Building Your Personal Learning Network, Part 1

Craig Roland

The latest catchphrase to spread throughout the online educational community is "personal learning network," which refers to a collection of people and resources you can consult to learn something or to get answers to your questions. Building learning connections is not a new practice for teachers. From the time we enter the classroom, we gather useful curriculum resources, and periodically call on colleagues for advice, read educational journals, and attend professional conferences in order to enhance our understanding of pedagogy and the subjects we teach. With the aid of some online tools, you can now expand your existing learning network to include people and resources from all over the world. Here are two tips to get you started—additional suggestions will follow in the May/June 2009 issue of *School-Arts*:

Tip 1: Join the Twitter Community

In my December 2008 column, I described several social networks that you can join to communicate and interact with other art educators from around the globe. Another option is to join the Twitter community (**twitter. com**). Twitter allows users to send and read messages that are limited to 140 characters. The content of these short missives, known as "tweets," offer a mixture of the mundane and the useful. They may include anything from publicity announcements to questions posed by the author, from links to websites, to descriptions of what someone is doing at the moment.

After signing up for an account and customizing your profile, you need to create a network of people that you will follow and that will follow you. Start by inviting colleagues and friends to join Twitter. Try searching Twitter's public timeline using keywords that describe you and your interests (e.g., "art teacher" or "NBCT"). Browse through the results and read the authors' profiles of messages that attract your attention. If you find someone you'd like to follow, click on the "follow" button under his or her icon. Also, look at the people they follow for more possibilities. Lastly, see Twitter4Teachers (**twitter4teachers.pbwiki.com**) for a list of teachers on Twitter by grade level and subject area. Add your name to that list. Conversely, the best way to get people to follow you is to use Twitter regularly to reflect on what's happening in your classroom and to raise issues or share resources that might interest other teachers. For tips on getting started with Twitter, read Darren Rowse's "10 Easy Steps for Twitter Beginners" (**snipurl. com/6w6o8**).

Tip 2: Set up a Social Bookmarking Account

Social bookmarking is a variation of the popular practice of saving and organizing links to Web pages (sometimes called "favorites") that you want to remember and return to at a later date. In a social bookmarking system, links are usually shared with selected people through groups or networks. Since your links are stored online rather than on your computer, they are available through any computer connected to the Internet.

Social bookmarking sites encourage users to organize their collections of bookmarks with tags, which are keywords associated with the content of a linked page. Other features available through some social bookmarking services include subscription feeds that inform you when new bookmarks have been added to your network or group, plus the ability to highlight and annotate bookmarked pages.

Two social bookmarking services popular among teachers are Delicious (**delicious.com**) and Diigo (**diigo. com**), which offers educator accounts with features intended to serve the needs of K–12 teachers. To get started with either service, you need to first register for an account and install special bookmaking buttons in your Web browser. To learn more, watch Common Craft's "Social Bookmarking in Plain English" video (**snipurl. com/6w6pm**). ☙

Craig Roland is an associate professor of art education in the School of Art and Art History at the University of Florida in Gainesville, Florida. He is the author of The Art Teacher's Guide to the Internet *(Davis Publications, 2005). rolandc@ufl.edu*