CONNECTING TO THE LIS ONLINE COMMUNITY: A NEW INFORMATION PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPING A PERSONAL LEARNING NETWORK

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ABSTRACT

Social networking tools and Web 2.0 technologies provide opportunities for library and information science (LIS) professionals to connect and learn from one another by developing a Personal Learning Network (PLN). As a new information professional, immersing into the online LIS community can appear daunting at first. The purpose of this paper is to reflect upon and share my learning experiences from the beginning stages of developing my own PLN. A methodical approach was taken, which includes a literature review of supporting concepts; using statistical analysis of PLN growth and participation; seeking insights, ideas and opinions via Twitter, and documenting my learning and development with reflective writing practices.

The value gained from creating connections and participating in the online LIS community and my PLN has resulted in it becoming an integral part in planning professional development activities, developing a current awareness of key issues and trends and informing a sense of professional identity. Continued maintenance and effective management of my PLN will not only prompt constant knowledge and skills development but also enable the sharing and building of best practices with other information professionals. Where the focus of this paper is on demonstrating a PLN "in action", the aim is to provide insight and guidance to other new information professionals.

1. INTRODUCTION

Library and information science (LIS) professionals have the opportunity to benefit from the current technological environment by using Web 2.0 tools and technologies to form connections with people, ideas and knowledge. Establishing a personal learning network is an approach to meet constantly evolving professional goals, learning needs and objectives. There is literally an abundance of advice in the blogosphere about which tools and applications are most common and best to use to 'set up' a PLN, but not how to use them. Little has been reported on a person's *experiences* in growing and maintaining a PLN. Prescribing PLN tools is not the focus for this paper, nor is providing etiquette

guidelines for using tools such as Twitter and blogs. Discussion includes strategies used for immersion and building a PLN; how my PLN has grown; approaches to 'joining the conversation' and contributing to the network and outline key outcomes and value gained from PLN learning opportunities. Providing insight into my own learning experiences with reflection and analysis aims to assist other new LIS professionals to activate connections with the online LIS community.

1.1. Methodology

The approach taken was methodological and structured, using myself as the focal point. A literature review of supporting concepts was conducted to provide theoretical grounding. Participation in the massive open online course (MOOC) "Connectivism and Connective Knowledge" also contributed to an understanding of Connectivism and network theory, which resulted in their application to the PLN context. One of the goals for this study was to deliver a systematic and partially objective view on PLN development by involving basic statistical analysis. Qualitative components of the research included key findings from the literature review and reflections on personal learning experiences documented on my blog called 'Flight Path'.

2. OVERVIEW OF KEY CONCEPTS

Amongst the literature, definitions for a 'personal learning network' vary, the discrepancies primarily stemming from individual experiences and application of the concept. Given the personal nature of how a personal learning network is constructed, it is not unreasonable to be forgiving of a lack of agreement on a definition. Incorporating common characteristics from definitions found in the literature, a personal learning network (PLN) can be defined as a group of people with whom you connect to interact and exchange information and resources; share knowledge, experience and ideas, collectively creating an informed guide to professional development opportunities and continual learning (Klingensmith 2009, Berge and McElvaney 2009 & Tobin 1998).

The mechanical aspects and dynamics of a PLN are generally not addressed in the literature. This is where the learning theory of "connectivism" supports the PLN concept in describing how connections are formed and nurtured, whether that be information, knowledge, ideas or people. Within the context of a PLN, connectivism means that knowledge is distributed across a "network of connections" and our knowledge "is a set of connections formed by actions and experience" (Downes 2007, February 3). Connectivism recognises the impact of technology on our ability and ways in which we learn. Developing the ability to "construct and traverse these networks of connections" is referred to as the learning process (Downes 2007, February 3).

3. ESTABLISHING A PLN - TO CONNECT, OR NOT TO CONNECT?

3.1. Drivers and Motivators

Keeping up to date with the latest technologies - tools, applications and resources, as well as key LIS issues and trends, is a responsibility to be readily accepted and embraced by information professionals. Social and technological drivers, such as online social networking, Web 2.0 and rapid

increases in the amount of information available, create an environment which requires a different approach to learning (Siemens 2005, 1). Technology is both a driver and enabler of increased learning opportunities (Warlick 2009, p. 13).

Each individual's professional development needs will vary according to skill set, level of expertise and career stage; one size doesn't fit all (Bauer 2010, p. 38). According to Bauer (2010), extended professional development, as opposed to short term activities, such as workshops, seminars, etc, is more beneficial and has greater impact when it is ongoing, with time and effort regularly invested (Bauer 2010, p. 38). Establishing and maintaining a PLN addresses the need for committing to career-long skill set updating and expansion not only in order to thrive in a digital age, but also to ensure continued employability.

