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**Your Personal Learning Network : Professional Development on Demand**

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# Your Personal Learning Network

## Professional Development on Demand

**Abstract:** Web 2.0 tools and resources can enhance our efficiency and effectiveness as music educators, supporting personal learning networks for ongoing professional growth and development. This article includes (a) an explanation of Really Simple Syndication (RSS) and the use of an RSS reader/aggregator; (b) a discussion of blogs, podcasts, wikis, folksonomies, and other resources that can be subscribed to via RSS, with examples of these media applicable to music teaching and learning highlighted; (c) a list of tools that allow one to search for RSS-enabled content of interest; and (d) instructions for accessing resources to create and develop blogs, podcasts, wikis, and folksonomies.

**Keywords:** age, career, development, lifelong learning, profession, teaching, technology, RSS, blog, podcast, wiki, Web 2.0

*Elizabeth arrives at school, heads to the music office, logs on to her computer, and settles in with a cup of coffee to check her newsreader for updates that have come in overnight. She notices an announcement about an upcoming conference that she wants to attend and quickly adds the registration deadline to her calendar. She is excited that teachers in California and Florida have commented on her blog post about an interdisciplinary music unit she is creating, providing her with suggestions based on their experiences teaching similar lessons. Elizabeth sees that a new podcast on music technology has automatically been downloaded to her computer; she will sync it to her iPod before leaving school and listen to it on her drive home. She also examines an ear-training website that has been bookmarked and shared by a teacher in Europe. It is impressive, and*

*Elizabeth decides to show it to her music theory class that afternoon.*

*Using just a few minutes of her morning routine, Elizabeth learns things that will help her teach her students today and in the future. Like all dedicated teachers, she realizes that professional growth and development are essential to her ongoing effectiveness as a music educator. Over the years, she has developed her professional knowledge in many ways, both formal—participation in activities, such as in-services at her school, conferences, workshops, and college classes—and informal—conversations with colleagues over coffee, reading journal articles, and observations of other teachers. While all these approaches have merit, Elizabeth finds the easily accessible, online, personalized network of people and materials from around the world increasingly valuable.*

*Music educators can engage in meaningful, ongoing professional development by creating a personal learning network utilizing free Internet tools and resources.*

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## Research on Professional Development

There is a growing body of research on the professional development of music educators,<sup>1</sup> and several key findings are beginning to emerge. Researchers are confirming what would seem to be intuitive: Teacher professional development needs are not uniform; one size does not fit all. Teachers' preferences for professional development appear to be related to the specific teaching responsibilities and the area of music in which they teach. It seems logical that the professional development interests and needs of the band director, general music teacher, choral educator, and string specialist would differ in at least some areas. It also appears that professional development needs may vary according to the stage of a teacher's career. For instance, in a recent study, less experienced teachers indicated a greater preference for information about classroom management issues and administrative aspects of music teaching than music educators who had taught longer.<sup>2</sup>

Researchers have also found that extended professional development experiences are more beneficial than those that are short-term. Professional development seems to have a greater impact when it is ongoing, rather than concentrated, and when it involves a substantial commitment of time.<sup>3</sup> In addition, there is evidence that mentors, both formal and informal, can be valuable facilitators of professional development.<sup>4</sup> Finally, music educators often value informal professional development (e.g., learning from students, personal interactions with colleagues, conversations over dinner, etc.).<sup>5</sup>

## Personal Learning Networks (PLNs)

Is there a practical way these research findings can be applied to support music teachers' learning? Is it possible to have individualized professional development experiences that are sustained over time, involve consultation with mentors, and allow for an informal means of communication and collaboration? With the Internet,

and in particular, the so-called Web 2.0 tools now available,<sup>6</sup> it is possible to have large learning networks, taking advantage of the collective wisdom and experiences of people from around the world. A technology-assisted PLN can enable sustained professional development that uses a diverse set of resources that are personalized and available on demand.

