Build Your Own Personal Learning Network

The CTO Challenge

Building Your Personal Learning Network

By Miguel Guhlin

As a chief technology officer or director of technology, probably one of the toughest challenges you face isn’t keeping up with the technology, but rather understanding how to leverage it for your organization. While in the past, we were limited by the occasions that served as “learning experiences,” in the 21st century, learning isn’t restricted to a special event bound by time and place. We don’t learn just when sitting in a meeting, or at a conference or from 8:00 to 3:30 PM when school is in session. Today, we have the potential to tap into a flow of conversation, a web-based learning ecology, that we can learn from 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

As someone who awoke to that fact just two short years ago, I am continually astonished at the rapidity of change. In fact, I had my first — and so far, only — panic attack in July 2005, when driving down the highway to work, I realized that the world is changing faster than I can keep up.

The only way for me to respond to that panic attack was to seize control, to realize that I do have some measure of control over how I react to rapid, tectonic paradigm-shifts that inflict terror because they transform the world around me. Not feeling it, huh? Well, that means you haven’t looked over the edge and seen it looking back at you.

The only way for all of us to deal with the current challenge to our particular approach to learning — aside from ignoring it completely, which is about as effective as ignoring an oncoming truck — is to seize the wheel and create our own learning network. As technology directors, people look to us to model learning new technologies. Are you taking advantage of all the resources you can to streamline the often messy learning process?

Where Learning Conversations Take Place

- **Classroom 2.0**: A place for members of www.Classroom20.com to share links, Classroom 2.0 is a social networking site devoted to those interested in the practical application of computer technology (especially Web 2.0) in the classroom and in their own professional development.

- **CTOnetwork**: The focus of this group is to bridge the disparate organizations focused on CTOs, technology directors, and school district level technology issues.

- **EduStreams**: Easily track education-related uStream.tv broadcasts (EDuStreams). Find out more about those via the Education World
WHY JUMP IN?

Christopher Parsons shares that we need to do four things with the overwhelming amount of unorganized content — information, ideas, tips and how-to’s, and personal information — we receive; the kind of content that might be useful in the future but today might be thrown away or filed away in a way — paper notes, e-mail, bookmarks — that would not be useful and would probably be forgotten. Those four things are:

- **Read**: Read/watch/listen to the entirety of the content that you are presented with.
- **Evaluate**: Consider what the content means to you, and whether or not it is a source of information that intuitively seems appropriate/acceptable for a task at hand.
- **Critique**: Moving beyond evaluate, seriously reflect on the material and then form your own opinion of it.
- **Write**: Share your critique with others, so they can engage with you and the original content to develop a cohesive knowledge-product.

In the past, reading, evaluating, and critiquing were done to different degrees by each of us individually. It was rare that any of us actually published our critiques for others to read. Now, it is possible for me to share how what I read, evaluate, and critique connects with my own personal learning and schema. That’s powerful, because individuals like you and me now have the power to publish at will to an audience of millions. The key thing to remember is that as we externalize our thinking, it becomes less of “I am an expert expounding on what I know” and more of “I am a learner, just like you, sharing what I’m learning so that we can learn together through our common errors and maximize our breakthroughs.” Consider that our understanding of learning is changing. We need to think of learning as *an experience that happens when we connect with others*.

If you fail to connect to the network of learners, you miss out on a global conversation about what you are passionate about. And missing out is a darn shame because it can save you time, energy, and increase your reach, no matter how brilliant (or not) you are. That’s a powerful idea. Smart people get smarter because they have access to the network of learners. People who are just starting out are able to learn as fast as they can to accomplish what they need to do.

When I meet folks who are just becoming aware of the global conversation — usually because I push them over the edge in a workshop — I like to share several tools with them. They are essential learning tools that every 21st century learner should have. Using them involves action, but it is the acts of use that cast out our fear of change. The act of building your own personal learning network (PLN) is your fundamental act of freedom. Start now.

THE TOOLS YOU NEED

Although hundreds of tools are available, you only need a few to get started. Please be aware that the purpose of these suggested tools is to externalize the knowledge-building you do every day. It is also to take advantage of the potential power of networked learning. Thousands of educators are online, and you can tap into their collective knowledge to ask questions and have conversations about what you need to learn. The only expectation is that you share with them what you know. Each no-cost tool listed below does it in a slightly different, but complementary, way.

Get a Diigo.com account.

