



EXPLORING PERSONAL LEARNING NETWORKS

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Illustrations by Lifewide Community artist Kibiko Hachiyon



Foreword from the Editor

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Welcome to this, our fourteenth issue of Lifewide Magazine. Once again, thanks to a Guest Editor,

Kamakshi Rajagopal and Commissioning Editor, Norman Jackson, we have a magazine that focuses on an important theme, albeit one that has not yet received the public profile that it merits: Personal Learning Networks (PLNs).

The very process of putting this edition together has been a model of developing a learning network for a specific purpose, as Norman describes in his article on learning ecologies (page 50). The magazine draws on the perspectives and experience of academics, bloggers, researchers, teachers, students and more, collating commissioned articles and others sourced from the internet and illustrated by our community artist Kibiko HachiYon as well as images available on the web. Contributions again come from around the globe, from Canada to Australia and many places between. To all who have contributed, a heartfelt thank you.



To help you navigate through the theme of personal learning networks, we have grouped articles. We begin with an introduction to the topic by Norman. This is followed by a series of conceptual pieces, led by Kamakshi's comprehensive account titled Understanding PLNs.

As always, we have sought to honour our aim of contributing to the body of academic knowledge. To this end, we conducted an open survey on personal

perceptions and practice. My analysis of the data can

be found next (page 31). The survey is still open, so if you would like to add your views, please go to the website shown in my article.

The next set of articles presents some narratives and reflections on PLNs. They include practice in Higher Education, an interview with a graduate on how he used networking in his university environment and a network built around a personal leisure interest. To conclude this section, Norman posits the notion of an ecology for person learning.

Some practical advice is offered next to those who may be new to the idea of personal learning networks.

Finally, we have a number of news items. We are delighted to welcome a new member to the core team, Melissa Shaw, and we catch up with some of the activities in which our team members are engaged.

Already thinking ahead to issue 15, we invite contributions to our evolving explorations and our next topic, Connected Learning.

I hope you will enjoy reading this issue of Lifewide Magazine as much as we have enjoyed putting it together. A special thank you to Kamakshi who has been an exemplary guest editor and a great addition to our PLN.



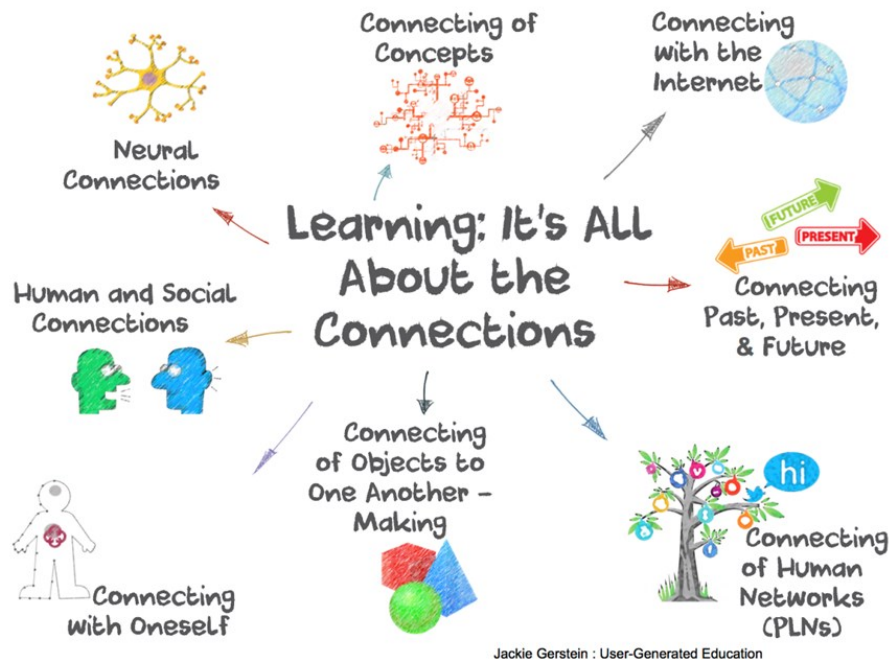
Jenny



EXPLORING PERSONAL LEARNING NETWORKS (PLNs) IN THE SOCIAL AGE

Norman Jackson, Commissioning Editor

'I have come to believe that connection and all of its implications, is one of the most important concepts in understanding, engaging in, and facilitating powerful learning experiences'. This quote and the accompanying illustration (below) by Jackie Gerstein¹ draw attention to the fundamental ways in which human beings are free thinking agents with the power to connect and form relationships with people, ideas, causes, objects, places and contexts and give meaning to their connections.



Connectivity is one of the defining properties of the Social Age², the age we now inhabit brought about by our ability to connect anytime and almost anywhere to people, information and other resources through the internet via mobile communication devices, Web 2.0 technologies and social media. Forming connections and relationships with people who can help us achieve something, and help us learn, is part and parcel of being the social beings we are. But the idea of networking for learning and networking to advance our goals and ambitions, has become more possible and more powerful as a result of the new affordances provided by the internet, smart phones and other mobile communication devices, and Web 2.0 and social media technologies.

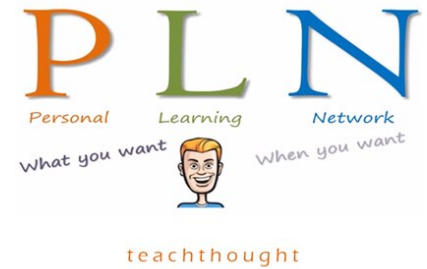
Lifewide Magazine is exploring different dimensions of lifewide learning in the Social Age - in this Issue we continue this journey by exploring one aspect of connectivity - namely the idea and practice of networked learning - particularly the networks we create as individuals in order to learn and achieve.

PERSONAL LEARNING NETWORKS

A PLN is a way of describing the group of people that each of us connects with to learn from, and sometimes with. It's personal because we choose the people we want to involve. We see advantages of being connected to them and forming and sustaining a relationship with them in order to develop our thinking and capabilities. We also participate in networks of connected people in order to be involved in something and/or to achieve something and learning then becomes a bi-product of our involvement.

Our PLN is not limited to online interactions, but it is the ability to connect easily with many people from all over the world, in a sustained manner, that makes the social practice of a PLN so powerful. In a world of just-in-time learning the affordances provided by the internet means it is also possible to find people quickly at the point that a problem has to be solved. Such possibilities were simply not available ten years ago.

When we give something a name it defines the way we view it. The words PERSONAL (meaningful to me), LEARNING (the act of gaining new, or modifying existing knowledge, behaviours, skills, values or beliefs) and NETWORK(S) (a group of people we connect to or who are connected to us), emphasise these aspects of the concept but ignore other aspects.



Our PLNs often enable us to involve ourselves in something, often to accomplish something we value. PLNs and the relationships we build within them are also a way of involving people in our own life projects and for disseminating the results of our learning. In other words they provide a vehicle for participation and for influencing the thinking and actions of others.

Our PLNs change through time as we move from formal education, into a career, we change jobs, roles and careers or engage in new projects, and perhaps move to new cities or new countries. Because of this our PLNs have both lifelong and lifewide dimensions. Our development through life, it might be argued, is the result of a constellation of PLNs we have created and been a part of tracking the sorts of changes in our circumstances outlined above.

Our PLNs vary according to types of knowledge we want to access. If we need to learn complex things like ways of thinking, communicating and behaving in a specific field of social practice, we create networks for learning that will enable us to participate in such social practices and gain access to the embodied knowledge of others who are more experienced and expert than ourselves. To some extent we can engage in conversations through which tacit knowledge can be shared through on-line forums but such forms of communication will not allow us to observe people in action and appreciate the nuances of their actions in the particularities of the contexts and situations they inhabit. But there is a world of networking through which people share their personal knowledge, insights and experiences through the medium of the internet. It is these computer-mediated networks for personal learning that have extended our scope for PLNs.

Our PLNs are central to our ecologies for learning and achieving: the complex set of relationships we create in a particular context for a particular purpose that provide us with opportunities and resources for learning, development and achievement. PLNs are like the blood vessels in our body or the roots and capillary vessels of a tree. They provide the relational structure and means of connecting to others and the means of tapping into the medium and nutrients for learning - the flow of information, knowledge and wisdom within our learning ecology. They connect our ecology for learning with the ecologies other people create for their learning so gaining deeper understandings of our PLNs will also help us understand the ecology of learning.

Given that PLNs are so important it is surprising that higher education does little to encourage students to develop and practice the skills of networking for learning: preferring instead to rely on learners assimilating knowledge that has been codified in books and journal articles. For most students their future world of learning will be in their ability to discover, create and co-create new knowledge to solve their everyday problems in particular situations and contexts. They need to become adept at creating, maintaining and making effective use of the resources contained within a multitude of PLNs. So what might universities do to help students develop this important capability for learning and achieving? There are at least three possible strategies.

- 1) The professional route - universities might emulate the ways in which professionals working in business and industry develop and maintain their links. A starting point might be to utilise their network of alumni, and involve students in using professional networking platforms like LinkedIn and Academia.edu.
- 2) The subject route - within the programme and the broader social/cultural environment of a department, students could be encouraged to network around social activities, study groups, and projects and assignments that deliberately encourage learners to discover things not only through books but through finding people who can help them.
- 3) The lifewide route - universities might recognise that students are active networks in other parts of their lives outside the academic programme through which they form PLNs. Perhaps these experiences can be used to explore the idea and practice of networking perhaps in the context of personal development planning?

It's been an absolute delight to work with our Guest Editor Kamakshi Rajagopal. Her research underpins the conceptual articles, personal narratives and opinion pieces. The editorial team is indebted to all the people who have contributed to Lifewide Education's PLN to help us explore and examine this important aspect of lifewide learning.

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UNDERSTANDING PERSONAL LEARNING NETWORKS

Kamakshi Rajagopal

With an academic background in Dutch and English philology and major in computational linguistics, Kamakshi Rajagopal is a researcher in the field of educational technology, working as an assistant professor at the Open Universiteit in the Netherlands. Her research focuses on understanding how people use their personal networks to support their continuous professional development. Her professional interests include the topics of social media and professional development, new technologies and intercultural competence development



In her Ph.D. studies, Kamakshi investigated how professionals create and manage their personal learning networks as resources for their learning and how technology can effectively support professionals in this type of learning.

Introduction

This article is based on two published articles^{1,2} I have written based on my doctoral work. Its purpose is to show how professionals create and maintain their own networks for professional learning.

In modern working life, professionals need to perform flexibly and independently in ever– changing environments. To be able to do this effectively, they depend on various learning skills, among others autonomous and self–directed learning. As they are partly supported in their learning by interaction with their peers, an essential lifelong and lifewide learning skill they need to develop, is the ability to find and to connect with relevant others, *i.e.*, professional networking^{3,4}

Personal Learning Network



I define the activity of professional networking as the act of making connections with other professionals, with or without the intention of making long–term ties with them. The skills at the centre of networking involve an ability to identify and understand other people’s work in relation to one’s own, and to assess the value of the connection with these others for potential future work. The result of networking is a personal professional network, *i.e.*, an egocentric, personally and intentionally created network of people set up by an individual specifically in the context of her professional activities. This network gathers a heterogeneous circle of people, distributed across different groups and places, and connected to the individual with connections of varying degrees of strength^{4,5}

Both strong and weak connections contribute to the individual’s learning: strong ties allow for active collaboration on knowledge creation, whereas weak ties are sources for new information, knowledge and ideas. For personal networks, Grabher and Ibert⁶ proposed a three–layered approach, consisting of a communality layer (strong ties), a sociality layer (weak ties) and a connectivity layer (very weak ties). Using a combination of face to face and technology facilitated communication an individual can create and orchestrate ties to individuals, existing networks and organisations to effectively support their learning needs. In doing so they create a *personal learning network* (PLN).

Learning professionals can actively undertake measures to make the best use of the learning opportunities in their layered personal learning networks. They need to perform three important (primary) tasks that form the basis for all other further activities within the network: building connections (adding new people to the network so that there are resources available when a learning need arises); maintaining connections (keeping in touch with relevant persons); and activating connections with selected persons for the purpose of learning^{4,7}

Factors influencing choices in building, maintaining and activating PLNs

The literature search for factors that influence the stages of building, maintaining and activating connections revealed topics related to the context of networking. A clear value for professionals emerged: they design and navigate their network to bring them the most professional and educational benefit at each stage of their career. They undertake specific activities for networking, such as joining (online and face-to-face) professional associations, participating in conferences, workshops, seminars or networking events to meet new people or to reconfirm existing ties. In addition, increasingly, web-based technologies play a role in connecting with new people (on social networking sites such as LinkedIn and Facebook) or for maintaining relations after events. The literature study, however, gave little information on the practical strategies that encourage and establish successful professional relationship building. I researched this through a survey and in-depth interviews. A number of factors emerged from this work these are grouped into three main categories: (A) factors relating to the professional learner's personal interests; (B) factors relating to the contact and their relationship with the learner; and, (C) external characteristics of the work environment.

The learner is the orchestrator of their own learning network

A) The first group of factors relates to the professional learner's personal professional interests, largely determined by certain immediate professional needs.

- *Communality.* While creating new connections, people look out for common ground with an unknown person. This can be in the form of topics of interest, organisation or common connections (network). The survey results indicated that professionals also use communality on topic and organisation to decide whom to maintain connections with in a personal learning network. In activating a connection within a personal learning network, the key factor that emerged from the survey is the suitability of that person's experience or expertise for the particular topic or need sought (*cf.*, experts, zone of proximal development, etc.).

B) The next group of factors on contacts' qualities relate to features of the contact in question (the contact's organisation, network or reputation), or indicate the personal attachment between the learner and the contact (benevolence, like-mindedness). They can also indicate the professional's assessment of the potential value of the tie (potential for collaboration or learning).

- *Organisation of the contact.* The organisation the contact belongs to may influence choices made regarding the nature of a tie.
- *Network of a contact.* The network of a contact may also be a decisive factor in the management of professional ties.
- *Reputation.* Reputation plays a role in network ties with others in general, and in the creation of a new connection.
- *Benevolence.* Another factor that plays a crucial role is benevolence or the general "good contact" between an individual and a new contact. People connect with others whom they like or trust, or with whom they feel a particular connection.
- *Like-mindedness* - sharing a common vision on the domain of work creates a trusted platform where they feel comfortable further pursuing the conversation. Further discussions could reveal more communality, and thereby new scope for connecting. Building new connections in a personal network consists of identifying relevant skills and competence in others and establishing a trusted platform through conversation where the potential of the connection can be explored.
- *Real potential for collaboration.* Discussions could deal with the details of common interest and reveal a clear potential for collaboration.
- *Real potential for learning.* More than that, through an extended conversation, the interviewees indicated they could identify a potential for learning through maintaining the connection.

C) The final group of factors relate to external characteristics of the work environment in which the tie between the professional learner and the contact is situated.

- *Trends in the work environment.* The professional interests of a learner can be largely determined by circumstances and trends in the work environment of the professional. For example, the increasing popularity of a particular domain might make it more relevant to connect to ties working in that domain.

Although these nine factors emerged from the studies, it was not possible to identify conclusively to what extent each factor influences each stage of networking. However, the results show that benevolence, like-mindedness and real potential for collaboration and learning play an important role in the building phase. Further research is necessary to refine this aspect of the model. Figure 1 illustrates the 3 stages of the networking process, with the factors that influence each of these stages.



Figure 1: Three stages of the networking process with the nine factors influencing decisions¹.

Networking attitude and awareness of a learner

Although factors identified in previous studies related to a learner's practical decisions, informal literature and the in-depth interviews revealed that networking itself is linked to a deeper metacognitive level, namely, the attitude of the learner. When asked to reflect on their learning experiences and the role of others in those learning processes, interviewees displayed clear differences in the way they interact with contacts in their personal networks and the way they learn from these interactions. Some interviewees are able to describe the contributions of their contacts to their learning in a much more detailed and contextualised way than did others: the learning experiences were identified with the contact's qualities. Also, they portray some insight into their contact's strengths and weaknesses as well as of their own:

The effects of networking are not limited to face-to-face interactions with the contacts: even when others are not present, their words, messages and perspectives can influence the reflections of the learner. This results from two conditions: (i) the reflective behaviour of the learner; and, (ii) the extent to which the learner views the contacts as visible entities (or learning resources) in her personal network.

These observations allow us to conclude that networking for networked learning is not only a skill to be developed, but also an attitude towards learning to be cultivated. The interviews confirmed that networking revolves around a complex ability of (i) recognising and identifying the other's qualities; and, of (ii) making (valuable) associations of these qualities with the learner's own qualities that could take place when interacting with a contact or even in the contact's absence. Learners have different levels of proficiency in this skill, but can also differ in the actual application of the skill, due to the attitude with which they approach learning. Proficient networkers use dedicated events and environments where networking has the prime focus (such as professional conferences, seminars and, more recently, online social networking sites) to trigger their mind into making valuable associations.

The interviews supported findings that this attitude emerges with people who a) experience the value of their network at first hand and/or people who b) reflect on their work and learning in a broader perspective than their day-to-day practice.

Personal Learning Network Model

The nine factors that influence personal professional networking (identified above), as well as the networking attitude that governs networking activities (described above) can be schematically represented in a personal professional networking model (illustrated in Figure 2).

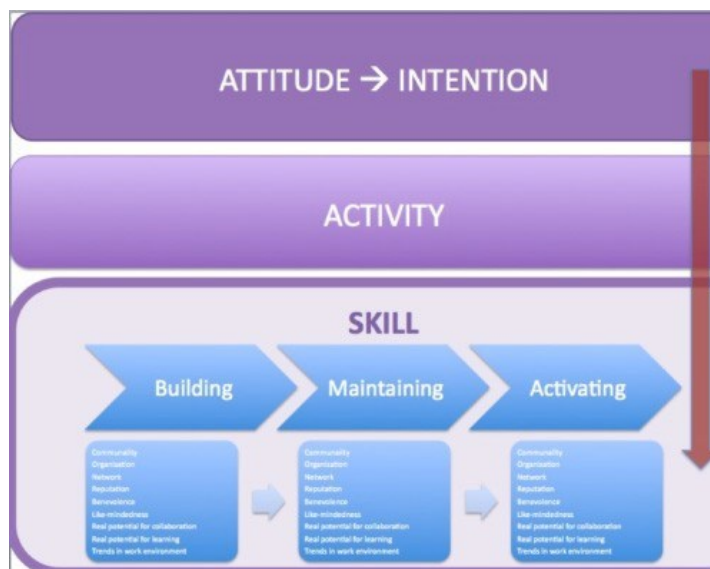


Figure 2: Personal professional networking model¹

This three-layered model relates the attitude of a professional learner towards networking to the actual networking skills she displays in day-to-day practice. Attitudes and skills are different types of qualities: an attitude is something of the mind, a perspective with which a person views the world; a skill is a practical, developable ability to do something. Because of this difference, it is not possible to directly link the two layers. To do so, requires two important intermediary steps in our view. The first one is the translation of this attitude in the mind to a deliberate intention (attitude-to-intention layer). When professionals have developed an attitude of approaching their professional life and learning in a networked way, they build, maintain and activate their contacts intentionally.

The second step is to translate that intention into actions (activity layer). The professional's intention manifests itself through the activity of networking, where the professional engages in practices enabling and supporting networking. These include activating strong ties (e.g., brainstorming with colleagues), activating weak ties (e.g., reaching a known contact), building or maintaining weak and very weak ties (e.g., joining networking events or an online social networking site). The activity of networking depends on the complex skill of being able to make associations between the contact's qualities and one's own (skill layer). This complex skill is in turn influenced by the different factors identified earlier in this article at the different phases of networking. As such, the attitude trickles down as it were to affect the professional's actions and the required skills.

A personal learning network (PLN) is a network set up by an individual specifically in the context of her professional activities through online platforms to support her professional non-formal learning needs. Therefore, a professional who intentionally builds, maintains and activates her strong, weak and very weak ties with contacts within her personal network for the purpose of improving her learning — and uses technology to support this activity — is creating a personal learning network. The learner at the centre orchestrates the whole environment, browsing, selecting and choosing the most relevant information resources^{8,9,10}

A personal learning network model, including the technological tools that support different aspects of networking, is illustrated overleaf in Figure 3.

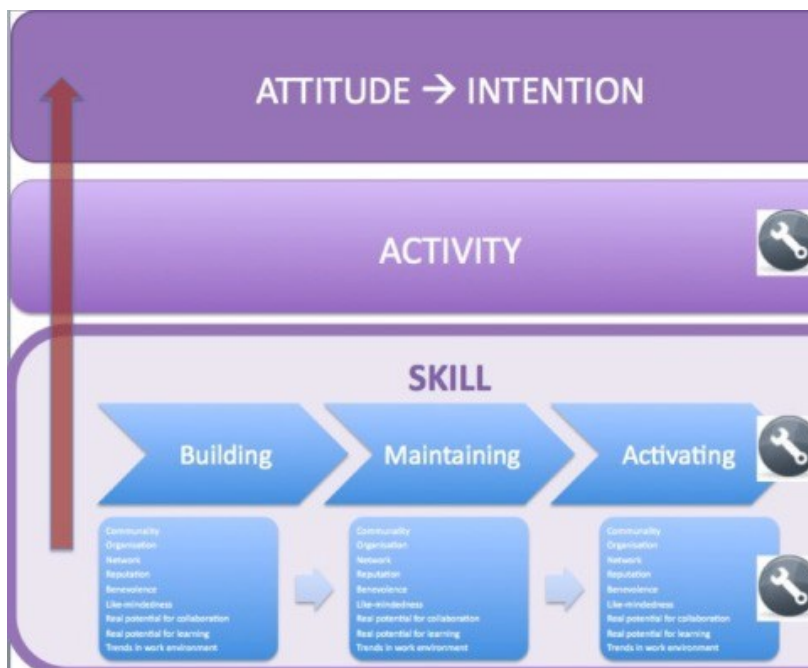


Figure 3: Personal Learning Network model.