PLNs consist of a collection of resources that is accessible when you want to learn something and can include both people—friends, family, colleagues, former teachers, and other individuals with expertise in an area who can be consulted for advice and input—and things—books, journals, and a variety of multimedia Web resources. A technology-assisted PLN allows professional development in your specific areas of interest, delivered “just in time,” as you need it. It affords a means to stay current with news and innovations in the profession, challenging your thinking with new ideas, approaches, and techniques. PLNs allow you to be part of a global conversation about topics of interest to you, enabling

a broader, inclusive view of music education and the world in general. Access to a technology-assisted PLN is not time or place bound; it is asynchronous, available at any time and place where there is access to the Internet and, in some instances, even without Internet access. Technology-assisted PLNs allow for connections with others that can diminish feelings of professional isolation.

## Tools to Develop Your Technology-assisted PLN

A PLN can be easily developed using free tools, most of which are accessible via a standard Web browser. These tools and their connections can be visualized as depicted in Figure 1.

What follows is an introduction to building and developing a technology-assisted PLN. The level of technological skill necessary to get started is not extensive. All music educators should be able to easily establish their PLN using resources that may include blog and news sites, wikis, podcasts, and folksonomies.

**FIGURE 1**

**Tools to build a personal learning network**



A PLN not only allows music teachers to consume information but also to communicate and collaborate with others, sharing and publishing original materials. PLNs are participatory; they involve active learning, not merely the passive absorption of information.

## RSS

RSS, which stands for Really Simple Syndication, is the technology that creates the threads to connect our technology-assisted PLN. RSS allows one to subscribe to Internet content and then be notified when something new is available to read, view, or listen to. This type of subscription is free; it is simply a protocol that allows individuals to automatically know when new information or materials are ready without having to actually check individual sites. To take advantage of this technology, one must set up an RSS reader or aggregator—a Web-based or desktop software tool that collects all your subscriptions in one place, periodically checking them to see if any of the Internet resources you are interested in have changed. RSS readers are also available for mobile computing devices, including phones and tablet computers, such as the iPad. When new materials are available, they can usually be read, watched, or listed to within the RSS aggregator. Some materials can also be downloaded for offline access and even transferred to other devices, such as the popular iPod, for on-the-go learning. For more information about RSS, view the short video *RSS in Plain English* (see Sidebar 1).

An easy-to-use RSS reader to start building a PLN is Google Reader. First, sign up for a free Google account, or sign in to your existing Google account.<sup>7</sup> Click the “Reader” link (check under the “More” area at the top of the webpage). See the “Getting Started with Google Reader” site for more information.<sup>8</sup> Sidebar 2 provides direct links to Google Reader and other newsreader applications.

## Blogs and News

When you have your RSS reader set up, it is time to begin developing a network.

### SIDEBAR 1

#### Common Craft Videos on Tools for a Technology-Assisted Personal Learning Network

- *RSS in Plain English*: [http://www.commoncraft.com/rss\\_plain\\_english](http://www.commoncraft.com/rss_plain_english)
- *Blogs in Plain English*: <http://www.commoncraft.com/blogs>
- *Podcasting in Plain English*: <http://www.commoncraft.com/podcasting>
- *Wikis in Plain English*: <http://www.commoncraft.com/video-wikis-plain-english>
- *Social Bookmarking in Plain English*: <http://www.commoncraft.com/bookmarking-plain-english>
- *Social Media in Plain English*: <http://www.commoncraft.com/socialmedia>
- *Twitter in Plain English*: <http://www.commoncraft.com/twitter>

### SIDEBAR 2

#### RSS Readers

##### Web-Based Readers

- Netvibes: <http://www.netvibes.com/>
- Google Reader: <http://reader.google.com/>

##### Free Desktop Readers

- NetNewswire (Macintosh): <http://netnewswireapp.com/mac//>
- FeedDemon (Windows): <http://www.feeddemon.com/>

Blogs and news sites are a good place to start. Blogs, short for *web logs*, are created by individuals who are interested in sharing information, perceptions, and reflections on specific topics. They consist primarily of text, often augmented with graphics and sometimes with audio or video. One can find blogs written about nearly any conceivable subject. Blogs vary greatly in both the frequency with which new material is posted and the quality of that material. Like most Internet resources, it is important to carefully assess the validity of a blog’s content, especially if a person of unknown credentials has created it. An important feature of most blogs is the ability for

readers to comment back to the author, enabling a dialog to take place about a topic. To learn more about blogs, view the short video *Blogs in Plain English* (see Sidebar 1). In addition to blogs, other websites also have RSS feeds available that are used to disseminate *news* about specific topics.

