

How To Start Your Own Online Professional Learning Community

The Power

NEW!
VERSION
2.0



of an

Online PLC

By Michelle Waters | MrsWatersEnglish.com

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The Power of an Online PLC

My Story

I needed a copy of a recently passed education bill to analyze for a blog post. The legislative website in my state was down, so I published a tweet asking if someone could send me a copy of the bill. My tweet included the [#oklaed](#) hashtag used by a group of educators from across the state.



Moments later, the Director of Secondary Language Arts at the State Department of Education tweeted me back, stating that I could pick up a copy of the bill at his office. A few hours later, I stood in his office, discussing English/Language Arts pedagogy, comparing our childhood teaching experiences, and agreeing to write a [report on teaching elements of journalism in an ELA classroom](#). This wouldn't be so amazing, except that I'm a newbie teacher, with only three years' experience, and [alternately certified](#). This makes me a baby in the education world.

It also means I didn't study education in college, but instead earned a Bachelor's degree in Journalism and Public Relations. After working for newspapers for six years, I started a home-based web design and hosting company. During the 10 years I ran my business, I learned from my business colleagues how to network via social media, email, and other online resources. Through that experience, I remembered that I had always wanted to be a teacher.

In the State of Oklahoma, you can become a teacher if you have a Bachelor's degree in a relevant field, pass the Oklahoma General Education Test, the Oklahoma Subject Area Test related to your field of study, and the Oklahoma Professional Teaching Exam. I received approval to seek alternative certification in 2009, my initial alternative certification in 2011 and my first job that August. I finally completed the entire process in June 2014; my standard alternative teaching certificate is hanging on the wall in my classroom.

The significance of my story is that nowhere in this process (until this year) did anyone help me setup a Professional Learning Community. While the state did require me to complete the Resident Teacher Program during my first year, which included a mentor teacher, administrator and a higher education representative, my mentor at the high school had one foot in retirement, my principal spent much of his time handling discipline issues and moving buses (this was a small school), and I never saw a higher education representative. I guess someone checked a box somewhere saying I completed this program, because I am a teacher.

Blogging

Because I was once a single person living on my teaching income, I know how nervous public school teachers can become about speaking out on political issues.

And so, I have used my retired status to as full of an effect as possible by joining the blogosphere, advocating for public schools, public school teachers, and public school administrators who have to fight political fights every day just because investors see big money in privatizing education.

Yes, I make a few people uncomfortable from time to time. But for the most part, I try to let many others know that they have someone speaking up and standing up for them. Unless you have been there, most people don't know just how exposed to criticism public school teachers can feel. That's why I speak up.

And the cool thing about it is that I have become acquainted with some pretty amazing bloggers in the process. **Claudia Swisher, Rob Miller, OkEducationTruths** (Seriously, I still haven't figured out who it is.), **Jason James, Michelle Waters, Dr. John Thompson, and Seth Meier** have all contributed to my learning curve in reading their work and paying close attention to their comments in social media.

Photo 1: From *Life at the Intersections* by [Brett Dickerson.net](http://BrettDickerson.net)

That said, having a journalism background, and a burning desire to be an amazing teacher, I was not content to let this get me down. I joined online education forums, hunted down any educator I could find who would offer me advice – everyone from the school librarian to the middle school English teacher – and joined education networks on Twitter and Facebook to learn as much as I can about teaching.

The next year, I moved to a high-poverty middle school. Thanks to my co-teacher Cindy Buss, and many other wonderful colleagues at Del Crest Middle School, my teaching has vastly improved since that first year. I was even nominated for Teacher of the Year at my school last year, which still amazes me.

Not only is this the story of my journey, but also a guide to help other new teachers – traditionally or alternatively certified – develop a learning and resource network. This will save your career, and your sanity, especially if you are at a school that doesn't have my current school staff's and administration's collaborative spirit.



What Is An Online PLC?

While I have been participating in online business or education Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) since 2001 – via message boards and blogs first, and now via social media – I had never heard the term until this year. So if you haven't heard the term until now, don't feel bad. (I love it when I learn something new!)

