

Reboot Camp

In just 15 minutes a day, you too can get into tip-top **tech** shape

By Joyce Valenza and Doug Johnson

To stay fit, we all know we need to exercise. It might be a 30-minute cardio workout one day, some weight training the next, or just forgetting about the car and walking. In a similar way, we need to invest in our professional health.

What exercise regime do teacher-librarians need to grow their skills and be able to lead? Well, just like at any upscale health club (kickboxing! jazz dancing!), there are an increasing number of attractive options to choose from (Ning! webinars!). And best of all, they actually work. Our one caveat? Don't overdo it. Unlike with the gym, 15 minutes a day is all that's required to realize genuine benefits.

But first... why bother?

Before Web 2.0 came along, continuing education usually meant reading professional journals, attending conferences, and taking classes—and these are all still important. But today, they aren't sufficient to keep current with the latest developments in librarianship and information technology.

In addition, it can be lonely being a librarian—especially a school librarian. As the only media specialist in the building, you may be craving your colleagues' advice and sympathy.

Fortunately, over the past few years, wired media specialists have assembled personal learning networks. As a result, we can now connect to learning opportunities on a daily basis, whenever (and wherever) it's convenient. Keeping professionally fit isn't important just for our own well-being; it's important to those we work with, including classroom teachers, principals, guidance counselors, and students.

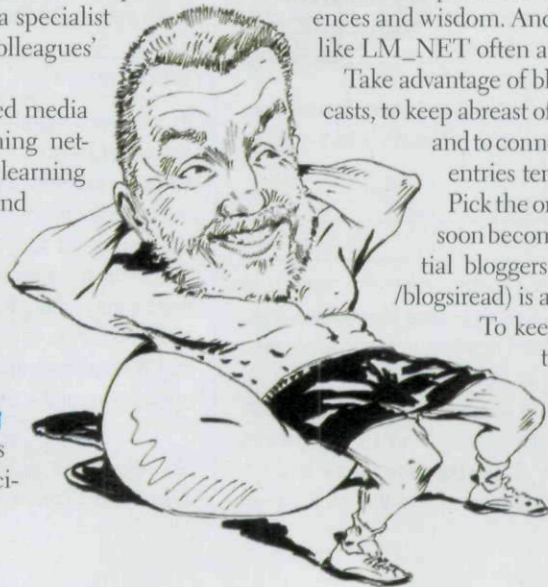
The menu for continuous learning

A wide variety of networking resources is available online—and the only cost associated with them is time.

Electronic mailing lists, while decidedly “old school,” are still a valuable means of tapping into others' expertise. LM_NET (www.eduref.org/lm_net) is the granddaddy of such resources. Also, take a look at AASLForum, ISTE SIGMS, WWWEdu, and your own state library association's mailing list. A simple query to such lists often results in not just recommendations of published information, but shared experiences and wisdom. And don't forget that discussion lists like LM_NET often archive their messages.

Take advantage of blogs and their aural cousins, podcasts, to keep abreast of the latest thinking in the field—and to connect with educational leaders. Blog entries tend to be timely and opinionated. Pick the ones that are fun to read, and you'll soon become addicted. Doug's list of influential bloggers (doug-johnson.squarespace.com/blogsiread) is a good place to start.

To keep up with those blogs, subscribe to RSS feeds and group them in one spot through an aggregator. Joyce recommends Google Reader (reader.google.com) because it's easy to access from iGoogle (google



Illustrations by Tim Bower.

.com/ig). Set up a tab on your *i*Google page for individual library-, tech-, and book-related RSS subscriptions.

Join a Ning, attend a webinar

Nings let you create your own social networks (much like Facebook or MySpace), such as Joyce's Teacher Librarian Ning (teacherlibrarian.ning.com). They complement electronic lists by providing a media-rich forum, with blogs, and are a great way to share photos, videos, and other resources with fellow network members. These networks provide members with their own home pages and allow smaller special interest groups to form. Look at the Classroom 2.0 Ning (classroom20.ning.com), Library Youth and Teen Services 2.0 (libraryyouth.ning.com), and Library 2.0 (library20.ning.com).