3.2. Purpose of a PLN

The purpose for establishing, developing and maintaining a PLN is user-centric and is solely dependent on the individual's learning and professional development needs, goals and plans. A PLN present opportunities to extend learning beyond formal means through solving problems; exploring and reconciling ideas; sharing advice and experiences, prompting increased reflection and enabling the individual to experience professional growth as part of a collaborative network (Wentworth Institute of Technology n.d & Couros 2010, p. 110). The people (and the information resources they provide) who the individual is connected in the PLN provide the parameters which guide learning - activities, expectations and outcomes (Tobin 1998). Through active engagement with, and strategic management of a PLN, the LIS professional can develop "authentic and sustainable knowledge networks" to ensure learning needs are met (Couros 2010, p. 110).

3.3. Reflecting on a beginner's start

Admittedly, not even 12 months ago I was not enthusiastic about entering the online LIS community. The prospect of conversing and sharing ideas with people I didn't know, using Web 2.0 tools and applications, appeared very daunting and overwhelming. Prior to being introduced to the PLN concept, I thought I had little need to use its enabling technologies, both as a professional and in my work role in the aviation industry.

It was July 2010 when I first learnt of the PLN concept and its associated Web 2.0 tools, from a LIS lecturer at Queensland University of Technology (QUT). Until that time, I had little to no experience or exposure to such tools, nor an understanding of the benefits of a collaborative learning environment. The study unit, which involved the use of a PLN amongst peers, both exposed my comfort levels with technology as well as built a foundation for increasing confidence in the online space. A profound fear of the unknown was my biggest barrier. However, I found that all I needed was a little push, some encouragement and guidance from a mentor to show me the way.

4. IMMERSING INTO THE LIS COMMUNITY - BUILDING A PLN

4.1. Tools and Technologies

The PLN concept is often identified interchangeably as a personal learning environment (PLE). It is important to distinguish between the two concepts separately; the vital distinction being the people,

the 'human' component, to understand the *purpose* of using tools to build, maintain and manage a PLN. Web 2.0 applications provide a way to find and connect with others and generate own content; to externalise thoughts, ideas and reflection, which is an integral part of a functioning PLN (Guhlin n.d). Tools create "spaces" for interacting and communicating with a PLN. The tools listed below are those currently used to connect and communicate with my PLN.

Tool	Purpose
Microblogging - Twitter	Main channel for communication with members of my PLN; key source for receiving and giving advice and encouragement, links to resources and information.
Blogging - Wordpress	Blogging is a way to contribute to my PLN by sharing thoughts, reflections and ideas.
RSS Aggregator - Google Reader	Blogs which I regularly read and comment on are filtered to this one location for easy access.

Table 1: PLN Tools

There are other tools which have the potential (and ones I'd like) to be utilised to a greater extent in the future. However these tools may only be used for project specific purposes. These tools include: -
• Social bookmarking - Diigo
• Research and collaboration - Mendeley
• Wikis - Wikispaces, pbworks

Choosing which tools to use and setting up was the easy task, and this is where a lot of the literature and discussion ceases. The challenge from this point was to build confidence in using the tools and devise strategies and personal rules for participating in the online LIS community.

4.2. Strategies for Immersion
Interactions with those in my founding PLN, using Twitter, inspired the formulation of strategies and approaches to further immerse into the online LIS community. Using Twitter was my main communication tool, building confidence and increasing comfort levels were the initial focus. I started following people who I had met in real life; who were local LIS professionals and students, and those who were recommended to me by those more experienced in the online "conversation", such as leaders and influences in the online LIS community and professional field.

While just observing 'the conversation' was enough to begin with, a common way to start gaining a visible presence in the PLN is to re-tweet an interesting link to an article or someone else's comment (Ferguson 2010, p. 14). As a big believer in 'the small things', I found offering support and providing encouragement to others was a more natural progression to 'joining in'. Helping out members of my PLN has enabled me to reach out and connect with peers. Also a receiver of encouragement, for which I am thankful for especially when I first started blogging, has made the difference in further welcoming me to the online community. This 'two-way' encouragement or 'paying it forward' has seen

my participation in conversation increase, as well as helped strengthen connections to people in the network.

4.3. Growth of the PLN

The key input into building and growing a PLN is participating in conversation. Building a PLN does not always mean growth in numbers. This tends to be only in the early stages of establishing connections, according to Utecht's (2008) stages of PLN adoption - immersion, evaluation, 'know it all', perspective and balance. Throughout the progression from immersion to gaining 'perspective', it is intended my focus will shift from growth to nurturing and building strength in the relationships with members of my PLN (experiences in initial conversation have alluded to this).

From the small sample of data collected, a relationship between conversation and PLN growth is not yet evident. The most amounts of tweets for a fortnight did not influence the number of followers gained. Similarly, commenting on blogs did not result in acquiring a higher than average number of followers. However, in the period of the most blog comments appeared to have coincided with higher conversation activity. The number of blog subscriptions have not risen nor fallen by large amounts over the sampled time period. This indicates that when 'setting up' a PLN decisions are made quickly about whom and what to read on a regular basis. Most recent data show the number of blog subscriptions added have decreased, and even seen a reduction in the total number of blog subscriptions. Tuning focus with regards to availability and professional interests explain these movements. Overall, the number of followers and people followed continue to increase over time, with the number of followers gained rising per fortnight. It is difficult to suggest if this is likely to continue or begin to plateau as the focus shifts from growing connections to strengthening relationships.