To get started, here are a few blogs and news sites to consider for inclusion in your technology-assisted PLN. *So You Want to Teach?* is a blog written by a band director with discussions pertinent to teachers in a variety of disciplines. Much of the content is especially appropriate for younger educators. Teachers interested in the science of music learning may enjoy reading about various topics related to music cognition, as discussed in *Music Matters*. For those who would like to explore the intersection of music, technology, and education, the *Teaching Music in the 21st Century* blog might prove to be an excellent resource. To keep up on the latest news from MENC: The National Association for Music Education, subscribe to one or more of its RSS feeds. Finally, it is possible to get the latest news on any topic of interest by creating your own custom RSS feed through Google News Search. See Sidebar 3 for more details about all of these resources and Sidebar 4 for suggestions on how to locate blogs and news on other topics.

## Podcasts

Podcasts are often described as online radio shows or TV programs and may consist of only audio or include video, graphics, and text. These productions can range in quality from amateurish to very professional, with content, like blogs, that includes nearly any imaginable topic. Podcasts can be subscribed to via RSS, with notifications of new programs appearing in one’s RSS reader. They may be downloaded to a computer or transferred to a portable media player for convenient mobile access. Podcasts are perfect for extending your PLN to environments where you are able to listen but need to devote the rest of your attention elsewhere, for example, in a car while driving or at the gym when exercising.

### SIDEBAR 3

## Resources for Your Technology-Assisted Personal Learning Network

Look for and click on this symbol to subscribe to a site's RSS feed: . In Google Reader, you can add the RSS feed for a site by clicking the "Add a Subscription" button and entering the site's URL. Below are sites mentioned in the article.

Name	URL of Site
<i>Blogs</i>	
<i>Music Matters</i> <i>So You Want to Teach?</i> <i>Teaching Music in the 21st Century</i>	<a href="http://musiccognition.blogspot.com/">http://musiccognition.blogspot.com/</a> <a href="http://www.soyouwanttoteach.com/">http://www.soyouwanttoteach.com/</a> <a href="http://teachingmusic.posterous.com/">http://teachingmusic.posterous.com/</a>
<i>News</i>	
Google News MENC: The National Association for Music Education News	<a href="http://tinyurl.com/35segy">http://tinyurl.com/35segy</a> Subscribe to MENC's RSS feeds to have the latest resources and articles from your favorite sections of <a href="http://www.menc.org">www.menc.org</a> delivered to you automatically. Look for the RSS symbol  on the address bar of your Web browser. Click on the symbol to select and subscribe to up to 10 feeds, including News, Events, Band, Chorus, Future Teachers, General Music, Higher Education/Administration, Jazz, Orchestra, and Parents/Press. (Some browsers may not allow you to subscribe to all 10 feeds.)
<i>Podcasts</i>	
<i>Classics for Kids</i> <i>Jazz Profiles</i> <i>iTunesU</i> <i>TEDtalks</i> <i>YouTube in the Music Classroom</i> YouTube videos	<a href="http://tinyurl.com/6cuwag">http://tinyurl.com/6cuwag</a> <a href="http://tinyurl.com/27px5j">http://tinyurl.com/27px5j</a> <a href="http://www.apple.com/education/itunes-u/">http://www.apple.com/education/itunes-u/</a> <a href="http://www.ted.com/">http://www.ted.com/</a> <a href="http://www.youtube.com/MusicClassroom">http://www.youtube.com/MusicClassroom</a> <a href="http://www.youtube.com/rssls">http://www.youtube.com/rssls</a>
<i>Wikis</i>	
<i>Choral Public Domain Library</i> <i>SIGMT</i> <i>Wikipedia, music education</i> (There are also many other articles.) <i>Wind Repertory Project</i>	<a href="http://www.cpd.org/">http://www.cpd.org/</a> <a href="http://sigmt.iste.wikispaces.net/">http://sigmt.iste.wikispaces.net/</a> <a href="http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Music_education">http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Music_education</a> <a href="http://www.windrep.org/">http://www.windrep.org/</a>
<i>Folksonomies</i>	
Delicious Music education bookmarks Diigo	<a href="http://delicious.com/">http://delicious.com/</a> <a href="http://www.delicious.com/musiceducation/">http://www.delicious.com/musiceducation/</a> <a href="http://www.diigo.com/">http://www.diigo.com/</a>
<i>Twitter</i>	
"Cure What Ails You: A Dose of Twitter for Every Day of the School Year" #MusEdChat "Music Educators to Follow on Twitter" Twitter.com	<a href="http://sites.google.com/a/kathyschrock.net/twittercure/">http://sites.google.com/a/kathyschrock.net/twittercure/</a> <a href="http://musedmajor.net/musedchat/">http://musedmajor.net/musedchat/</a> <a href="http://mustech.net/2009/09/20/music-educators-to-follow-on-twitter">http://mustech.net/2009/09/20/music-educators-to-follow-on-twitter</a> <a href="http://www.twitter.com">http://www.twitter.com</a>