To support orchestration of a PLN learners need to have a high level of control on tools they use and the way they use them. Although these functionalities fulfill the general stages of networking, technology does not yet support the deeper understanding of networking practice. For example, the distinction between strong, weak and very weak ties with respect to content of the relationship is not always visible in online social networking sites. The technology therefore offers minimal support in developing ties in a meaningful way. Also at the level of networking activity, technology provides common platforms where people can connect (general social networking sites such as LinkedIn, Facebook, Hyves and Twitter; domain-specific social networking sites, such as UNESCO-UNEVOC eForum and the Zunia network; event-specific social networking sites such as platforms for online conferences, workshops and webinars). Face-to-face events are also increasing-

ly supported by Web-based technologies, to enable people to make more valuable weak ties on a longer term (see for example, the “Follow the Sun — Learning Futures Festival Online 2011” initiative.

Although technological solutions facilitate many aspects of networking, it is unclear if technology supports or, indeed, affects the networking attitude of professionals and/or the related intention to build, maintain and activate the strong and weak ties in their personal network for the purpose of learning.

People in a PLN

People are the most important asset of a Personal Learning Network, so what sorts of people are involved? In a collaborative study² 15 participants identified the people in their individual personal learning networks, which included contacts ranging from family members and colleagues, to well-known public figures and scientists. Using these real inhabitants of a specific PLNs 22 concepts were identified for the reasons why people had been included in a particular PLN Figure 4.

Three broad categories can be distinguished within the concepts, namely:

- relating to personal characteristics of the learner's contact: expert(ise), values, presence, adaptability, influential, different perspectives, their ability to make you change, do things differently, innovation, change, inspiring, eccentric, role models, passion
- relating to the relationship between learner and contact: mentoring, friendship, trust, familiarity, comfort
- relating to the learner's own reasons and expectations: validation, reality check, disruption



Figure 4 Concepts driving Personal Learning Networks

	CONCEPTS	SURVEY STATEMENTS	(Strongly) Agree
1	different perspectives	People who can give me Different Perspectives	96%
2	Values	People with Values I appreciate	87%
3	Passionate	Passionate	84%
4	Inspirational	Inspirational	84%
5	Trust	Are people I trust	80%
6	Innovative	Innovative	74%
7	Expertise	People with Specific Expertise	74%
		Experts on topics that are relevant to me	72%
8	Disruption	to provide me with disruptive thoughts, ideas and opinions	72%
9	reality check	to give me a reality check for my thoughts, ideas and opinions	72%
10	do things differently	People who do Things Differently	72%
11	Familiarity	Have a certain familiarity to me	65%
12	Validation	to validate my thoughts, ideas and opinions	63%
		to criticize my thoughts, ideas and opinions	54%
13	ability to make me change	People who have the ability to make me Change	61%
14	adaptability	People who can Adapt themselves	57%
15	change	People who can change themselves	54%
		People who can Change things	54%
16	presence	People who have Presence	54%
17	friendship	Are my friends	54%
18	comfort	Give me comfort	50%
19	anti-role models	My role models	48%
		People who show me how Not to Do Things	39%
20	influence	Influential	46%
21	eccentric	Eccentric	46%
22	mentorship	Are my mentors	43%

http://farm4.staticflickr.com/3209/2983755525_63e1a4d766.jpg

Concluding statement

Our Personal Learning Networks must be seen as a 'work in progress' in the sense that they continually evolve as our circumstances, interests and needs change. What is clear is that they are a lifelong enterprise but they only have meaning in the day to day contexts and activities that constitute the lifewide dimension of our lives.

Acknowledgements

This article draws on two published articles^{1,2} For the more complete referencing please read these articles. The article is in part based research conducted under the Language Technologies for Lifelong Learning (LTfLL) project (2008–2011), which was co-funded by the European Union

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HOLISTIC MODEL FOR A PERSONAL LEARNING NETWORK: A Work in Progress

Tanya Lau



Tanya is an eLearning instructional designer from Sydney. She is interested in how people learn, and how we can facilitate learning and behaviour change. She is also pretty fascinated by organisational learning, innovation, creativity & change. She is studying the role of Personal Learning Networks in professional practice as part of a Master's degree.

My research proposal is framed around the question of how a learning professional's Personal Learning Network (PLN) supports innovation in their own practice. When I last time met with my supervisor, one of the most helpful suggestions he made was for me to tease out the factors from the literature that might influence an individual's network to achieve the desired outcome (i.e. improvements / innovations in professional practice) – and to develop a model based on these factors. I could then position my research to explore and/or validate the proposed model; this would also help provide some structure to my interviews and data analysis. So this is what I've been working on. Aside from helping bring structure to my research methodology, the process of thinking in terms of a model has been extremely useful in helping me to consolidate the various (and disparate) strands of literature I've reviewed, and my thinking around it. I am sharing my thinking through my blog and Lifewide Magazine in order to gain feedback on my ideas. This is my working draft.

My Holistic PLN Model

As I tease out the strands of research three key components emerge for me as being relevant (Figure 1):

Environment – a lot of research focuses on the 'tools'/tech that people use to build and develop networks. Whilst this is certainly interesting – as different tools have different affordances which support varying aspects of PLN relationship development – it's more than just the discrete tools and tech that influence the development of these relationships. It's the entire context in which the tools/tech are embedded and used: this includes the environmental & situational context (e.g. where is the tool/tech being used – work, home, bus, train, beach, etc.), culture (including organisational/industry/societal/national/geographical/political etc), and the support (people, resources) available to develop skills in the use of the tools/tech.

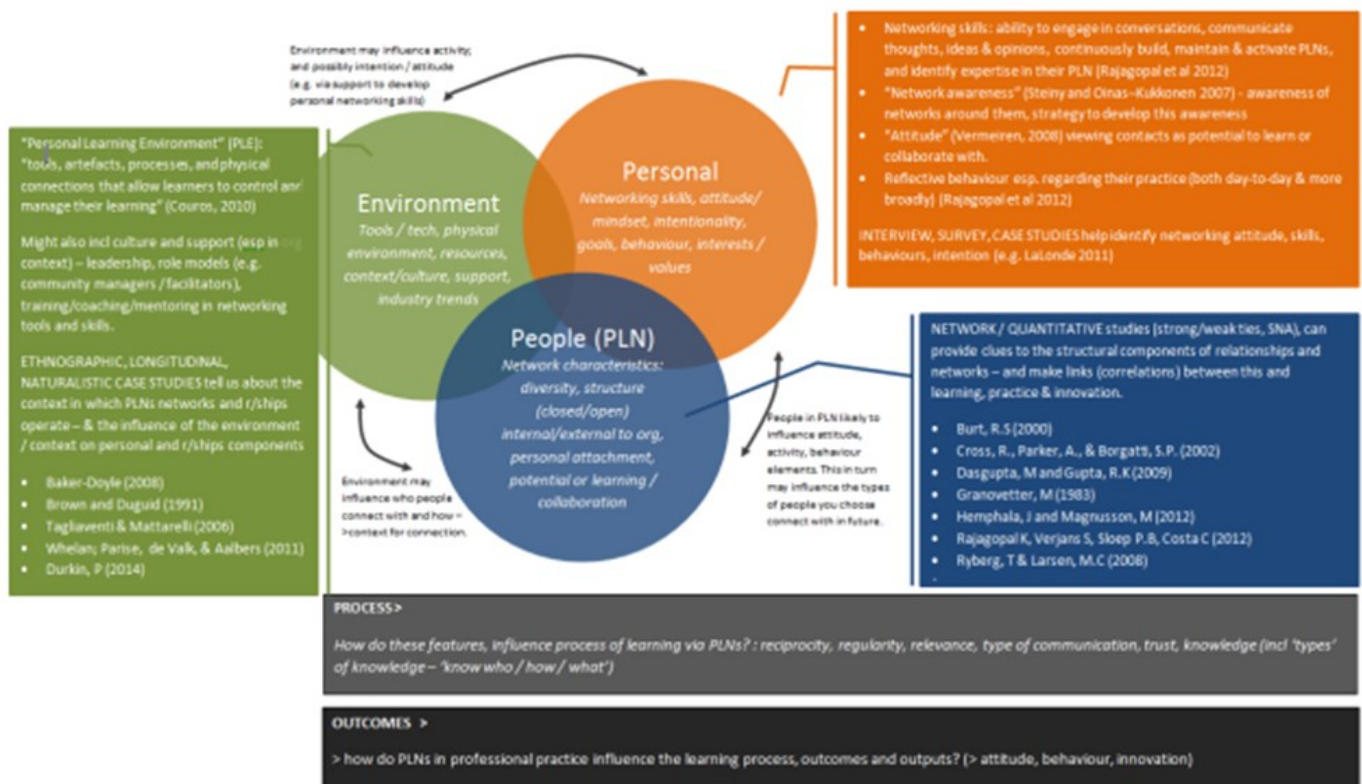


Figure 1 My holistic PLN Model

Personal – these are the personal skills and characteristics that contribute to an individual’s decision and motivation to actively and intentionally build and maintain a PLN. Significantly, this includes both networking ‘skills’, as well as attitude / mindset, and reflective behaviours.

People – this I’ve classified as the ‘network’ characteristics that make up an individual’s PLN, consolidating the body of research on network structure (strong vs weak ties; open/closed networks, network diversity etc). A lot of this research comes from the management / R&D literature and so often focuses on identifying links between these network components and outcomes like innovation and creativity.

Of course, there are interactions and complex links between all three components, which is what I’ve tried to portray in the model. I see these three components as impacting both the **processes** of learning and the **outcomes**. The outcome of interest I’m defining primarily as innovation in professional practice – but mindset, behaviour, beliefs and values all contribute to the outcome (output?) of ‘innovative practice’, and could be considered as secondary outcomes (this could be explored further-through interviews).

How does this model link in with existing PLN models?

Rajagopal et al (2012)¹ (see also Kamakshi Rajagopal's article in this Magazine) provide a model based on their research and a review of the existing literature (Figure 2). This model demonstrates the importance of the personal skills, attitude and behaviours required to develop an effective PLN; and the factors which influence intentionality (why and who people choose to connect with). It also touches on the role of tools / tech for supporting the behaviours (‘Activity’) and ‘skill’ components. But what’s missing I think is the broader context related to environment (i.e. it’s not just tools and technology), and network / people characteristics that may impact on these personal skills, attitude and behaviours. Thus my attempt to incorporate these components into my model.

Serendipitous connections: a footnote

As I’ve been formulating my ideas over the last week or so, I came across a couple of blog posts (from my own PLN) that struck me as being serendipitously related:

[Personal Learning Networks: Learning in a Connected World](#) by Sahana Chattopadhyay (@sahana2802) which I first encountered on LinkedIn, but which Sahana also published on her [blog \(accompanied by an excellent discussion #MSLOC430 related thread\)](#). Aside from this being a well written, comprehensive argument on the benefits of building PLNs to support the changing nature of work, what struck me was her emphasis on mindset and attitude – not just tools – as critical in effective social learning and collaboration (reflecting Rajagopal et al’s 2012 model above).

[My Professional Network Review](#) by Michelle Ockers (@MichelleOckers) – this detailed analysis of her PLN blew me away when I saw it. This post for me, represents a perfect example of the attitude, intentional activity (including reflective behaviour) and skills that Rajagopal et al (2012) describe in their model for building, maintaining and activating PLNs.

The articles in this issue of Lifewide Magazine also provide ideas for me to work with so I’ll continue to tweak and share my evolving thinking on this as it progresses and welcome feedback from readers of the Magazine.

Acknowledgement

This article is a slightly modified version of a post I made on [February 11, 2015](#). You can read the original article at: <https://explorationsinlearning.wordpress.com/2015/02/11/a-model-of-personal-learning-networks-in-progress/>

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1 Rajagopal, K., Desirée J. B., Van Bruggen, J. and Sloep. P.B. (2012) Understanding personal learning networks: Their structure, content and the networking skills needed to optimally use them *First Monday*, Volume 17, Number 1 - 2 January 2012 <http://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/3559/3131>

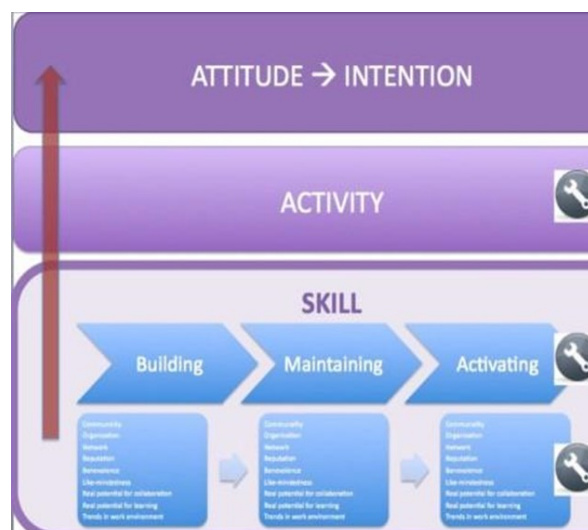


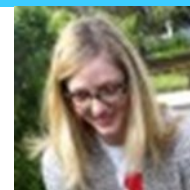
Figure 2 Model of a PLN Rajagopal et al (2012)¹

PERSONAL LEARNING NETWORKS: SHARING KNOWLEDGE AS DEMOCRACY

Alison Seaman

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Primary interests: adult, organizational & networked learning. alisonseaman.com



Different Perspectives

Sherry Turkle famously argues technology has begun to overtake our attention and time, which has led to increased physical isolation and shallow online interaction. She contends, in a community-starved world, we need to disconnect from our smartphones and other Information and Communications Technology (ICT)-enabling devices in order to create greater balance: “We think constant connection will make us feel less lonely. The opposite is true ... If we don’t teach our children to be alone, they will know only how to be lonely”. Detractors such as David Banks, Nathan Jurgenson and others counter that Turkle’s assessment of alienation creates a digital dualism. They consider it more appropriate instead to consider our technique—*how* we use technology.

Online interactions can be shallow, but it’s no certainty. I’ve spent over a decade in different online spaces—primarily as a member of various web fora where sub-communities exist—and I cannot say that what I’ve witnessed and experienced was anything less than a human desire to connect with others. Sometimes these online spaces offered, for those who felt lonely or isolated by their interests in their physical environments, a place to belong. In other words, for many people I’ve encountered these are not places for leading a shallow existence.

What *can* lead to isolation is a lack of both technical skills and an understanding of the social elements of the Web, both of which are required for productive social networks—and Personal Learning Networks (PLNs). It takes time and a level of humility to come to terms with the idea that knowledge is no longer contained solely “in [our] skulls, books, and libraries” and is instead constructed from knowledge distributed across networks and on the Web.

Social Benefits of Networked Forms of Communication

We are beginning to see the benefits ICT can have for our everyday lives and society. Technology-enabled connections and communication have improved lives across the globe by providing a number of benefits, ranging from, but not limited to: providing spaces to offer up-to-date information to the masses during crises, to coordinating relief efforts and providing a means to connect with others to give and receive comfort and support. This relatively new role became evident throughout Hurricane Sandy. During the superstorm, mobile phone

access to Twitter and Instagram transformed those platforms into key channels of communication despite the existence of some user-spread misinformation. Following Sandy, tools such as Storify and Amazon.com gift registries, which were promoted and disseminated through social media sites like Twitter and Facebook, acted as lifelines to provide information and to coordinate supplies to affected individuals. Outside of immediate crisis situations, there is also evidence suggesting social communication strengthens human relationships, particularly for introverts, and has benefitted families, youth and businesses around the world. Smartphones have also been shown to help homeless citizens find support and stay connected to society.

Increasing Importance of PLNs

As we become more reliant on networks to support many facets of our everyday lives, we must also ensure that we can collectively function—to share and learn together as PLNs—in these new networked spaces.

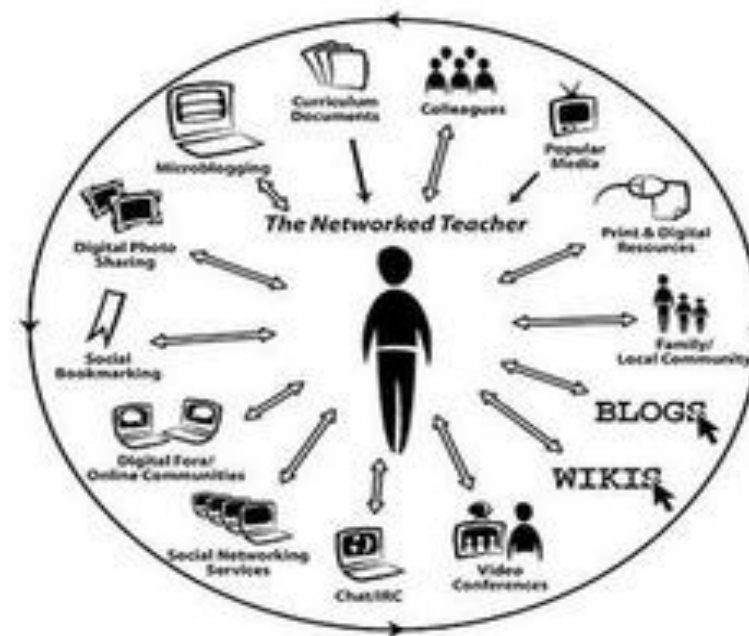
Shelly Terrell, a connected educator and co-founder of the Twitter stream #edchat describes a PLN as “the people you choose to connect with and learn from.” Though inconclusive, the term PLN first emerged as early as 1998 as part of Organizational Development specialist Dori Digeni’s vision for the extension of organizational collaborative learning online. Digeni predicted that the Internet would rapidly increase the speed at which knowledge accumulates. This could only be managed by interdependent networks of learners, or knowledge workers.



According to Digenti:

The PLN consists of relationships between individuals where the goal is enhancement of mutual learning. The currency of the PLN is learning in the form of feed back, insights, documentation, new contacts, or new business opportunities. It is based on reciprocity and a level of trust that each party is actively seeking value-added information for the other.

This definition has essentially held true, despite some debate over both the PLN's relationship to earlier definitions of learning communities and the distinction between the network connections among individuals and the means by which they manage their own learning via the Web. There appears to be some agreement, however, that the term PLN has often been ascribed to networked learning online.



Underlying the development of a PLN is the need for individual learners to be able to have the capacity for self-direction, which requires a higher level of learning maturity—an absence of which may represent a barrier for a percentage of adults to learn in this way. Also crucially important for networked learning is the level of development of individuals' digital and web literacies in order for members to optimally filter out 'noise' and contribute to the health of the network. Although approaches to and experiences when establishing a PLN may vary, individuals seeking to build one may wish to first self-assess their own abilities to learn and share within networks before seeking out others with similar interests.

Personal Learning Environments (PLEs) that facilitate Personal Knowledge Management (PKM) play an important role in creating richness within a PLN, too. Learners who store

important information in Web 2.0 tools such as wikis, blogs, microblogs, social bookmarking and on other platforms create quickly accessible resources. With such resources at their disposal, they 'know how to act' when faced with the need to create immediate connections to topics arising during discussions, and can provide content or insight for others need to grow knowledge.

It's also important to include a range of voices in a PLN. Incorporating individuals with diverse opinions avoids the risk of the network becoming an 'echo chamber', where dominant opinions are 'echoed' back to network members. This can obscure alternate viewpoints and prevent learning from taking place.

There is, however, some debate over how an individual best fosters such a learning environment. Although some suggest observation and trial and error may be the best way to learn how to do so, facilitated, networked learning appears to play a large role in developing broader capacity to learn in networks for those who require a supportive space.

Despite Sherry Turkle's claims about the isolating nature of digital space, there is growing evidence that increased access to Information and Communications Technology (ICT)—and by extension increased connections to others—holds the potential to greatly improve individual lives. I've seen and experienced this myself. As the online economy continues to grow, more individuals and organisations will establish virtual presences. Under these circumstances, as in the past, education can become an important vehicle to help others develop an understanding of what it means to participate in what appears to be becoming a new public sphere.

Acknowledgement

This article is an edited version of an article which was originally posted as a blog on the Hybrid Pedagogy site on January 13th 2013. <http://www.hybridpedagogy.com/Journal/personal-learning-networks-knowledge-sharing-democracy/> We are grateful to Alison and to Hybrid Pedagogy for permission to republish the article in Lifewide Magazine.

Image credits

https://etsmagazine.files.wordpress.com/2014/11/shutterstock_148375790.jpg

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PERSONAL LEARNING NETWORKS AND AUTHENTIC LEARNING

Shelley Lowes, Memorial University Newfoundland, Canada

Personal learning networks (PLN) are the connections and communications made with others to question, reflect on and evaluate information in order to create new knowledge¹. Learners create, develop and connect a network of resources to meet their personal and academic interests and needs thus creating PLN²

PLNs support authentic learning. Authentic learning occurs when activities parallel real-life practices with multiple solutions, require collaboration and support from a variety of sources and resources, and are multidisciplinary³. In creating authentic learning opportunities through the use of PLN, the learner communicates, collaborates and self-directs the acquisition of knowledge to make new meaning⁴.

The three main types of PLN in support of authentic learning are synchronous, semi-synchronous and asynchronous^{2,5}. These networks provide for the development of unique authentic learning opportunities tailored to the diverse needs and styles of the learner. Similarly, each type of network can harness a multitude of tools to align the specific learning style to the learner's needs and interests². For example, PLN offer authentic learning to utilize blogs, wikis, RSS feeds, links to sources of information and authentic resources, and peer collaboration. These communication and social networking tools support authentic learning through collaboration, resource distribution and the construction of new knowledge⁶. Furthermore, the criterion for authentic learning is met through the creation of PLN⁷.

The process of designing and creating PLN encourages learners to think for themselves, explore and question existing knowledge within global communities, and foster higher level thinking through authentic learning experiences⁷. The PLN contributes to the establishment of authentic learning communities by "supporting peer-to-peer learning, enhancing reflective learning and fostering social engagement"^{4p6}. According to Pozgaj⁹, informal learning through conversations, social networks and group work is essential for lifelong learning. Therefore, authentic learning activities and PLN contribute to the development of lifelong learners³.

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3 Types of PLN

Synchronous

Colleagues and other people you talk to in-person

- Hallway Conversation
- PLC Work
- LPS Spark
- Scopia
- iChat
- Skype
- Google Hangouts
- Facetime

Asynchronous

Periodical. Scheduled. Subscription based.