In order to define this new term, I turned to my online colleague and retired Norman educator [Claudia Swisher](#), who said:

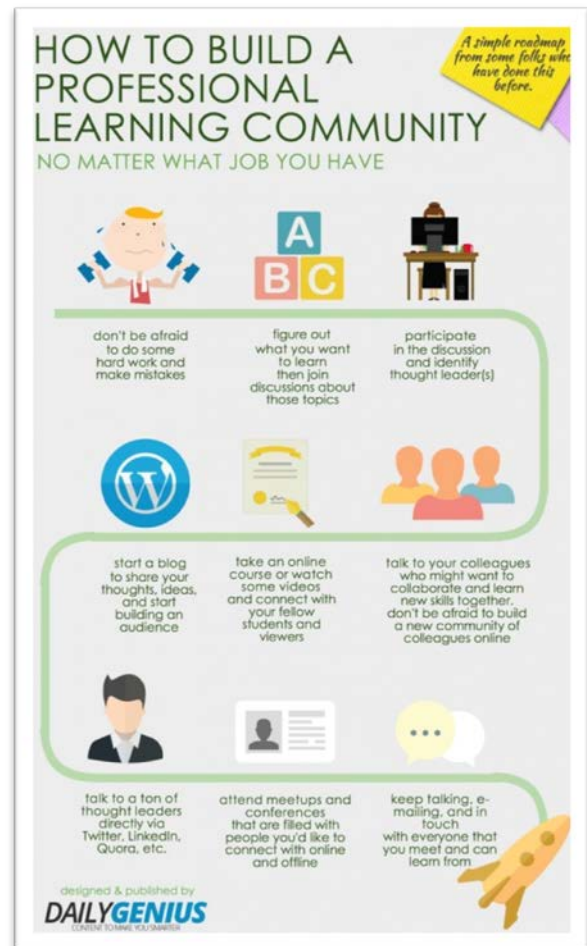
"I visited Rick DuFour's school, and I understand HIS definition was a grade or department that comes together to analyze data (test scores). My former schools used PLC to mean smaller cross-curricular groups of teachers gathered together for information dissemination.

MY vision is like-minded professionals and stake holders who CHOOSE to come together to discuss issues, listen, and hopefully come to some solutions. Even if no solutions occur, participants will leave energized, with more tools and ideas than before."

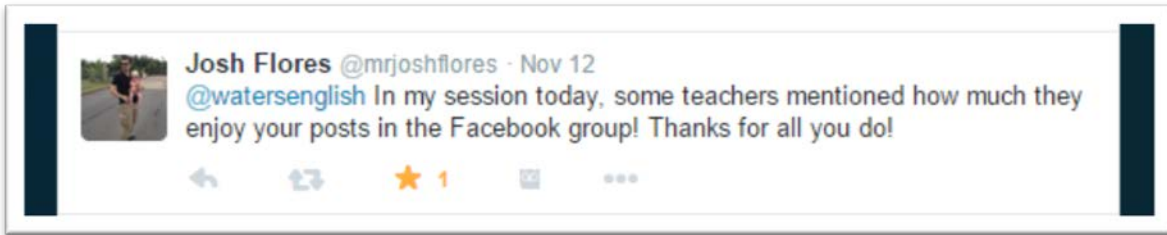
I think PLCs can be function in both ways An in-school PLC can include a collaborative department meeting regularly to develop and maintain its teaching and subject-area standards, grade-level teachers meeting to discuss and manage student-related situations, and impromptu teacher meetings happening randomly in the hallways.

Naturally, an online PLC is simply a community of colleagues from across the globe with whom you learn online. This community often includes thought leaders that you follow and educators who consider you a thought leader in your subject area, in education generally, or sometimes in areas such education technology or special education.


While you can find just about anything you want to know from your online PLC, that's not their sole purpose. PLCs can also give you a voice, enable you to reach out to those who are going



through the same things you have experienced, and who are searching for the same information you have found. Online PLCs are a two-way street.



A screenshot of a tweet from Josh Flores (@mrjoshflores) dated Nov 12. The tweet text says: "@watersenglish In my session today, some teachers mentioned how much they enjoy your posts in the Facebook group! Thanks for all you do!". Below the text are icons for reply, retweet (4), like (1), share, and a menu icon.