*[Diigo.com](http://www.diigo.com)* is a social bookmarking tool, similar to the popular Del.icio.us service, but Diigo also centralizes various learning possibilities. The social aspect of learning is important, especially with our increasing focus...
on conversations that add value to what we are learning. Diigo lets you bookmark Web sites and have online conversations about them.

Centralize your learning through web sites and the conversations you have about that learning by using Diigo. Because Diigo is free, you can encourage your superintendent and other administrative staff to become part of the conversation. That kind of networking empowers everyone who participates in the conversation. Below are some suggestions for using Diigo:

- Annotate curriculum documents and add stickies to show where tech integration is happening and could happen. That could be annotated for a group of curriculum writers.
- Annotate state education agency memos for your administrators. We get memos every day and they are posted online. Immediately, among a team, share the implications of the ideas in the memo, the most important points, and so on.
- See instructional uses of Diigo as screencasts developed by Clay Burell, an International School teacher.

Example: [http://www.diigo.com/user/mguhlin](http://www.diigo.com/user/mguhlin)

Use Twitter.com to build a professional learning network.

Many 21st century teachers are out there. Find them and create a Twitter network that can be supportive.
Many 21st century teachers are out there. Find them and create a Twitter network that can be a support group, provide inspiring projects, and keep you in touch with like-minded people. All of you participating in a workshop, for example, can be a group. Locate one another in Twitter.com and become a network.

You can use Twitter specific tools to connect with others. One of my favorites is TweetScan.com. It allows you to search the many “tweets” that occur each day (view a search on Education) and subscribe to the results via RSS. (See the “Google Reader” section of this article for more on RSS). That way, real-time comments about what is critical to your work come to you.

Whenever there is contact with other educators, there is hope. That’s the power of communications. I can’t begin to share the excitement I felt on September 19, 2000, while participating in a TeachMeet 7 taking place in Scotland. How did I find out about it? Obviously, I was not in Scotland. I was sitting at my desk working on work projects, when a “tweet” came in from Paul Harrington, an educator in Wales. As a result of his sharing via twitter, I was able to participate in the conference via my web browser and listen to speakers like Ewan McIntosh and others share what they are doing in schools in Scotland. Do you think that might have impacted my perspective about the power of global learning opportunities? How might participating in a dialogue with educators from around the world have impacted your perspective?

By combining the power of Diigo and Twitter, I am able to track more easily ad-hoc professional learning opportunities as they occur, as well as have conversations about them before and after they occur. That kind of just-in-time learning, as it happens, can be very powerful for educators. One way I approached tracking broadcast learning opportunities included creating a Diigo group. I invited other educators to join and now we have a collaboratively updated list of EDuStreams — educational professional learning happening online via uStream, Elluminate, Wimba.com sessions that are appearing online. EDuStreams are actually video/audio presentations and conversations done by educators about topics they are interested in. Twitter allows us to share those at will, while Diigo allows us to keep track of those opportunities and share them with others, even if they are not on Twitter. After you get your Twitter and Diigo accounts, join the EDuStreams group on Diigo to keep up to date on new learning opportunities.

Example: Norms for Online Behavior
Find it here: http://twitter.com with a list of educators to follow at http://twitter.com/mguhlin.

Start blogging.
Blogging is a process of reflecting on what you learn every day. How can anyone spend time blogging on top of what they do all day? The fact is that some of my best blogging research — when I decide on Future Blog Posts — occurs while I’m looking for something else. In fact, my focus during the day is learning something, either for work or to satisfy my own curiosity (which begins with a question or a wondering).

At the end of the day, early evening in fact, I quickly look back at what I tagged for a Future Blog Post, which is actually a “tag” I keep in Diigo. I might bookmark many items, but I only blog about those that are immediately relevant or connected.

In the past, I would copy-n-paste the link or the relevant quote or point that triggered my thinking into my blog program (Thingamablog) but now I just use Diigo. In that way, blogging for me isn’t a “special” activity, but part of everything I do. When I’m asked about what I know about a particular topic relevant to my work as a technology director, I am able to check my bookmarks. If I have spent time reflecting on the implementation of a technology-related project in my blog, I usually bookmark that as well and quickly can pull up the needed information. That work prepares me in advance for questions my job naturally throws at me.

So here I am again, coaching, and asking my students to trust that they will need what I’m requiring them to do: blogging, wiki-ing, social bookmarking, digital story creating, and online discussion. If they can get through my class, they will be able to apply those new skills to their teaching — and their students will
In a real way, this is a much different way of behaving and acting. Modeling it for our students is critical, as Cheri points out above, but understanding it ourselves is just as important. Before blogs (BB), I never would have done that (tag ideas, blog about my response/reflection, wikify my resources for others, podcast valuable conversations with other people for later listening). In fact, keeping a journal was a joke for me, even though I knew that every “good” writer kept one. It wasn’t until I started blogging — with a real audience reading it — that I understood the power of blogging everything.

