

# Personal Learning Networks in Economics Teaching



*"Chance favours the connected mind"*

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## Why should teaching support be limited to those good natured conversations by the photocopier or in the staffroom or face-to-face discussions at a departmental meeting?

These are still incredibly important for our own school provides a time and place for ideas and subject knowledge to be nurtured and enhanced. That said there is growing interest within the teaching community in how [personal learning networks](#) (PLNs) can be nurtured as part of continuing professional development (CPD). Whilst most schools and colleges have commitment to CPD and a sizeable budget to go with it, the best CPD does not carry a heavy financial cost. Indeed, many of the best resources and events are **free!**

### What is a personal learning network?

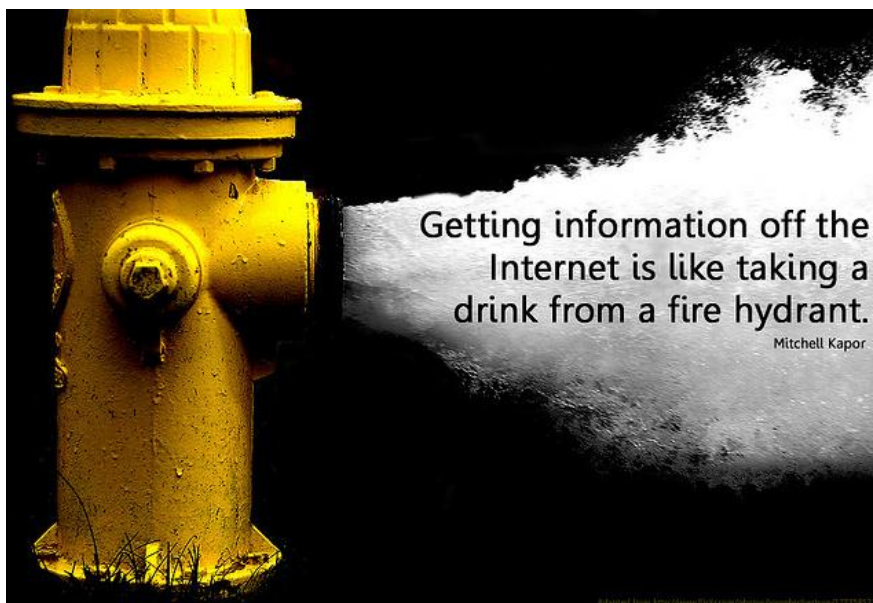
A PLN might be defined as "**the entire collection of people with whom you connect, engage and exchange information both offline and online.**" This will continuously change and evolve – it must do to avoid information overload for busy people!

Many networks can become a varied and vibrant blend of **face-to-face connection** allied to **powerful sharing and networking opportunities** through the **open global web**. I believe very strongly that the increasingly sophisticated usage of social media tools within education serves to increase demand for face-to-face conversations especially for people who have met initially within online communities.

### Building a personalised learning network

The components of a PLN might start with a **professional goal** or a desire to **develop a personal interest** (perhaps [finding your element](#) in the spirit of the work of Ken Robinson!).

