

Infusing Tech to Connect

Whether your learning network is physical or digital, technology can maximize the learning for you, the educators in your network, and your students. Using technology can remove the barriers of time and space and create new relationships. Technology can serve as a platform for sharing new ideas and pushing existing practices forward in innovative ways. Here are just two examples:

- A third-grade class is frantically checking resources, whispering their ideas to peers, and checking a wall map. One team is using iPads to look up information about weather in regions of the United States, and others are taking notes on a piece of chart paper. They are in the midst of a Mystery Skype session: While connected via Skype to another class across the country, these third graders are trying to guess the location of the other class. Their teachers set up this lesson through their relationship as connected educators.
- Seventh-grade students are preparing to meet with their first-grade “tech buddies.” They have created an interactive math board for their younger peers using the wires and clips from Makey Makey. Using aluminum foil as a conductor, the teens have created a mix of equations and possible solutions for their peers to answer. When they attach a clip attached to the right answer, first graders will hear applause from the computer. When the answer is incorrect, they will hear a buzz and know they need to try again. This quiz board allows the elementary students to do some math review, while the older

CONNECT TO LEAD

students get to practice their technology skills. The students meet once per quarter, sharing their love of technology and building positive relationships across schools.

Although the technology used isn't critical, it provides a pathway for students to engage in learning in a fun and collaborative way.

Educators are using technology as a way to communicate, a way to learn, and a way to connect with others. When we provide students with a learning opportunity using digital tools, we are building the skills they will need to be successful now and in the future.

Learning in digital spaces can be powerful for teachers and leaders, as well as students. Heather Kaiser, a connected educator from North Carolina, explained the benefits,

Digital spaces promote the kind of knowledge sharing that I need in order to be effective in my role as an academically and intellectually gifted consultant teacher. In these digital spaces, I can connect with educators (in my district and beyond) to both receive and offer affirmation, advice, innovations, and ideas that challenge our thinking regarding educational practices. It has been my experience that the more we interact, the deeper our relationships become, and the more we are able to help each other grow professionally. (personal communication, 2018)

Meeting Your Virtual Network

Once you are active on social media for a while, you start to find “your people”—educators whose work resonates with you. Through their blog posts, tweets, podcasts, or Instagram posts, you will learn from these “Edu-Heroes,” and it won't be long until you feel a connection to these new friends. You may connect with these educators in Twitter chats or Facebook groups, and, if you are lucky, you may actually meet them in person.

Last year, for example, I attended a conference where I had the chance to connect face-to-face with amazing educators I knew from Twitter. It was a joy to make a personal connection with such innovative experts and positive educators as Jennifer

Williams (@JenWilliamsEdu), Tisha Richmond (@TishRich), and Sean Farnum (@magicpantsjones). When you have followed someone’s work and regularly read their content, you feel as if you already know them. What is even better is when they are just as positive and inspiring in person. Find your people. Follow their work. Connect with them digitally. When you have the opportunity, connect in person. It solidifies your connection and creates a lasting relationship that can benefit you and your school.

Voxer Gives You a Voice

As you probably noticed from reading earlier chapters, I love the Voxer walkie-talkie app that allows connected groups of people to essentially leave voice messages for everyone in the group. I love this tool for collaborative planning and especially for book studies. In fact, I first “pushed the orange button” when I joined a lively group of educators who were reading *Innovator’s Mindset* by George Couros. (To record your voice and send your message, or *vox*, you tap or click an orange button.) Each week we posted questions from the chapters and everyone responded throughout the week. It was a great way to connect with my network and engage in meaningful dialogue about a book that focused on the work that we were trying to accomplish as a network.

If you’re hesitant to try Voxer because you don’t like the sound of your voice, or you prefer to plan what you’re going to say rather than “thinking out loud,” you’re not alone. I had those same fears at first, too. But don’t make the mistake of thinking you don’t have anything important to say. Sharing your ideas is critical to growing as an educator. So maybe your first, or fifth, or hundredth vox isn’t mind-blowing. That’s okay; it doesn’t have to be. It does, however, represent the opportunity for you to connect with other educators.