- Google Reader (RSS)
- Diigo
- Delicious
- Email subscriptions
- Digital periodicals

Semisynchronous

Not "real-time" but possibly close to real-time. Participation as time allows.

- Email
- Google Docs
- Discussion boards
- Blog commenting
- Facebook
- Twitter

Technology can provide the tools to enhance authentic learning by providing learners access to resources and sources in a global community⁶. In support of authentic learning, the establishment of PLN allows the learner to control the pace of learning, explore connections, question the global community, and analyse multiple solutions to problems to make responsible decisions^{2,6,8}

Acknowledgement

The article is adapted from a Blog Post 18/08/2011 http://edutechwiki.unige.ch/en/Personal_learning_networks_supporting_authentic_learning We are grateful to edutech wiki for publishing the article under a Creative Commons Licence which allows us to **Share**— copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format and **Adapt**— remix, transform, and build upon the material.

PLN — A WAY TO MAKE SENSE OF COMPLEXITY

Sahana Chattopadhyay



Trying to make sense of a complex situation alone is the equivalent of six blind men trying to comprehend the characteristics of an elephant. This is where an individual's PLN becomes important, and the more diverse it is the better. Diverse here implies *cognitive diversity* -- arising from different world-views, cultural perspectives, varied educational background, and possessing different problem-solving frameworks and heuristics. A PLN of diverse individuals not only helps to hold up widely different viewpoints on the same challenge but also broadens and deepens one's learning. Diversity of thoughts and ideas are the best precursors to innovative and creative solutions. PLNs typically consist of strong and weak ties. Exchanging of deep and tacit knowledge, i.e., knowledge which is not codified and where learning happens through the process of dialogue and reciprocity typically work with *strong ties*. *Weak ties* bring in the much needed variety of thoughts and opinions. One's PLN should ideally consist of a mix of strong and weak ties to maintain a balance.

Blog Post <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/personal-learning-networks-ongoing-connected-world-chattopadhyay>

Image credit <http://www.giocomania.org/pagine/16454/pagina.asp>

DIGITAL NETWORKS, PARTICIPATION AND INFLUENCE

Sean Michael Morris



Sean is Director of Hybrid Pedagogy, an open access on-line journal. He is interested in the practice of critical digital pedagogy as a social movement and has helped to build Hybrid Pedagogy's educational outreach experiments. He plays World of Warcraft, pursues yoga, and continues to perfect his chocolate chip cookie recipe. You can follow him on Twitter [@slamteacher](#), and his personal website can be found at www.seanmichaelmorris.com.

In her blog post, "Networks of Care and Vulnerability," Bonnie Stewart says that, participation "enrols us in a media machine that is always and already out of our control; an attention economy that increasingly takes complex identities and reduces them to sound bites and black & white alignments." My own experience of Twitter affirms this: the personality that I craft online is also the personality that is crafted for me, by the responses I receive, by the nature of my followers and who I follow, by the conversations I choose or do not choose to be a part of. My presence becomes expected in certain circumstances, a surprise in others, and unwelcome in still others. And because the community to which I adhere my moniker (@slamteacher) is one upon which I exert the same kind of influence, my participation involves, like fiction, a willing suspension of disbelief.

Twitter is fuel for reputation online. It is an incredibly fast way to insert yourself into dialogues you want to belong to. It is the quickest, most ready costume to don. Take it from me. I am a non-academic with a resumé colourful enough to include time as a massage therapist, advertising executive, spiritual counsellor, documentary cameraman, and a fantasy novelist; yet, because of the networks I belong to, I am invited into academic discussions not open even to some of those with tenure and books.

"It isn't that a single tweet constitutes scholarship, although in rare cases one might," Jesse Stommel writes, "but rather that Twitter and participatory media more broadly disperses the locus of scholarship, making the work less about scholarly products (the bits) and more about community presence and engagement (the scrawl)." In this way, publications generate rather than simply land upon audiences, publications that change and grow even as the conversation about them expands and develops. And peer review, in this case, is constituted by reception and dialogue, so that every networked text (or Tweet) is written and rewritten as much by the community as by the author.

"Influence," Bonnie says in 'Open to Influence: Academic Influence on Twitter,' "is how we determine the reputation and

credibility and essentially the status of a scholar." As she states in the summary of her dissertation research:

The impression of capacity for meaningful contribution is key to cultivating influence and the regard of actively networked peers. The value and meaning of that sense of contribution is tied in part to the ways in which network signals operate individual to individual... The value is also, frankly, in the fact that we can see our signals received, in networks, in real-time. Never underestimate the power of people listening.

social and personal learning networks become publications of their own sort

What this suggests to me is that the more we are perceived as scholars, the more scholarly we perceive ourselves. The cycle rolls on and our influence widens (or the perception of our influence widens). This is more than just a matter of having lots of followers, of course. Perceived influence also comes from how we engage with those followers, how we grow our networks and allow them to be grown for us. Jesse tweeted "Rigorous networked scholarship is not instantaneous. Relies on collective, recursive, and very deliberate thinking." He also offers, "Thinking grows recursively through metonymy as Tweets brush against one another. Reveals itself over time on the platform."

Acknowledgement

Lifewide Magazine is grateful to the author and Hybrid Pedagogy for allowing us to publish this extract from Sean's article posted on 31/03/15 You can read the complete article at.

<http://www.hybridpedagogy.com/announcements/digital-networks-participation-and-influence-a-digped-discussion/>

THREE WAYS PERSONAL LEARNING NETWORKS ARE EVOLVING

Peps Mccrea



Peps describes himself as an 'award-grinning' teacher educator, researcher and social entrepreneur. He founded <http://staffrm.io> a Professional Network for Teachers.

The notion of a Personal Learning Network (PLN) is a familiar concept these days. Yet, the nature of Personal Learning Networks is evolving as the range of tools available to support them increases, and our rapport with those tools becomes more sophisticated.

The aim of this post is to outline the changes that appear to be taking shape, and to offer some practical strategies for teachers to supercharge their Personal Learning Networks.

Evolution 1: Sharing is becoming more agile

Agile is a concept that has had a significant impact on the software development community. At its core, it is about getting products and ideas out quickly, so that their potential value can be tested and feedback gathered to improve them. The products and ideas are then iterated and the cycle continues.

A similar phenomenon is beginning to happen in Personal Learning Networks spheres. Educators are shipping their ideas before they are perfect, and encouraging others feedback and build upon those ideas. PLNs are exhibiting a hive mentality with a common purpose at their heart. Making your Personal Learning Networks more agile is a must.

Evolution 2: Learning is about challenging yourself

In the past people were content to have a Personal Learning Network that agreed with their views and understood their perspectives. Nowadays, we see people follow and interact with those who offer different perspectives and can challenge their viewpoints.

This requires courage, but extending your Personal Learning Network to incorporate people you disagree with will force you to develop a more open mind, and a more robust personal position. In short, it's a stronger learning experience.

Evolution 3: Personal is becoming professional

In the next few years we're going to be talking much more about Professional Learning Networks. The differences are subtle yet powerful. One is that professional learning networks are more focussed on the purposes rather than the compositions of their communities. Collaboration is about making change happen at the societal rather than the individual level.

3 Ways to make your PLN more authentic & agile

1. Write shorter posts or otherwise create more shareable content more often
2. Don't hold back from sharing half-formed ideas; contextualized properly, this is where Personal Learning Networks can hit their sweet spot. It's also a part of a growth mindset!
3. Build on other people's ideas and take them in your own direction while communicating who influenced you and how.

Personal learning still happens, but as a by-product. Another difference is the role that identity plays in Professional Learning Networks. Educators are finding more sophisticated ways of representing themselves and their reputations online.

3 Ways to challenge yourself within your PLN

1. Follow people on Twitter whose ideas you disagree with and don't always understand
2. Engage in debate, but make sure to go for the ball, not the player
3. Challenge your own assumptions in public

While a more familiar route may be to personalize your professional learning network, the reverse also applies.

3 Ways to professionalize your Personal Learning Network

1. Figure out your unique value offering and build your Personal Learning Network around that
2. Collaborate with others to make change happen as well as share ideas
3. Use multiple platforms to build a richer and more distributed identity.

Pulling It All Together

Personal Learning Networks are here to stay, and they will continue to evolve. The most important thing is to muster the courage to jump in and experiment. Personal Learning Networking is as much about your mindset as it is about the action you take.

So what changes have you noticed in your own Personal Learning Networks? Please share your ideas I'd love to know what you think. Please add comments to my original post at <http://www.teachthought.com/learning/3-ways-personal-learning-networks-are-evolving/>

THE POWER AND POTENTIAL OF NETWORKING CONVERSATIONS

Kamakshi Rajagopal

Kamakshi's portrait and biography can be found on page 5, above.

Introduction

In my first contribution to this magazine¹ I shared my research on the nature of Personal Learning Networks (PLNs). In this article I want to examine the social practice of networking, in particular the conversational perspective of networking, to draw some consequences for networked learners and network organisers. Understanding the social and cognitive processes underlying networking better, will allow us to become more proficient in using our own PLNs, and also more adept at guiding others in building their own. This article builds on the conclusions of a study that I conducted in 2012 in the CEI conference in Maas-tricht. For more details on the study, I refer to my doctoral thesis².

Personal Perspective

Networking didn't come naturally to me. After graduating from traditional graduate and post-graduate courses, I had to break out of my view of the world as my perspectives were challenged by the work I did. As I started my professional career and learnt the finer side of project-based work, I realized that the most important aspects of my work were the conversations I had with my close colleagues. They informed our strategies for project



planning, development and just work. Everyone brought their flavor and perspective on the project problems we shared, be it from working towards the best possible outcomes of the project to deciding where to go for project dinners. Work relationships turned into friendships and persist after professional and personal changes. But it didn't stop with my close colleagues – conversations built the relations with the colleagues on the other side of the office, in other organisations, long-term professional partners, incidental professional partners and even outside work, with acquaintances and friends.

With this understanding, I started to view networking differently. Yes, it was hard to step out of my comfort zone, and start talking to a stranger. But I knew the results could be rewarding. At the very least, I would learn something about them. At the very best, I was sowing the seeds for a long-term friendship. So I made it a point to start that conversation, whenever I could.

I think my experience is not very different from what many people experience. Soon, networking became an essential part of my work. I even started enjoying the conversations. More than that, I started seeing these conversations as opportunities for learning. As a way to tackle issues that I was struggling with, problems I was working on. Networking has become an important activity to support my continuous professional development and I recognise it as an essential 21st century skill.

The Co-Created Meaning is in the Conversation

As a strategy to support our continuous professional development, we seek out networks that we feel contribute to our learning, that we feel comfortable in and meet people whose company we enjoy and we feel we learn from. This is an established social practice in all fields and disciplines: once the need is felt to grow, networking events and opportunities are organized, often by organisations or people who feel the benefits of organizing a gathering.

Even though we might understand the value of networking, we often don't spend much time thinking about how or why this social practice works. What actually happens when we network?

Common sense tells us that conversation, interaction, thinking and feeling are central to the process of networking. But what happens in these conversations that gives us a learning experience? And why do these conversations lead us to cultivate relationships from which new things may emerge?

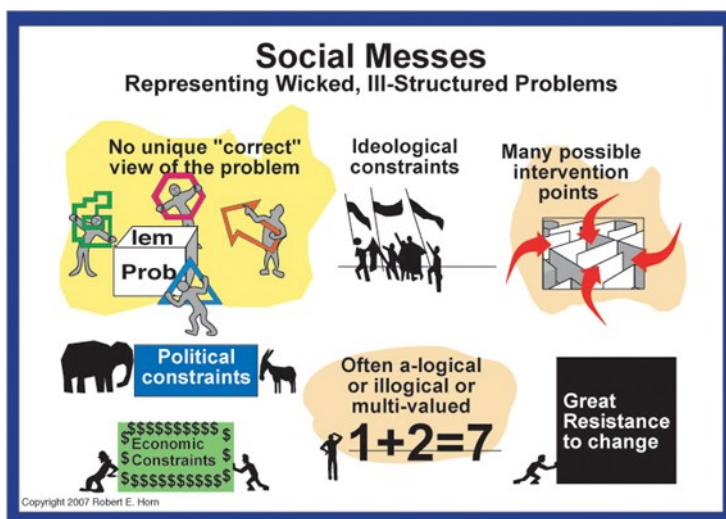
The focus of research in networks however does not primarily take this perspective. Most research on networks zoom in on mapping existing connections between people and the nature of these connections. Taking a perspective of the whole networking practice as a practice around conversation opens up interesting avenues for research.

Networks Designed for Conversation

Taking a conversation perspective on networking means looking at the content of the conversations in networks. From an individual's perspective, this means creating the opportunities for conversations to take place as and when needed.

Viewing a network as a designed environment gives more control to the learner. A personal learning network then becomes a designed egocentric network where the learner at the center takes charge of their networked learning. They actively construct their network, looking at the context in which they work, the relevant topics on which they work, and who the people are who will add to their understanding and learning. Some of the factors influencing these decisions were discussed in my previous article in this magazine. In practical terms, networked learners seek out and create opportunities to have conversations.

In my first contribution I outlined some of the reasons for why we network and the sorts of people we include in our network and the factors that influence the choices we make.



Wicked problems are social or cultural problems that are difficult to solve because of incomplete, contradictory, and changing requirements. These problems are typically offloaded to policy makers, or are written off as being too cumbersome to bother with. Yet these are the problems that plague our world and our cities - poverty, sustainability, equality and health and well-being are issues that touch each and every one of us³

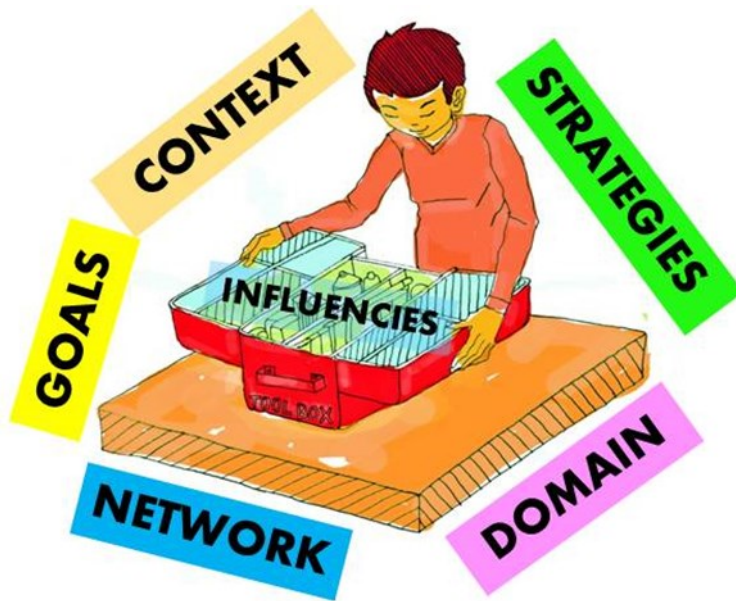
One of the ways that we seek out spaces for conversation is through participation in networking environments and events, a gathering of people or even a community interested in conversation about relevant topics. Networking is the most natural way of extending and re-establishing a personal (learning / professional) network. A networking event becomes one defined period in time when conversation on this topic, with the people who are interested in it, is focused and intensified. In such situations, networking can become a sensemaking activity or learning enterprise associated with democratic engagement with a complex or 'wicked' problem.³

In a networking event, the network members try to articulate their own understandings about the complex problem in order to come to a collaborative, shared understanding.

Factors that Influence Participation in Networked Conversations

Each individual networker's understanding of, and response to, the complex problem in a networked conversation is (implicitly and explicitly) influenced by five factors. These are: the context in which the individual is situated, the strategies (methods of working and learning) that the individual generally uses, the domain that the individual is interested in and has knowledge of, the network that the individual has access to, and the individual's implicit and explicitly formulated goals and motivations. These factors influence the networker's willingness, and capability to participate in the networked conversation. They are the unexpressed or hidden influences that the networker carries in every networking situation or session that he/she participates in (Figure 1).

Figure 1 Five factors that influence individual's participation in network conversations.



Each networking conversation affords individuals the opportunity to explore complex problems, particularly their social complexity, through interactions with others who share an interest in the problem. Through explorative dialogue, they discuss their personal beliefs and interpretations of the problem in ways that are influenced by these five factors. As a consequence of these dialogues, participants in the networked conversation start to co-create new meanings and understandings of the dimensions of the problems they are discussing. They forge more links between and within the factors themselves, and thereby re-construct their individual perspectives or understanding. Through this process they begin to align their own interpretations and understandings with other participants, creating a

collaborative or shared perspective or understanding of the problem.

The experience of participating in networks show many similarities with Weick's descriptive perspective on sensemaking^{4,2}. Networkers are situated in a socially complex environment around a complex problem or broad topic, on which they participate in many discursive activities – a chaos containing various diverse interpretations of the five factors (*sensemaking in flux*) emerges. They engage in noticing and naming (both individually and collaboratively) what they see and perceive during the networking event, by linking up (or aligning) several instances of the factors (*noticing and bracketing; labeling and categorizing*). Their perceptions are positioned against the backdrop of their own past activities, i.e. projects that they have done in the past year, or the teaching practice that they pursue (*presumption*). The networking event (the conference) gives them the opportunity to re-evaluate their presumption and to amend it based on their new interactions (*retrospection*). These temporary understandings are iterative – with every new social interaction, the understanding can be changed to create a better fit (*social and systemic*). The networkers also engage in action, defining goals and strategies (*action*). Finally, the networkers ultimately value the conversations held at the conference, in their various formations (one-to-one, small group, ad-hoc discussions, one-to-many presentations). In these conversations, tacit knowledge is increasingly articulated (articulation in *communication*).

Features of Networking Conversations

Formality vs. Informality Networking happens in environments where formality and informality are both essential. A networking conversation needs some formality, as it happens between two people representing two distinct groups – different organisations, different disciplines etc. However, a certain amount of informality is also necessary, as both parties need to be able to connect on a personal level. For a networking dialogue to become a learning dialogue, the environment needs to be conducive for the dialogue to reach levels of intensity where the dialogue partners can go beyond the mere exchange of factual information.

Orchestrated Serendipity Meeting a new person, and connecting with them, often seems to be a stroke of luck. How often do we hear people say that they were fortunate to meet that particular partner at the exact moment that they needed to. However, serendipity may not necessarily be magic or divine. There are several contextual matters that are defined by an individual's conscious actions. It could also be argued that people put themselves in situations where serendipity can occur. For learning, this would mean that a learner consciously seeks out contexts where interesting meetings can take place. However, the meeting itself is serendipitous. Of all the people present, it does take some opportunity to meet the person you need to connect to.

Holistic meetings, engaged knowledge building Networking interactions are holistic meetings. On a personal level, these interactions are not restricted to certain professional topics, but can touch on any aspects of shared or distinct interests. For

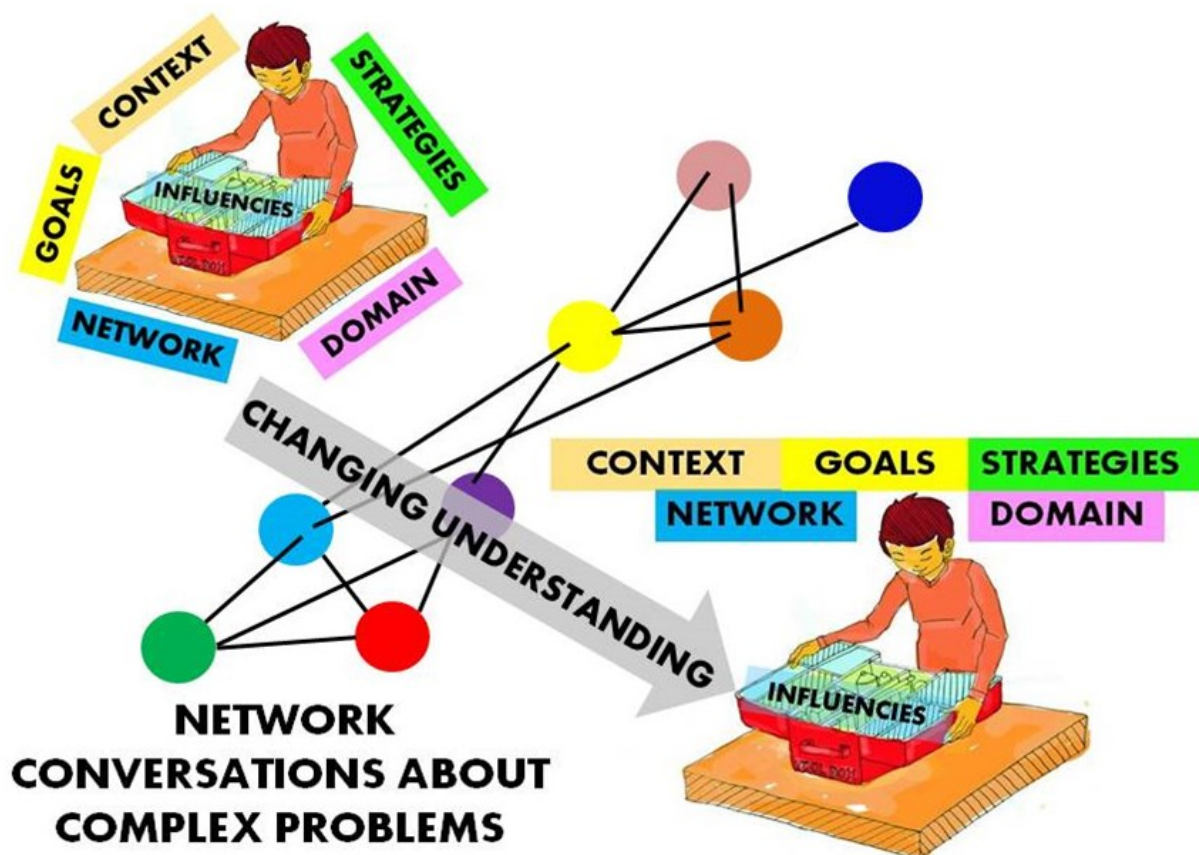
learning, these holistic meetings create a backdrop against which dialogue partners can engage in deeper knowledge building conversations. When networking dialogues become knowledge-building conversations, the dialogue partners seek out common ground and differences in each other's understanding of a topic. They actively participate in triggering breakdown and re-establishing common ground.

