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A Review of *What Connected Educators Do Differently*

Whitaker, T., Zoul, J., & Casas, J. (2015). *What connected educators do differently*. New York: Routledge.

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ABSTRACT

Connections to others are important in any field or educational context. Connecting to colleagues and students is especially critical in digital learning environments. What Connected Educators Do Differently is a recommended read for anyone who teaches—especially those in virtual or hybrid classrooms. The notions of connecting personally and professionally through communication, collaboration, and community are at the core of this book.

Keywords: *personal and professional networks (P2LNs), digital learning environment, communication, collaboration, community*

Introduction

While searching for current readings on working with postsecondary students in a digital learning environment, this text was selected based on the idea that connected educators are unique or set apart in some way from one another's counterparts. The premise of this book is making connections and highlighting the numerous ways which connected educators of any grade level, from pre-K to higher education, meet their own professional needs, as well as, the needs of their students with and through personal and professional learning networks. The book encourages readers to reflect and self-assess his/

her current practice to determine areas of strength and goals for improvement. Anyone serving in a role in the field of education, from a child care provider to a higher education administrator, would benefit from the stories and ideas throughout the text on how to increase professional and personal connections.

Background

The authors who collaborated to write this text are educators and actively working in the field of education either in leadership and/or supervisor roles. Collectively, they have many years of experience as elementary, middle, and secondary public school

teachers and researchers using both traditional and digital platforms. Additionally, all three authors have served as high school principals; while one is now a professor and a second is a K-12 school superintendent.

Whitaker et al. share that this book is a result of their own networking and the successful product of their initial chance meeting, which developed into a strong working relationship. The purpose of the book is to highlight stories, people, and resources from their own personal and professional networks (P²LN) in order to encourage others in the field to become more connected to their work. There are frequent stories and references to people they have met through their connections who serve at a variety of educational levels. They have coined the P²LN phrase to represent “P to the power of 2” (p. xxiv), placing emphasis on the importance of developing both components of networking.

Text Design and Layout

Whitaker, Zoul, and Casas developed the book around eight *key connectors* to encourage the reader to find ways to maximize one’s personal and professional life by becoming more connected: (1) Invest in a Personal and Professional Learning Network (P²LN); (2) Learn What They Want, When They Want, How They Want; (3) Embrace the Three Cs: Communication, Collaboration, and Community; (4) Give and Take ... and Give Some More; (5) Strive to Be

Tomorrow ... Today; (6) Know That It Is Still About the 3 Rs: Relationships, Relationships, Relationships; (7) Model the Way; and (8) Know When to Unplug. The authors emphasize the importance of being connected in the profession as a mindset more so than one specific idea, program, or component. The book is comprised of an opening introduction followed by eight chapters, which correspond with the key connectors. These key connectors are single action steps for educators to follow to be intentional in their learning and growth.

Every chapter defines and provides examples of a key connector and concludes with three short sections titled, *Follow 5*, *Find 5*, *Take 5*. *Follow 5* provides a list of advice from five educators the authors of the text feel embody the components of the chapter. *Find 5* is a list of online resources and/or tools for the reader to further develop one’s own skills. *Take 5* offers suggested action steps the reader can take to either get started or continue to develop as a connected educator. The latter seems to be the most valuable component of the text. Each of these three sections builds upon the next throughout the book, thereby reinforcing ideas and knowledge gained.

Chapters 1 and 2

Chapters 1 and 2 focus on the foundational terminology to be used throughout the book and introduce the reader to the (P²LN) model of investing in a Personal and Professional Learning Network, as well

as, the social media platform, Twitter. The authors write in such a way that it is easy for the reader to be able to relate to their stories and positions. Additionally, the description of Twitter provides the reader with the ability to immediately open and start an account.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 highlights the three C's: Communication, Collaboration, and Community. The authors emphasize the importance of combining these three areas with purpose, passion, and pride. This translates into a chapter which motivates the reader to reflect on his/her current practices and how they may be improved. As the field of education is continually critiqued and examined, the following provides a point of inspiration and self-reflection for the reader:

The challenge facing schools today is the ability to cultivate a culture wherein all members of the school community feel comfortable in disrupting routines long established by the status quo and embrace a connected world which world is ready to support their desire to learn without limits. (p. 30)

Chapters 4 and 5

Chapters 4 and 5 continue the motivational trend and encourage connected educators to find ways to give back, not only take, to other people within their network. There

are three types of people described: the givers, takers, and matchers. As with other forms of educational networking texts, sharing and stealing of ideas is encouraged rather than borrowing. The authors contend that *borrowing* can often be a transaction limited to material things, such as paper, pencils, worksheets, books, etc., as opposed to ideas about how to improve a topic, lesson, or engagement with students. In short, "the original item tended to stay with the original owner, even if the borrower used it, too" (p. 53). The idea of borrowing means that it will not be changed, but stealing it and making it one's own allows for enhancing the original idea, thereby taking ownership to share with another. Through shifting the thinking to *stealing* an idea, "we honor this person by not taking what she has to share and using it exactly as designed, but by taking it, using it, strengthening it, and sharing it anew with others," thereby owning it ourselves before giving it back again (p. 53). The authors challenge one's thinking about taking and giving within the frame of a network.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 parallels the phrase used in real estate, *location, location, location*, with encouraging readers to remember their PLN growth starts with trust in building *relationships, relationships, relationships*. The authors remind the reader that this book is the outcome of them meeting and developing their relationship over time with one another. The focus is not

solely on relationships with students and co-workers in their direct environment, but also, through colleagues found around the world. Again, the use of Twitter to aid in this group of followers and networking web is reiterated throughout.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 shifts toward the importance of modeling for others in response to a need as well as to inspire and integrate opportunities for collaboration. The authors are both practical and realistic in their advice to readers. The tone of the writing is positive and addresses the facets of failure which can occur in any position. The choices made after the failure are the focus of how to change, as well as, encouraging risk-taking.

Perhaps, one of the most surprising chapters is the final chapter on knowing when to disconnect or unplug from technology. After the build up to working toward connections primarily through social media access and various other digital sources, the authors leave the reader with the reminder that the opportunity to limit screen time

and social media engagement is equally important. They emphasize ways the connected educator reflects, reads, and takes moments of solitude to rejuvenate. This conclusion is both unexpected and refreshing.

Conclusion

Initially, the book seems to be geared toward multiple ways to connect digitally to postsecondary students with tips and resources. However, the presentation of the book as a personal narrative is much more in line with how to develop relationships that lead to connections. The primary tool for connecting both professionally and personally with great emphasis throughout is the Twitter platform. For readers who may not want to start a Twitter account, they may find that this book will not directly apply to their needs. However, one can still find a good deal of information and ways to shift one's thinking toward how to further grow a personal and professional learning network. The material and insights gained are relevant for educators at all levels from primary to post-secondary in both traditional and online settings.

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