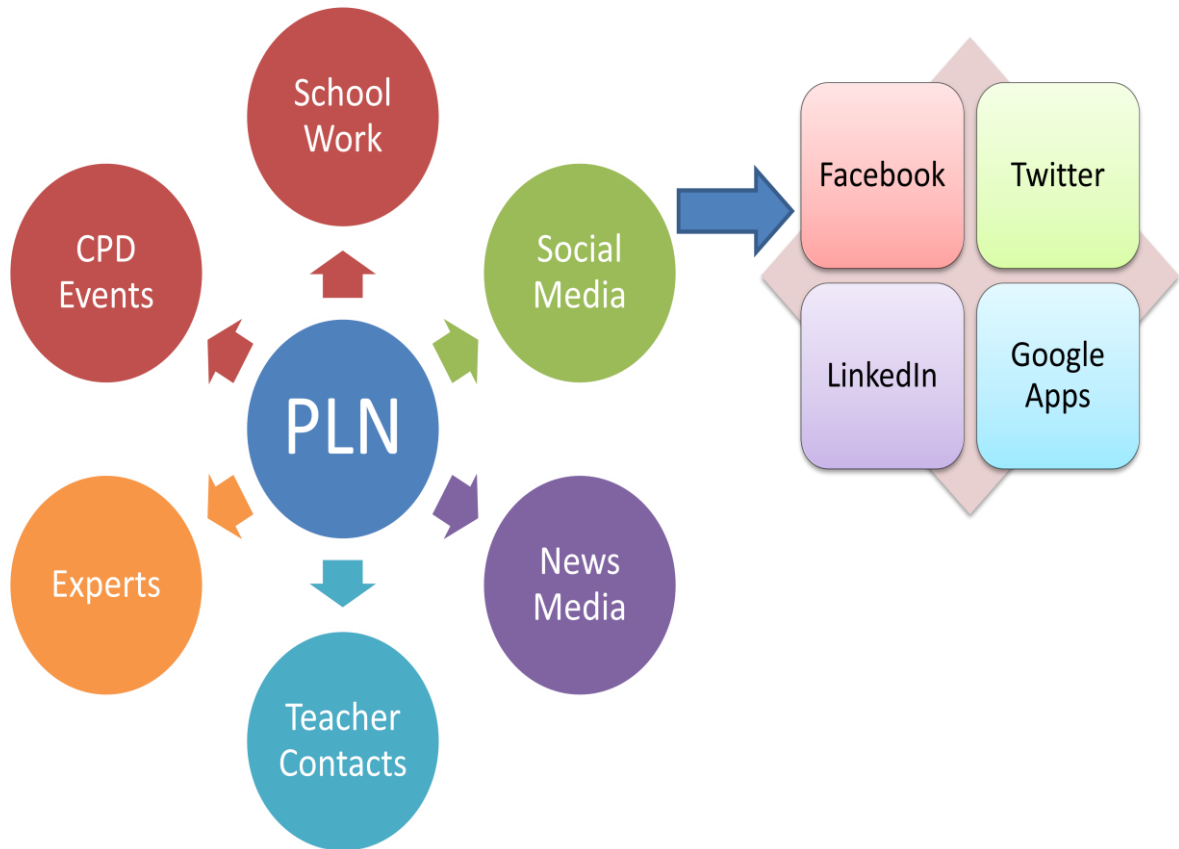
At the heart of a PLN is **choosing and then creating an infrastructure** from which **network nodes** can appear. Some become part of your daily routine; others are brought into play only once or twice a year - all have the potential for **enrichment** of your work as a teacher and in many other areas of school life.



Busy people need to find ways of filtering new information and ideas as they swarm onto the web!

Facebook users share more than 30 billion pieces of content—Web links, news stories, blog posts, photos each month.

Twitter users generate more than 155 million tweets per day (up from 55 million one year ago). 54 percent of adults who own mobile phones access Twitter with their mobile device



## Enrichment lectures at universities and other organisations

At Eton we are lucky to be within sufficiently close reach of the capital to attend many lectures and public events held by the LSE, the RSA, the RGS, and the Royal Society et al. All of them provide podcasts and/or videos of the events ; often streamed live for those who are unable to attend on the day. The [Independent on a Saturday](#) is excellent for flagging up talks and other events for the week ahead.

- [RSA Talks](#)
- [LSE Public Lectures](#)
- [Royal Society](#)
- [Gresham College](#)

## Twitter

A growing community of teachers and students make use of Twitter as a learning resource. I am reminded of Steven Johnson's phrase from "[Where Good Ideas come From](#)" - that "chance favours the connected mind." Twitter encourages this approach!



- Follow and respond to tweets from teachers, professors, journalists, authors, organisations and friends from across the world
- Twitter is great for finding out first **events**, lectures and films that you might want to see
- Create your own lists of key topics and generate lists / categories of contacts
- Use Twitter as a forum **for floating ideas** and engaging in collaborative work e.g. through the weekly **#edchat** hour on a Thursday evening and **#teacherontwitter**
- Economics & Business Teachers can be found here: **#ecbusteach**
- **Every day** there is something to surprise and inform, to question and to challenge.
  - i. BBC Newsnight: @BBCNewsnight
  - ii. Dan Ariely @danariely (author)
  - iii. Danny Quah (LSE) @dannyquah
  - iv. David Smith (Sunday Times) @dsmitheconomics
  - v. Faisal Islam (Channel 4) @faisalislam
  - vi. Gapminder (Hans Rosling) @hansrosling
  - vii. Graham Carter @GrahamCarterGC
  - viii. Guardian Business Desk @businessdesk
  - ix. Heidi Watkins (Teacher) @WattersWords
  - x. Kevin Hinde @kevinhinde Director of Distance Learning at Durham Business School
  - xi. Michael Porter (Business Strategy) @michaeleporter
  - xii. Paul Krugman (New York Times) @NYTimeskrugman
  - xiii. Richard Otley (Colfe's School): @COLFEseconomics
  - xiv. Robert Went @went1955 Economist at Dutch Scientific Council
  - xv. Tim Harford @timharford (author)
  - xvi. Tom Barrett (@tombarrett) – superb e-learning evangelist and enthusiast





## Facebook and Teacher Blogs

It is interesting to see the use of Facebook by a growing number of economics teachers and departments. Many colleagues are experimenting with how it can be used to support their work. A small, dedicated band of teachers blog about their subject and encourage their students to do likewise. The links below focus on economics and business only.



