner of different reasons.

Resources for Teachers

Let's focus on one of these. The recommended teaching resources you find through Twitter often have far more value than those you find through *Google* because they have been tried and tested in the classroom by someone in your network. Often relying on your network is now even a better bet than taking advice from an acknowledged expert. This curious fact was revealed by James Surowiecki in his study called 'The Wisdom of Crowds' (2004).

Surowiecki shows that the aggregation of information in groups, results in decisions that are often better than could have been made by any single member of the group. This works when the crowd is a 'diverse collection of independently-deciding individuals' and when this is the case, they are likely to make certain types of decisions and predictions better than individuals or even experts. In our case, you can add 'about classroom resources' after the word 'decision'.

Building your network

The value of a tool such as *Twitter,* and of your PLN, is of course totally dependent on the people you have in your network. As Surowiecki shows, it is better if your decisions are taken by a very particular type of crowd, so you should aim to build a large and diverse group of people from different countries and walks of life (not just people like you). This is why I believe Twitter shows most benefits when you start to connect to a very large number of people. I have a network of over 3,000 people, which I have built organically over the course of almost four years of Twitter use, adding people gradually. I don't recommend people try building a very large network very quickly, but I do think that following 100 people to start off with is a good idea. How can you find people worth following? I recommend starting with a list of friendly Twitter educators people that Barbara Sakamoto has created : http://twitter.com/barbsaka/starter-pln.

Twitter is not Email

Twitter is also only going to be useful to you if you start using it on a regular basis. The first thing you should do is to stop treating *Twitter* like you do email. You should not expect to read all of your messages. If you treat Twitter like a *global online staffroom*, where you join in the conversations when you have time and want to, then

it will also feel more like fun and of use than an obligation. I also recommend you start to participate in some of the discussions that teachers have on Twitter, so that people get to know you. Often these are ad-hoc and impromptu, but perhaps the best place to start is with an organised discussion. ELT chat is probably the best one, as they have a website to help you and also archive previous chats : http://eltchat.com/.

Students who *tweet*

Can the idea of using a *PLN* with *Twitter* at its centre be used to support language learning as well as teacher development? I decided to ask some of my young adult students if they wanted to use *Twitter*. Making it optional meant that only 10% of them decided to do so. Since then, however, I have seen the number grow to 20%. Apart from connecting to me and each other, they have found other people in their own networks that also use *Twitter* and some of these are English speakers. How are they using the tool? Apart from *tweeting* in their own language, they are also using English, and I have seen a number of them use Twitter in the following ways:

- to help each other with grammatical questions
- to chat to each other in English in a light-hearted way
- to chat to English-speaking friends and contacts
- to ask me about information regarding English class and exams
- to respond to some of the things that I have been tweeting about.

What conclusions can be drawn from this?

It's early days, but T*witter* is being used for teacher development and this should continue to grow. *Twitter* also shows promise as a tool for informal learning with language learners.

References

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