A screenshot of a tweet conversation. The top tweet is from Mrs. Waters (@watersenglish) dated Nov 10, with the text: "Bookmark this page for future reference to the #oklaed Sunday night chats! fb.me/3w1j&JsKZ". It has 4 retweets and 3 likes. Below it is a reply from Rob Miller (@jmsprincipal) dated Nov 10, with the text: "@watersenglish Wonderful resource! Thanks for putting this together!". The reply is timestamped "8:36 PM - 10 Nov 2014" and has a "Details" link. Below the reply is a text input field with the placeholder "Reply to @jmsprincipal". At the bottom is another tweet from Mrs. Waters (@watersenglish) dated Nov 10, with the text: "@jmsprincipal You're welcome! Thank you for being one of the 'squeaky wheels' of #oklaed. :D". It has 1 like.

Why Do You Need An Online PLC?

While you spend hours a day in front of people, teaching is essentially a lonely job. You spend more hours grading papers and planning lessons, outside of the contracted day, time that you take from your family. While everyone has spent time in a classroom, few people outside of other educators have any idea what it's like to be the one leading that classroom of 20+ students, staying on time, and maintaining control for 180+ days of the year.

Our current political climate, where teachers are vilified, punished, and ridiculed, does not help.

That's not all. In some schools, the staff's and administration's climate is more about competition, or exclusion, than about collaboration and inclusion. If that's the story at your school, you need to create your own virtual PLC so you can gain the support you need from fellow educators.

If you have been blessed to be a part of an amazingly collaborative staff like the one at my school, you already know the value of working together, and you can share that with other educators who may not be so blessed, or who at least know the value of networking.

We must work together if we want to grow professionally, if we want to stand firm politically, and if we want to do the best way can to take care of our kids. We owe it to them to work together.

If you want to keep your job, you need to be able to answer yes to Gallup's 12 questions. These questions are part of a survey companies can use to determine how engaged their employees are, and it includes questions asking if you have received recognition for doing good work, you feel that someone cares about you as a person at work, someone cares about your professional development at work, and if you have a best friend at work.

Answer no to any of these questions, and you may soon be destined to lose your engagement at work -- otherwise known as burnout. Fortunately, you aren't confined to the walls of your building to create the network you need. You can reach out to the people you need online.

Here's how to start building that online network.

How To Build Your Online Presence

I started using the internet regularly in 2001. Back then, online forums (also known as message boards) were all the rage, and I became very comfortable communicating via their interface. As a matter of fact, I setup a few of my own forums and became proficient enough at installing, modifying, and managing them that I was able to start a web design and hosting company for work at home moms.

Naturally, when I became a teacher, my first forays into finding an online network of educators took me to forums for teachers. There are not very many of them, and I never became an active member in any of them (I did ask a few questions, but for the most part, I felt that everyone else knew way more than I did, which is probably true), but I still return to those forums to search for answers to educational questions and to look for research.

The reason I chose forums first (aside from the fact that I was most comfortable using them) is that forums allow me to lurk – observe the conversation without having to participate. In forums, I can see how the conversation flows among the group of people, see what the prevailing attitudes are, what the expected etiquette is, and develop an understanding of how I can best contribute. While weblogs (personal websites where people write in a journal format with the most recent articles, called posts, appear first), provide a wealth of information, and I advise you to get involved in them, forums can provide a safer place to really develop a feel for an online community.

My favorite forum for this purpose is:

[A to Z Teacher Stuff Forum](#)

I wish I could give you a dozen forums to check out, but I can't. Forums tend to be expensive to build and maintain, and they just are not as popular now that we have social media.

More resources to help you build your online presence:

- [5 Key Things Needed To Improve Your Digital Identity](#) by Forbes.com
- [Brand You](#) by GeorgeCouros.ca
- [Taking Care Of your Digital Self](#) by Web20Classroom.org

Once you feel comfortable online, it's time to start building up your teacher blog.

How to Start A Teacher Blog

Starting your own teacher blog can be a scary step. What if people think you don't know what you're talking about? What if you have nothing to say? What if you change your mind? Fortunately, you're not the only one having these (and other) fears. The best thing you can do is jump right in and start learning. (I bet that's what you tell you're students when they're afraid to start writing!)

