

What's Happen-Ning



with online teacher professional development?

The ABCs of online PLCs

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Ning is just one of many free online social networking services that can facilitate—even transform teacher's understanding of their subject area and pedagogy. Keeping content and collaboration as the main focus, the following elements make Ning an ideal space for professional learning communities.

As a teacher educator who teaches both online and F2F I have come to appreciate these simple—yet powerful—features offered through social networks reconfigured to be networks of learning—also referred to as *knowledge networks*.

Anatomy. It's unrealistic to expect a group of teachers to convene online without a shared interest or purpose.

Ning allows you to name your network and determine its unique parts, their function and what they look like. Do you want more discussion than mere access of content? Do you want to share video and do interactive quizzes in a self-paced format? Do you want to place more emphasis on the individual educator as multimedia author? You can do all of these things—which means you need to have a *clear purpose* for your professional learning community clearly (i.e., Integrating the NETS-S across the curriculum; Using documentaries to teach Science; Teaching the Novel; Implementing Connected Math, etc.).

Broadcast messaging.

Ning allows you to send a sleek and html-styled message to all the members of your PLC (and sends you a copy). You don't need to keep track of email addresses. And you can choose to receive messages within your PLC rather than at your home or work email addresses. This seemingly small feature makes the biggest difference in facilitating communication across everyone in your PLC.



Customization. You as the administrator have control over anatomy, color, layout, menus, URL, and just about everything else. You can control what members have access to—and what information they need to provide in order to be a member of the network. (You can also designate everyone as administrators). Each PLC member can also customize their My Page—adding and reflecting a sense of ownership and participation. Toss in a mere \$25/month and your PLC can be ad-free.

Documents. What sets Ning apart from other sites (like blogger.com) is the ability to upload, store and share actual documents (not just links) within your PLC. This feature gives it a courseware-like quality of content management systems such as Blackboard and Web CT. A word of caution: The standard *Terms of Use* policy across social networking sites and all things Google is that they “own” your content (although they probably wouldn't have cause to usurp it—unless it was subpoenaed for court). This means that private documents (i.e., student records) should not be uploaded to Ning or any other 3rd-party web site.

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Embed code. This allows you to import content & functionality from other interesting places. I can post a YouTube video and/or create and embed a survey (SurveyMonkey.com). I can also and/or a quiz (ProProfs.com), or a curriculum map to collaborate on (Docs.Google.com). All of these can be seamlessly woven into my PLC. Note: Currently only the administrators of a network can embed code within their blogs, forums and text boxes, but if every member has administrative privileges, then it's not an issue.



Feature selection. By just dragging and dropping, you can add & delete a variety of features: Upload & share images, videos, event reminders, blog entries, live chat. You can also allow members to subscribe to an RSS feed so the PLC comes to their desktop on an as-needed basis. A word of caution: Like all things Google, even when you "delete" features, they don't go away entirely. They are only "deactivated."

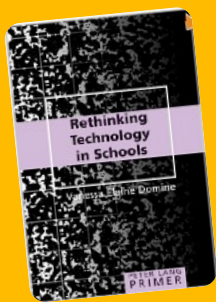
Groups. Ning allows you to break your membership into groups (i.e., based on subject area, grade level, etc.). This is a particularly useful feature when working with large numbers of teachers/administrators and/or doing committee work. The chair of the committee can then maintain the group's "home" page. As a network administrator (and creator of these groups) you can float to each group to monitor progress.



HTML. Not every text box, blog post or discussion post is WYSIWYG. Knowing basic html coding tags (i.e, paragraph spacing, breaks, font styles) is helpful and will make your work more efficient. Ning just enriched the broadcast messaging feature, so format away!

Integrated apps. It seems like every day Ning announces another 3rd-party application that is easily integrated into their user interface. And it's not limited to fluffy "gifts" or emoticon libraries. Depending upon the function of your PLC, you can embed Twitter feeds, display WordPress blogs, display UStreamTV and Hulu (if you already subscribe) and conduct surveys via PollDaddy. If you're having difficulty scheduling meetings, you can also integrate Tungle.me.

- Finally, the greatest potential for knowledge networking and professional development for educators is this user-generated content and functionality now exists in a *web-based* format. Schools need only a computer and a high-speed internet connection. No expensive software needed. This is a boon to urban areas that are low in funds yet reside in the midst of cloud



About the Presenter

Vanessa Domine is an Associate Professor at Montclair State University. She teaches both traditional and online courses in education and technology within MSU's nationally acclaimed teacher education program. Her research targets media and technology literacies among young people and the pursuit of democratic education within schools. Her most recent book is *Rethinking Technology in Schools* (Peter Lang, 2008) that provides a roadmap for teachers and administrators. Dr. Domine currently serves on the Executive Board of the National Association for Media Literacy Education