5. PARTICIPATING IN "THE CONVERSATION" - ENGAGING WITH THE PLN

Actively participating in a PLN is a 'two-way street'; PLNs are reciprocal in nature (Rheingold 2010). Therefore, contributing to the PLN must be worthwhile, for both the individual and the network. I don't tend to comment on a blog post for the sake of being seen or noticed. I prefer to demonstrate my thought process, consideration and engagement with the author's content as a sign of respect for their work. Involving reflective practices not only benefits learning and development as an individual, but also the network. Collaborative learning and development of collective 'know how' involves sharing new connections between ideas and knowledge (Attwell 2010, p. 5).

Ways of using and engaging with a PLN appear endless. Information, learning and technology appear central to PLN interactivity, as well as sharing and collaborative functionality. What is typically found in a PLN are solutions, questions and answers, suggestions, learning opportunities, current events, resources and discussion (Boss 2008, August 13 and Warlick 2009, p. 13). PLNs are filters for worthwhile content. When a link to an article or resource is passed around a PLN, it's an indication of the item's relevance, importance and/or sometimes authority. PLNs are opportunities to contribute to collaborative solutions, access a range of opinions and ideas about key trends and issues, to learn from leaders and experts in a specific field, and about new technologies and best practices

(Wentworth Institute of Technology n.d). Engagement with a PLN is only limited by the individual's enthusiasm for involvement and learning goals.

6. CONSTANT TUNING - MANAGING AND MAINTAINING A PLN

Key activities involved in maintaining a successful network are described by Rheingold (2009, May 11) as 'tuning' and 'feeding'. Rheingold's (2009, May 11) 'mix' for following (tuning) and tweeting (feeding) has both inspired and further informed my approach to how I can gain (and give) the most to my PLN. Since confidence has increased, a 'healthy mix' of people has started to emerge in my following list, a goal I continue to aim for. This mix shall 'cast the net' wider, look outside 'library world' to include people who may work in different sectors and information environments; those who work in varying degrees of information professional roles; people with various areas and levels of expertise, and those aligned with a range of professional interests. I have realised its okay to step outside and bring diverse opinions and ideas into my PLN. Rheingold's (2009, May 11) tips were found to be not limited to Twitter, but also applicable to interactions in the blogosphere. Regular assessment of professional interests and career/expertise stages will ensure a continually finely tuned network.

Measuring a successful PLN will always be subjective, in some way, to an individual's circumstances; however the principles of connectivism (Siemens 2005), each linked to learning processes, may guide the development of an effective one. "Diversity in opinions; increasing capacity to know more (by seeing and creating connections between ideas and concepts); nurturing and maintaining connections, and maintaining currency (accurate and up to date knowledge) as the intent of all learning activities", can all be considered as characteristics of a sustainable network (Siemens 2005, p. 5).

7. A CONTINUAL LEARNING PROCESS - OUTCOMES AND BENEFITS OF A PLN

The value derived from a PLN has benefited professional development on all angles. The wealth and variety of information filtered through a PLN have fed into professional development activities planning; setting skills, knowledge and career objectives, and activated a need to constantly acquire current awareness of issues and trends. A PLN has enabled identification of knowledge and skill gaps which help determine learning needs and prompt appropriate action (Bennett and Weibrands 2010, p. 3).
As a new information professional, establishing a PLN has started to inform, direct and shape a sense of professional identity. Far from having a professional 'signature', one of the most valuable lessons experienced from interacting with my PLN has been learning more each day about the mark I may potentially make on the LIS profession in the future.

Being the only information professional in a unique setting such as an Engineering Technical Library in the aviation industry, isolation is felt from time to time. Connecting with my PLN throughout the day reminds me of the like-minded people I have around to bounce ideas, seek and give support and advice, and simply being part of one, big cheerleading squad. It's not only the individual who benefits

and learns, the network learns together, and therefore the PLN is a giant 'sandpit' for all those involved in self-directed and self-paced, community-driven learning and development.

8. CONCLUSION

Immersing into the online LIS community can be daunting at first, but it's safe to say there is no shortage of people willing to lend a hand and encourage newcomers. There is little to be afraid of for new information professionals considering a PLN approach to life-long learning and professional development. Tools and enabling technologies provide spaces for the generation of collaborative solutions, best practices and lending (and receiving) support. With interaction, an understanding of identity and learning needs emerge, which enhances the ability to continually tune professional development plans and activities.

Further exploration of the PLN concept in practice will benefit from an incorporation of network theory and connectivism, creating an integrated theoretical framework for network analysis and measuring PLN effectiveness. This study has contributed to establishing benchmarks and elements for PLN engagement and self-evaluation. What has become clear is instigating a PLN approach to addressing career-long professional development and learning needs is a necessary commitment for the new information professional, now and beyond.

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