If you’re interested in Voxer (voxer.com) but not sure where to get started, check out The Ed Squad at theedsquad.org/voxer for a complete list of educational Voxer groups—from technology to English Language Learners to makerspaces to school leadership and more.



Voxer
Groups

Twitter Is a Game Changer

Twitter is another powerful tool for connecting and breaking boundaries, and it has been a game-changer for my personal and professional growth. As you model connectedness as a school leader and get involved on Twitter, you may notice the lack of titles across the social network. Not that individuals don't include titles (my handle is @DrJacieMaslyk), but the titles don't seem to matter. That is the beauty of this digital network: Jump in a Twitter conversation and you will find pre-service teachers, principals, guidance counselors, and tech directors all connecting and sharing ideas together. It changes the game by creating access to experts and thought leaders across the globe.

The power of technology to connect educators is critical if we are to stay relevant in our roles. As educator and STEM advocate Chris Woods (@DailySTEM) explained,

I'm a teacher in a small Michigan community miles from everywhere.

Twitter provides a great forum to find ideas to use in my classroom. The educators I meet on Twitter encourage, motivate, and challenge me to think differently about how I teach. And I'm also able to share the creative things my students make, do, and say with the rest of the world. I'm so glad some kid was inspired by their teacher to grow up and invent Twitter. (personal communication, 2018)

Connected educators see the value in Twitter and use it as a source of inspiration and professional growth. It is a place to find new ideas and ask questions. Within the Twitter community, you will find those who push you to think more deeply and those who may even push your buttons, but either way it is a tool that you can use to meet your personalized needs as a leader and a learner. A connected third-grade teacher, Kristen Nan has found this to have a tremendous impact not only on her as an individual, but also on her students:

Through the use of Twitter, I have found my crew. These are critical relationships with the people that make up my PLN. These educators have empowered me to use my voice. They have walked alongside me in my journey. They have picked me up when I have fallen and have celebrated my successes. Even more powerful, they have done this very same thing for my students! Educators from around the globe enter my classroom each

day as a powerful force of opportunity for every child. The touch of a button and my students are connecting with an expert in California. They tweet about a concept, and they have twenty ideas readily available to view from Rhode Island to Arizona. No longer is education defined by the name written by one's homeroom number. Today, in the connected field of education, each child is given a global learning experience unlike any other. (personal communication, 2018)

Once you are hooked on Twitter, it won't be long before you are jumping into weekly chats. You will "see" those in your learning network each week as you join regular chats and connect with your educational family. You might even decide to start your own Twitter chat. It may sound daunting, but with some planning and preparation, it is actually pretty easy to do (Figure 6.1)

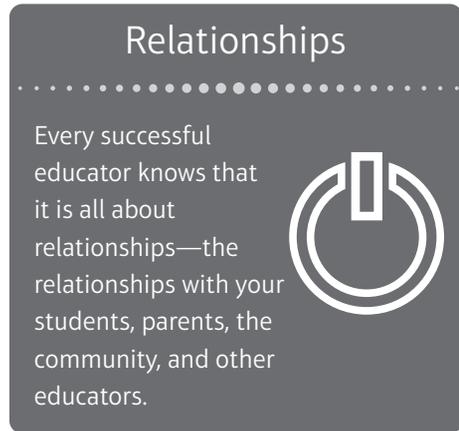


Figure 6.1 Powering up our leadership depends on the relationships we build each day.

Leading Your Own Twitter Chat

One of the tools that helped me to build a learning network around my work in STEAM and maker education was establishing a Twitter chat. I was an active participant in a few weekly chats already, including #satchat, #TeacherFriends, and #formativechat. Each week, I became more attentive to the way that moderators asked questions, how they responded to participants, and the way they promoted the chat to others. The more I thought about it, the more I realized that leading a Twitter chat was something I could do! You can, too:

1. **Choose a hashtag.** Because the focus for my chat would be STEAM and making, I called it #STEAMMakerChat. (Looking back, I should have chosen something a little shorter and easier for participants to type.)
2. **Choose a date, time, frequency, and length.** I determined that I would just do a monthly chat. The thought of preparing for one weekly was a little daunting.

CONNECT TO LEAD

Because #STEAMMakerChat was my first try at this, I planned for thirty minutes as opposed to an hour. With the busy schedules of educators, the half hour seemed just right.

