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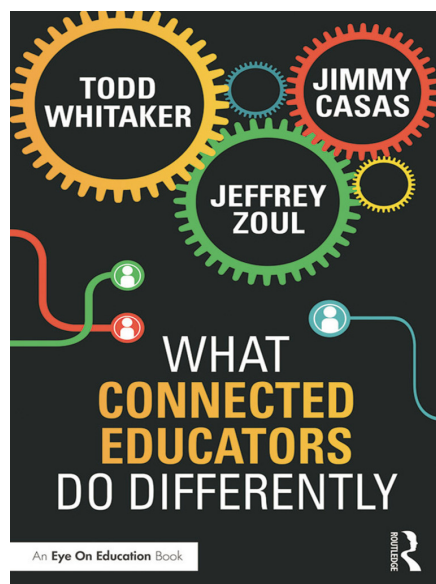
Review of *What Connected Educators Do Differently*

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

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In *What Connected Educators Do Differently*, Whitaker, Zoul, and Casas (2015) encourage readers to become *connected educators* by reaching beyond traditional career connections and entering into the broader educational network made available through social media tools such as Twitter because “there is simply too much to be gained and nothing to lose” (p. xx). In addition, the authors stress that educators *should* connect because it is relatively simple to engage virtually with people around the world, and being connected shapes our learning and our students’ learning. The authors admit that no amount of online connectivity can replace face-to-face connections; however, they believe connecting in new ways allows educators to be more knowledgeable, effective, energized, and efficient as professionals.

The primary purpose of the book is to showcase what connected educators do differently from those who are not connected and to share tips with others wishing to connect. The book is geared toward a wide audience, including educators in Pre-K to higher education and provides the reader with both instructional suggestions as well as anecdotal stories from Whitaker, Zoul, and Casas’ (2015) own experiences as connected educators. The authors all work in the field of education, hold advanced degrees, and share a passion for using digital and social media tools as a means of professional development.

As professors of education, we hoped that this book would offer insight for us in terms of professionally connecting with others through social media tools as well as helping our preservice teachers develop an online presence prior to beginning their first job. Each chapter is organized around a key connector, an action that readers can take to connect with others in the field in order to further their professional learning. Each chapter concludes with the following three sections: Follow 5, where readers are encouraged to “follow” five educators from the authors’ professional networks on Twitter who offer insights on the chapter’s connector; Find 5, which links to five resources; and Take 5, which includes five action steps related to each connector.

The authors begin with Connector 1: “Invest in a Personal and Professional Learning Network” (P²LN), which details how to use digital tools and social media as a means of networking both professionally and personally with other educators. The success of educators’ learning networks depends on the time and effort that each individual is willing to commit to others and themselves. Twitter is the suggested “go to” tool for connectivity and in this chapter, the authors describe how to choose a Twitter name and create a profile. Although the idea of trying something like Twitter may feel uncomfortable, the authors stress that, “the global society in which we live has changed dramatically in the past few decades and we must be prepared to model for our students and for our colleagues a willingness to embrace this change” (p. 9). Becoming connected allows educators to take ownership of their professional learning, which is important because the profession has been “silent and isolated for too long” (p. 13). After reading this chapter, we were excited to begin our connected journey with the tools and ideas highlighted by the authors.

Connector 2: “Learn What They Want, When They Want, How They Want” reminds educators not to limit their learning to traditional delivery modes like after school workshops. Instead, for example, participating in Twitter chats, online discussions about a specific topic, may be an alternative option and are free for anyone to join. In this chapter, the authors continue to provide more detail about connecting with other educators on Twitter and they explain hashtags, which allow educators to search Twitter by topic. The authors also suggest attending Edcamps, or loosely-organized conferences where educators gather informally to share information and ideas. Whether the learning occurs online or in person, educators need opportunities to connect and build professional relationships. With so many options and so little time, educators must choose wisely what they need to know, when they choose to learn it, and how they go about gaining the learning they need.

Connector 3: “Embrace the Three C’s: Communication, Collaboration and Community”

focuses on how and why educators decide to become connected. Some do so because they feel isolated, perhaps because of the context of their school or discontentment with their colleagues. These feelings can compound for connected educators because “their own school districts may not see or appreciate the value that a connected educator can bring to the local organization” (p. 30). However, connected educators, as active members of online educational networks, can help cultivate a culture wherein all members of the school community feel comfortable disrupting routines and embracing a connected world. Tools such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, blogs, and podcasts are free and many schools are using social media to showcase the work of their students and staff, which creates a sense of pride. Connected educators “flatten the walls of the school so parents and the community can get a real and immediate glimpse of the countless meaningful activities being experienced by students in school every day” (p. 39). As teacher educators, we see how the suggestions in this chapter provide a way for schools to share everyday accomplishments with the broader community.

Connector 4: “Give and Take... and Give Some More” highlights how connected educators prioritize the use of social media for supporting improvements by adopting practices that are working in other schools around the world. The authors admit that for every one educator who commits to the connected journey, there are hundreds who lose interest along the way. The connected community can increase the chances of educators sticking with Twitter or other social media by following them. The authors found that once educators have about 100 followers, they tend to see the benefits of connecting this way. However, many give up before they get to this number. We often associate technology with speed; we expect everything to be fast and instant, but what we learn in this chapter is that building an online network requires time and persistence just as building a face-to-face network does.