Just like I suggested with forums, you can begin by reading other people's work. Start by reading the blogs of teachers you know and respect. If you don't know any, I recommend starting with these:

- [Blogging Through The Fourth Dimension](#) by Pernille Ripp, a middle school teacher in Wisconsin
- [A View From The Edge](#) by Rob Miller, a middle school principal in Oklahoma
- [I'm Lovin' Lit](#) by Erin Cobb, a middle school English teacher in Louisiana
- [Taught By Finland](#) written by Tim Walker, an American teacher in a Finnish school
- [Cult of Pedagogy](#) by Jennifer Gonzalez, former middle school ELA teacher and teacher educator
- [Fourth Generation Teacher](#) by Claudia Swisher, retired reading teacher in Oklahoma
- [Diane Ravitch's Blog](#), written by the historian of education and Research Professor of Education at New York University
- [Two Writing Teachers](#) by (you guessed it!) two writing teachers in Pennsylvania and New York City
- [Mrs. Waters' English](#), the blog written by yours truly
- [Love, Teach](#) by an English teacher at an urban Title I school
- [Math Equals Love](#) by Sarah Hagan, a math teacher at a small Oklahoma high school

I recommend you read through those blogs, get to know their authors, and when you feel comfortable, start commenting on the posts. Yes, I know, that sounds scary for someone who is brand new to online PLCs.

For more information on blog commenting, read the following posts:

- [Teachers: Why You Should Comment On Other Educator's Blogs](#) (available on Jan. 6, 2015)
- [Teachers: How To Write Great Blog Comments](#) (available on Jan. 7, 2015)

Even if you're not sure what you want to say, it's always a good idea to have your own site add in your profile when you comment on other sites. Setup your site, tell your readers a little bit about yourself, and then write posts about the articles you've read online. Nothing says your posts have to be long.

Still not sure?

Claudia Swisher, retired Norman Public Schools teacher and prolific education blogger, shares some advice for those who are still not sure if they should dip their toes in the blogging water:

It took me years of reading and following before I tried my own blog...that, and Barresi! She made me sooo angry I HAD to speak. But it was years of lurking, reading, creating my interests in education...seeing who I agreed with and why...who I didn't, and why.

Then I had to decide if my voice had something to contribute...and what that was. I LOVED writing about my class, but my numbers were always low on any post about my class...My numbers are highest when I rant, and that makes me really sad. Reflective pieces do not resonate. I think that's a reflection on ME and on US...if that makes sense...we've been angry for four years...we'll see what happens when a new administration takes over.

I also knew I needed to write about STATE issues...my voice sounds stiff and pedantic when I write about national issues or events I do not experience first hand.

I started my blog after being dared by Nancy Flanagan, a friend and national blogger...she also dragged me onto Twitter and was my first follower. (My advice) is to reach out before jumping into blogging, and just lurking, responding on blogs you like, making contacts and relationships...and then asking for help!

In short, once you do decide to start your own blog, you'll need to find your own voice, and your own purpose. What makes you want to write, even if no one else is reading or listening?

Whether you're a technophobe or a technogeek teacher, I have a guide to help you setup your own teacher or classroom blog. You can download a copy of my [No-Nonsense Guide to Setting Up Your Teacher Blog](#).

Basically, there are 3 steps you must complete in order to start a blog:

1. Purchase a domain name
2. Setup website (may include hosting and software)
3. Design your site (may include installing a theme/template and customizing graphics)

Once you've completed those steps, you'll need to think about the future your site. Ask yourself these questions:

1. **What is the purpose of my site?** For example, you might be setting up a classroom blog where your students can practice writing in a secure environment, or writing an education blog where you can share your expertise and reflect with other teachers and administrators.
2. **Who is my site's audience?** You might be writing just for the students in your class, for teachers in your subject area, or for a broader range of educators in public or private education.
3. **What am I writing about?** Your content will vary based on the answers to the two previous questions. An elementary math teacher will write about vastly different topics from a high school English teacher. To gain an understanding of what others in your field are writing (and aren't writing!) I recommend you find other bloggers like you who are writing to the same audience.