Cognitive Activity in Networking

Not every networking conversation needs to be a learning experience though. This can only occur when the individual networker becomes an **engaged** member of the social network. The networker's activity is both on a physical level, by participation in the networking activities, and on a cognitive level, by sensing and problem-solving and by identifying and categorizing.

This allows us to define the following cognitive model of the process of networking (Figure 2). We assume in this model that the networker has gained some value through the networking experience.

Figure 2 The cognitive process in network conversations that lead to the co-creation of new meanings and understandings within the network of participants.



A networker chooses to interact with others on a shared wicked problem through participation in a dedicated networking space. She enters this networking space, implicitly or explicitly influenced by her goals, strategies, network, context, domain knowledge and interests. By engaging in conversations with other people in the networking space, and exposure to the exchanges between others within the networking space, the networker tries to make sense of the different aspects of the wicked problem being discussed. Through this process, she aligns, interprets and alters the influences on her thinking according to her changing understanding. The networker might also contribute to collaborative understanding, by sharing her own sense making through the network conversation. When the networker leaves the networking space, her goals, strategies, context, network, domain knowledge and interests have been modified as a result of the learning that has taken place, it is likely that her understandings are now more in tune or aligned with those of other participants. The networker has re-assessed and altered her interpretation of the problem and the factors that influence her thinking.

Consequences for Networkers and Network Organizers

Now, what does this mean for us, in our daily networking activities and opportunities?

On the one hand, it has consequences for individual networkers. I will discuss them around three themes: diversity, network grazing and orchestrating serendipitous interaction.

Diversity Networkers benefit from meeting people with different backgrounds. Every new person met has a new story to tell about the shared complex problem. It is important to remember here that, especially in face-to-face environments, the diversity can be very great. Such diversity is not seen as an obstacle, but rather as an asset that contributes to the building of shared understanding.

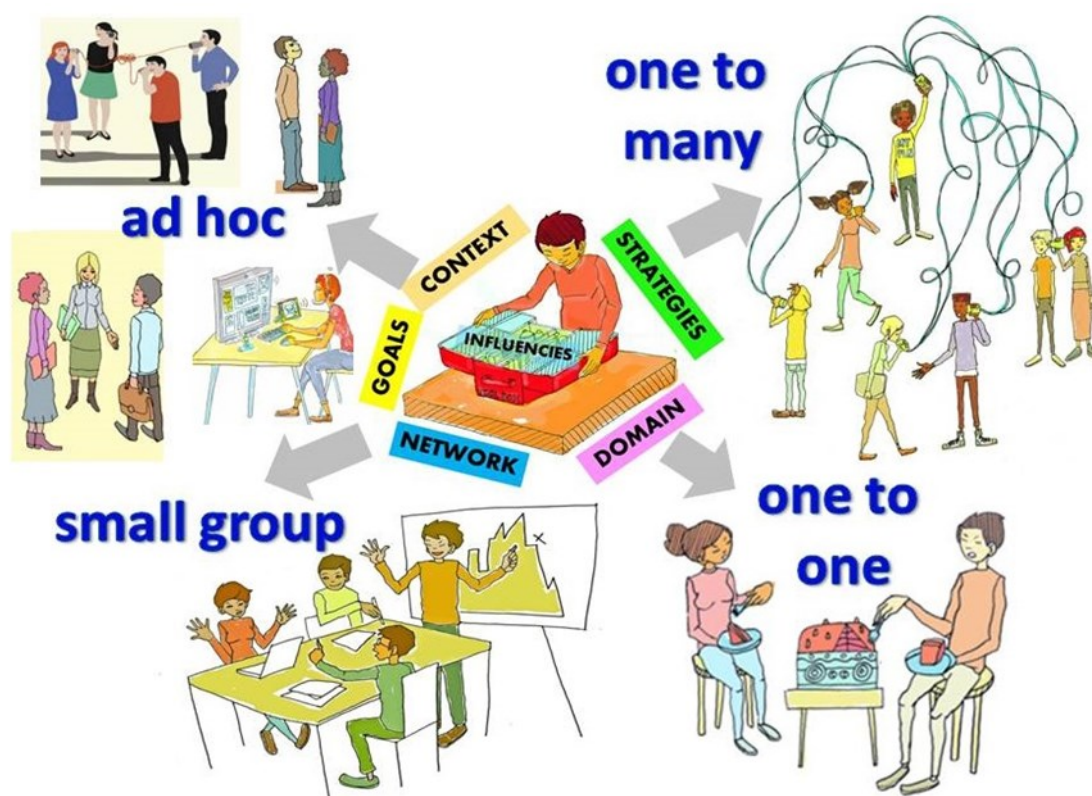
Network grazing Networking often focuses on long-term network building. However, this conversational perspective of networking also highlights the immediate benefits of the networking: an increased understanding from a particularly interesting conversation does not necessarily need a long-term relationship coming forth from it. Rather, individual networkers can graze a network by engaging in various conversations with different people to see what they can learn from these. Through the conversations, they have the opportunity to build and extend their personal network, but do not need to.

Orchestrating serendipitous interaction Contrary to investing in individual relationships, individual networkers need to invest time and effort into identifying locations where orchestrated serendipity can happen. This can include various things such as annual conferences, local coffee houses or the office cafeteria, to online social networks or weblogs. By spending time in these spaces, they can increase the opportunities of serendipitous meetings with relevant others and their ideas.

On the other hand, it also has consequences for networking activity organizers, to how they organize conversations, manage the outcomes of conversations and improve the use of digital technologies.

Orchestrating different forms of conversation Organised networks have the potential to reach a diverse group of people, and for designing a rich *networking environment* that is designed to allow people to have interesting conversations. Even more, the main purpose of networking organisers needs to be to create environments that afford various forms of conversation, as described in the following model of the networking environment (Figure 3).

Figure 3 Conversational model for the networking environment



Networking environments provide various types of support activities that engage the participants in dialogue with different levels of intensity. When dialogues have low intensity (such as ad-hoc conversations or small group discussions), only some information on the personal interpretation of the content factors is shared. As dialogue intensity increases (as in 1-to-1 discussions, or a speaker-to-audience dialogue), more information and details on personal interpretation are shared. The more information is shared, the more likely new co-created meanings will be developed amongst participants.

Managing conversations Organisers of networking environments can also increase the value of the outcomes of the conversations held in their environments, in particular in two distinct ways. Firstly, they can improve the quality and intensity of the conversations held by bringing together people with diverse backgrounds in suitable forms of conversation. Secondly, they can capture the outcomes of the conversations in various ways, in order that the outcomes be picked up by others who were not part of the original conversation. Digital networking environments afford these improvements the most, but there is scope for more blended solutions to improve the management of conversations in face-to-face environments as well.

Using digital platforms to support and enhance face-to-face conversations Currently, digital platforms afford more forms of conversation than face-to-face environments. They perform especially well in terms of distributed participation in conversations. However, they perform poorly in their affordances for holistic conversation. The blending of face-to-face and digital conversations offers the most powerful environments for networked conversation. There are already some instances where there is a natural collaboration between face-to-face and online networking, such as the use of social media as a preparatory platform for and as a backchannel during live events. However, there is scope for much more inventive uses of digital platforms in the creation of spaces for new forms of conversation.

Networking - a key capability for the Social Age

In this article, I have discussed the networking activity itself, and what happens in networking conversations conducted within a network of shared interest such that they become learning experiences for individual networked participants. I believe that understanding this aspect of networking is an important factor in understanding personal learning networks as such. The social practice of networking requires us to be able to build and maintain our personal learning networks. Understanding this practice better will allow us to become more purposeful and adept in building our PLNs so that they support our learning needs better. Moreover, it will also allow us to support novice networkers in developing their proficiency in the essential social and cognitive processes so that they can become accomplished networked learners in the Social Age.

Acknowledgement

<http://www.buergerstiftung-stendal.de/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/network-people.jpg>

Wicked Problem Image source <http://www.strategykinetics.com/2007/09/this-is-the-sec.html>

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Other illustrations drawn by community artist Kiboko Hachiyon

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SEEK, SENSE, SHARE : UNDERSTANDING THE FLOW OF INFORMATION THROUGH MY PLN

Norman Jackson

Founder of Lifewide Education

The Social Age (1) has created new affordances for networking and changed the way my own PLN works by enabling me to connect to the imaginations, writings, illustrations and conversations of a multitude of people through social media, RSS feeds, mail lists and forums.

I wanted to connect and integrate my ideas on PLNs with the flow of information and knowledge through my own learning ecology. Using my PLN I discovered the Seek-Sense-Share model of information flow developed by Harold Jarche(2) to represent the way we set out to find information that is relevant to our learning and development projects, make sense and use that information then share with others our understandings.

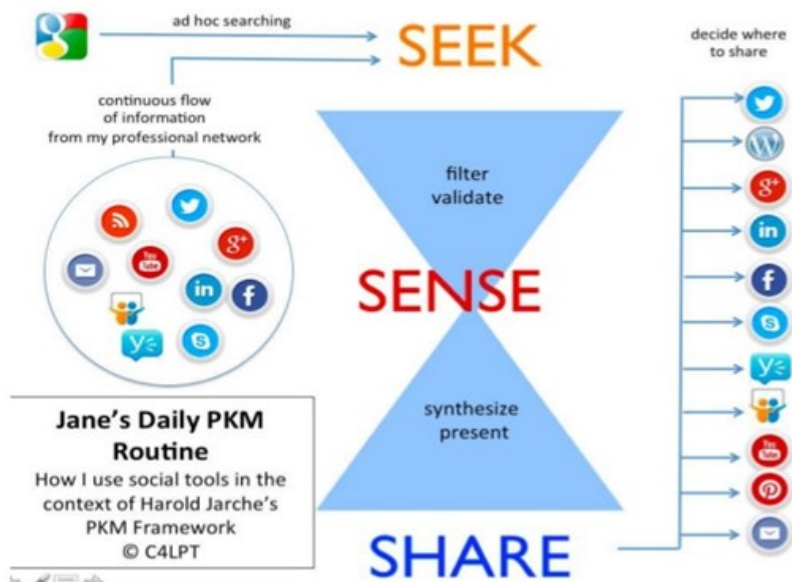


According to Harold, Personal Knowledge Mastery (PKM) is a framework for individuals to take control of their professional development through a continuous process of seeking, sense-making, and sharing.

Seeking is finding things out and keeping up to date. Building a network of colleagues is helpful in this regard. It not only allows us to “pull” information, but also have it “pushed” to us by trusted sources. Good curators are valued members of knowledge networks. I think that seeking can be passive - i.e. we connect to people, communities and organisations who share their knowledge freely and wait with 'watchful anticipation' for something to emerge that is of interest. And then there is the more deliberate mode where we invest lots of time and energy seeking out information that has the potential to be useful.

Sensing is how we personalize information and use it. Sensing includes reflection and putting into practice what we have learned. Often it requires experimentation, as we learn best by doing. Sensing is about trying to make sense of the information we receive or find. We try to connect it to our own understandings which we may need to alter in the process. It is all about creating meaning and then perhaps learning to use what we have learnt.

Sharing includes exchanging resources, ideas, and experiences with our networks as well as collaborating with our colleagues. Sharing involves gifting our understandings or personal sense making to the world either by making it accessible in publications like magazines, books, papers, blogs, twitter posts and any other open access publication vehicles. It's also about using it in work or other social practices.



SEEKING further information on PLNs through my own PLN led me to Jane Hart's excellent blog post(3) in which she described how she had applied the Seek-Sense-Share model to her own daily knowledge management routine. I like this representation as it converts an abstract model into something tangible and meaningful.

I decided to personalise Jane's approach and the result is shown in the illustration below. Unlike Jane's disciplined daily routine, my approach to accessing the information flow from my PLN is quite chaotic. But it becomes more disciplined and systematic when I want

to learn something. I dedicate the time and resources to SEEKING information that might be relevant (such as what I'm doing now) for a particular purpose. In other words, while this model explains the ongoing information flows in my life, it only springs into action when I have created an ecology for learning or achieving something for which I have a need for new information and knowledge (4).

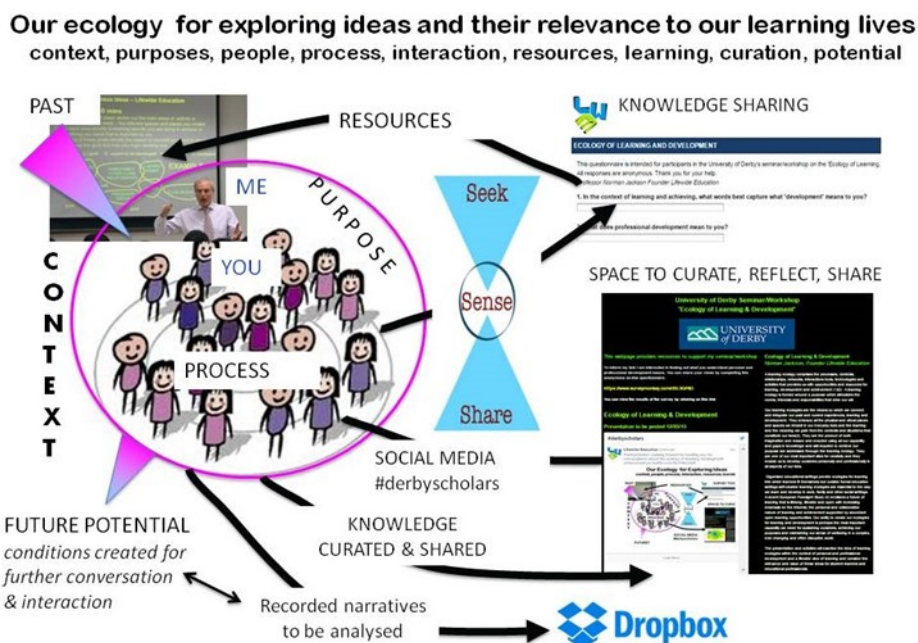


The illustration represents the flow of information and knowledge through my current learning ecology. While there is a lot of use of technological tools what is hidden from view are the people who make use of these technologies who create, curate and communicate the information which I receive or SEEK.

I use my PLN to SEEK information in two different ways. The first is to provide me with a continuous flow of information that might be of interest and which I might be able to make use of either now or in the future. The second mode becomes active when I engage with a problem and I actively begin to create an ecology within which I SEEK specific information, and individuals inside or outside my existing PLN, who can provide me with information, relevant to my learning project. This is a transactional relationship in which I commit to SHARING some of what I have learnt with the people who include me in their PLN or who in future engage in their own SEEKING for information that I have shared.

In accessing the information I make a judgement as to its relevance, validity and utility and then I either store it or put it to use by bringing it into my learning project. Through a process of trying to understand and apply the information SENSING, I create new meaning and change my own understandings which I can SHARE via my Twitter accounts or through my websites, connections to mail lists or through on-line publications, with other people who will be interested. The value of CURATING as part of the infrastructure for sharing is that it provides a context to enable deeper understandings to be made. This in turn stimulates interest and new exchanges with people who I may then include in my PLN.

The SEEK SENSE SHARE model also works well for more dynamic learning ecologies such as a teacher working with her students might experience. For example, while writing this article I facilitated a workshop in a university on the theme of *Ecologies for Learning, Development and Achievement*. I created a learning ecology in which SEEKING involved inviting workshop participants to complete an on-line survey the content of which was included in my presentation. Also during the workshop, and as a result of the relationships and understanding SENSE MAKING developed, participants were able to draw a picture of a learning ecology that they had created and share their story of what it meant (SENSING). These narratives were recorded for analysis (MORE SENSING) after the workshop. What EMERGES from this process will be SHARED with participants and perhaps the cycle will continue?



I conclude that Harold Jarche's SEEK SENSE SHARE conceptual tool for visualising the flow of information to, through and from a learning ecology seems to work very well in the contexts I have described.

The big question is does it work for you? We welcome your views and illustrative stories?

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SUSTAINING MY PROFESSIONAL LEARNING NETWORK (PLN) IS AS MUCH PERSONAL AS PROFESSIONAL

Wendy Burleston



Wendy is a Canadian high school teacher-librarian who believes that school libraries can be transformative places for student learning.

My various experiences in my PLN during the past seven days (a BCTLA-sponsored Webinar, a dinner book Club meeting with teacher-librarian colleagues and friends, informal hallway and office conversations with colleagues, reading and posting via Google Community, Twitter and Facebook) inspired this visual response. Appropriately, the response evolved as a result of a new connections in my PLN, Sylvia Duckworth ([@sylviaduckworth](#)) and Jacques Cool ([@zecooll](#)), who created and publicly shared an artistic and thought-provoking sketchnote "How to Grow a PLN".

I followed the guidance of a sketchnote resource posted in Google Communities by Duckworth and a helpful Google Site of useful resources for the novice sketch noter to create my illustration. Although nowhere near as artistically polished as many online examples, my effort does answer the question I posed in my previous blog entry: how can I sustain my PLN? My sketchnote addresses this question in four parts, extending Duckworth and Cool's garden metaphor.

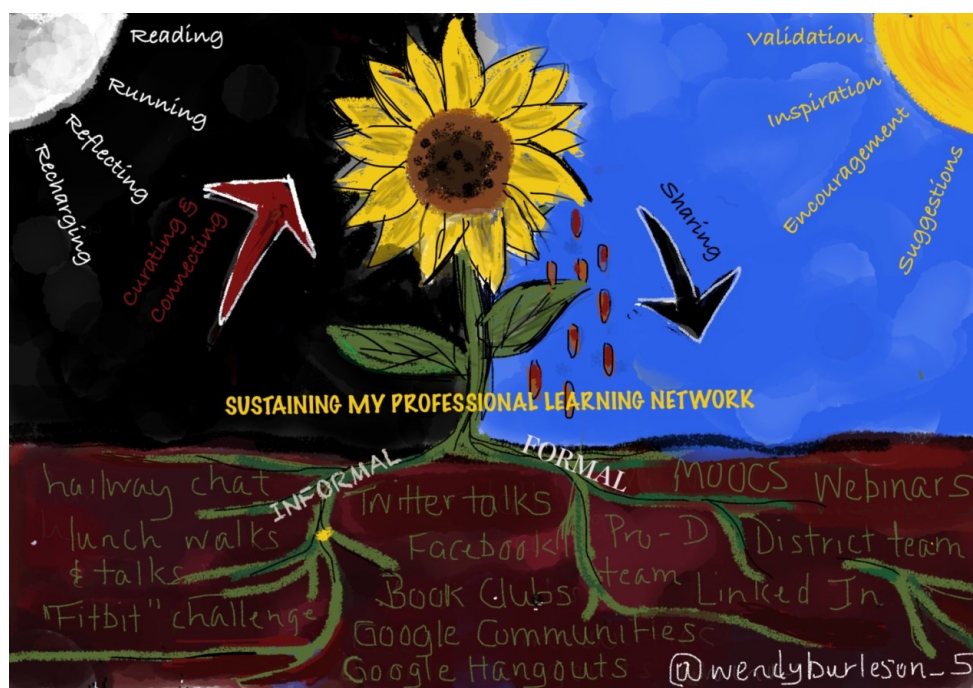
The sunflower: is a metaphor for me, and my own growth.

The yellow represents my optimism, one of my favorite paintings (Van Gogh's iconic "Sunflowers"), and personal connections to Slovenia and my grandparents. Sunflowers grow in abundance in the Metlika village where my grandmother grew up and I recall with fondness these stunning flowers from her garden in Nelson, B.C., but I digress. Really, the key analogies include growth – a dynamic process with a variety of environmental conditions necessary to sustain it – as well as the sharing of learning and growth, represented by the seeds, some of which will be absorbed into the PLN.

The roots: representative of my

current PLN foundation – informal and formal networks, and the intertwining and inextricability of several tools within this network. That is, although the foundation of every PLN is student learning, personal chat and socialization represents an important element. A few examples. I'm part of a Fitbit challenge with my M.Ed cohort, and enjoy connecting to colleagues personally in the chatroom of our weekly video conferences. These interactions make me feel part of a team and help to reduce stress around course assignments. At my school, I chat with colleagues during lunch hour walks and conversations in the library office. I'm connected with colleagues on Facebook and Twitter, where I share resources, but also things of personal interest. Such interpersonal connections sustain my motivation to learn with and share with others.

