

Do you work in a school district where meeting face to face is limited by distance? Are you searching for challenging, job-embedded professional learning to meet your own needs? Would you like to connect with professional learners across Ontario? If you answered yes to any or all of these questions, then Learning Connections is for you.

Learning Connections (LC) is an online, networked, professional learning community for teachers from K–8, principals, vice-principals, district trainers, and supervisory officers across Ontario. It connects educators with the common goal of improving student achievement in literacy and numeracy. Using a blended learning approach of face-to-face sessions and an online learning community, Learning Connections helps educators connect with like-minded individuals across the province. The program is funded through the Literacy & Numeracy Secretariat and has been steadily growing over the past five years. It is affiliated with the award-winning ABEL (Advanced Broadband Enabled Learning www.abelearn.ca) program based at York University, Toronto. The Learning Connections program has grown out of the innovation and research process that has been fundamental to the success of the ABEL program.

The Learning Connections online community is accessed at www.learningconnections.on.ca. To enter the community as a school team or individual, you must first send your name and your school district email to lchelp@yorku.ca. When you have your username and password, you have access to a rich and vital professional learning community where teachers share resources; collaborate with each other within districts and across districts; participate in professional development activities both in real time and in the online environment; and have access to cutting edge software tools to enhance teaching and learning at any level. LC resources and tools are also available for teachers to use with their students as they apply their learning in classroom practice.

Teacher-librarians, aware of the power of online learning communities, are collaborators, sharers of information, and, most importantly, school leaders. The Learning Connections community offers the opportunity for teacher-librarians to share their expertise provincially.

During the 2008-2009 school year, teacher-librarians in the York Region District School Board (YRDSB) began exploring how they could best make use of the LC learning community. Initially, teacher-librarians spent time browsing through the resources and sharing them with teachers in their individual schools. Towards the end of the school year those participants began thinking about how they could share expertise within the LC community in order to first, model exemplary practice in school libraries and second, promote online

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discussion with school library staff in school districts beyond YRDSB.

This idea of professional learning is promoted by Will Richardson (<http://weblogg-ed.com/about>), an avid proponent of networked learning communities and a blogger about educational issues. Richardson believes that, as educators, we need to change the way we learn before we change the way we teach. He defines Professional Learning Practice as a professional development model that immerses educators in environments and practices that allow them to learn and own the literacies of 21st Century learning and teaching (<http://plpnetwork.com>). Learning Connections is the online forum for Ontario educators to help them make this shift in professional learning and move their learning practice forward.

Through participation in self-directed, online professional learning, educators must take responsibility for their own professional learning; develop meaningful professional learning relationships; and engage in learning in a manner that is much different from top-down district-determined “sit ‘n’ git” professional development. Our challenge is in changing how teachers think about learning and using Web2.0 tools for information sharing: the concept of giving information to get information. Teacher-librarians are familiar with this framework as they work with teacher peers in a face-to-face everyday; I know that many school library personnel are involved in this type of learning already, and that all teacher-librarians have the skills to best make the leap to an online collaborative teaching and learning cycle.

If you are a teacher-librarian, classroom teacher or any type of system leader looking to learn more about how you can access this self-directed professional learning community, Learning Connections will meet your needs. I look forward to meeting many new learners in our blended professional learning environment. ■