When asked what my greatest source of professional learning and support is, my answer is one that often surprises people: social media. I have found numerous resources, both digital and human, by spending time at a variety of social networking sites.

It might seem strange to those unfamiliar with the power of social networks such as nings, Twitter, or Facebook that a teacher could really find any professional learning of value in an online environment, but I can honestly say I am a more thoughtful, reflective teacher than I was just a few years ago because of the time I have invested in fostering my online relationships.

My first real experience with online professional development was when I joined the English Companion Ning (http://englishcompanion.ning.com/) in February of 2009. It was a smallish community of several hundred English teachers asking questions of each other and discussing various aspects of our field. I was amazed that I could post a question or a blog entry and Jim Burke or other literacy experts would comment or provide me with insights, feedback, or suggestions I hadn’t considered before. It made me feel as if I had something to share, ideas that were important. Additionally, I began to know many of the regular contributors and recognized those whose pedagogical beliefs were similar to mine. I found that I turned to these people the most for conversations about specific concerns or questions. My biggest leaps in learning, however, came when someone challenged my thinking or pushed back on my opinions. These challenges caused me to think deeply about why I believed certain things and forced me to articulate my ideas in coherent, rational ways, something I’d not been asked to do in the more traditional professional development I had experienced in my school district. Today, the English Companion Ning is composed of thousands of teachers from around the world working together to become the best teachers they can be.

Lately, my greatest source of professional learning comes from Twitter, a microblogging platform that limits posts to 140 characters or less. Many of the people I got to know on the EC ning are also on Twitter, and conversations here are fast and furious. The most efficient way to participate in professional learning on Twitter is to follow a chat. These are organized gatherings of people interested in a particular topic who have a threaded conversation using a “hashtag” (#) to label their tweets. For example, on Monday evenings from 7pm-8pm Eastern Time, Meeno Rami hosts #engechat. People who wish to participate in the chat search #engechat, and all of the tweets with that hashtag show up in their window. The hardest part about participating in these chats is remembering to include the hashtag in my posts. There are chats for a variety of educational purposes; one only has to join Twitter and follow a few teachers to find them.

For me, Twitter and the weekly and monthly chats in which I participate provide me with an opportunity to learn something new from people around the world no matter what time I go online. I get to interact with some of the smartest people in my field, including Jim Burke (@englishcomp), Kelly Gallagher (@KellyGToGo), Donalyn Miller (@donalynbooks), Carol Jago (@CarolJago), Penny Kittle (@writer), and Jeff Anderson (@writeguyjeff) to name a few. While some people are more active than others, I find that following people such as these helps me step up my game. They often tweet about new books and articles they’ve read, new ideas they’re brewing, and updates on important news pertaining to education. I can follow the links I’m interested in and then share the ones I feel most passionate about with my own Twitter followers or with members of my department.

Online networks spurred me to expand my personal networks as well. While spending time on the EC Ning, I first heard about the National Writing Project (NWP). So many of the contributors of the ning had participated in NWP summer institutes or were affiliated in some way with a writing project site, and I decided I needed to learn more about it. In the summer of 2009, I joined the Illinois Writing Project. Through my work with IWP, I have gained confidence in myself as a teacher of writing. I write more now than I ever did, and have gained the confidence to begin presenting at IWP events and state-level conferences.

Using social networks to further my learning has enriched my professional life in more ways than I can name. I have a support network, a never-ending source of inspiration and new ideas, and a learning network that spans the globe. It is professional development that matters and feeds my soul.

About the Author:

Melinda Rench is a seventh grade language arts teacher at Northbrook Junior High in Northbrook Illinois, and a teacher leader with the Illinois Learning Project. She is also a member of the Amelia Elizabeth Walden award committee.