The sun and daylight: the sustenance for these roots to thrive on a daily basis – the connections I foster with my colleagues online and in person. That sense of connectedness manifests, for me, in the words I've chosen for the sun's rays. Two colleagues recently remarked that they enjoy collaborating with me because I help them feel supported and



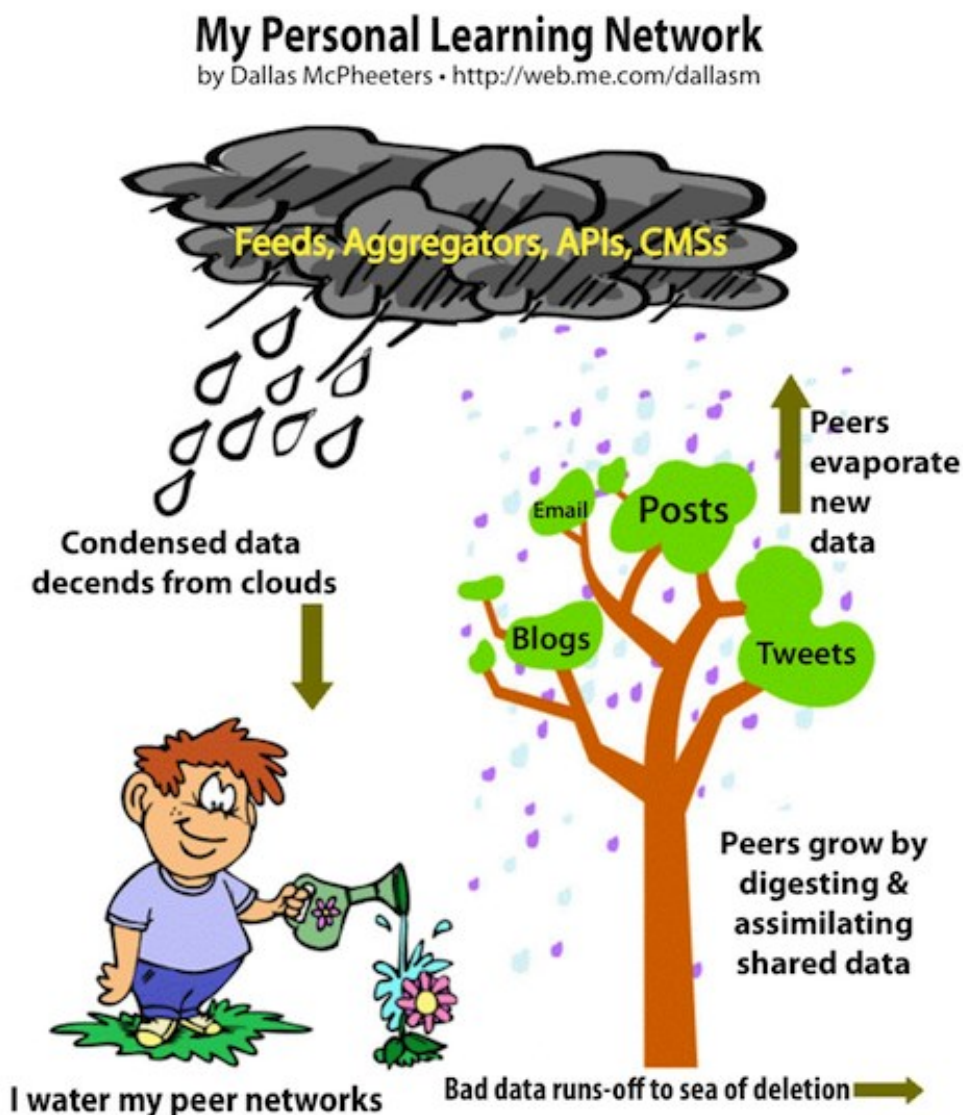
validated. Another expressed appreciation for the ideas I suggest for making her re-think and add to her existing research projects. Although I felt elated receiving this feedback, in truth, this sustenance extends both ways. These rays do not represent only what I attempt to give, but also what I receive from my colleagues. I am fortunate to work in a highly collaborative school with creative, innovative colleagues who inspire me to think within the box – working to improve upon existing strengths – and outside of the box – doing and trying things (like Flipink) that may help me develop directions for change and improvement in my teaching.

The moon and night: the personal time I require to implement inspirational ideas. For me, reading and running are natural and necessary means by which I reflect and recharge – hence the choice of my Twitter profile image [@wendyburleson_5](#). I truly believe that many of my most

innovative ideas have originated during a 5-10 km run (not a half-marathon, mind you, as I'm focusing solely upon finishing the race!), especially as I often run "unplugged" free of even my ipod Shuffle, leaving my mind free to muse about quotes, articles, conversations I've curated in my mind. And as for daily reading, well, this is simply my natural element as a teacher-librarian, English teacher, and my personal continuation of a healthy life-long habit.

Adapted from Wendy's post at:

<https://thetenacioustl.wordpress.com/2015/02/01/sustaining-the-professional-learning-network-pln-its-as-much-personal-as-professional/>



Adapted from Background Image Courtesy: Fullerton Arboretum

LIFEWIDE LEARNING SURVEY OF PERSONAL LEARNING NETWORKS

May/June 2015

Jenny Willis



Jenny's career has involved many dimensions of teaching, educational management and research. She has a PhD in socio-linguistics and first worked with Norman on aspects of professional and personal development, creativity and lifewide learning at the Surrey Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning. She is a founder member of Lifewide Learning, conducts research and writes for its publications. She edits Lifewide Magazine and is also executive editor for Creative Academic Magazine. Jenny is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts. For more information about her go to <http://no2stigma.weebly.com>.

BACKGROUND

Two of Lifewide Education's principal objectives are:

- 1 Publication and dissemination of information relevant to lifewide learning, education and personal development
- 2 Research and scholarship related to these ideas

In accordance with these aims, the fourteenth issue of Lifewide Magazine focuses on the important, but relatively unexplored, issue of personal learning networks (PLNs). To complement it, we conducted an open survey of individual perceptions of PLNs and their practice. Our findings would contribute to this edition of the magazine and provide a basis for further research and articles.

An on-line survey was created using SurveyMonkey. The survey comprised open-ended qualitative and quantitative questions. Potentially interested people were contacted by email and other electronic links and invited to complete the survey. Responses are anonymous and no individual is identified in our analysis.

RESPONDENTS

A total of 41 valid responses was received by the time this analysis was made. The survey remains open and any reader who would like to contribute their views is welcome to do so by logging on to <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/RTTGKWG>

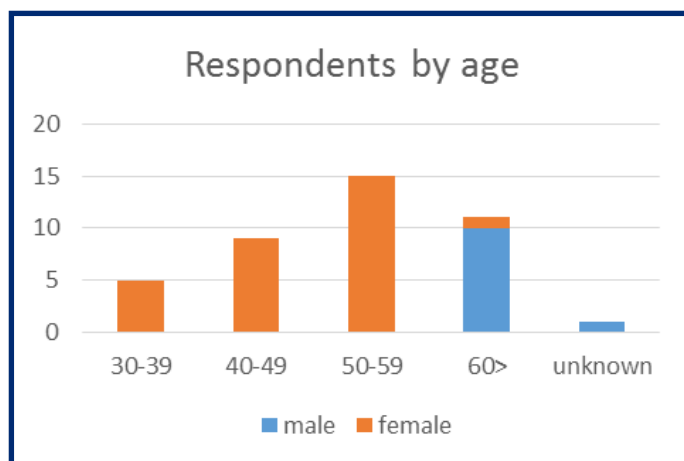
Gender

There was an imbalance of 3:1 in the gender of respondents, with 30 women compared with 11 men. This may reflect the nature of their professional roles, and responses may be skewed by this factor.

Age

There was also a potential bias due to the age of respondents, with only five being below the age of 40. As shown in Figure 1, 26 were over the age of 50 and 11 were 60+. The figure also shows that male respondents were older than female, another factor that may have affected the findings.

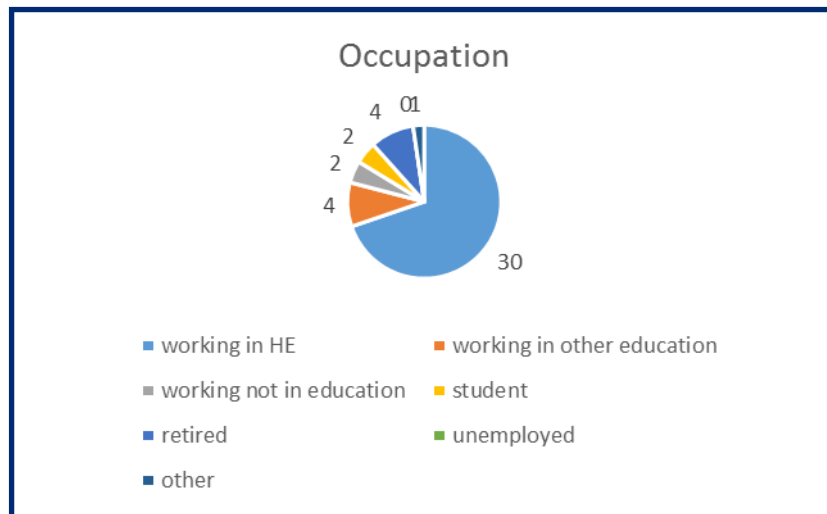
Figure 1



Occupation

Figure 2 shows that the majority of respondents (30) were working in HE, with a further 4 people working in other educational sectors. 4 respondents were retired, no-one was unemployed.

Figure 2



Some respondents added comments to explain their situation:

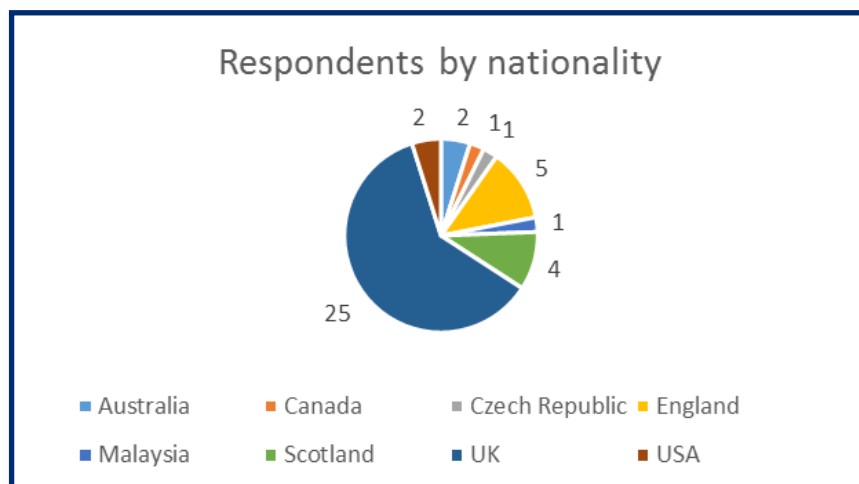
- I used to work in higher education, now community education and recently used communities of practice and social learning theories to define lifewide learning in my community.
- Educational consultant.
- Not for Profit - Research & Development - Education/Training/Certification.
- Also studying a research masters part time.
- Retired but working in a voluntary 'professional' sense. Hence some questions above are not relevant.

These remarks related largely to the retired group and indicate that they remain professionally active, often without financial remuneration.

Nationality

The final question in this section was respondents' nationality. Responses are given in Figure 3 using the individuals' own terms, e.g. some people used 'UK' whereas others were more precise, 'Scottish', 'English'. If we total these three groups, 34 respondents were from the UK. The remainder were from around the world, as illustrated.

Figure 3



In sum, we acknowledge the group of 41 respondents may not be typical of a random sample of the population, but their responses offer a starting point for further research.

RESPONSES

1. What does the term 'Personal Learning Network' mean to you?

Responses to this question were markedly similar. Recurrent themes included support, mutual learning (active and passive), personal agency, networks/groups and shared values. These are iterative and it is slightly artificial to categorise them, but some typical comments follow.

Professional support

- The people you contact to provide you with professional support
- group of possibly disparate people who can be supportive when I am learning
- All the contacts you draw on to support your learning



Networks

- Groups of people, often connected through different networks, who provide inspiration and support for my development
- A network of reliable people I trust that sit outside of established networks
- the web of individuals, entities, & resources I organize around my own learning interests
- Contacts who are useful to me, and vice-versa

Shared/reciprocal learning

- personal contacts of people you have learned/currently learn with, mentor/mentee professional contacts
- The people around me, with and from whom I learn
- A PLN is a connected group of individuals who share the same interests, learn from each other by participating in the community and share what is learned or created.

Shared values, mutual respect

- For example, people I follow on Twitter who tweet about areas of HE that I'm interested in
- The likeminded folk in my personal and business world who support me with challenge, thinking, stretch and learning on a day to day basis.
- The peers I am connected to who I value and who value me and my network

Media

- Connecting to people and resources via a range of social media to share and learn
- I think of these as the nodes/places of connection where I can bring together resources (human, print, electronic) as part of learning - co-created learning and change; these reciprocal networks are comprised of people, organisations, and community groups/entities
- The people and organisations I have contact with, actively and passively, using technologies e.g. email, as well as face-to-face contacts and old technologies e.g. books.

Personal agency/explicit expectations

- A group of people contrived with the mutual goal of learning and collaborating
- The people and organisations I have been proactive in developing relationships with, or who have wanted to be involved with me
- Where learners connect to people with the express purpose of learning.

Formal or informal

- An informal network of peers with shared learning goals who wish to work together, through peer learning and teaching to achieve these goals
- A group of people organised loosely or formally, who consciously confer and share their reflections and practices, so

- I associate this with professional networks. I instantly started writing about professional networks, colleagues (internal and external) and then realised that maybe that wasn't quite the purpose of the question! Of course I do learn more broadly from a variety of people and sources, however I don't necessarily think of them as a 'network'.

In other words, respondents generally have an explicit expectation of learning, and are seeking support proactively. They expect learning to be shared and mutual. Support is generally for professional purposes, but sometimes also personal. Groups and networks are facilitated by many of today's interactive media.

2. What concepts / words do you associate with idea of 'Personal Learning Networks'?

Reflecting the same themes as in question 1, respondents refer to such dimensions as *collaboration, construction, communities, and creativity*, often all in one response. For instance:

- Collaboration. Independence. Interdependence. Communities of Practice. Reflection. Action Planning
- Construct, collaboration, facilitation, enhancement
- Connection, inspiration, support, advice, community, peers, mentors

Again, there is reference to **shared values** and the need for **trust**:

- Trust, shared values, experience
- Trust, sounding board, sharing, learning, connections, value, personal development
- People I trust; experts in the field
- Reflective engagement, intellectual honesty, practical involvement, experience, knowledge

Some people associate the term with *media*:

- Professional contacts, social online networks e.g. linkedIn
- Groups, technology, email lists, conferences, professional associations, tutorial groups
- Community of practice, social media, colleagues, supervisor
- Technology, JIT, streams
- People Maillists Forums Connections Information Twitter LinkedIn

There are both implicit and explicit ***expectations of learning and enrichment*** from the relationship:

- Comparability enrichment diversity
- Learning, connection, interaction, stimulate, inspire, learn, grow, develop
- reciprocity, discovery, serendipity
- informal learning interests as well as formal learning opportunities; varied - not necessarily all about the same or similar topics

As some of these last comments observe, learning may be unexpected and wide-ranging.

Responses confirm the way in which perceived meanings of a PLN (question 1) have been applied in practice.



3. How important is your Personal Learning Network (PLN) to your everyday learning, personal development and wellbeing? Please tick the box that best describes your practice

In this question, respondents were asked to check boxes to indicate the level of importance their PLN played in their personal lives. The options were:

I do not have a PLN

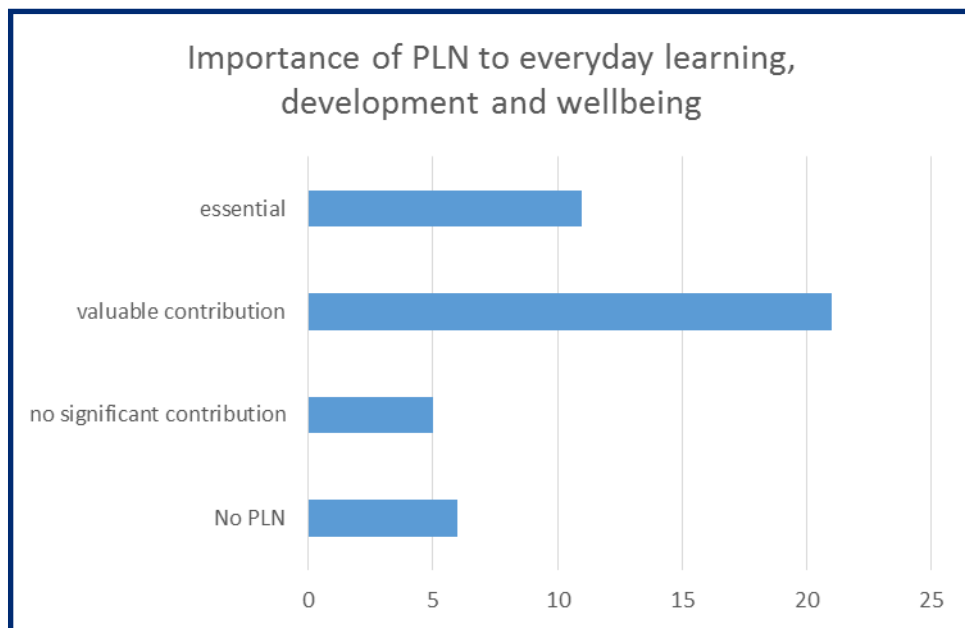
I have a PLN but it does not make a significant contribution to my learning, personal development and wellbeing

My PLN makes a valuable contribution to my learning, personal development and wellbeing

My PLN is essential to my learning, personal development and wellbeing

Figure 4 summarises their responses. The total number of checks is 43, which would suggest that two of the 41 respondents have ticked more than one box.

Figure 4



It is clear that the majority (21) felt their PLN played a valuable part in their everyday life, with a further 11 saying it was essential. This would suggest that PLNs can potentially be valuable tools for our personal development and wellbeing.

4. In the context of your professional work, how important is your Personal Learning Network (PLN) to your learning, professional development, and achievement?

Question 4 asked a similar question but focused here on the role of PLNs in respondents' professional lives. The options were:

I do not have a PLN

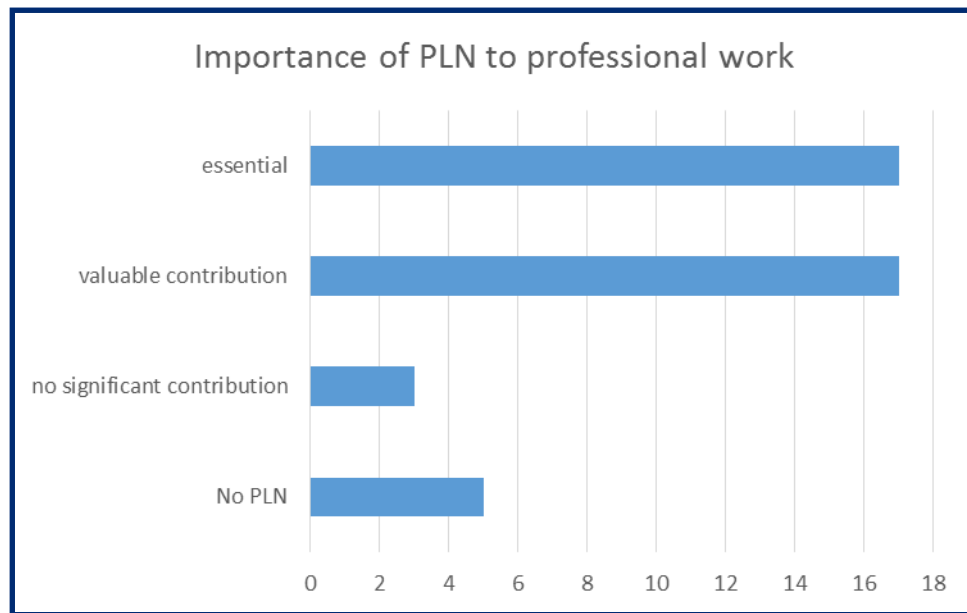
I have a PLN but it does not make a significant contribution to my learning, development and achievement

My PLN makes a valuable contribution to my learning, development and achievement

My PLN is essential to my learning, development and achievement

Responses are summarised in Figure 5. They again exceed the total number of respondents, indicating that one person has checked two options.

Figure 5



An equal number of people (17 in each category) stated that their PLN was either essential or had a valuable role in their professional work. For 8 individuals, it played no or little role. This group may represent those who are retired hence the question was not relevant to them. We conclude that PLNs are very important in the professional lives of working people.

5. In the context of your professional work, what sort of people or groups are involved in your Personal Learning Network?

Question 5 explored the frequency of contact with specific types of people. The frequency options were:

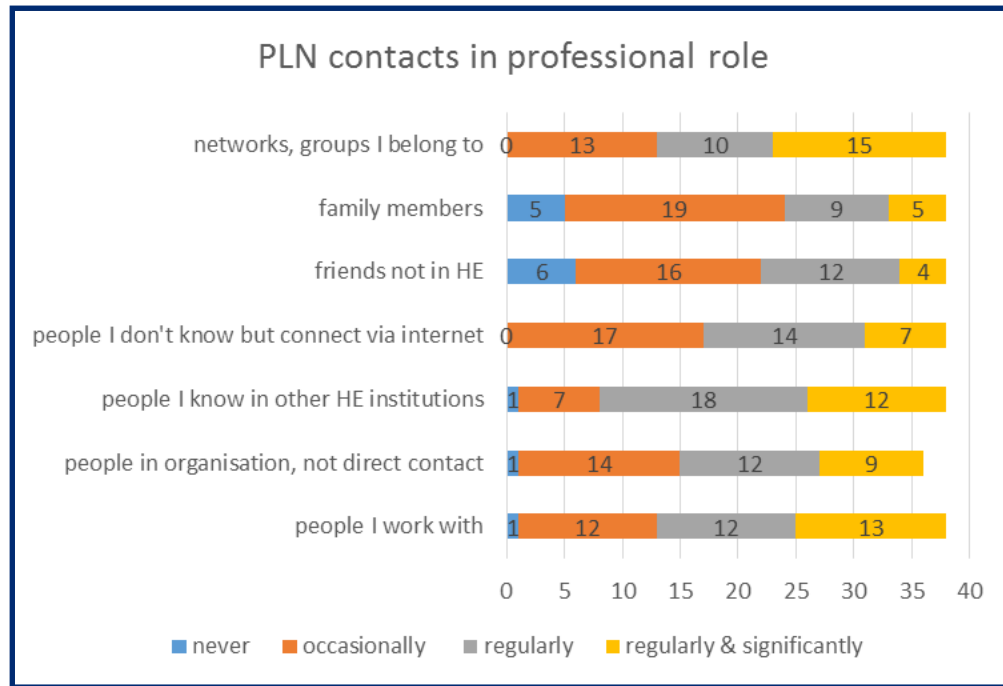
- Make regular and significant contributions to my PLN
- Never make a contribution to my PLN
- Occasionally make a contribution to my PLN
- Regularly make a contribution to my PLN

The people or groups asked about were:

- People I work with
- Other people in my institution/organisation who I do not work with directly
- People I know who work in other higher education institutions and/or other organisations
- People who I don't know directly but who I am able to connect with via the internet
- Friends who do not work in higher education
- Members of my family
- People in networks and groups I belong to

Responses are collated in Figure 6. Again, totals vary and are below 41, suggesting that those who are retired may not have responded to this question.