Connector 5: “Strive to be Tomorrow...Today” underscores how connected educators have a drive for excellence that pushes them beyond what is

expected today to accomplish what might be expected tomorrow. The authors describe how connected educators use their personal and professional networks to connect with educators across the globe that challenge and extend their thinking as well as inspire them to excel. In order to achieve this goal, connected educators must be willing to step outside of their comfort zones in order to take risks and affect change. In addition, they must also keep up to date on current trends in education and beyond to inform their thinking. Connected educators then use this knowledge to inform and reflect on their own practices. The authors provide 16 strategies for making a positive impact on the lives of those with whom educators work most closely; however, only a few of the strategies, such as This Week on Twitter, Local Edcamp, and Televisé the Tweets, are related to connectivity.

Connector 6 “Know That it is Still About the 3 Rs: Relationships, Relationships, Relationships,” underscores the critical role relationships play in the lives of connected educators. These relationships extend beyond the walls of one’s school and/or district to a learning network that includes people from all over the world in all kinds of roles. This network serves as a means for sharing ideas, stories, questions and solutions. The authors highlight the importance of trust in these relationships and the idea that connected educators expect the best from themselves as well as others. Again, the authors reiterate the fact that connected educators seek out other personal and professional learning network (P²LN) members from diverse backgrounds in order to promote growth in their own thinking as well as that of others. While we agree with the premise of the connector, we found that it did not add any additional insight into our understanding of what connected educators do, since the importance of relationships was stressed throughout the first five connectors.

Connector 7, “Model the Way,” introduces the idea of connected educators leading by example, pushing themselves and those around them to take risks, strive for their best, and create a collaborative school culture. The authors caution against the “lock

and block” approach (p. 100) that many school leaders adopt in response to the misuse of social media tools. Instead, they offer an alternative approach where challenges associated with social media tools are to be expected and embraced. The authors emphasize the importance of creating a culture that trusts students and staff to use social media tools responsibly and as a means to extend their learning and brand their school. When a problem arises, they suggest treating it as a teachable moment. However, while the authors include an example of a school system taking the “lock and block” approach (at Roosevelt High School in Los Angeles Unified School District in 2013, when students figured out how to hack iPad security to access Facebook), they fail to provide a concrete example of how challenges might be addressed in a culture of trust. This lack of specific, usable information surrounding a real problem that schools grapple with on a daily basis is just one example of the how the book does not provide readers with the specific strategies necessary for moving forward in their connected journey.

Connector 8, “Know When to Unplug,” refers to the fact that connected educators understand the importance of a work-life balance and thus intentionally take time to unplug and spend time with friends, family, and themselves in order to maintain this balance. The authors cite studies showing how spending too much time plugged in can lead to physical, emotional, and mental health problems. While there are many ways for connected educators to unplug, the authors share three common ways many connected educators do so: exercise, reading, and solitude. By unplugging, connected educators allow themselves the opportunity to de-stress, refocus, and relax. By doing so, they position themselves to reconnect and give their all. We agree that a work-life balance is important and that achieving this balance can lead to greater productivity, relationships, and quality of life and feel that this message extends to both connected and disconnected educators alike.

As two college professors of education, we eagerly began reading *What Connected Educators Do Differently* with the hopes of extending our online

professional networks and becoming more digitally-connected. After reading the first few chapters, which provided clear directions for establishing a P²LN via Twitter, we were enthusiastic about setting up our Twitter accounts and seeking out educators to follow and learn from. However, as we read through the remaining chapters, this enthusiasm soon dwindled and turned into frustration at the lack of specific suggestions provided by the authors. For example, the primary tool for connecting promoted in the text was Twitter, but the authors provided little information on other social media tools that could be useful in connecting with educators and students around the globe.

This book was written with the intent purpose of identifying “what it is, precisely, that connected educators do differently from those who are not and how we can share these practices with other educators wishing to connect” (p. xxi). While this was the stated purpose, the authors fall short of this goal. Much of the book paints an idealistic, unattainable vision of what it means to be a connected educator. According to the authors, connected educators “give of themselves freely and often” (p. 45), “possess an almost fanatical ‘pay it forward’ mindset” (p. 46), “respond consistently whenever they are called upon (p. 49), “bring their best to their organization every day” (p. 66), “fundamentally believe that together they can change the world” (p. 70), “are able to anticipate the next thing coming at them” (p. 74), and “have high expectations for everyone with whom they interact professionally—and even higher expectations for themselves” (p. 86). The authors create a picture of the connected educator as the epitome of perfection and set up a dichotomy where the disconnected educator sadly is lacking.

In short, *What Connected Educators Do Differently* encourages readers to embrace the opportunities social media tools, such as Twitter, offer for professional learning and students’ learning. We agree with the authors’ argument that these tools are essential for 21st century teaching and learning. However, beyond suggestions for starting a professional network on Twitter, which are explained in the first few chapters, and the

suggestions at the end of each chapter (*Follow 5, Find 5, Take 5*), we found the book lacking in terms of substance and concrete steps educators can take in achieving connectivity. In addition, we worry whether this information will quickly become outdated given the ever-changing nature of the internet and social media tools. Despite these shortcomings, we do recognize the value of this book for educators looking to further their own learning and that of their students using digital tools. We live in a global society, and as educators, it is our obligation to prepare students for success. To do this, we also need to extend our learning beyond the walls of our own classroom and school. In addition, social media tools provide learning opportunities that may not be available in our immediate context. Therefore, we recommend this book for educators looking to expand their online presence, as well as those who are just getting started on the pathway to becoming a connected educator.