- Promote the idea of chatting about your chosen topics.** For example, you can create images and slides and tweet them out with the chat's hashtag—maybe preview a few questions or issues you plan to discuss. I use the free version of Canva ([canva.com](https://www.canva.com)), which has all the tools I need for creating my chat slides. I also tagged great STEAM and maker educators with the hope that they would join in and support the discussion of the topic they, too, were so passionate about.
- Plan your questions.** These needed to focus the conversation and provide insight into the topic. My #STEAMMakerChat is three questions in thirty minutes, which really flies by. For times when it doesn't, I also plan some content to enhance the chat during lulls in the conversation. Once my questions were planned, I used Canva to create slides for each one (Figure 6.2).
- Grab your device, and follow the hashtag when chat time arrives.** Be ready for great connections, new ideas, and personalized learning in the palm of your hand.

Active in a number of Twitter chats and host of #PD4UandMe, Pam Hubler knows that staying connected through social media benefits her in the role of tech coach. From South Carolina, Pam connects with educators across the world on a daily basis. She said, "It's an amazing way to exchange ideas and get information fast from like-minded, innovative educators across the globe. Twitter has some of the best free professional development



Figure 6.2 Create slides for each chat question you plan. These engage participants and help to grow your network.

there is, and it's often more valuable than what anyone can plan for you.” (personal communication, 2019)

Even if you start small, you never know where your chat will end up. The #STEAM-MakerChat chat that I established almost two years ago still continues monthly and serves as a gathering place for this creative network of teachers and leaders committed to STEAM and Maker education. Come and check us out the first Monday of each month at 7:00 p.m. (EST).



POWER UP Case Study: Beaver County Innovation and Learning Consortium

Now serving hundreds of teachers and thousands of K-12 students, the Beaver County Innovation and Learning Consortium (BCILC) began as a conversation over lunch but has evolved into a five-district network of educators, school leaders, and community organizations. Founded by a group of central office administrators (myself included), the BCILC started with three districts—one suburban, one urban, one rural—and aimed to create a way for teachers in Pennsylvania's Beaver County to connect with one another and improve classroom instruction through creativity and innovative practices.

We mapped out a yearlong plan (see Appendix A) that would engage educators and school leaders in shared learning, professional reading, site visits, and action planning. For our initial consortium members, we selected a diverse mix of forward-thinking individuals: six to eight teachers, one to two building principals, and one to two central office administrators from each district. Our initial goals included three key ideas:

- **Engage to provide shared professional learning for teachers across school districts.** Whether participating in a hands-on design challenge or learning about new technologies, the teachers were able to actively engage in learning and talk about ways that could translate into their classrooms. Professional development that we shared included sessions on coding for Finch Robots with BirdBrain Technologies (finchrobot.com), working with e-textiles

(presented by a non-profit community partner), and virtual reality using Google Expeditions (edu.google.com/products/vr-ar).

- **Connect by visiting schools and organizations that promote creativity and innovation.** Professional learning sessions included an exploration of the connections between STEAM and maker education, developing the habits of mind, and the engineering design process. Teachers from different districts, subject areas, and grade levels collaborated on the meaning of innovation and ways that school cultures can support the kind of learning that extends beyond the curriculum and incorporates innovative instructional strategies. Between our professional learning days and school visits, we stayed connected through professional book studies using Voxer.
- **Innovate to create learning spaces within our own schools where students and teachers can learn in new ways.** An important component of professional growth is learning about new teaching strategies, observing innovative programs, and exploring new learning spaces. The teachers in our consortium visited area makerspaces and planned for the spaces in their own schools, as well as visited the Beaver County Career and Technology Center.

Team Yellow, a BCILC subgroup of four educators from three very different districts, is a good example of our network in action. Over the course of two years, Team Yellow participated in shared professional learning, part of which included classroom visits as the team planned a lesson together. One implemented the lesson while the co-creators observed, and then all reflected on it, even brainstorming improvements and texting ideas to each other after hours. These were teachers from completely different subjects and grade levels—elementary, middle school social studies, high school English, and high school biology. They were assigned to a group to participate in this professional learning endeavor through our consortium, but somehow came together to blossom as an innovative thinking powerhouse that drew inspiration from each other and channeled it to their students.