Figure 6



The people with whom significant contact is made professionally (the yellow bars) show that the most frequent contact is made with people in networks and groups to which the respondent belongs, followed closely by people they work with directly and those they know in other HE institutions. Least contact is made with family members and friends not working in HE. This would indicate a clear distinction, albeit unconsciously made, between work and personal lives.

Some respondents added other contacts or comments to the list of those asked about. They were:

- Book group; writers group.
- Don't have one. Have friends/colleagues whom I may contact for guidance or information. Wouldn't call that learning!
- Exhibitions, articles
- I am a School Governor and Learned Journal Editor, these both occasionally make a contribution to my PLN
- I've only recently come across the concept of PLN so I don't really think about PLN as such. But I do draw on a wide network of contacts to support my work and personal development. I'm not sure that the label has any value.
- People I follow on Twitter
- People who I don't know directly, but who I am able to connect with not via the internet
- Total strangers or people I see on TV or hear on the radio, as well as writers make key and sometimes surprising contributions

6. In the context of your professional work, how do you communicate with the people in your Personal Learning Network?

This question examined a range of potential media by which contact might be made in the professional context of PLNs and the people/groups involved in the contact. The people/groups were:

- People I work with
- Other people in my institution/organisation who I do not work with directly
- People I know who work in other higher education institutions and/or other organisations
- People who I don't know directly but who I am able to connect with via the internet
- Friends who do not work in higher education
- Members of my family
- People in networks and groups I belong to

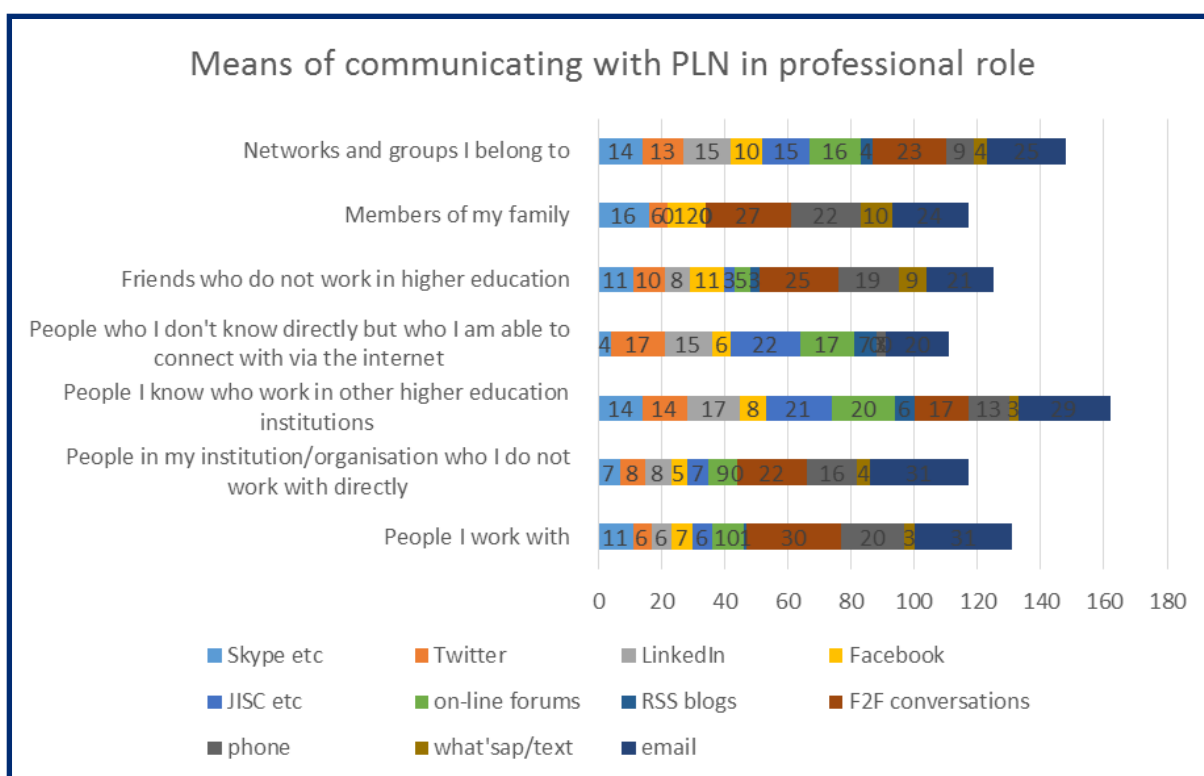
The media by which contact might be made were:

- Skype and similar
- Twitter
- LinkedIn
- Facebook
- JISC and similar
- On-line forums
- RSS blogs
- Face-to-face conversations
- Phone
- Text
- Email

Responses are collated in Figure 7. The two colours that stand out as most frequent means of contact are the dark blue bars, representing email, and the bronze bars, face-to-face conversations. This is consistent for all people/groups contacted via email, and in that of face-to-face conversations where no contact is made via the internet with people respondents do not know.

It would appear then that traditional means of contact remain those preferred.

Figure 7



The least frequently used medium is generally text (olive bars). The exceptions to this are when contacting members of the family or friends in HE. Once again this indicates that respondents vary their practice for those they know well, preferring not to use this less formal medium for professional contact.

Some respondents added other forms of communication they may have in their professional role:

- Often the choice of medium is dictated by the message - for example Twitter is public, telephone is personal and confidential.
- Email notifications from blogs, etc.
- ResearchGate Academia.edu

The first comment here recognises an ethical dimension to the choice of which medium to use. It makes explicit the inference we have drawn regarding the use of phone or face-to-face conversations.

7. How do Personal Learning Networks feature in Personal Development Planning processes and practices?

This final question was open ended and responses on the role of PLNs in PDP ranged from negative to positive.

Negative

- No idea
- Not evidently.
- They don't.
- Not formally in my workplace
- The role of PLEs is possibly not recognised sufficiently in PDP
- They don't officially
- I don't think they do at the moment where I work
- Haven't thought about it much, I'm afraid. I would like to make more of the PLN I've put together on Twitter but don't have time to tweet or even log in most days.

Whilst some of these responses indicate that little thought has been given to the value of PLNs, others imply that the PLN might be valuable and that there is scope for exploring this. Two of these comments suggest that there is organisational resistance to the notion. The following comments expand on this negativity and acknowledge the lost learning opportunities:

- A key component in my PDP and practice not recognised as essential part of PDP in my US-based university, not in my immediate workplace (which focuses on teaching professional development)
- More concerned with developing ways of using PLE/PLN in workplace development. Doing this now for humanitarian aid context.
- I feel it would contribute greatly but there is very little space in my institution and my workload is so huge I can barely breathe - I feel sad as I am missing on many valuable opportunities as there is simply no time for exchanges. I feel isolated and working in a silo. Outside of the work I participate in several communities and this is rewarding - still I have such limited time and space in my life (due to family and work responsibilities) that it is difficult to fit in these other activities. I try to do sth for local community every week and I learn a lot from exchanges with my local community and several groups. I guess it keeps me sane and helps me keep going. I'm in a difficult phase in my life and so I am hoping I will have more opportunities in years to come.

Positive

The positive comments offer a wide range of practical support derived from PLNs. As the following list shows, this can include mentoring and reflection, reflection leading to action, information seeking, awareness raising and exploration:

- Members of PLN help me articulate my PLP and support me at various stages. My mentor helps me to reflect.
- Converting concepts to actions.
- Provide guidance on ways in which I can expand my understanding and/or knowledge in a specific area, and in particular, suggest other people with similar interests to network with, or further reading that may be of assistance.
- F2F and email PLNS, but online/ blog forums not yet really but likely to in the future.
- Awareness raising.
- I call on contacts to find opportunities, offer opportunities and get information.

Some of these comments are general, while others clearly related to PDP processes. To conclude this section, we might bear in mind the words of this respondent:

- essential in order to develop authentic identities as HE professionals.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

The feedback from these 41 respondents has been rich and informative. They reinforce the concepts and practices reflected in so many of the articles in this issue of Lifewide Magazine, not least the progression from personal motivation, through pro-active seeking of like-minded individuals to enhance their PLN, to sharing and joint sense making in a spiral of ever-expanding enquiry and learning.

Thank you to those who have contributed to this research. Remember, if you have views that you would like to share, the survey is still open and can be accessed at <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/RTTGKWG>



Image credits

BEYOND CONVERSATION: The Power and Latent Potential of a Collaborative Network to Disrupt the Dominant Design

Andrew Middleton



Andrew is Head of Innovation & Professional Development at Sheffield Hallam University and leads the UK Media Enhanced Learning Special Interest Group (MELSIG), a pioneering group interested in enhancing and transforming learning with digital and social media. Andrew has edited books on media-enhanced learning, been a facilitator on the open learning event Bring Your Own Devices for Learning, and is Managing Editor the open Journal of the Media Enhanced Learning and the Student Engagement & Experience Journal. He is also an active member of the Lifewide Education Community.

My ideal PLN

This issue of Lifewide Magazine is devoted to exploring the idea of Personal Learning Networks - the network of connections we make through which we learn and achieve things we value. I want to describe an important feature of my own PLN namely my active participation in the Media Enhanced Learning Special Interest Group (MELSIG), the network of 'professional friendships' I value. The mostly external and informal relationships I have with members of this network have formed around the interests we share. The network represents my idea and ideal of a Personal Learning Network that nourishes and enriches my professional life.

Personal learning is all about relationships and attitudes. Have you ever considered that the attitude we have to working with peers outside our institution is often very different to the way we approach our day job inside our institution? In this article I explore this difference by contrasting my experience of the codified role I have 'at work' with my experience of working with the external connections I have made through MELSIG. It feels as though the former is about being paid and being accountable for what you do and the latter is more about working with shared values and purposes. However, there are signs of convergence of these what Cronin¹ calls "dissonant" identities which each offer different ways of being professional.

What is MELSIG?

MELSIG is a special interest group: a group of people who share a common interest. In our case that common interest is in how digital and social media can be used to enhance and transform teaching and learning in higher education. It's the sense of purpose that gives our existence meaning and binds us together. MELSIG is about grappling with the complex or wicked social problem of bringing about systemic change in higher education (see Kamakshi Rajagopal's article²).



SMART DEVICES
for
LEARNING

Sheffield 8th February 2013

MELSIG is a loosely formed idea and I often think, if I could find a bit more time and persuade a few more people to take an active role it could benefit from more structure and organisation to create a more definable shape. Even though MELSIG has a steering group it mostly functions now through a momentum in which self-organisation and emergence have become properties of the network: ideas are suggested and MELSIG's badge helps them become real.

Nevertheless it takes great effort, but it seems to work and continues to be relevant because it is founded on principles and values that essentially espouse mutual development, openness, inclusivity, co-creation and the value of participation.

It is worth thinking about the effort involved in developing and maintaining a PLN. Eric Stoller (2015)³ says, "Engagement via social media takes time. If you don't have enough time to engage with people then you'll never truly get the value of social media... You have to work at it." 'Working at it' feels more acute than working at other friendships – it takes a particular confidence, even audacity. I agree with Kamakshi Rajagopal that making professional friendships doesn't come easily to many people. The protocols are not necessarily clear or even established, but once you have found a way that feels acceptable to you, I agree, it can become an indispensable part of your work. So perhaps the "effort" is about social fumbling

and adding a new additional layer to your work, and working out how you can moderate other aspects of your life to accommodate this. I haven't consciously done the latter yet, though in a learning network the benefits of mentoring are often implicit as Kamakshi suggests, and you trust that your friendships are both mutually inspiring and challenging helping you to do your job better.

I strongly believe that everyone who ever connected with MELSIG has brought something valuable with them that keeps it alive: interest, ideas, energy and peer support - both practical and emotional. Again picking up on Kamakshi Rajagopal's piece², this act of networked conversation is much more than an exchange of knowledge. At MELSIG events, for example, the day concludes with a round robin of take away points. It is at this final point in the day that the nature of conversation becomes clear as participants "try to articulate their own understandings about [their] complex problem in order to come to a collaborative, shared understanding."

Note that money is not a factor in the way we value each other in a network like MELSIG and it has become a point of principle to get by without generating income and, as such, members give their time, expertise and creativity freely. Giving without expecting anything in return is thus another important property of this value-based collaborative network.



Not only is MELSIG a loosely formed idea, but it is a loosely formed network. Its strongest bonds have been those which are established in our events connecting 'core members' (those who have been associated with the SIG for a while and have contributed in some way to its activities) with people who have arranged to present on their practice or offer a workshop. On the day we encourage people who are new to the SIG to step forward and offer a 5 minute Thunderstorm – after all, if you've turned you will have at least a good question around which to form a discussion.

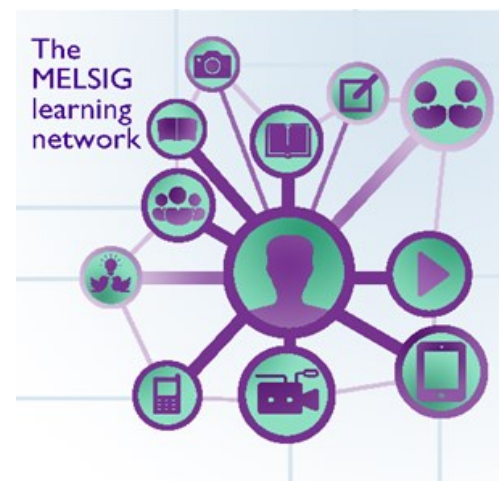
The core group is dynamic and new people consistently connect with it and then stay part of it. It is regenerated through MELSIG events and the SIG's Twitter network.

In between events, book projects, online courses, MELSIG's website³, and now its new journal (JMEL)³, all contribute to MELSIG's ongoing sense of presence. The website for example hosts resources from workshops such as sets of information on using smart apps and BYOD, the MELSIG books, and there is guidance on podcasting, innovation scenarios and bibliographies.

Action speaks louder than words

We cannot bring about change without action so as well as conversation MELSIG supports and encourages action. Some action is formal - that is, planned activities directly associated with MELSIG and is mostly in the form of the events we organise and the writing projects we run. In terms of 'network' it begins to become more interesting as we move away from this formal presence and MELSIG associates connect with other networks and individuals.

About four times a year we hold free events around specific topics and regularly attract a lot of people to these events. The events are promoted through the MELSIG Twitter handle, an event specific hashtag, our Jiscmail list and others. The use of Twitter has been particularly interesting because it is here that you start to see evidence of how much the events are valued. Unlike the Jiscmail announcements, the Twitter announcements become the part of a networked conversation. You can see people responding to the call as individuals taking responsibility for retweeting the news or perhaps signalling regret when they can't attend.



PERSONAL LEARNING NETWORKS, ECOLOGIES AND ENVIRONMENTS

Peter Rawsthorne

Peter is an IT professional, educational technologist adult educator and keen Morris Dancer.



I was prompted by a very interesting tweet, the person asked the question "What was the difference between a Personal Learning Network (PLN) and a Personal Learning Ecology (PLE)". This question got me thinking and I have reflected upon it often in the last few days. One thing that jumped out from this reflection is to add the Personal Learning Environment to this question. This is how I define these three related ideas.

Personal Learning Network is global and includes wherever your network reach extends, all resources are available (these resources can be; filtered or unfiltered, human, digital, printed, or otherwise). It is important to consider everything in your network that can contain or process knowledge and provide skills acquisition or understanding as a part of this network. Your PLN is very broad.

Personal Learning Ecology is more geographically related... the learning objects are what is available in the "local area" or within easy reach (digitally or otherwise). Items in the learning ecology are what come available as the learner goes through their day and are the items in which the learner has built their knowledge. These objects have the ability to be viewed through multiple intelligences and consumed using multiple tools. They are the things that are on the current learning path and not too far out in the person's network. What is in the ecology is a subset of your PLN and these items are very easily accessible through multiple modalities at the right time. Often it is the objects that are right in front of you during your learning that are most important, it's the "when the student is ready the teacher will come" idea. And with PLEcologies the teacher can come in many forms. Depth and breadth is also important, therefore when the learning opportunity presents itself it needs to be explored in its entirety.

Personal Learning Environment is the full extent of the tools used to gather knowledge and deepen understanding. This PLE is more technology based and includes all your devices, approaches and collaborative technologies.

An example:



I have taken it upon myself to develop an expert understanding of the Morris dancing and related folk music tradition with focus on learning to play the pipe and tabor. I've committed myself to this journey and for me it's about getting to mastery, not the rate in which I get to mastery. I purposefully put myself in positions to learn more. I have been documenting my

process in learning the pipe and tabor and regularly seek out opportunities to deepen my understanding of Morris dancing and playing these traditional musical instruments. I have felt this is slowing due to not getting the correct mentorship and feedback as I try to learn, and not knowing what is my next step toward deliberate practice is difficult. I continue to read books on the subject and attend festivals and face-to-face workshops to learn more. Recently two things have occurred that I consider show the difference between a *learning ecology* and a *learning network*.

A while back I was searching for books in these subject areas. My emerging learning network on this subject pointed me toward a couple of books which I have begun to read. One of the books describes when learning the pipe and tabor it is good to do this by ear, and it is a good idea to practise while sitting at a piano so you can listen correctly to the notes as playing on the piano then play them on the pipe. This back and forth between piano and pipe will greatly assist in learning the tones that occur when over-blowing the pipe. Training the ear is important to learning the pipe. Even though the book(s) came via my network, it is the presence of these books close at hand that put them into my ecology.



I have also been focused on learning a jig called "I'll go and enlist for a sailor". Some of the steps were eluding me. Over this last weekend I attended the Marlboro Morris Ale and was fortunate enough to meet John Dexter, who could teach me the jig. I was shown the steps in detail by a master of the dance, much of the mystery of the steps were demonstrated, they are no longer a mystery. All my reading of the dance, watching videos had prepared me well for this master / apprentice type session. I was ready to learn and the correct situation presented itself as I was on my learning journey. The Morris Ale became a part of my learning ecology.

These are both examples of how what was right in front of me from within my PLEcology is what I needed best. How this is different from the PLN is that I focused my learning on what was directly in front of me as resources instead of searching my broader network. Most often it is important to hold the faith that the right learning is available at the right time.

This article was originally published in my blog in June 2011 and appeared in Lifewide Magazine in

<http://criticaltechnology.blogspot.co.uk/2011/06/personal-learning-ecology.html>

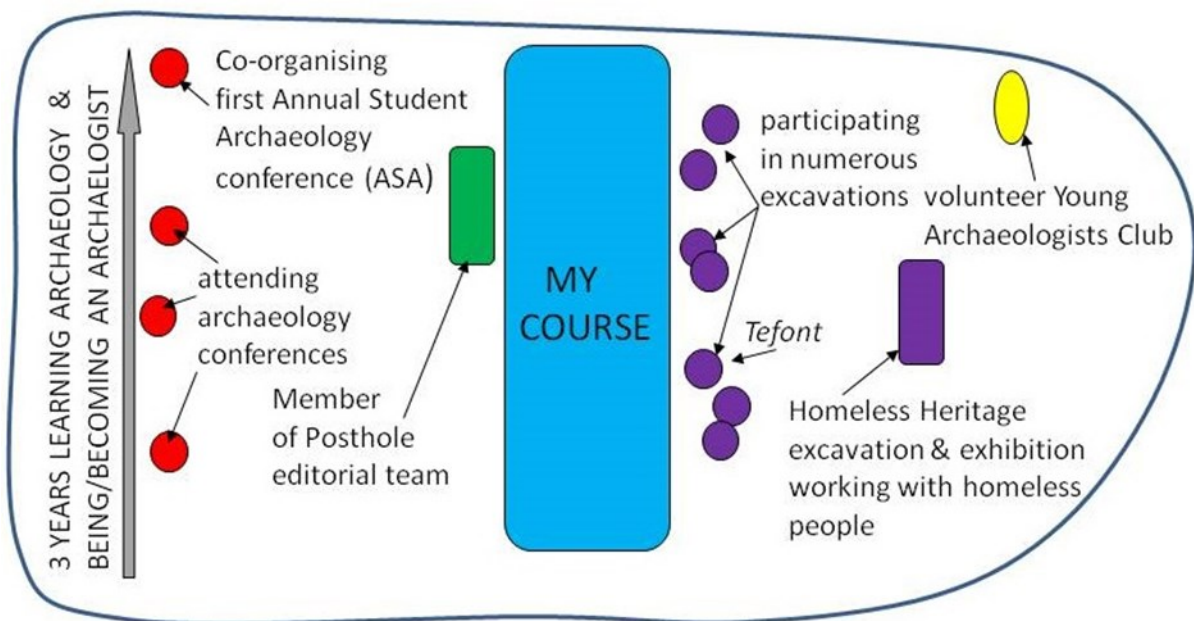


LEARNING TO BE AN ARCHAEOLOGIST: MY PERSONAL NETWORK FOR LEARNING

Michael Tomlinson talks with Norman Jackson

In this interview Michael shares his understandings of networking and describes how he networked in order to pursue his interests and develop himself while he was studying archaeology at university. Two years after graduating Michael reflects on his experience and compares it to his current work situation. The names of people he mentions have been changed to protect their identity. The interview builds on Michael's account of the learning ecology he created to become the archaeologist he wanted to be¹. I will re-use the diagram he created to explain how he developed himself (Figure 1).

Figure 1 The learning ecology Michael developed¹ in order to become an archaeologist while he was studying archaeology at university. His ecology provided the context for his personal learning network.



Interviewer: What does networking mean to you, what does it actually mean to network?

Michael: To develop connections.

Interviewer: Is that all?

Michael: I think so, yes.

Interviewer: So why do you network?

Michael: Probably for almost any reason you can think of.

Interviewer: So give me some examples.

Michael: Well, professional development, personal development, fun, enjoyment. To learn a new skill. To get support. To push someone else under your thumb. You can network for almost any reason: scheming with other people is a form of networking and teaching is arguably a form of networking, if we say

that network is to build connections, then teaching is therefore, by definition, networking, of sorts.

Interviewer: Thinking back to when you were at university, how important was networking for you?

Michael: My networking has always been in the context of learning something from somebody. You know, so it's somebody that you have a relationship with who you are learning useful information from.... there are names that spring to mind....people that I learnt a lot from like, [my] supervisor, the head of department, certain people that I met through ASA². People through Homeless Heritage³. Those kinds of people were connections that I created, and, yeah, I learnt a great deal from them.

