Chapter 2
Preparing K–12 Teachers for Blended and Online Learning:
The Role of PLNs in Preservice Learning and Professional Development

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ABSTRACT

Personal learning networks (PLNs) are a form of informal professional development in which teachers build and maintain connections to other educators and learning professionals and the resources that will meet their personal continuing education needs. Although PLNs can incorporate face-to-face connections, they typically make heavy use of social networking tools for finding and sharing information and educational innovations. In this chapter, the authors discuss how PLNs have been developed and used by preservice and inservice teachers, discussing the similarities and differences between the two groups along with the progression of PLN development from preservice to inservice teacher experiences. Next the authors discuss the role that PLNs play in helping teachers develop their blended and virtual learning knowledge and skills, along with ideas for how teacher-educators and administrators can provide support for this endeavor.

INTRODUCTION

Ashley, a high school history teacher who has been in the profession for five years, has been told that during the upcoming school year she will need to teach classes using a concurrent model of instruction. In other words, half of her students will be sitting at desks in her classroom, and the other half will be at remote locations, joining the classroom via a computer conferencing tool. Ashley's school offered a few

workshops for teachers, mostly focused on learning how to use the school-supported learning management system and conferencing tool and school policies related to using the tools and student privacy. Still, Ashley was not convinced that these workshops would prepare her for the assigned teaching task. At this point, she was fairly experienced teaching history at the assigned grade levels. She had decorated her classroom, developed lesson plans and assignments that she enjoyed using, and had learned how to facilitate a lively class discussion. However, this year everything is going to be different. In some ways, she feels like she is a first year teacher all over again, entering a new teaching situation and starting from scratch. She is not sure what types of learning activities will best meet her students' needs and fit with her learning content. She lacks confidence about her ability to engage students in person and online simultaneously. She would love to connect with other teachers who have done this successfully, probably as much for reassurance that it will work as for the exchange of teaching advice and tips.

Blended and online learning are new concepts for many teachers, just like Ashley in the example above. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020, it was unlikely that preservice teachers would experience online learning within their teacher preparation programs or be prepared to teach in an online or blended setting. Inservice teachers, with initial teaching degrees completed via campus-based programs prior to 2020, may have experienced blended or online learning as part of a professional development course or an advanced degree. However, it is unlikely that the curricular content of their experiences would have included blended or online learning pedagogies and technologies.

In the absence of formal learning experiences focused on the development of blended and virtual teaching skills, teachers might look toward their personal learning networks (PLNs) as a source of information and support. The COVID-19 pandemic, which coincided with the writing of this chapter, provides the perfect backdrop for considering how K-12 teachers might make use of a personal learning network to prepare themselves to teach students via blended and online learning modalities. With schools worldwide making a swift shift to remote learning approaches in order to keep students and teachers safe, teachers needed to quickly learn new ways of teaching. There was no time for teachers to enroll in university programs or take courses to learn how to design and teach online courses, and in many cases, those courses did not exist anyway. Instead, teachers needed to rely on the resources made available to them via their schools, their school district, their professional organizations, and the Internet.

What did Ashley do? First, she availed herself of all local guidance for teaching remotely. She attended her school's training on how to use the learning management system and videoconferencing system. These tools would help her … but the training was more technical than pedagogical. She did not receive guidance on teaching with these tools beyond information about the mechanics of uploading files and lecturing online. Because effective teaching requires much more than information transmission, Ashley sought help about developing a sense of online community among her students, and how to engage students in learning conversations and activities much like she would in the face-to-face classroom. In conversation with her local colleagues, she learned that two of the second-year teachers experienced online courses as undergraduates, and another teacher was earning a master's degree online. Those teachers offered some ideas based on their experiences as online students and shared a few online resources for online teaching. It was at that moment – when her colleagues shared those online resources – that Ashley knew how to solve her problem and meet her current professional development needs. She grabbed a cup of coffee, went online, and started searching for help. As a new teacher, she had sought lesson inspiration on Pinterest more than once, and now she returned there to find teachers who were creating and shar-

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