For more background on podcasts, view the *Podcasting in Plain English* video (Sidebar 1).

There are many excellent podcasts related to music education. National Public Radio (NPR) makes many of its shows available as podcasts. *Classics For Kids* explores the music, lives, times, and cultures of classical composers; it could be used directly with students or as source material to develop lessons. Another NPR broadcast turned podcast is *Jazz Profiles*, a look at the music and lives of famous jazz artists. A rich source of learning on a variety of topics, with content appropriate to both K–12 and higher education audiences, is *iTunes U*. In addition, *TEDtalks* are available as audio or video podcasts and feature international thought leaders who have presented at the annual Technology, Entertainment, Design (TED) conference held in California and, more recently, other locations around the world. YouTube offers many videos that are of educational value. As with Google News, it is possible to create a custom RSS feed in YouTube as well as to subscribe to channels that others have already established, such as the *YouTube in the Music Classroom* channel. To find additional podcasts of interest, see the search tools in Sidebar 3.

### Wikis

The word *wiki* comes from the Hawaiian phrase *wiki-wiki*, which means "quick" or "fast."<sup>9</sup> Wikis are fast ways to build Web pages that can be edited within any standard Web browser. More information about the history and development of wiki technologies can be found by reading the related article in what is probably the most famous wiki, *Wikipedia*. Multiple people can collaborate on a wiki, tracking each change that is made to a page. This makes it possible to easily revert to earlier versions of a wiki page should something be unintentionally altered or accidentally deleted. Wikis are quite easy to use—if someone has the skills to use a word processing program, he or she should be able to create a wiki page. The *Wikis in Plain English* (Sidebar 1) video provides a fun introduction to the wiki concept.

## SIDEBAR 4

### Search Engines and Directories for Web 2.0 Materials

Name	URL of Site
<i>Blogs and News</i>	
100 Music Education Bloggers Google Blog Search Technorati	<a href="http://mustech.net/100-me-bloggers">http://mustech.net/100-me-bloggers</a> <a href="http://blogsearch.google.com/">http://blogsearch.google.com/</a> <a href="http://technorati.com/">http://technorati.com/</a>
<i>Podcasts</i>	
iTunes  Podcast Alley Podscope	Search for podcasts within the free iTunes application. Learn more at <a href="http://www.apple.com/itunes/whatson/podcasts/">http://www.apple.com/itunes/whatson/podcasts/</a> <a href="http://www.podcastalley.com/">http://www.podcastalley.com/</a> <a href="http://www.podscope.com/">http://www.podscope.com/</a>
<i>Wikis</i>	
Qwika Wiki.com Wiki Directory	<a href="http://www.qwika.com/">http://www.qwika.com/</a> <a href="http://www.wiki.com/">http://www.wiki.com/</a> <a href="http://wiki.wetpaint.com/page/Wiki+Directory">http://wiki.wetpaint.com/page/Wiki+Directory</a>
<i>Folksonomies</i>	
Delicious Diigo	<a href="http://delicious.com/">http://delicious.com/</a> <a href="http://www.diigo.com/">http://www.diigo.com/</a>

The well-known *Wikipedia* has a variety of articles about music education topics, including the history of music education, standards, methodologies, and music advocacy. Another wiki that may appeal to music educators is the *Choral Public Domain Library* (CPDL), which contains information about vocal music that is within the public domain. CPDL has details about composers, lyricists, genre, voicing, instruments used, and language of the text for numerous choral works; many of the pieces are freely available as downloadable PDF files. For band directors, The *Wind Repertory Project* is a wiki devoted to wind literature, with entries categorized by composer, grade level, form, and style. *SIGMT* is the wiki of a special interest group of the International Society for Technology in Music Education that is devoted to music and technology.