Interviewer: When you were at university, you did all sorts of things that were not part of your course, let's call them projects (Figure1). Talk me through how networking actually helped you work with the projects you got involved in.

Michael: So I suppose in my first year, most of my networking was in a social context. I was meeting people, getting to know people, certainly, you know, my housemate for the next two years, I got to know him ... and learnt a lot about people from him... He knew stuff that I didn't know, he had a kind of encyclopaedic knowledge of history and all those kind of things, and I learned a great deal from him, and other colleagues and friends, and things like that. But I didn't do much from a work point of view.

Then in the second year I got interested in Homeless Heritage... I met, the team from Homeless Heritage, and the shelter residents we were working with.



Through the Homeless Heritage team I was introduced to a whole new world of community engagement, community archaeology, and how all of that works... and that really interested me. In fact I chose community engagement as my topic for my seminar in the final year.

Also, in that summer of my second year, I did a couple of digs, a couple of excavations, and I met a lot of people through that, so that really was the start of what you might call my networking within archaeology, because that I was developing ties with people in the field, outside of what I was doing [in my course] ... So the

first dig excavation I went on, I spent two weeks there, got to know the site supervisor, got to know people who were Masters and older, and those relationships then carried on through my time at uni. And again, you learn about what it's like digging, how you become an archaeologist. You know, you watch these other people who have done it, and you see actually how it's all done.



So people acted as kind of conduits into new areas, into topics. The on-site excavation team acted as a conduit into field archaeology, and how field archaeology worked, Homeless Heritage got me interested in community engagement in archaeology, and indeed community engagement in academia generally. That led to additional contacts, with people at the Council, for example. The lead County Archaeologist for York... who I learnt stuff from... I didn't have a particularly close relationship with him, but I learned a bit about him, and I learnt a bit about what he did and how it all worked. He gave me an insight into how publicly-funded archaeology works, and how ... what the job of a county archaeologist is, so that was useful.

Interviewer:

So you're saying, that particular people you networked with, opened up new opportunities and gave you insights into what being an archaeologist was all about?

Michael:

Yes. New areas of information. I think that's the thing, that was the big thing, you know, I learnt from them, absolutely, but also I did a lot of the learning then by myself, but it was these people who acted as

the trigger to get involved in these kind of areas.

Interviewer: Didn't you do some editorial work?

Michael: Yeah ... that was the 'Post Hole' the department's archaeology magazine...that was the end of second, beginning of third year. And that was interesting, so that was when I met guys on the team, who were the people that I started running ASA [Annual Student Archaeology conference] with in my final year...

Interviewer: So you worked with two people on the magazine and that led onto something quite different?

Michael: Yeah, absolutely, and I think networking goes back to this. If you look through history at people who have done well in whatever field they are, they inevitably come from groups where there are other like-minded people thinking about the same things, who [are] also enthused and want to be involved in what it is they are doing, you know. And I think that's really interesting. ..the way things work is you put a bunch of people together who are interested in the same things, who are smart, who are able to engage with it, ask interesting questions and challenge each other, and you get fantastic results. And much better than if you have someone in isolation. they can get a certain distance, but they're never going to have the same impact as if you've got lots of people bouncing ideas off each other, challenging each other, and egging each other on.

Interviewer:

who are passionate, who are enthusiastic. Who are smart enough, and engaged enough to actually push those goals further. ASA absolutely started as an idea of something, but was pushed bigger and better and more significant, as a result of the three of us all working together, there's absolutely no doubt about that. And I think had it just been one of us, it would have never been anywhere near as successful, even just two of us, I don't think it would have been as successful. So I think that is a real classic example of where a network is really valuable, and I didn't learn this in my course.

The experience was interesting in terms of understanding how student bodies and student committees and the university and things like that worked. And also it gave me an interesting insight into leadership, and how potentially how bad leaders lead, compared to good leaders. You know, I'd been lucky up to that point to have worked with some very good leaders. But there were issues around leading this project and the [post hole], and that again, was people [and their behaviours] giving me an insight into the way it works.

Interviewer: You have highlighted several times that you did things in order to gain insights about things you did not know about in order to become an archaeologist. How did you gain insights into the commercial world of archaeology?

Michael:

Yeah, the site manager, who I'd worked with on the dig I mentioned that I did at the end of my first year had some commercial work. He was looking at [hiring] some students, and I got myself and two others involved and, yeah, that was a really good experience.



I think that's the value of university a lot of the time, because you can get a group of people around you who are like-minded,

Interviewer:

So did network with you or you with him?

Michael: I'm fairly sure he made the contact. Because he just remembered us, and he was kind of like, you guys did a good job at the time, it would be good to get you back on board, kind of thing.

Interviewer: So these reflections demonstrate that you learnt the value of networking while you were at university, how have you carried what you've learnt beyond university?

Michael: I think I probably haven't, really. There's an interesting network potentially within Samaritans [where I volunteer], there's people there who kind of see things in a similar way and you can have interesting conversations with them. But I see those people on quite a sporadic basis. I think at the moment I don't really do any kind of meaningful networking.

Interviewer: Is it that because you don't feel the need to network?

Michael: No, I think it's a combination of things, I think it's partly the nature of the job that I do. For various reasons I did not try to pursue a career in archaeology. If I had I would still be using and extending my network.

My job does not really encourage me to network. It's probably the nature of a lot of commercial work. The kind of networking that I think is the most powerful, and is, in my view, what true networking is really about, is about getting like-minded people together to work on things together to push ideas forward, to push concepts forward, and to change thinking in that way. And I think when you go into a workplace environment, no-one cares about that kind of thing, unless you're researching, or unless you're developing, because actually, they just want you to get the job done..... When you're at university, you have the privilege of having the time and space to think about and get involved with all kinds of things. And I don't think you get that so much in work.

Interviewer: So is it then the more opportunities you have for interacting with like minded people, the more you are likely to network?

Michael: I think so, I think that's probably right, and I'm just thinking about it now, you know, if you think of when I was at university, you might go to the pub with some friends, and you would always end up, well, not always, but often end up discussing all kinds of things, within the field, specifically for us, archaeology. And that was really interesting. In fact, now I think about it, I think ideas like ASA probably originated in the pub. And I think a lot of great ideas start off like that. Just casual conversations with people who are like-minded. And I think when you go out into the wide world, as it were, because you don't have that concentration of people who think the same way, there are far fewer opportunities for that type of conversation. You know. None of my current contacts ... are particularly interested in the kind of things I am, aside from a few in the Samaritans' prison team [who I work with] about the absurdity that is our current prison system. So I think it is about the opportunities, but also you've got to have the will and responsibility to go and seek out those opportunities. I suppose ... and actually go and find the people. But it's not always necessarily that easy to do.



Networking Insights Provided by Michael's testimony

While Michael himself is clear that his undergraduate course provided the foundation for learning to be an archaeologist, he is also clear that much of his development as an archaeologist occurred outside his course. It was these experiences, partly self-created and partly created by others, that enabled him to explore the possibilities of what being an archaeologist might mean, and developing confidence in his own understandings and sense of identity as an archaeologist.

These explorations were fundamentally dependent on the connections he made with people who were able to provide him with insights and opportunities for learning and development beyond what he could gain through his course. Most of these people were not directly linked to his course, rather they were participants in the broader social environment and community of archaeologists associated with his university or the field more generally. These connections became relationships that were developed through close, face to face conversation and collaborative participation in meaningful activity.

It's clear that Michael believes that 'true' networking is fundamentally about learning, and accessing information and gaining personal insights through the exchange of the tacit. It would seem that some of his relationships for learning were able to lead onto further experiences for learning: experiences that could not have been anticipated. For example working on a dig organised by a postgraduate student created the opportunity to gain experience of the commercial world of archaeology. In this way the investments we make in our network of connections and the relationships we make within this network hold the potential for opportunity in the future.

Through his connections and projects Michael gained a different sort of learning experience to what he gained through his course. Through the network of people he connected with, he observed other people 'doing archaeology' and 'being archaeologists'. Through their doings and beings they shared their embodied knowledge and ways of thinking. By observing and conversing with them Michael gained insights into 'how it all worked': he learnt what being an archaeologist meant in a particular context and situation. Such understandings could not have been gained through his course.

The type of networking Michael describes - face to face, strongly relational and close to and in action, aimed at achieving something, is quite different to the technology mediated forms of networking which are highlighted in many of the articles in this magazine. For Michael, it is clear, that these sorts of networking relationships were the most useful because they enabled him to gain access to the embodied knowledge of people who were more experienced and knowledgeable than he was. The people he networked with provided him with a 'conduit' to the embodied knowledge of experts as well as the new affordances for practising and learning that he sought. His interests were deepened through the relationships he formed and the insights he gained. Some of the relationships he made gave him confidence to pursue and implement ideas that he would not have followed through by himself. In other words, his network of connections thus opened possibility for enterprise and achievement.

Michael recognises the importance of his university course in providing him not only with the basic knowledge and skills that enabled him to understand what archaeology was about, but perhaps more importantly, with the opportunities to meet and interact with people who were interested in doing archaeology. Perhaps it is this aspect of the university environment that is underestimated in the educational process. A university department, formed around a discipline, creates a social/cultural environment within which people can connect and have conversations from which ideas, activities and actions emerge. This process happens outside the educational designs and intentions of the university course but within the social/cultural spaces associated with a course.

So, if so much good leaning and development derives from the interest-drive connections that can be made while studying at university, what should universities do to encourage students to make the most of their opportunities to network? In Michael's view:

Networking should be about forging new connections with likeminded, or even not so likeminded, people. By talking to people, and exploring ideas, beliefs and assumptions together you can develop new thoughts on stances, and cement or change your views. Universities should encourage networking by encouraging or forcing students to do interdepartmental work. To meet people, form contacts, develop new relationships and explore ideas together focused on a topic or project. Students will learn the value of networking as good ideas are born. Michael

Reference

Image

1 Learning Ecologies Lifewide Magazine August 2013

http://www.sharkscope.com/images/sliders/images_social_network.png

PERSONAL LEARNING NETWORKS: AN ECOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

Norman Jackson

Learning Ecologies

I believe that learning through life is best viewed as an 'ecological' process^{1, 2, 3}. By that I mean that the characteristics of how I learn and develop in all the different contexts and situations in my everyday life, feels more like a living, emergent, organic process involving me, my purposes and my relationships with the physical, virtual and social worlds I inhabit, rather than something that I plan and engineer. I feel I, and my learning, are part of an ecosystem which I help create and maintain but do not control.

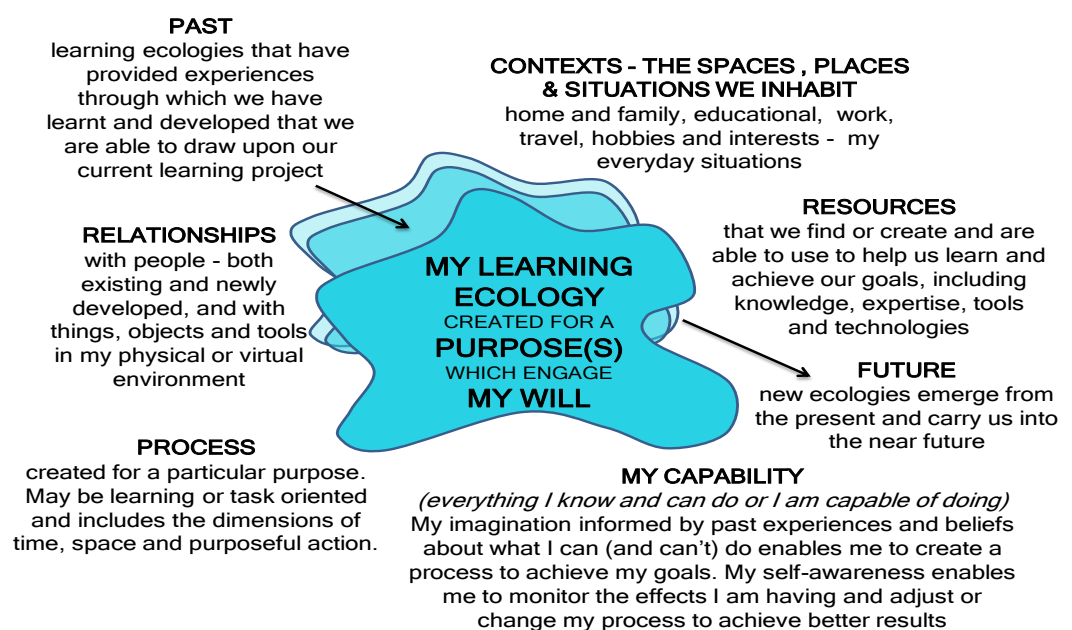


Ecosystem - the complex set of relationships and interactions among the living resources, habitats, and residents of an area for the purpose of living

Learning Ecology: the complex set of relationships we create in a particular context for a particular purpose that provide us with opportunities and resources for learning, development and achievement^{1, 2, 3}

Who I learn from or with, at any point in time, is determined by both me and them. From my perspective it involves me in trying to find people who can help me with a particular problem, inquiry or goal, and persuading them to help me. From their perspective, it involves them in sharing something of themselves—either publicly or more privately. More than likely, trying to learn from someone involves me in trying to engage them in a relationship for learning which may result in learning with them, rather than only from them. Our relationship might be mediated by communication technologies and social platforms, and/or particular contexts and circumstances. My learning ecology also includes people who I am not directly trying to involve in my learning but who nevertheless might contribute to it in unanticipated ways. There is an element of accidental connectivity and opportunism in the way that learning is encouraged to emerge.

My concept of a learning ecology is all embracing (Figure 1 right). It comprises processes and contexts, relationships, connections and networks, interactions, tools, technologies and activities that provide us with opportunities and resources for learning, development, creativity and achievement. Our PLNs are an important component of our learning ecology—they comprise the connections we make with the people we believe can help us achieve our particular goals, and beyond this perhaps, who we feel might provide emotional support and enrich our lives.



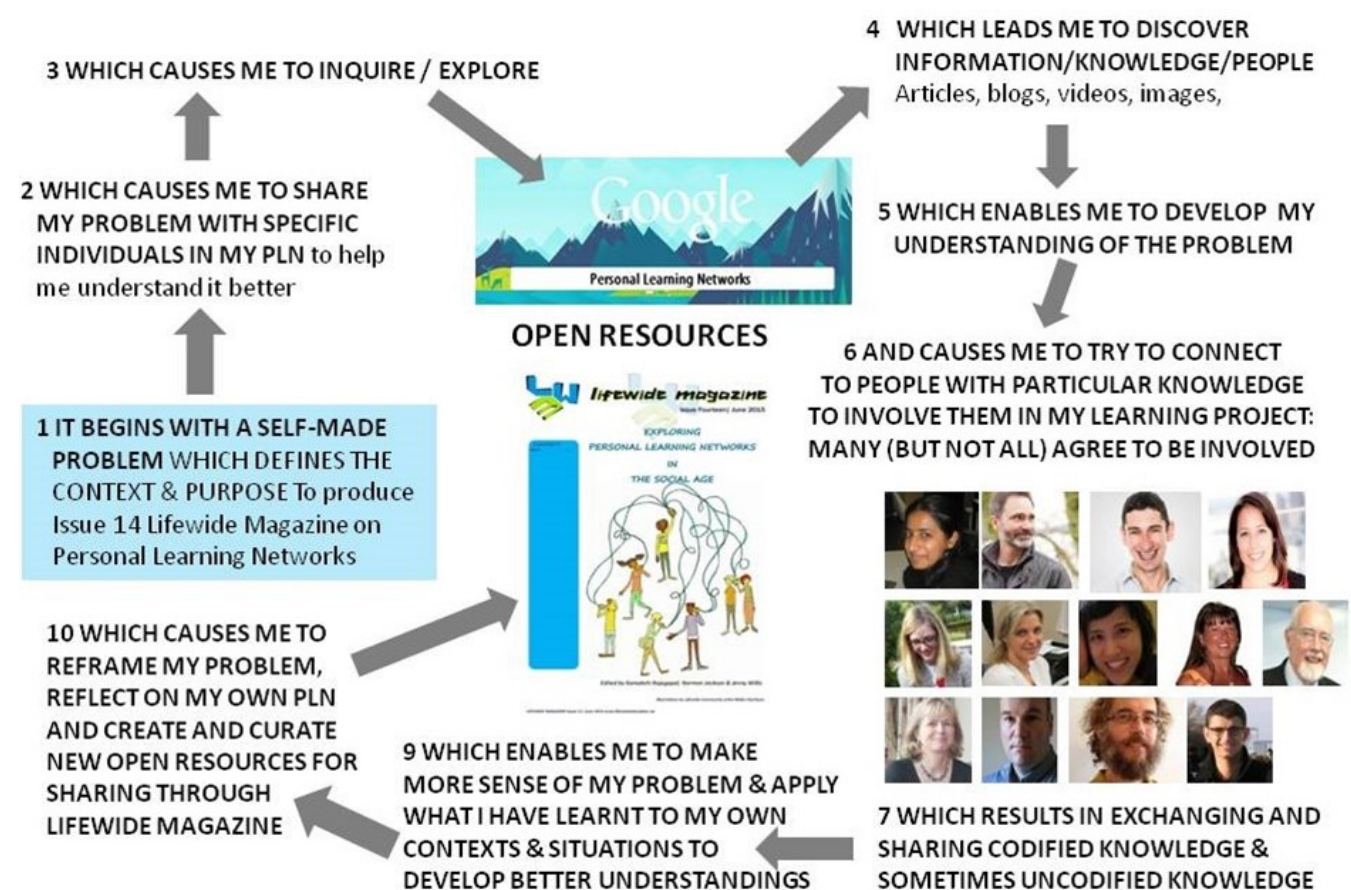
What Role Do Our PLNs Play in Our Learning Ecologies?

Maintaining the organic metaphor, PLNs are like the blood vessels in our body or the roots and capillary vessels of a tree. They provide the structure and means of connecting to others and the means of tapping into the medium and nutrients for learning - the flow of information, knowledge and wisdom within our learning ecology. They connect our ecology for learning with the ecologies developed by others for their learning.

Every time we embark on a new project that requires significant learning we intuitively begin to create a PLN with particular goals and objectives in mind. If we have inhabited a context for a while we will have established a PLN that contains a number of people and resources and tools we can readily draw upon. But if the context and or problems are unfamiliar then we will have to do a fair amount of invention or adaptation.

Making Sense of My PLN

I will illustrate the way in which my PLN developed as a process of making new connections in order to create the information flow necessary to produce this issue of Lifewide Magazine. Every issue of the magazine requires me to draw upon my existing PLN and to expand it by identifying new people with particular knowledge, expertise and interests in the topics we chose to explore. Figure 2 below illustrates the emergent and iterative process which began about 8 weeks before publication.



PLN's are often formed around problems which individuals formulate because they care about the problem or they want to achieve a particular goal. My process began with the self-made problem called, 'How do we produce a magazine on the theme of Personal Learning Networks'? With the knowledge I already had I tried to create a framing statement to explain what this issue of the magazine was about.

I shared this framing statement with my co-editor and with a few other people who I rely on to give me feedback on my ideas. On this occasion I got some useful feedback from John Cowan and in true JC form he began to elaborate some of his own thoughts. So I took the opportunity of using his 'musings' to invite him to draw these out in an article. However, on this occasion he declined - and that is the way it works isn't it?

Having overcome the hurdle called 'making a start', I was energised enough to begin searching for content that might be included. Google was my main search tool, combined with searches on twitter, google images and academia.edu. Over a couple of days I identified a number of interesting blog posts and downloaded several articles and I felt I had a 'feel' for what was readily accessible and for the key ideas we could include. Two articles in particular seemed to offer the most useful and comprehensive understandings: both were written by Kamakashi Rajagopal. As Commissioning Editor I decided to approach her to see if she would be willing to be our featured author and, if she was, to offer her the opportunity to co-edit this issue of the magazine ie to help us shape the content. I include our initial conversation to illustrate the fundamental process of engaging someone in a new learning project. The speed with which this happened reflects the energy and interest of the people involved and also the effectiveness of our communication tools.

We had a skype conversation a few days later where these initial intentions were elaborated. She sent me a copy of her thesis containing a lot of unpublished material that convinced me that she was committed to the project and willing to contribute to my PLN, at least for this learning project. In return I sent her my early thinking on PLNs and learning ecologies. Over the next few weeks we shared ideas and questions through the process of writing, editing and preparing illustrations, and in this way contributed to each others' understandings.

Lifewide Magazine a PLN Publication!

I have known for a long time that our Magazine drives Lifewide Education's continuous inquiry into the nature of lifewide learning and the continuous development of PLNs to explore and develop ideas. But with this issue I began to appreciate the Magazine as a type of PLN publication!

Network Building Process

My process was driven by the need to create a flow of information through my learning ecology. The SEEK, SENSE, SHARE model I described in an earlier article explains this process well.⁴ Information/people seeking involved two main strategies:

- 1) Searching for and finding articles that were relevant and then contacting the author to see if we could use the articles (even if they were offered under a Creative Commons licence) to gain their permission. This was usually accomplished through their blog.
- 2) Inviting individuals, most of whom I knew and who had contributed before, to share their perspectives on PLNs.

Message posted on Dr Kamakashi Rajagopal's personal website

Sent: Wednesday, 15 April 2015, 11:30

Subject: Invitation to contribute to Lifewide-Magazine

Dear Kamakshi

I have been reading some of your articles on PLN's with great interest. They have contributed greatly to my understanding. I lead a social enterprise in the UK called Lifewide Education <http://www.lifewideeducation.uk/> We produce a quarterly magazine Lifewide Magazine and each issue explores a different dimension of lifewide learning. The June issue will explore Personal Learning Networks and I was wondering whether I could persuade you to either write our main Feature on the theme of Understanding Personal Learning Networks, and / or you would be interested in being a co-editor for the issue – to help guide us in the framing and presentation of the issue. I attach a link to the magazine so you can see the format and the sorts of themes we have addressed. We have a readership of around 500.