Once you've answered these questions, you'll need to create the following pages on your site, even if you're writing a blog that will contain frequently updated posts:

1. **About.** Make sure you include a page that tells readers about who you are. Even if you don't include your real name and school district, you can tell your readers enough about you so that they can identify with who you are and what your mission is as a blogger.
2. **Contact.** If you choose to use a Wordpress or Edublogs site, you can install a plugin that will enable you to create a contact page. This will enable your readers to send you an email without you having to give up your email address on a website (which is dangerous, as you may be spammed if you post your email address online).

Now that you've setup your site, determined what your goals are and created some pages, you need to consider what you'll write about. Personally, I decided to write a blog geared to other educators in which I reflect on my teaching practice, share what I've learned, and connect with other teachers and administrators. My articles typically are about English Language Arts classroom topics, education policy issues, and relevant news in our industry.

Develop Your Writing Style

Some people are natural-born writers. They hold a pen up to paper and words start flowing. On the other hand, there are people who struggle to write a few paragraphs. Having a unique writing style will help set your writing apart from others, even if you fall into the group of people that finds writing difficult. Here are some ways to develop your writing style.

The best writers have a love of words, and they are avid readers. Believe it or not, reading is a great way to develop your writing style. The types of things you enjoy reading are probably things you would enjoy writing.

Reading other peoples' writing will also give you insights on your own writing. As you read, some authors' styles will seem to pop out at you as very good or very bad. You probably have a writing style similar to the authors you enjoy reading.

What are your writing strengths? Some people are great at writing news-oriented stories, while some people prefer to write reviews and opinion pieces. If you like to teach people things, your writing strength could be how-to articles. If you enjoy coming up with slogans and catchy headlines, you might be a natural when it comes to copywriting. There are many types of writing to explore.

In order to develop your writing style, you need to write. Try to write something everyday. The more you write, the easier it will get. Experiment with different styles and techniques. You will see that some types of writing come easier to you. Blogs and journals are a great way to get writing practice.

These "practice writings" don't need to be masterpieces, and you can delete what you write if you want. The point is to keep your writing muscles flexed by exercising them a little each day. Your natural strengths will come out as you try different forms of writing.

Embrace your personality and voice as you write. Use words that you would use when you speak. If your writing sounds unnatural and awkward, your reader will be turned off. Let your personality come out in your writing. Have a conversation with your readers as you would with someone you were speaking to face to face. If you like talking about certain subjects, write about them.

Free writing can also help you develop your unique style. Sit down in a quiet place and set a timer for five to ten minutes. Clear your head and start writing what comes to your mind, and keep writing until time runs out. Don't worry about grammar or spelling. Just write whatever you think of.

When the timer goes off, read over what you have written. It may not make sense, but it can give you ideas for other things to write about.



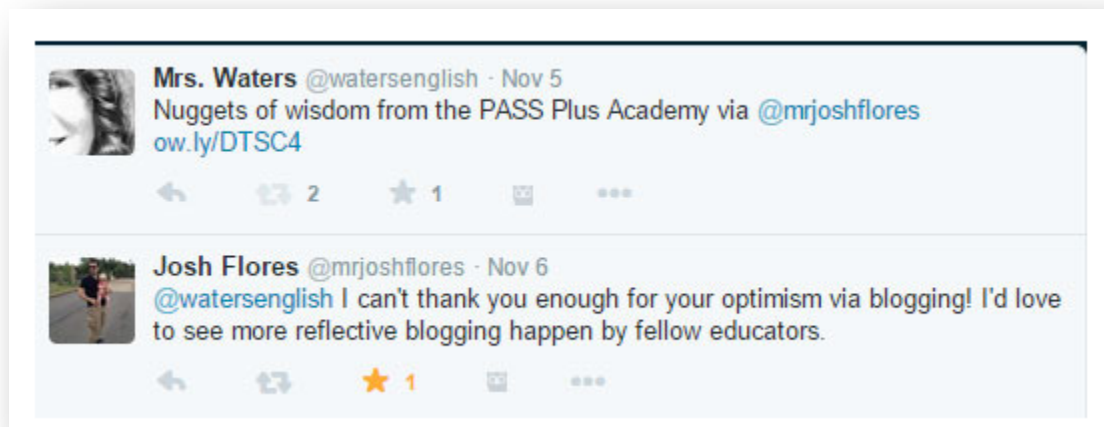
Questions?

Feel free to contact me via my [Contact](#) page, or by replying to one of the emails from my personal newsletter.