To learn more about social networking, visit Helene Blowers's Learning 2.0 (plcmcl2-about.blogspot.com/), also known as "23 Things." This self-directed online tutorial is a great introduction to many of Web 2.0's tools, and the sessions can be spread out over approximately eight weeks. Aimed at public librarians, some states, like California, have adapted the tutorial for school librarians (schoollibrarylearning2.blogspot.com). Check with your local library organization to see if there's a nearby group of librarians who are taking the course, or start your own group.

Webcasts, or webinars, are presentations and workshops that are delivered over the Internet, and they're becoming increasingly popular. They can be live—delivered at a set day and time—but also are often archived for later viewing. Typically, they range from 15 minutes to an hour. Webcasts allow us to attend conferences we never could have gotten to—at no charge!

To try out a Webcast, visit the Apple Learning Interchange (edcommunity.apple.com/ali) and search for the National Educational Computing Conference to "attend" last year's hugely successful conference. There are plenty of great "edtech" speakers at K12 Online Conference (k12online-conference.org). Use Hitchhikr (hitchhikr.com), an index to conferences, to hitch a ride to any number of events. Finally, EdTechTalk (edtechtalk.com) is a portal for attending a variety of conferences, most of them in the evenings. Join a group or listen to the archives. Each show includes live discussion plus a chat, and they're archived. During the course of a week, you'll find several groups hosting guests and discussions, including: Women of Web 2.0, Teachers Teaching Teachers, 21st Century Learning, and It's Elementary.

Get into a MUVE, or just Twitter

Multi-User Virtual Environments (MUVEs), such as Second Life (secondlife.com), offer a growing number of opportunities to interact and learn with colleagues. Your Second Life avatar can attend a presentation, communicate with fellow professionals in real time, and even build virtual learning resources. Look for in-world programs and events over the coming year.



Try out Twitter (twitter.com). Tweets are brief posts of 140 or fewer characters that you can receive on the Web or your phone. The essential question that drives Twitter is: *What are you doing?* The real trick for success in Twitter is finding the right folks to follow. Start with the experts whose articles you've read, sessions you've attended, and classes you've taken—odds are, they're already tweeting. Adopt the lists of their followers—or those they themselves are following!—and add them to your own network. You'll find that Tweeters will share what they had for breakfast, along with their exceptional blog posts and their favorite Web-based tools. You can get great nuggets of information in tweets.

Find the time to make it happen

By now you're no doubt wondering where you'll ever find the time to learn new tools and set up your own personal learning network. Our advice is to go slowly. You wouldn't go out and run a marathon without any training, would you?

Commit to just 15 minutes every day. Stephen Abrams, in "15 Minutes a Day: A Personal Learning Management Strategy" (*Information Outlook*, Feb. 2007), observed how one organization used that approach to complete the entire "23 Things" tutorial.

Don't try to do too much at once. Pick one or two tools at a time and use them for a few weeks or even months. When you've grown comfortable with them, then try another new resource. And remember: not every tool fits every individual's learning preferences.

Practice the "one in, one out" theory. Keep the number of blogs you're reading manageable by always deleting an old feed whenever you add a new one. Too many of us add new things to our lives without ever seriously considering what we should let go of.

Form a genuine community. The thing about social networking is that, well, it's social. Getting to know individuals and groups is a great way to stay committed and involved. Have conversations with the people you find interesting and knowledgeable. Most are flattered to be asked for help or advice. One of the real pleasures of Web 2.0 communications is that the line between personal and professional gets blurred. We get to know each other as individuals with real lives, not just people with similar jobs.

Give back. If you are only a "lurker" on discussion lists, blogs, or Nings, you're only getting half the value of the experience. Discuss, suggest, rant, praise, and question. It's all part of your daily professional workout.

Joyce Valenza is the librarian at Springfield Township High School in Erdenheim, PA. Doug Johnson is the director of media and technology for the Mankato (MN) Public Schools. For more great tips, visit the online version of this article at www.slj.com.

© 2008 School Library Journal, Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier, Inc. All Rights Reserved. Copyright of School Library Journal is the property of Reed Business Information and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.