**Thoughts after reading Richardson and Mancabelli’s Book *Personal Learning Networks***

**R546 Task 3-Option B. Super thought paper/ book review**

Personal learning network is neither a new concept nor an unfamiliar act that we never practice in our daily life. On the contrary, most of us may have already been acquiring different domains of knowledge from our beloved families, friends or colleagues through social networking tools such as Facebook, Twitters and others. Will Richardson and Rob Mancabelli, the author of the book “Personal Learning Networks-Using the Power of Connections to transform Education” suggest a personal learning network is “a set of connections to people and resources both offline and online who enrich our learning” (p.2, Richardson & Mancabelli, 2011). As my goal is to become a teacher educator, I become interested in knowing how I can engage my students in building their personal learning networks. After all, teacher education programs can only offer so much. Competent teachers must continuously engage in various professional learning experiences to improve their teaching practices. Therefore, I was really looking forward to reading Richardson and Mancabelli’s book.

The main goal of this book is to promote the use of and development of personal learning networks (PLN) to “transform” education rather than “reform” education. By “transform”, the authors mean that we must stop follow the traditional familiar way of schooling. Instead of taking the old model of schooling and adapt technology to it, PLN should be incorporated to allow “deep learning, inquiry, collaboration, and performance” (p.3, Richardson & Mancabelli, 2011) to become the foci, not just test scores. The authors suggest that “personal learning network” in one sense is similar to “social network” since they both stress “connections” and “social”. However, personal learning network goes beyond the notion of social network in that we are connecting to strangers who share the same passion as ours for the purpose of learning. We do not connect to people just to know them—we connect to them in order to learn. In social networks, you connect with people you already know and love. You share your daily life experience and whatever piece of information you feel your love ones may be interested. The interactions within social networks are social exercises. In personal learning networks or professional learning networks, the connections are built with specific learning goal in mind. The knowledge exchanged in a personal learning network is also more focused on the professional domain. As such, the interactions in personal learning networks are more of intellectual exercises rather than social ones.

I find myself agree with the authors ardently and this is also why I feel it is important that I have the ability to motivate future teachers to engage in PLN. Whether in preservice teacher education or inservice teacher professional development, PLN can be a powerful form of teacher learning. Learning should be an ongoing process, especially for teachers nowadays. As modern technologies and knowledge expansion continue to reshape our curriculum and students’ way of learning, we as teachers also need to constantly update our pedagogical knowledge and content knowledge. Teacher learning cannot only happen in schools. Teachers has to be encouraged to expand their learning to outside of school in order to ensure their lifelong professional learning. PLN, as a powerful form of informal learning, has the advantages of engaging teachers in continuous professional growth. In my opinion, an effective PLN can lead to an “**individualized reflective and collaborative mobile learning**”. First of all, PLN allows teachers to personalize their professional learning experience through connecting to people and resources they feel relevant to them. Unlike those mandatory traditional professional developments where teachers do not necessarily feel the content or the topic is relevant to them, PLN embodies self-directed and self-motivated learning where the learners engage in professional learning events voluntarily out of their actual needs. Second, PLN allows the learning to occur anytime anywhere. In traditional professional development such as workshops or seminars, teachers are bound by time and location of the professional development. In PLN, learning takes place in both synchronous and asynchronous forms via various social media and digital devices. You may sit at home comfortably in front of your computer to attend a webinar you learned from following some teacher’s blog. You may use your mobile phone to engage in an ardent discussion in your facebook PLN group while waiting for bus. With the support of internet connection and mobile technology, having a PLN give teachers more flexibility and autonomy in terms of how their professional learning should take place. Finally, the professional learning occurring in PLN can be reciprocal, social and reflective. In a PLN community, people expect reciprocal relationship where you cannot simply just listen in but you also need to offer help when you know the answer. This reciprocity is the key to the sustainability and growth of a PLN community. In PLN, knowledge is socially constructed through sharing and discussing. Community members co-construct their understanding toward a certain topic by sharing their experience and opinions together. And then, due to the reciprocity and social interdependence of PLN, as a node of the network, community members tend to engage in self-reflection. As a part of this ongoing flow of learning, you are held accountable for the information you throw out to the public. Whether it is responding to a question by sharing your personal teaching experience or offering other people the teaching materials you created, the act of sharing allows people to reflect on what they are sharing with other people.