How To Build A PLC On Twitter

The most valuable PLC I have joined is the [#OklaEd](#) chat on Twitter. Teachers and administrators from all over the state join together at 8 p.m. CT every Sunday night to discuss various issues faced by our state's public education system. Our PLC has become so important that one of the candidates running for superintendent joined us prior to and after she won the election.

By participating in that chat, I have "met," and had the opportunity to work with and influence many other educators in my subject-area, along with other teachers, principals, superintendents, and more.



I setup my first Twitter profile in 2009 and my first educational account in September 2013. As a newbie to educational tweeting, I chose to follow the accounts Twitter suggested, such as [@Edutopia](#), [@WeAreTeachers](#), [@ScholasticTeachers](#), and [@TeacherCreated](#).

Then I followed national leaders and publications such as [@EducationWeek](#), [@RWeingarten](#), [@DianeRavitch](#), and [@HuffPostEdu](#).

Through those sources, and teachers I know who are on Twitter, I discovered the educational thought leaders in the world, the U.S. and in my state.

What To Share On Twitter

You have 140 characters or less. What could you possibly share in that amount of space? Here are a few ideas to get you started.

- Inspirational quotes – yours or famous people’s
- Pithy professional reflections or insights
- Summary and link to relevant articles you’ve read online
- Short description of blog posts you’ve written
- Retweets of comments or links other Twitter users have posted

Below are resources to help you start using Twitter in your teaching practice:

- [Twitter In 60 Seconds](#) [YouTube Video]
- [Getting Started With Twitter For Teachers](#) [Google Doc]
- [Can Tweeting Help Your Teaching?](#) By NEA.org
- [The Complete Guide To Twitter Hashtags For Education](#) by TeachThought.com
- [Educational Hashtags](#) by CybraryMan.com
- [Hashtags, Twitter Chats And TweetDeck For Education](#) by TheEduBlogger.com
- [A Printable List Of The Best Education Hashtags](#) by EdTechMagazine.com
- [8 Tips To Create A Twitter-Driven School Culture](#) by Edutopia.org

You’ll also need a few tools to help making tweeting easier. You can read my recommendations in the last section of this special report.

In the meantime, let’s talk about the other social networking site predominately used by teachers: Facebook.

How To Build Your Facebook Page

Facebook for Teachers: Two main categories of use

| Professional Development | Use with Students |
|--|--|
| -Joining groups or follow pages intended for teachers | -Posting educational material for students to see (videos, links, etc) |
| -Asking for ideas/suggestions from other teachers | -Space for student collaboration |
| -Following education pages to stay current on new trends, ideas, | -Creating surveys or polls for students |
| -Sharing resources, materials, and ideas | -Keeping student and parents informed about events |

Before we jump into the details of setting up a Facebook profile, let's talk about what this website actually is. Facebook is a social network where people of various interests meet to discuss and share information about those interests.

Examples in the real world of social networks might be things like alumni gatherings, family reunions, and professional workshops or conferences.

Most of us have been to these events or understand at least the professional benefit of interacting with people in your subject area and friends who can help steer other educators your way. What Facebook brings to the world of social networking is access and flexibility. In other words, even if your school can't afford to send you to that professional conference in the big city nowhere near where you live, you can still network with people in your field.

Not to mention, instead of meeting perhaps a few dozen or a few hundred people at local professional conferences, you now have the ability to meet thousands of people for little to no cost.

Facebook is considered by most networking experts as the most powerful social network in the world. Now that's a big claim but it is supported by statistics.

There are more than one billion ACTIVE users on Facebook. According to Facebook, people spend more than 700 billion minutes per month on the Facebook platform. In any given day, you will find that half of the total number of active users have logged on to Facebook.

Think about 500 million people a day browsing through Facebook, chatting with friends, sharing birthday greetings with families and learning how to solve teaching issues, or finding teaching resources by visiting pages...like the one you will be developing for your education network.

What is even more interesting is that with the advent of smart phones and phone networks that allow users to carry Internet access with them practically wherever they go throughout the day, statistics are showing that users are connecting to Facebook more frequently than ever. In fact, Facebook reports that more than 500 million active users access Facebook directly through their mobile devices each month!

