The Connected Librarian: Using Social Media for "Do It Yourself" Professional Development

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Abstract

For many librarians, staying up-to-date on the latest professional trends and issues can be a significant challenge. We all know that the amount of available information is growing rapidly, and finding the time to make sense of it and incorporate it into our practice is an ongoing problem. Without developing ourselves, we risk stagnating in our practice: relying on past successes and not exploring new opportunities for improvements in how we do our work and build our libraries and services. In this article, the author outlines some strategies to help you become a "connected librarian" by taking advantage of the latest technologies to enhance your professional learning and organizational effectiveness.

Keywords

professional development; social media; librarianship

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Up to now, professional development has largely consisted of reading relevant journals, attending conferences, taking classes, and interacting with colleagues at work or in our associations. It has been a fairly off-line environment, with electronic articles and the occasional webinar more recently introducing a digital element. This model has reliably served its purpose, and continues to be an important part of any professional development program, but aspects of it are increasingly under threat from budget reductions. One of the first items to go during a time of financial restraint can be the professional development budget line, limiting the availability of work-funded conference participation, travel, journal subscriptions, and course fees.

Fortunately, emerging technologies have opened an entirely new set of professional development options, often at little or no cost to you or your organization. Blogs, wikis, Twitter, LinkedIn, forums, open access journals, open courses, webinars, and a wide variety of social media tools can provide the foundation for building your personal learning network (PLN). As described by Wenger, A PLN is your very own online community of practice: a group of people from anywhere in the world that you choose to connect with, to interact with, and to learn from (Coursos n. pag.). It is completely under your control, allowing you to add new contacts as you discover them and remove others as they lose their relevance to your professional development needs. The effectiveness
of the PLN model is supported by the theory of connectivism. Connectivism asserts that opportunities for learning exist in many distributed "nodes" (or information resources), which, when linked together in a network, allow for the development of a deeper level of understanding than could be achieved individually (Siemens n. pag.). One of the distinct advantages of a PLN is that it allows you to configure (and continually tweak) your own information filtering system. According to Clay Shirky, filter failure, the inability to control the information coming at you, is a much more significant problem than information overload. The PLN allows you to effectively combat information overload by developing your own set of personalized information filters. Over time, by refining and adjusting your PLN, you can get just the information you need, when you need it, and avoid the deluge of what you do not need.

Harold Jarche, a leading thinker in networked organizational development, argues that there are three critical steps in setting up an effective PLN: seeking, sense-making, and sharing. Seeking is the process of identifying useful people, resources, and networks to include in your PLN. Sense-making is the process of reflecting on the content you have found important and adding your own thoughts or comments to help you and others make better sense of it. Worthwhile sense-making can be the most challenging element of building your PLN. It requires taking the time to think carefully about and reflect on what has been read, heard, or viewed so that it becomes part of your own body of knowledge rather than something that is consumed and forgotten.

Finding the time to carry out all three of these tasks on a regular basis can seem daunting initially, but, according to networked non-profit expert Beth Kanter, it can often be done within one to two hours each day spread out across your schedule. If you have a mobile device and a commute on public transit, this can be an effective way to spend your travel time to and from the office. Others may prefer to do some searching throughout the day, with some dedicated sense-making at lunch, and a little sharing at the end of the day. Regardless of your preferences and schedule, it is often possible to fit these activities into your routine. Once your network is established, you will find the benefits far outweigh the time commitment.

When establishing your PLN, the first thing to do as part of the seeking process is an inventory of what you already have. Most likely you have some favourite authors, blogs, and journals that can form the starting point for your network. For example, when I started my PLN, I was regularly visiting Charles Jennings' *Improving Performance through Learning Innovation* blog, always watched for the latest issue of the *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning* and a handful of other journals each quarter, and had a variety of books on the go. These, and other similar sources, formed the original basis of my PLN.

Next, you should setup a Twitter account. Currently this is one of the most effective tools for connecting with others. Many people are skeptical of Twitter, viewing it as an information wasteland and time sink, consisting of reports of what was on someone's breakfast menu or the latest antics of celebrities. However, the most crucial aspect of Twitter to keep in mind is that you control it. A Twitter account that follows no one is
remarkably silent and peaceful. As you begin to "follow" others, it does begin to get noisy, but you can choose to "unfollow" anyone who falls outside your area of interest. The information produced by your Twitter account can be as smart (or as vacuous) as you choose to make it. As a result, choosing who to follow is very important. Just before setting up my PLN I had read Jay Cross's book *Informal Learning*. I did a quick Twitter search and discovered that Jay had a Twitter account, so I followed him. I reviewed my bookshelf and quickly found several other authors I respected, tracked them down on Twitter and followed them. I then reviewed my favourite newspaper columnists and bloggers, and followed any of those who were "tweeting". Very quickly, my PLN was growing, and providing information from a large group of people that I wanted to learn more from. Examples of useful tweets can include links to new web sites or recent blog posts, news items, opinions on current events, webinar announcements, reflections on live conference presentations, and much more. Twitter also allowed me to look at whom those I follow are themselves following. Reviewing these (by examining their profile statements and recent tweets) I was able to add several informative individuals and resources to my network. As I encounter new blogs or read new books or articles, I will check to see if the authors are on Twitter, review their recent posts, and use my information filter in deciding who and what I need to follow. As part of my filtering, I occasionally unfollow someone, knowing there is no risk of insult to those tweeting, and that it is important to keep PLNs focused. Collections librarians will recognize some similarities here. Your PLN requires careful evaluation and selection, as well as ongoing weeding, to stay fresh and relevant. Your professional information needs will evolve over time, as will the content of your PLN.

