

# Personal learning networks

## Collective intelligence and knowledge communities in the digital age



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In early 2015 I read an article by Nicole Cooke, which advocated the use of online personal learning networks (PLN) for librarians and information workers (Cooke, 2012). The article highlighted the benefits of the PLN as a tool to help the information practitioner to remain in touch with the changing nature of libraries, learning, technology and data management in the age of social media. For some years, an idea was hovering in the ether about developing instructional materials for creating a PLN. When the Scottish Library and Information Council's Innovation and Development Fund call was issued in late 2014, this seemed an ideal time to turn the idea into reality for information and library workers.

After a successful bid for funding, a team was convened to consider content, target audience and format. This included professionals from JISC, SLIC, Perth College UHI, colleagues from the University of the Highlands and Islands, NHS Scotland, and the Chartered Institute of Information Professionals.

PLNs are personal because the individual builds connections and personal relationships either in person or online. This can be done at any time, as convenient to the practitioner. The nature of the activity usually involves the sharing of ideas, resources and best practice. Access to the opinions and activities of experts, combined with the sharing element, means that the practitioner will be learning, both personally and professionally. The network is a global one, is available 24x7, and is free for those with access to the internet. It takes time and effort to create a PLN, but the initial outlay is rewarded in time with access to new professional acquaintances, ideas and knowledge.

The project team discussed the nature of PLNs and what the various strands of the information profession might expect from such a network and how they might use it in the workplace. The diverse background of the team members was a tremendous help in scoping parameters, activities, and how practitioners would reflect on their PLN activities. In the initial framework for the PLN materials, the activities were completed with the creation of a reflective piece for the practitioner's personal benefit. The team agreed that this would be more useful for the practitioner if the reflective piece was a formal writing-up of CPD activity, and indeed could be used as CPD activity for professional revalidation, for those taking that route.

For some time it has been asserted that libraries should strive to create 'activities that are communication based rather than simply information based' (Dervin, quoted in Cooke, 2012). This is pertinent in most types of library services, and particularly in public and academic libraries. Users are no longer looking for an 'information bank' which is updated sporadically by library staff; they need to know about technology, services, access to data and how the library service itself is changing in response to the needs of the organisation. Professionals also need to be aware of the way the end user chooses to work; whether on a phone, a tablet or a PC. Users are becoming more demanding in this sphere, and they take for granted that not only will materials open and function correctly on their devices, but also that they will be able to print from those devices, and access the network.

In this world of 'bring your own device' and 'big data', it is essential that the information professional keeps abreast of developments in their own field while also being aware of developments in technology, social media, tools, and resources. The Horizon Report: 2016 Higher Education (New Media Consortium 2016) lists 'bring your own device' and 'learning analytics' as developments that are imminent (or, in many cases, already with us). In the mid-term (2–3 years), the report lists augmented and virtual reality and makerspaces as likely developments in higher education. Again, the more savvy universities and libraries are already using such technologies and ideas. In the longer term, the report predicts that use of affective computing and robotics will become more mainstream. It might be difficult to envisage how these last two might be used

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in libraries, but if they become mainstream and affordable, library professionals will doubtless have ideas about how to do so. The idea of a catalogue PC that gently asks the user why they're getting so frustrated, or of a robot merrily labelling multiple items, is not really that far-fetched.

In terms of horizon-scanning, and the 'savvy' professionals mentioned above, my bet is that most of them will have a well-developed and active PLN. For an investment of 4–6 hours of activity, a practitioner will have the acorn of a PLN, ready to be nurtured and developed at their own pace. As a bonus, 4–6 hours of CPD activity will be logged, with the potential for many more hours as the network grows. The materials do come with a health warning, as the very nature of social media and the web will mean that tools will be sold, merged, upgraded or simply disappear. In the last few days, Twitter announced the demise of Vine, which was a well-established and popular media-sharing tool. However, I believe that information professionals have the necessary skills and creativity to not only choose their own tools and channels, but to adapt their practices and networks as new ones appear. This will enable them to tap into the collective intelligence and knowledge communities mentioned in the title of this article (Jenkins, quoted in Cooke, 2012).

*Once you stop learning, you start dying.* Albert Einstein

*It does not matter how slowly you go, as long as you do not stop.* Confucius.

These two quotations sum up why a professional practitioner in any sphere would want to develop and nurture their network to broaden their mind and their knowledge: to keep learning, and not to stop.

The PLN materials are available here:

<http://www.perthltc.com/pln/story.html>

### References

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