Yet, while we recognize the importance of PLN, the pressing question we must ask next is: how do we build a good PLN and how can we motivate our learners to engage in PLN. With a mix of theory and practical suggestions, Richardson and mancabelli provide in-depth insight to how we can realize PLN at individual level, classroom level and school level. At individual level, the authors emphasize that it is the quality rather than the quantity of learning that matters in a PLN. The level of participation is important (p.55, Richardson & Mancabelli, 2011). The higher level of participation (e.g. be the creators or the conversationalists) the better. They further introduced five types of tools to create PLN: Twitter, diigo, Google Reader (this service has been discontinued), Blogger and Facebook. At classroom level, the key toward creating a networked classroom is the notion of ‘classroom as node” (p.61, Richardson & Mancabelli, 2011). Under this notion, the authors argue that teacher’s role now becomes “one of helping students organize their own learning and navigate the complexities of finding and connecting their own nodes of learning in ways that serve them well” (p.61, Richardson & Mancabelli, 2011). Teacher and students should connect inside and outside of the classroom. Student’s work should be published locally and globally. Collaboration is also essentially for the learners to create and share knowledge. Finally, at school level, the authors suggest there are three cornerstones that ensure the success of implementing networked school: (1) the compelling case, (2) the change team, and (3) the pilot. To establish compelling cases, the authors suggest that we appeal to “both logic and emotions and invites people into the conversation” (p.86, Richardson & Mancabelli, 2011). Building the change time to initiate the PLN creation is another crucial component. The authors provided some suggestions on aspects such as how big the team should be, who the suitable candidates are and how the team could collaborate. Finally, the author suggests that there must be a pilot run before “expanding the program to the whole school” (p.99, Richardson & Mancabelli, 2011). The gave suggestions on aspects such as how to select participants, the length of the pilot run and how to make time for everyone to engage in the work.

Despite the in-depth insights into effective incorporation of PLN at individual, classroom and school level, I feel that I am still concerned if I would have my students’ buy-in for PLN. As I mentioned, PLN is self-regulated and self-motivated learning. The reason why we want to promote PLN is because we want our learners to continue the learning outside of formal education. PLN is more than a concept you want students to understand. It is the learning attitude you want your students to embrace and hence making it difficult to teach. In terms of motivating learners to engage in PLN outside of classroom, Chapter 5 of the book somewhat answered my question. In Chapter 5, the authors provides strategies for dealing with a variety of hurdles toward realizing PLN including (1) money, politics, and technology; (2) technical support; (3) school policies; and (4) resistance to change. I find those arguments really helpful in promoting and realizing PLN. For example, one of the reasons learners might not be motivated to engage in PLN could be because they feel they don’t have enough time. The authors quoted a school principal’s opinion to rebuttal this argument:

people think that this takes more time, but it actually saves time to use social media since you can get answers to your questions very quickly…. For example, I Tweeted out that I was looking to develop a new walkthrough procedure at my school and within minutes I had links to resources, pdf files of walkthrough formats and advice on what works and what doesn’t. It would have taken me hours to search for this stuff, and even longer to write it all from scratch (p.134, Richardson & Mancabelli, 2011).

Yet, being able to respond to all the resistances does not mean learners’ actual belief and behavior is going to change. The information I gained from this book serves as a great start of planning my PLN teaching, but I feel I need to read more to learn about motivational strategies and instructional design to have students’ actual buy-in for PLN.

Overall, I find this book helped me develop a concrete understanding of PLN and strategies for realizing PLN instruction. With both theory and practical suggestions, this book is very informative, useful and beneficial for teachers, teacher educators and administrators who want to promote PLN at different level of implementation. However, I feel further research and evidence is needed in order to know how we can have learners’ actual buy-in for PLN.

Reference:

Richardson, W., & Mancabelli, R. (2011). *Personal Learning Networks: Using the Power of Connections to Transform Education*. Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree Press.