Another critical tool for building your PLN is your RSS feed reader. Most web sites that produce ongoing content, such as blogs or journals, have an RSS feed that you can subscribe to using RSS feed reader software. There are many examples of free RSS feed reader software available, including Google Reader and FeedDemon. By setting up your feed reader and adding RSS feeds from your favourite blogs and online journals, sources will begin to push relevant material to you, making it easier to find useful information. Much like with your Twitter account, over time you will want to weed out some feeds as you continue to add new ones.

Online communities can be another important source of information for your PLN. Both Facebook.com and LinkedIn.com allow you to connect with colleagues but also have group features providing those with common interests to share information and interact virtually. Library-related LinkedIn groups include "Ebooks in Libraries", "Digital Libraries", the "American Library Association", and more. By participating in these groups, you will meet new people and learn about a wide range of new resources. You might also want to consider widening your group membership and also joining related groups outside librarianship, such as those in adult education, management, or organizational development. This can add diversity to your PLN, which is important to ensure it continues to remain a source of fresh ideas and innovations.

As your PLN grows, you will begin to discover more information than you can make immediate use of. Social bookmarking tools such as Delicious.com or Diigo.com allow
you to save web sites for later viewing. In addition, your saved sites can be catalogued using "tags", which will help you manage and later retrieve the information. These tools also allow you to review the saved sites and tags of others, making the discoveries of others in your network an important resource to add to your ongoing information seeking.

At this point, you may still be primarily consuming information, reading articles, blog posts, and tweets, sitting in on webinars, and reviewing online comments. This is an important part of the sense-making process, but to fully engage with the material you are encountering and to make it part of your own long-term knowledge, it is important to add your own thoughts into the mix. Others will begin to follow you and will be looking for your contribution as well. "Lurking", the act of consuming but not contributing, is fine during the initial learning stage, but to take your PLN to the next level (a combination of sense making and sharing), you will need to start putting yourself forward. This can take courage, as you may perceive risks in sharing your thoughts and opinions, but it is an essential part of using a PLN for your professional development.

A simple way to start contributing is to "retweet". You'll find that over time you will begin to establish your own set of followers on Twitter. Often those you follow will follow you in return (this was once considered good manners but it is no longer expected). These people are looking to learn from you as much as you are wanting to learn from them. When you see a tweet that is meaningful to you, retweet it. This will share the tweet with all of your followers, providing them with both access to this piece of information they may not have yet encountered, as well as learning a little bit about you – what you think is important, relevant, or thought-provoking. Eventually, you may want to start adding a brief comment to your retweets (this can be challenging with the 140 character limit). Watch how others retweet and you will quickly get a sense of how a few additional words can enhance a retweet. Something as simple as "this worked at my library!" can add value to a tweet and let others quickly learn something about what you have been working on.

Blogs are another important place to contribute. If you read a blog post that you find particularly meaningful, add a comment to let the author know that you valued his or her post and why it mattered to you. This is important for a few reasons. First, the blog author will appreciate knowing that his or her writing connected with you. Second, it could invite others to comment also, widening the conversation. Third, it will force you to gather your thoughts and reflect carefully on the content. The act of writing out why you valued the post will enhance your learning, increase your internal knowledge base, and help to improve your own professional practice.

Another important way to enhance your sense-making and to move into sharing is to start blogging. Freely available software like Blogger.com or Wordpress.com make it fairly easy to get started. The act of regular writing forces you to reflect on concepts that matter to you, to revisit the tweets, blog posts, or online comments of others who resonated with you and to explore them more fully. This kind of learning in public is one of the most important professional development methods you can adopt to refine your
thinking and improve your practice. Eventually (if you choose to publicize it), others may find your blog and become part of your readership. This isn't about trying to claim some kind of superstar status but is simply a way to have a conversation with more people than would be possible offline.

Although all of the methods suggested in this article involve the creation of a professional development strategy based on the development of an online PLN, it is important not to forget about the important face-to-face relationships that make up a critical part of your network. Maintaining a commitment to your professional association, attending conferences in-person, and participating in non-virtual classroom learning all continue to be important. Perhaps most important of all is to remember to bring the knowledge developed from your PLN back to work, to share what you are learning with your colleagues, and apply the new ideas and inspirations to your own practice.

Personal Learning Networks are an effective way to take control of your own professional development, especially when your organization lacks the resources to fund all of the classes, conferences, and other activities you would like to participate in. Social media technologies now provide the opportunity to become a connected librarian building online interactions with other professionals around the world.

Works Cited