### Folksonomies

Folksonomies, also referred to as collaborative tagging, social classification, social

indexing, and social tagging, involve a group of people using tags (keywords) to categorize and identify a resource. Among the most-used technologies for the development of folksonomies are bookmark sharing sites, such as Delicious. Unlike searching in Google, which makes no determination of the quality of sites it indexes, Delicious bookmarks were entered by a person who believed they have value. If you look at the Delicious bookmarks of people you know and respect, it can help you zero in on valuable resources a little more easily. In addition, Delicious allows users to create networks among each other to more easily share found resources. Another Delicious feature provides a way to subscribe to tags so that whenever a Delicious resource is labeled with that term, you are notified and can examine the resource for yourself. For instance, if I have subscribed to the tag *opera*, then I am alerted whenever that tag is used for a site bookmarked on Delicious. Tags, networks, and subscriptions make it easy

for groups of all sizes to work together to gather and share Internet resources. Collections of bookmarks can also be subscribed to via RSS. To get started with social bookmarking, explore “Music Education Bookmarks.” To learn more, view the video *Social Bookmarking in Plain English* (Sidebar 1), see “Help on Delicious,”<sup>10</sup> or visit Diigo,<sup>11</sup> another popular social bookmarking site.

### Twitter

A final tool that has become an increasingly valuable part of many people’s PLNs is Twitter, a one-to-many messaging service that can result in extended conversations, all conducted in “tweets” of 140 characters or less. Through Twitter, you “follow” others and they can choose to follow you. To use Twitter in a PLN, carefully select people to follow who share information that can inform and enrich your professional life. By using Twitter’s “hashtags” (a form of keywords) feature, you can further refine the information you receive by filtering tweets for specific information. Among the various applications of hashtags, people interested in specific topics use them to organize live chats through Twitter; there is even a #MusEdChat. To get started with Twitter, view the *Twitter in Plain English* video (see Sidebar 1), consider following some of the individuals from the “Music Educators to Follow on Twitter” list, and explore the excellent set of resources at “Cure What Ails You: A Dose of Twitter for Every Day of the School Year.”

### An Active Process

Growing through a PLN does not come from only reading, watching, and listening to the creations of others. It is important to also take time to reflect on the resources examined (for instance, by writing in a blog) and to share your ideas so that the people who are part of your network can learn from you and a dialog can take place. Many free tools exist to allow you to develop your PLN via blogs, podcasts, wikis, folksonomies, and Twitter. Sidebars 4 and 5 provide further information about some of these. Much

## SIDEBAR 5

### Create Your Own Blogs, Podcasts, Wikis, and Folksonomies

Name	URL of Site
<i>Blogs</i>	
Blogger Posterous Wordpress	http://www.blogger.com/ https://posterous.com/ http://wordpress.com/
<i>Podcasts</i>	
How to Create Your Own Podcast: A Step-by-Step Tutorial How to Create Your Own Podcast with No Technical Knowledge YouTube podcasting tutorial videos	http://tinyurl.com/4gczd http://tinyurl.com/c8e9ct http://tinyurl.com/czzudp
<i>Wikis</i>	
Pbwiki Wetpaint Wikispaces	http://pbworks.com/ http://www.wetpaint.com/ http://www.wikispaces.com/
<i>Folksonomies</i>	
Delicious Diigo	http://delicious.com/ http://www.diigo.com/

learning can occur if one takes the time to write down thoughts, develop new materials that build on existing resources, collaborate on projects with colleagues near and far, and share these things with the greater professional community.

Today it is possible to have large professional development networks, taking advantage of the collective wisdom and experiences of people from around the world. Web 2.0 tools can help us to accomplish this in a way that is personalized, sustained, and meaningful to our needs at any particular time. Get started with your technology-assisted PLN by setting up a newsreader and subscribing to resources of interest. Both you and your students will be the beneficiaries.

## NOTES

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10. See <http://www.delicious.com/help/getStarted>.
11. See <http://www.diigo.com/>.



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