<http://www.lifewidemagazine.co.uk/>

I very much hope that you are tempted by our invitation. Please get in touch if you like the idea.

warm regards N

Sent: Wednesday, 15 April 2015, 11:57

Subject: Invitation to contribute to Lifewide-Magazine

Dear N

Thank you very much for your invitation to contribute to your upcoming June issue of Lifewide Magazine. Although I didn't know your organisation till now, I do recognise many of the contributors and people you work with. I gladly accept both your invitation to write a feature for the issue, as well as co-editing the issue. Please do let me know about the practicalities and deadlines and such. If it works better, we can also skype to talk about these things. Hear from you soon, and thank you again for the invitation!

Best Wishes K

Sent: Wednesday, 15 April 2015, 12:18

Subject: Invitation to contribute to Lifewide Magazine

Dear K -I'm greatly impressed with the speed of your response and the graceful way you have accepted my invitation. I'm in the process of writing a framing statement for the issue and also identifying possible contributors I have identified in my searches. I will send you this later today and, if its convenient to you, perhaps we can have a discussion on skype tomorrow. What time would suit you for a skype chat??

warm regards N

In finding people to contribute, my main motives for incorporating them into my PLN were 1) their expertise/knowledge that was relevant to the topic 2) the diversity of perspectives they could bring to the exploration. Two of the 22 reasons cited in Kamakshi's article⁽⁴⁾. But I also sought people who were not expert (see below) in order to gain understanding about the way theoretical ideas related to their real worlds (to increase the diversity of perspectives).

I encountered four types of response to my invitation:

- 1 The person responded and gave me their permission to include their article often citing that it was published under a Creative Commons licence.
- 2 The person responded and declined the opportunity to participate, or in one case - an agent informed me they required a fee for participation.
- 3 The person did not respond even after several attempts to contact them.
- 4 The person responded in such a way as to open up the possibility for conversation and engagement.

The way the person responded held the potential for making the desired contribution to my learning project and/or moving beyond my expectations opening up new possibilities. I contacted 13 individuals using the first two strategies of whom 8 agreed to contribute, 1 person declined to be involved, another indicated they would consider involvement for a fee, and 3 people did not respond to my inquiries. Four people responded with enthusiasm and the interactions that ensued held the most potential for learning and were the most satisfying and mutually beneficial.

I also involved a group of higher education professionals participating in a workshop I was running, in a questionnaire-based survey and discussion. The information I gained through the responses to this survey helped me refine my thinking and develop the questionnaire for a larger scale survey. Through the on-line questionnaire I sought to involve many more people who were part of Lifewide Education's list of subscribers, or who belonged to the Higher Education Teaching and Learning and Higher Education Academy Groups on Linked-In. Their responses are summarised in Jenny Willis' article⁸

Reflections on My PLN

As the leader of this learning project, I had a purpose and a sense of what I wanted to achieve and I see the development of my PLN as the means for achieving this goal.

At the start my vision of the outcome is a bit vague but it becomes clearer as I engage with the problem and resources and learning gained through my PLN emerge and shape my thinking.

My vision, combined with my overall commitment to achieving it, provides the motivation to make me do the things I do in order to create the magazine. There has to be both an objective (to produce the magazine) and a deeper purpose (to extend understandings about lifewide learning and education) to ensure that I dedicate the necessary time and effort to the enterprise of developing a PLN. PLN formation (like my learning ecology), is thus driven by proximal and more distal goals. I have learnt over many years of working collaboratively not to be afraid of having a go at trying to involve people in my learning projects. But I'm also aware that the background research you do into their own contexts and interests, and the way you formulate and present the proposition for involvement is crucial to securing their involvement.

My PLN was developed through six practical strategies:

- 1) *Google-based searches for relevant information.* This information not only introduced me to research in the field but also a range of perspectives and dimensions on the topic.
- 2) Searches on twitter using #PLN #PersonalLearningNetworks this introduced me to some people and ideas that I did not know about.
- 3) Commissioned articles. I approached four individuals with a proposition to write an article.
- 4) The adaptation of a workshop to enable me to explore with a group some of the dimensions of PLN - partly aided by an on-line questionnaire.
- 5) Ad hoc and structured conversations with a number of people who helped me understand the idea of PLNs from their perspectives.
- 6) An open invitation to the members of our community to complete an on-line survey about PLNs.



As the orchestrator of my PLN, my role was not only to SEEK information that was relevant to the topic and context but to FILTER and make SENSE of the information - to connect, select, interpret, illustrate and present these different sources of knowledge to create the Magazine which is our vehicle for curating and sharing ideas. Harold Jarche's model of information flow⁷ which I discovered through this process, gave me with a conceptual tool that I found helpful in explaining the process.

A small number of people I approached declined to be involved either explicitly or passively by inaction. I tried several times to engage these people by reframing my invitation, but ultimately it was clear to me that they did not want to be involved on this occasion. The reality of trying to form a PLN is that not everyone who is invited wants to be involved or has the time to be involved.

Undoubtedly, as the perpetrator of my own PLN, I am the main beneficiary of the learning and relationships that flow from the process but I hope that the products of the PLN (the Magazine) will provide a useful resource to the PLNs of the people who seek and find the products of our work.

I am very grateful to everyone who contributed to my PLN ,influenced my thinking and provided content for this magazine.

1 Jackson, N. J. (2013a) The Concept of Learning Ecologies, in N. J. Jackson and G.B. Cooper (eds) *Lifewide Learning, Education and Personal Development E-book* Chapter A5 available on-line at <http://www.lifewideebook.co.uk/conceptual.html>

2 Jackson, N. J. (2013b) Learning Ecology Narratives, in N. J. Jackson and G. B. Cooper (eds) *Lifewide Learning, Education and Personal Development E-book* Chapter C4 available on line at: <http://www.lifewideebook.co.uk/research.html>

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4 Jackson, N. J. (2015) Seek, Sense Share: Understanding the flow of information through my PLN Lifewide Magazine June 2015 <http://www.lifewidemagazine.co.uk/>

5 Rajagopal, K. (2015a) Understanding Personal Learning Networks Lifewide Magazine June 2015 <http://www.lifewidemagazine.co.uk/>

6 Rajagopal, K. (2015b) Participating in Networks Designed by Others: another dimension of PLNs Lifewide Magazine June 2015 <http://www.lifewidemagazine.co.uk/>

7 Jarcho H, (2014) The Seek > Sense > Share Framework [Inside Learning Technologies](http://jarcho.com/2014/02/the-seek-sense-share-framework/) January 2014, *Posted Monday, 10 February 22 014* <http://jarcho.com/2014/02/the-seek-sense-share-framework/>

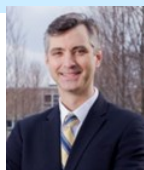
8 Willis, J. (2015) What does Personal Learning Network Mean to You?: A Survey Lifewide Magazine June 2015 <http://www.lifewidemagazine.co.uk/>

Image: http://www.eschoolnews.com/files/2015/03/shutterstock_156399698.jpg



HELPING STUDENTS DEVELOP PERSONAL LEARNING NETWORKS

Bernard Bull



Bernard is Assistant Vice President of Academics & Associate Professor of Education at Concordia University Wisconsin.

A student's personal learning network is a rich and ever-growing series of connections with people, resources, and communities around the world...connections that allow them to grow in knowledge, skill, ability and perspective. What if we spent more time thinking about the networks that students are building as they go through their schooling years? What if we made the building of such a network a central part of the curriculum, inviting students to keep a log or journal of their growing network, and how this network is empowering them to learn, how it is expanding their knowledge and perspective? How are they building a meaningful network? This would genuinely turn schools into places of fishing lessons. Students can interview people around the world, tutor and be tutored, take part in formal and informal learning communities, take part in Twitter chats and Hangouts, learn from and engage in the blogosphere, experience the power of working on a meaningful project in a distributed/virtual team, participate in a massive open online course (or design and teach one), share resources through social bookmarking and other technologies, host and take part in webinars, and build new online and blended learning communities around topics of personal value, need, and interest. Over time, the students may not only build a personal learning network, but also venture into starting their own personal teaching networks, being agents of change and positive influence in the digital world and beyond.

Practical First Steps

1) Introduce students to the idea of a personal learning network and have them create a map of that network using their favourite mind mapping tool. If you have one, share your PLN as an example. Be sure to spend time on the “why” of a PLN. Then invite students to add to and refine this network over the year.

2) Set aside time for PLN Show and Tell – This is simply a time where students display the visual of their network to others, explaining how they use it and how it helps them. On occasion, have students explain what is new in their network, how it was added and how it helps them. This provides a wonderful opportunity for peer-to-peer learning.

3) Create simple challenges where learners find a problem, try to solve it and periodically report back to the group. They will build and leverage their network to solve the problem. Along the way, they will not only find potential solutions, but they will experience the power of connected learning.

4) If you are working with younger students, consider building a class PLN, where you map it out on the wall, and you collectively add to it throughout the year through Skype sessions, Google Hangouts and other connections with people and groups around the world. When you face a new challenge as a class, ask the students, “Is there anything in our PLN that could help us with this? Do we need to expend or expand our PLN in some way?”



5) Find places in your course(s) where you can edge one or more activities a bit closer to the self-directed learning side of things. Invite students to use their personal learning networks to find and achieve learning goals.

Acknowledgement

This is an extract from a post made on November 22, 2013 by Bernard Bull @bdean1000

You can read the original article at:

<http://etale.org/main/2013/11/22/helping-students-develop-personal-learning-networks/>

Image credit

<http://www.leaditmagazine.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/flipping-out-janesville-620x330.jpg>

A FEW CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Kamakshi Rajagopal

When Norman and Jenny invited me to co-edit this special issue on Personal Learning Networks, I immediately agreed as it is a topic that I am very enthusiastic about.

This issue of Lifewide Magazine has turned out to be an interesting collection of articles on the topic of Personal Learning Networks and networked learning in general. In this short commentary, I would like to reflect on a couple of issues of personal learning networks that have come to the fore in this issue and on my views of where the future of personal learning networks can take us.

Firstly, the articles in this issue deal with social networks, irrespective of how they are facilitated: in face-to-face conversation or through digital means. This is a remarkable point as up to a couple of years ago, the overriding sentiment was that digital interactions and digitally facilitated networks are somehow inherently different from the “real” ones, which happen in face-to-face contact. The collection and diversity of the articles however shows that the most important aspect of the personal learning networks are not how they are facilitated but rather, their composition and the purpose of their very existence. This evolution has allowed researchers to go beyond the mere technical aspects of networks (such as Twitter networks being different from blog-based networks etc.) and focus on the types of relationships within personal learning networks. Concepts such as “strong ties” and “weak ties” can be scrutinized in more detail and questions can be asked on the modalities of weak ties and the affordances of the methods of interaction. This is picked up in the article of Tanya Lau, whose forthcoming work looks very interesting.

Secondly, another central issue that is highlighted in several articles in this issue is the driving force behind personal learning networks. The value it offers to the individual learner is expressed several times, but also the intentionality with which the learner approaches their network is emphasized. At the same time, the occurrence of serendipitous interactions and knowledge exchange is also valued.

In my opinion, this underlying tension between the crafting of a personal learning network or environment and the exploring of such a network is nicely captured in the concept of the personal learning ecology described by Norman Jackson. A learner may choose and construct the environment they want to learn in, including the people they want to involve in their learning, but once created, this environment becomes an ecology, that evolves in different directions out of the control of the learner. This tension between crafting the personal

learning environment and exploring the personal learning ecology should be a focus for further research.

The concept of personal learning networks has evolved significantly over the past years, where learners have become much more aware of the opportunities that their networks can give them. The underlying drivers for networked learning are becoming more important than ever in the current, constantly changing educational environment.

Personal learning networks that are built during stints of higher education can be the foundation for future learning opportunities and career development, as illustrated by the personal story of Michael Tomlinson.

As mainstream education providers also invest in networked learning through Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) as a way to extend their reach, learners will need to fall back on their competencies to build appropriate personal learning networks and environments to support their learning and development. They need to (be guided to) become advanced learners, who can take up several roles in the educational context. A learner should be a valuable *peer*, who can give suitable feedback to fellow learners. A learner should be able to develop expertise in a topic, when required. And a learner should be able to recognize expertise in others and be able to involve them in her own learning practice in appropriate roles. A learner should also be able to use the tools and instruments available to reach out to others, but also be aware of the limitations imposed on their interaction by the use of a particular mode of communication. These tools and instruments are very effective in seeking out relevant contacts, but they also go far in constructing the digital environment around a learner (Sie, Berlanga, Rajagopal, Pannekeet, Drachsler, Fazeli & Sloep, 2012). An advanced networked learner should realize the tinted glasses through which they see their personal networked world, and be able to change its construction when necessary.

This gives a new challenge to traditional education institutions, to guide their students to be able to function in a networked learning environment.

I hope you will enjoy this issue as much as I did in working on it with Norman and Jenny, and that you are inspired to continue your explorations of your personal learning networks.

Sie, R., Berlanga, A., Rajagopal, K., Pannekeet, K., Drachsler, H., Fazeli, S., & Sloep, P. (2012). Social tools for networked learning: Current and future research directions.

Lifewide Education Team News

Melissa Shaw has now joined the team. Melissa has had a long career in higher education, secondary education, local authority, an educational and national charity, and volunteering in educational, charity and health settings. She is particularly interested in career mentoring and coaching to help people navigate career-long development and continuing employability. Her wealth of experience and enthusiasm for helping people develop themselves will be great assets for our lifewide learning enterprise.

Lifewide Education Team June 2015



Norman Jackson
Founder & Leader



Jenny Willis, Magazine
Editor & Researcher



Russ Law
School Education



Brian Cooper
e-book Editor



Prof. Ronald Barnett



Sarah Jeffries Watts
HE Skills Awards &
Careers Education



Vicky Mann
HE Skills Awards &
Careers Education



Charlotte Betts
Careers & Skills
Education



Chrissi Nerantzi
Academic Developer



Professor Lorraine
Stefani - Leadership



Yalda Tomlinson
undergraduate student



Sarah Campbell
postgraduate student



Navid Tomlinson
Technology Support



Melissa Shaw
Coaching, Mentoring
Volunteering



Kiboko Hachiyon-
Illustrator



Prof. John Cowan
Honorary Fellow & Mentor

NEWS & EVENTS

This magazine is for the community of people involved in supporting students' learning and development through all their life experiences. If you would like share your activities please send your article to Jenny Willis, Executive Editor, jjenny@blueyonder.co.uk

DEVELOPING A HOLISTIC SKILLS FRAMEWORK



Lifewide Education Team member Charlotte Betts shares the work she is doing at Goldsmiths.

As a Skills Developer at Goldsmiths Careers Service I am undertaking a research process to inform the development of a new skills framework for Goldsmiths students. The framework will support Goldsmiths' commitment to the learning experience in all aspects: academic, personal, social and professional. As a member of the Lifewide Education team I have a real interest in this type of holistic, lifewide approach, offering opportunities for students to develop their skills for study and beyond. The Goldsmiths skills initiative will join up areas of academic study skills, professional practice, co-curricular activities and enterprise activities.

Goldsmiths Careers Service have recently launched a new publication ***The Frame*** to share some of this work and present staff and student perspectives on skills development. The first issue explores academic study skills and features an article on Self-Regulation by Norman Jackson. The issue is available online at: http://issuu.com/theframe/docs/the_frame_issue_1/1



The Autumn issue of ***The Frame*** will focus on the wide variety of co- and extra-curricular activities students are involved in alongside their studies including volunteering, activity in sports and societies, mentoring and ambassador roles. The issue will explore how these experiences enable learners to develop their personal and professional capabilities and how the HEAR and Gold Award can support this process.

I welcome your feedback on our Magazine. Charlotte Betts, Skills Developer, Goldsmiths



EXPLORING THE RELEVANCE OF LEARNING ECOLOGIES FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

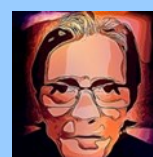
Knowing that Lifewide Education is keen to help university staff explore the idea of lifewide learning for themselves, we invited Professor Norman Jackson to facilitate a workshop at the University of Derby on the theme of the 'Ecology of Learning, Personal and Professional Development'. The session introduced and explored a series of concepts and ideas relating to learning ecologies and the lifewide and networked nature of learning and development activity.

Practical workshop activity involved participants in considering and reflection upon their individual learning journeys through life and identifying significant experiences, events and opportunities that have influenced their personal and professional development. Recognising the importance of both positive and negative experiences, and of anticipated and unanticipated events, delegates developed graphical representations of their individual learning journeys in small groups and captured key points in short video presentations.

The workshop was significant and valuable in several key respects. Firstly, the focus on individual experiences immediately challenged the common separation of 'personal' and 'professional' and framed a more holistic approach to reflection. Delegates developed extremely candid and open descriptions of their personal learning journeys highlighting how effective connection of knowledge and experience is key to the development of insight and new ideas. Secondly, the design of the workshop activity demonstrated for those involved the significant value of communication in developing new understanding. Distilling key points of often long careers into a narrative structure of important events and experiences, the simple use of an easy to use camera to record the narratives created a sense of performance, and developed a climax to the narrative sharing process. Finally, the transferability of concepts and ideas in the workshop was immediately apparent. Academic colleagues recognised value in the activity for structuring approaches to personal tutoring, colleagues in the careers and employability team identified potential for the model in terms of new development activities, and those involved in administrative support and quality enhancement expressed interest in the process from a staff development and team building perspective.

That educational systems can have the tendency to become somewhat compartmentalised and disaggregated is clear. The value for learning, personal and professional development of combining everything you know with everything you know was an important and valuable message.

Chris Wilson is Senior Lead in Learning Enhancement, in the Department of Learning Enhancement & Senior Lecturer in Music at the University of Derby





PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT ACTIVITIES

One of our core purposes is to support the further development of practices that encourage, support and recognise a lifewide approach to students' learning, development and achievement.

We have successfully supported the professional development of higher education teachers in universities in the UK and overseas.



Our aim is to encourage and support the development of curriculum designs and teaching and learning practices that encourage and enable learners to discover their purposes and recognise how, when and why they are learning and developing in all the situations and contexts that make up their life.

Our contributions are informed by an ongoing programme of research and scholarship.

We offer:

Awareness raising presentations on the concept and practice of lifewide learning and personal development

Facilitated workshops - 2 hour, half day or whole day aimed at turning ideas in to practice.



Consultancy and Professional Development Programmes - customised for clients

Our presentations and workshops are informed by the views of participants gained through pre-event surveys so that they can appreciate the relevance and significance of the knowledge being used.



Enquiries:

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07810462403

LIFEWIDE EDUCATION & CREATIVITY IN LIMERICK

Lifewide Education was invited to facilitate the Scholarly Innovation and Creativity module, on the University of Limerick's, Specialist Diploma in Teaching, Learning and Scholarship programme. The interesting thing is that the module focuses on everyday creativity and therefore connects in a fundamental way to concepts of lifewide learning and ecologies for learning, development and achievement.



UNIVERSITY of LIMERICK
OULSCOTT LIMERICK



The module lasts a day and half and it's something I enjoy doing. My approach is to try to build and facilitate an ecology in which we can all share our perspectives and understandings of creativity in our everyday life and our experiences of encouraging students to use and develop their own creativity.

The first half of my process introduces the core concepts of lifewide learning and learning ecologies and provides a set of conceptual tools for understanding the meanings of personal creativity. Personal beliefs and understandings are shared and revealed through a pre-course questionnaire and through the practical activities and discussions undertaken during the course.



The second half of the course involves a collaborative design thinking exercise in which participants are encouraged to use their imaginations to play with ideas to create novel curriculum designs and learning experiences. The final challenge is for participants to come up with their own innovative design and animate their designs through a poster and filmed presentation to the whole group.

I have discovered that this combination of activities under the pressure of a fairly tight time frame really does lead to lots of imaginative ideas and creative designs. The idea that learning and creativity can be viewed from a lifewide and ecological perspective is really liberating for most faculty. I use the post-course assignment to encourage participants to consolidate and refine their ideas and the feedback I receive suggests that quite a few participants are intending to try to implement their ideas. My intention is to follow up in six months to see how many participants try to bring their ideas into practical existence.

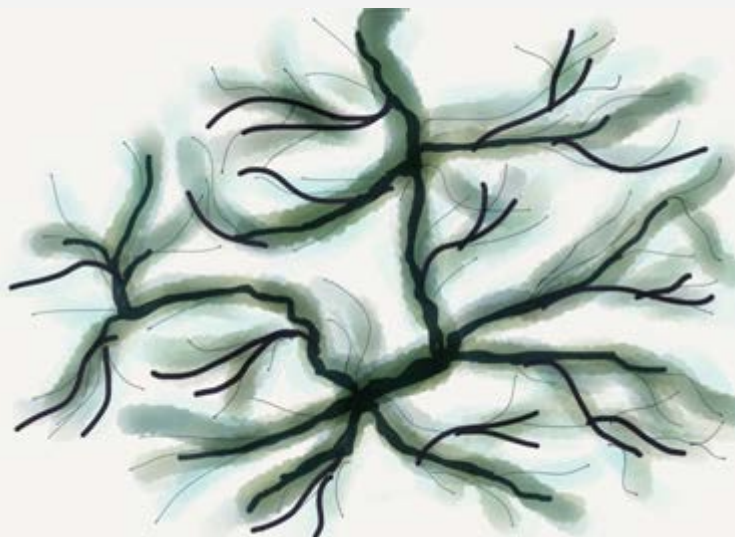


Norman Jackson

Lifewide Magazine Issue 15

EXPLORING RHIZOMATIC LEARNING

Personal Learning Networks focus attention on individual's power to create new connections in their life in order to learn. This capacity relates very well to the biological metaphor of a rhizome, likening the process of learning to the ways in which the roots of a plant spread laterally to seek, find and extract nutrients from the soil to sustain its growth. By analogy, an individual's connections reach out and connect to the sets of connections that others have made. Seen as a model for the social construction and co-creation of knowledge, rhizomatic processes emphasise the interconnectedness of ideas as well as boundless exploration across many perspectives, contexts and situations. Exploring the idea of rhizomatic learning seems a natural extension to our exploration of PLNs.



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**Contributions are welcome - please contact the Commissioning Editor
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