After the initial two-month “lesson-study” project, Team Yellow begged to continue working together because they loved the opportunities to visit each

other's classrooms and share insights on how to improve their instruction. They even asked to take on a leadership role within our consortium and mentor new teachers coming into the project. As their colleague and "coach," I was ecstatic about the possibilities for these teachers to be leaders and learners; as one teacher said, "When I'm with this team, I'm my best self!"

Funded and supported by the Grable Foundations, our consortium continues to offer unique opportunities for the educators and leaders in our county, growing and changing with their needs. The BCILC has welcomed three cohorts of learners in the last three years with teams of teachers participating in curriculum work, lesson study, and other collaborative projects, including the exploration of outdoor classrooms, wellness and mindfulness in the classroom, and literacy co-teaching using technology to connect across school districts. We have accomplished a lot, but also look forward to new opportunities in the future.

The POWER of 3, 2, 1

3 Steps to Take

1. Join a Voxer group, or create one of your own. This tool will help you to **personalize** learning for your teachers as well as develop **relationships** with other educators outside of your school.
2. Commit to joining a Twitter chat. Here are a few that you will find **welcoming**: #tlap, #masterychat, #whatischool, and #STEM4All.
3. Try an **unconventional** approach, and start your own network. Start small. You might just include three or four people. This can be a mini-network within your school or community.

2 Educators to Follow on Twitter

An instructional tech coach and connected educator at the Daniel Island School in South Carolina, **Pam Hubler (@specialtechie)** shares tweets about great books that she's reading, as well as tech tips. In addition to writing her blog (spedtech-geek.com/edtech-blog), Pam is a regular contributor to lots of weekly Twitter chats, actively pursuing new knowledge with others. As a System Designer (ISTE, 2018), Pam ensures that teachers in her district have the resources needed for the effective use of technology and strategies that will support student learning.

Jonathan Gerlach is a self-proclaimed "STEMthusiast" and advocate for STEM education. Based in Florida, he is part of many science networks and is active on social media. Known as **@STEMigo**, he recently started his own Twitter chat called #STEM4All and blogs at globaledstem.wordpress.com. As a Facilitator (ISTE, 2017), Jonathan navigates new technologies and shares his learning with others in his networks.

1 Learning Network to Learn More About



The
Compelled
Tribe

Developed by some innovative school leaders in 2014, **The Compelled Tribe** (thecompellededucator.com/p/the-compelled-tribe.html) started with Jennifer Hogan (@Jennifer_Hogan), Craig Vroom (@Vroom6), and Jon Wennstrom (@jon_wennstrom). All from different states (Alabama, Ohio, and Michigan), these three put out the call for a group of educators committed to writing and looking for some support in their efforts to connect with others through blogging. From that initial call, the network has welcomed more than 60 educators, including teachers, instructional coaches, principals, and superintendents, which are now divided into three "tribes," each led by one of the group founders. Each month, group members commit to writing at least two blog posts, one with a shared topic and one that is a topic of their own choosing. Tribe members also commit to reading each other's blogs, commenting, and sharing them on social media. The group also maintains a Voxer group where they connect on such topics as new ideas for parent-teacher conferences, the importance of mentors, and lessons found in educational failures.

Connecting to Standards

ISTE STANDARD FOR EDUCATION LEADERS

4. Systems Designer

Leaders build teams and systems to implement, sustain and continually improve the use of technology to support learning. Education leaders:

- 4a** Lead teams to collaboratively establish robust infrastructure and systems needed to implement the strategic plan.
- 4b** Ensure that resources for supporting the effective use of technology for learning are sufficient and scalable to meet future demand.
- 4c** Protect privacy and security by ensuring that students and staff observe effective privacy and data management policies.
- 4d** Establish partnerships that support the strategic vision, achieve learning priorities and improve operations.

Continuous improvement through effective professional learning can be enhanced through a learning network.

ISTE STANDARD FOR EDUCATORS

6. Facilitator

Educators facilitate learning with technology to support student achievement of the ISTE Standards for Students.

Learning with technology supports student growth toward the ISTE Standards for Students.