Amy Gehran at Contentious Blog articulates this really well when she writes the following (via Teach-n-Babble):

> A blog post is not (or at least, it shouldn’t be) a writing assignment you must prep for and deliver as a finished package…Blog your initial brainstorming…Blog your research and discovery…Blog your interactions. Did you just have an interesting conversation relevant to a topic you’ve been blogging? Ask the person with whom you conversed if you can blog the relevant portion, and whether you can identify them…The clincher to all this is to use your blog as your “backup brain” or at least as a public notebook. Why not get more mileage out of work you would have done anyway by changing your habits toward managing information and communicating publicly? Instead of keeping your thoughts, notes, and conversations to yourself, post them.

In my recent Blog Your World! workshop at the PBS/KLRN ICTT 2007 Conference, I shared it this way, as perceived by one of the newbie bloggers, Juliet Ray at Deep Thoughts (drop by and give her a comment):

> What an exciting day today is! I have created my first blog. Hello digital world, here I am! I look forward to using this site as a way of not only communicating with others, but to “externalize (Miguel’s new big word/concept I learned today) my knowledge.” Additionally, it will serve as a personal journal to assist in reflection on my journey through life.

This kind of externalization is useful to others. For example, back in 2005 I wrote a how-to for doing something in GNU/Linux operating system that used KDE as the GUI (as opposed to Gnome or the others out there). In September 20, 2007, someone found it and blogged about it…if I hadn’t externalized my knowledge, made a “backup brain,” then the information would not have been here for Jim Plumb to discover:

> If you want to change the default view in the Linux file manager konqueror check out this article: http://www.edsupport.cc/mguhlin/archives/2005/04/entry_174.htm. I wanted to have the view in tree mode rather than the default icon view.

Another neat result of Jim’s discovery is that I rediscover my own blog entry when Jim writes about it or interacts with it. It makes me want to re-read the entry. In reviewing my social bookmarking network, I noticed Mark Ahlness had picked up on one of my favorite blog entries, The List Article. I hadn’t seen that blog entry in ages, even though every article I write is based on the structure outlined in it.

Blog what you learn, what you do. Soon, you’ll realize you know — and as importantly, discover more — about what is in your head than you think.

**Example:** LeaderTalk Blog for school district administrators at http://leadertalk.org.

Get started at edublogs.org with an education-related blog about what you are learning and how it is relevant to your work. Ask yourself a few questions to get started, such as What are you most passionate about in your work? and What is the hardest thing you do in your work, and why is it challenging? Finally, share your
Some common questions technology directors might want answered include:

- What backup software do you use in your district?
- Have you considered switching from MS Exchange to Google Apps? How did you make the transition?
- What special-education tracking software or web-based service are you using at the District level?
- What kinds of audio/visual solutions are you using to broadcast school board meetings?

And many more. Responding to those types of questions in your blog and sharing resources with other technology directors via Diigo will enable you instantly to share ideas about important matters relevant to your work.

Get started by joining the CTOnetwork group for chief technology officers, technology directors/coordinators, and others in district-level technology positions.

Use Google Reader to Manage RSS Subscriptions:
Most new web pages now have what is known as an RSS feed button. A web site with an RSS (real simple syndication) feed enables you to read the content without visiting the site beyond the first time. You can subscribe to a site’s content — and subscription is free — and any updates/changes to the site will be delivered directly to you. (Watch this Video.) The benefit of that method is that creating a personal learning network will not result in more email, but less. Instead of receiving email notifications, you go to Google Reader to review the latest updates and changes, and participate when you have a need.

My Example: Miguel’s Shared Items in Google Reader
Get Started at http://reader.google.com

REFLECTING ON THE TOOLS

The tools discussed here can save a lot of time and energy as you try to join the flow of conversation. One of my favorite quotes — which came to me via Mark Wagner — is, “He who learns from one who is learning, drinks from a flowing river.”

I hope you’ll continue to learn every moment and share that learning with others. The rewards are infinite.

About the Author

As director of instructional technology for a large urban district in Texas, past president of the state-wide Technology Education Coordinators group in one of the largest U.S. technology educator organizations (TCEA), Miguel Guhlin continues to model the use of emerging technologies in schools. You can read his published writing or engage him in conversation via his blog at Around the Corner.