- BBC Business News: [www.facebook.com/bbcbusiness](http://www.facebook.com/bbcbusiness)
- Bromsgrove School [Business and Economics Department](#) on Facebook
- Econ Fix (Mark Johnston) <http://econfix.wordpress.com/>
- EconoMix (New York Times): <http://economix.blogs.nytimes.com/>
- Edinburgh Uni Econ Department: [www.facebook.com/UOE.Economics](http://www.facebook.com/UOE.Economics)
- Financial Times (Beyond BRICS): <http://blogs.ft.com/beyond-brics/>
- Financial Times Blogs: [www.ft.com/comment/blogs](http://www.ft.com/comment/blogs)
- Institute for New Economic Thinking [www.facebook.com/INETeconomics](http://www.facebook.com/INETeconomics)
- Intelligence Squared: [www.facebook.com/intelligence2](http://www.facebook.com/intelligence2)
- John Sloman Economics News Blog: <http://pearsonblog.campaignserver.co.uk/>
- Management Today: [www.facebook.com/managementtodaymag](http://www.facebook.com/managementtodaymag)
- Radio 4 Analysis [www.facebook.com/BBCRadio4Analysis?ref=ts](http://www.facebook.com/BBCRadio4Analysis?ref=ts)
- Tutor2u on Facebook: [www.facebook.com/Tutor2u](http://www.facebook.com/Tutor2u)
- Wellington College: Forum is here [Wellington College Economics](http://Wellington College Economics)

## Radio and TV

Good old-fashioned radio as a component of a PLN! A little time on a Sunday evening listening to Radio 4 whilst marking is always a productive time ahead of a new working week. And the BBC iPlayer or iTunes offers an easy way to catch up.

- Al Jazeera Business News: <http://english.aljazeera.net/business/>
- PBS (US): <http://www.pbs.org/search/?q=economics>
- Radio 4 Analysis: [www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b006r4vz](http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b006r4vz)
- Radio 4 More or Less: [www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b006qshd](http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b006qshd)
- Reuters UK Business: <http://uk.reuters.com/business>
- Sky Business News: <http://news.sky.com/skynews/Business>
- World Business Report: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/1143010.stm>

## Student-run societies

These are often the best form of CPD and the quality of the speakers that have spoken at school has usually been first-rate. They offer great opportunities for **cross-curricular understanding** – an example being a visit to the Geography Society last autumn to hear Charles Clover – author of [The End of the Line](#) (the book became a film).

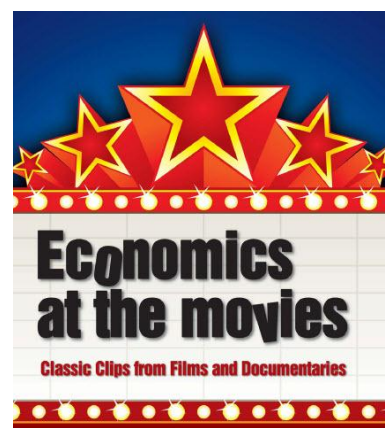
## iTunes and You Tube and Flickr

Great channels are emerging for **blending** new content into teaching and for encouraging students to do independent research. These seem to have particular currency when stretching highly-able students aiming for top UK and overseas universities.

- **iTunes U**
  - i. [Critical reasoning for beginners](#) (Oxford)
  - ii. [Centre for Entrepreneurial Learning](#) (Cambridge)
  - iii. [Discussions on entrepreneurship](#) (Cambridge)
  - iv. [Game Theory](#) (Yale)
- **You Tube and You Tube Edu**
  - i. At Google Talks: <http://www.youtube.com/user/AtGoogleTalks>
  - ii. [Channel 4 on Demand Documentaries](#)
  - iii. [International Monetary Fund](#)
  - iv. [London School of Economics](#)
  - v. [The Economist](#)
  - vi. [World Bank](#)
- **Flickr and other image & data repositories** (great for sourcing ideas for visual learners)
  - i. Boston Globe Big Picture: <http://www.boston.com/bigpicture/>
  - ii. Economist Daily Chart: [www.economist.com/blogs/dailychart](http://www.economist.com/blogs/dailychart)
  - iii. Flickr for teachers e.g. Bad Maths: <http://www.flickr.com/groups/badmaths/>
  - iv. Guardian Business Week: [www.guardian.co.uk/business/series/weekinpictures](http://www.guardian.co.uk/business/series/weekinpictures)
  - v. Guardian Data: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/data>
  - vi. Timetric: <http://timetric.com/public-data/>