Statistics actually now verify that Facebook users on mobile devices are twice as active on Facebook as non-mobile users. Now do you see how incredibly important it is for you to be on Facebook? The likelihood of the educators you'd like to connect with being on Facebook is now higher than ever.

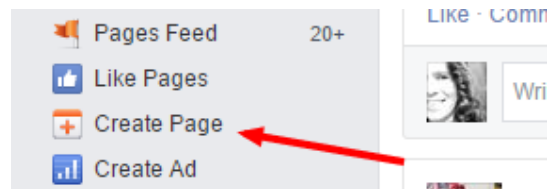
Facebook Profile Or Page?

Chances are, you already have a Facebook profile. It's the account you setup and added all your friends and family members to, the account that has your real name – all of them. While you can add your teacher friends to your Facebook profile, I don't recommend sharing all your teacher links, articles, tips, and suggestions here. After all, I don't think your Grandma cares about all the crazy decisions made by the legislator regarding public education.

Instead of flooding your profile – and your friends' news feeds – with your education posts, you need to setup a Facebook page. I setup a page called [Mrs. Waters English](#). It's where I share links from my website, from other education-related Facebook pages, and from other blogs I read. This way, those people who are interested in following me as a teacher can do so, and those who aren't can choose not to.

Creating Your Facebook Page

You will not be able to setup a Facebook page from your mobile device or tablet, so you'll need to login to your Facebook account on a desktop or laptop computer. Then find the "create page" button in the left column.



Naming your Page – Once you've chosen to create a page, you'll be given the option of assigning a name to that page. Once assigned you'll see that Facebook provides you with a dedicated URL that includes the name you've chosen but also a string of numbers. To get an attractive vanity URL (like www.facebook.com/mrswatersenglish) you'll need to have at least 25 fans.

Fans – Fans are people who visit your page and plan on coming back because they like what they see. Facebook gives these people something really tangible to do to demonstrate publically their interest in your page. They can click on a Like button at the top of the page that tells everyone how many people have liked your page to date.

Cover – Your “cover” refers to the large image that you can place at the top of your page. You can feature any photo you want about your teaching practice as long as it meets [Facebook guidelines](#). The dimensions should be 851 pixels wide and 315 pixels tall (for best results).

NOTE: All covers are set to public so anyone on Facebook can see your Page cover.

Profile Picture/Avatar – Facebook recommends you choose an image that is 200 x 200 pixels for your avatar, however your avatar will be shrunk down considerably in the News Feed so you should choose a photo that provides a large clear shot of your face.

Start things off with Invitations – To get your Facebook community page going, you’ll want to start by inviting your teacher friends and colleagues to support your page. Once on your page, they have the option to click the like button so that your number of “Likes” will go up and others will note the increasing popularity and join as well. As your community grows, so will the conversation on your page as long as you are following an engagement plan that ensures quality content is posted to your Facebook page on a regular basis.

Below are some resources to help you start using Facebook pages in your teaching practice:

- [14 Great Facebook Groups Every Teacher Should Know About](#)
- [Every Teacher’s Must-Have Guide To Facebook](#)

Online PLC Tools

Nurph

[Nurph.com](#): Sign into this Twitter chat platform with your Twitter account, and then enter the hashtag for the chat you wish to join. Not only does this browser-based (you don't have to download anything) software stream your Twitter chat quickly, it will also automatically append the hashtag when you participate in the conversation.



[Hootsuite](#): You can use this website, or the mobile apps, to manage your Facebook Page and your Twitter account. Once you've setup your social media accounts within Hootsuite, you can post to one or all of your

accounts at once. Even better, you can schedule Facebook or Twitter posts to publish at a later date. This is wonderful if you're sick one morning, or plan to go out of town over a weekend.

More Resources

Once you have your online presence established, and you're ready to take collaboration to the next level, you'll need the following tools:

 [7 Online Collaboration Tools Teachers Need](#)

Questions or comments?

If you have any questions or comments about building your own online PLC, please feel free to contact me via my website at [MrsWatersEnglish.com](#).

Thank you!

Michelle Waters

Michelle Waters
Middle School ELA Teacher

P.S. If you'd like more PLN, website, or teaching ELA resources, follow my blog using [Feedly.com](#), or join my [personal newsletter](#).