## Films and Book Festivals

I try to take time out to visit book and film festivals two or three times a year and keep up to speed with new works, films and documentaries that can be used in the classroom. A popular blog project has been [Economics at the Movies](#) and many fellow teachers have contributed. For many students the use of movie clips and documentaries really helps to cement their understanding. I follow a number of authors and directors on Twitter and tap into their own Twitter networks for fresh ideas and contacts.



## Subject associations and outside bodies

I really enjoy the team work that goes into judging the annual RES essay competition and my PLN has grown substantially from this and also working with a team of presenters on the tutor2u workshop / enrichment & conference events including our Teach Econ events.

- **EBEA:** I am a member but rarely use their resources – in my opinion the EBEA is stuck in a time warp. It does have a Facebook page <http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=89008691511> but few posts in recent months.
- **Royal Economic Society:** Their annual lectures are well attended and I have taken students in the past. Details and podcasts available here: <http://www.res.org.uk/society/lecture.asp>
- **Society of Business Economists:** The SBE has some useful information for non members
- **Moodle Community:** Fantastic open source community of passionate teachers



## Visits to other schools and colleges

I try to fit a few visits a year into my schedule and am always happy to host other colleagues. Maintaining contacts with current academics at universities in the UK and overseas is important to keep up to date with the ever-changing scene and requirements for UCAS entry. Many universities offer summer residential placements for colleagues wanting to refresh their skills and knowledge.

## Collaboration and sharing using web tools

- **Drop Box:** [www.dropbox.com](http://www.dropbox.com) - we use this extensively in sharing files between members of the Tutor2u revision workshop presenting teams.
- **Google Docs:** [www.googledocs.com](http://www.googledocs.com) – one of many Google Apps that can be used for teaching and collaborative work among students
- **Slideshare** - for sharing presentations and the option of allowing others to download
- **Moodle:** <http://moodle.org> - an open source community responsible for developing the VLE platform that we use for our own student VLE
- **Google Alerts:** <http://www.google.com/alerts>

- **Andrew McCarthy** (IT Blog) <http://ajmccarthynz.wordpress.com/> - brilliant blog from an economics/IT teacher in New Zealand who is also expert at utilising digital tools in teaching

## Feeds from economics research and other sources:

- Deloitte Economic Review: [www.deloitte.com/view/en\\_GB/uk/research-and-intelligence/economic-commentary/index.htm](http://www.deloitte.com/view/en_GB/uk/research-and-intelligence/economic-commentary/index.htm)
- HM Treasury: Twitter: <https://twitter.com/#!/hmtreasury> see also [www.hm-treasury.gov.uk](http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk)
- Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS): Twitter: <https://twitter.com/#!/theifs> see also [www.ifs.org.uk](http://www.ifs.org.uk)
- LSE Centrepiece: <http://cep.lse.ac.uk/CentrePiece/>
- Project Syndicate: [www.project-syndicate.org/](http://www.project-syndicate.org/)
- PWC Outlook: [www.pwc.co.uk/eng/publications/uk\\_economic\\_outlook.html](http://www.pwc.co.uk/eng/publications/uk_economic_outlook.html)
- Royal Economic Society: <http://www.res.org.uk/society/mediabriefings.asp>
- The Browser: <http://thebrowser.com/sections/business-economics>
- Vox EU Blog: [www.voxeu.org/](http://www.voxeu.org/)



## Overview

Personal learning networks take many forms and I am sure that I have missed out some important ingredients! I ought to give greater weight to the ideas and arguments that come from my own students many of whom are keen to share what they have read or picked up in the media. I have left out the many conversations and exchanges of views and resources that take place day in day out within my own school department and also using traditional email channels with colleagues from many other schools.



In my opinion many commercial CPD events are quite frankly shocking - and the exam boards charge full commercial rates for day-long events in the company of ageing retainers whose ambition is limited to poring over past papers. This CPD is sterile and expensive and too driven by the minutiae of exams, mark schemes and jumping through hoops. A personal learning network will have exam work in focus at certain times of the year but it should be much more than this.

I hope that this short paper has given a flavour of some of the components of my own personal learning network. What do you include in yours?

Geoff Riley FRSA - June 2011