Personal Learning Environments in the Learning Commons

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The sheer volume of information available today renders it impossible for everyone to know all there is to know on specific topics of interest.

It is in fact becoming increasingly difficult at times to find reliable, relevant data. This is a problem caused by the Internet and the seemingly endless number of tools available to store and share data. Although there is a promise of 'super' organization and distribution of information in projected Web 3.0 revelations, we need to right now empower learners, and the adults who coach them, to take control of their learning. We can do this by helping them shape their personalized environments. Every learner, whether child, teen, or adult, needs a virtual space of their own which is dedicated to helping them access, manage, and understand information and to helping them contribute to their knowledge building environment. One might term this the new and larger world of information literacy.

In the Learning Commons, a Personal Learning Environment (PLE) is critical to building capacity for learning to learn. Both students and educators are coached and supported in constructing, managing, and utilizing their PLE to the fullest potential. The Learning Commons takes responsibility for building and maintaining flexible physical and virtual environments conducive to the best learning for all types of clients and their needs. However, a PLE is different. It is a specific world designed by the user to best meet their individualized information, learning, social, and recreational needs. Individuals and groups can actually build on the rich networks, resources, and tools already established in the Learning Commons to extend their own learning universe.

Thus PLEs are driven by a need to make sense of the vast world of information and ideas and take advantage of technologies and tools available. In addition, they tap into the expertise of others in order to learn, to build knowledge, to create, to collaborate, and to share within their specified community and the broader learning environment.

Let's break down the concept.

Personal – It's all about the interests and the needs of each learner, whether child, teen, or adult. Tools and resources and contacts all need to be selected by the learner or the PLE will have no relevance.

Learning – It's all about learning and that learning should be self-directed. The learner needs to be in control, test ideas, collaborate, create, make mistakes, and fix them and keep on learning. This approach holds true for both formal and informal learning.

Environment - It's all about creating a safe but empowering learning space. The role of the Learning Commons is to ensure that everyone has access to the best tools, resources, skills, and supports to work and play and learn. It is about creating a culture of learning by fostering habits of mind conducive to learning how to learn. These habits include curiosity, a desire to make sense of the world, empathy for others, value of self, the need to take charge, and a sense of community.

To further define the personal learning environment, study the following model that divides the PLE into three distinct stages of development. Each phase empowers the learner to manage specific aspects of their learning potential. Each phase is a critical component of ensuring success. When put together, the result is powerful. Strengthened by continuous reflection and goal setting, the PLE sets up learning for life.

The first question for teacher librarian is to examine one's own personal learning environment. How do you as the information expert in the school manage your own world. Perhaps we begin with ourselves
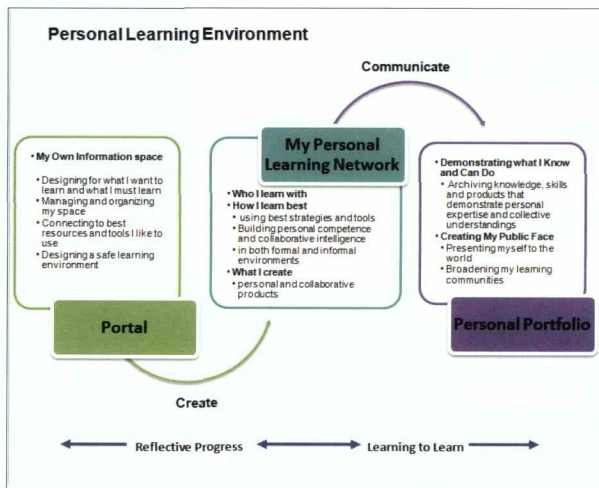
The Structure of a Digital Personal Learning Environment

and then enlist the assistance of young learners as we further our own expertise. Let's examine more closely each of the three elements of the PLE:

BEGIN BY BUILDING THE PORTAL

Portal construction tools continue to appear and are getting more sophisticated over time. Perhaps the easiest one to begin with for kids, teens, and even adults is iGoogle or the Start Page in Google Apps for Education. It takes very little time to understand what is happening when using these tools. Then as awareness of more complex software emerges, the idea of coming into command of one's own information world is set. We are embracing what we wish to spend our time learning and rejecting everything else. And, if we want to go out into the larger world, we can go there as we please. We teach and learn how to create our own "filters" realizing that no wall is foolproof, but intruders are blocked for the most part and our skill in information management grows to meet our changing needs and interests. For schooling, we will want links to our teachers, the school Learning Commons, and anything else connected to our

academic world. For other interests, we will invite selected information and people into our space.

THE PORTAL LEADS TO THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE PERSONAL LEARNING NETWORK

In the personal learning network or PLN, we are doing our work, connecting, producing, and creating both as a individual and in collaborative groups. The PLN is the place we are developing 21st Century Skills. We are listening, connecting to experts, hanging out our work for inspection and feedback, growing, and evolving. It is the place for formal schooling, but as importantly, it goes far beyond the classroom as we purposefully explore interests, passions, abilities, or just try to keep up in a field in which we are already an 'expert'. Will Richardson and Rob Mancabelli, in their book *Personal Learning Networks*, suggest a few of the many tools that help us connect and share. These include Diigo, Google Reader, and Blogger. These tools help keep us organized and provide a chance to express ourselves to the world. To this list, we would suggest any of the collaborative Google tools such as Google Documents, Google Draw, Google

Presentations, and other tools such as SpicyNodes that help us mind map what we know personally or collaboratively.

FINALLY, CREATE THE PRIVATE AND PUBLIC PORTFOLIO

Whether in formal or informal learning, sharing our work to develop a bank of our own personal and collaborative expertise is an essential part of the current connected world. For our bank of products, we select those that we want to be made public. We hang out our personal shingle. We come into command of our public face, knowing that prospective employers or opportunities come to those who get noticed. Tools such as Google Sites, YouTube, blogs, wikis, and the Creative Commons are simple tools to push our best feet forward. We become digital curators (collectors and organizers), who exhibit our work to the public.

The advantage for both young people and adults, is that the tools for construction are ubiquitous and can be stored in the cloud so that our PLE is available to us wherever, whenever, and on whatever device we choose to access it. It can be constructed to follow our progess and sophistication over the years, or, it can be broken down into useful segments. For learners who change schools often, the cloud-based PLE transfers along with us and informs, as we choose, our new adult learning coachese.

EMPOWERING THE LEARNER

A PLE enables learners to build on their own strengths and experiences. Every student comes to school with established knowledge building worlds. Regardless of demographics, economics, or ability, everyone has skills, ideas, and dreams built outside of school. The influence of these personal worlds is very individual, and consequently the visual below will look very different for every learner. Helping students transfer expertise from their worlds of play, home life, culture, and personal interest to the academic world is that much easier in a networked environment. When learners realize that their

personal expertise in social networking, computer skills, knowledge of music or of gaming have relevance to their academic world, then educators have an opportunity to broaden the influence they have in the academic sphere. Teacher librarians help students build personal learning environments that enable them to organize and manage both their personal worlds and their academic worlds

Within the portal and networked spaces of a PLE, students are encouraged to gather and organize links to resources, tools, friends, and experts that will help them expand all their interests both inside and outside of school. It is hoped that learners will discover that often there will be opportunity for connectivity between personal interests and their formal school life. Within their Personal Portfolio students will store and organize their photos, stories, projects, and works in progress. They will also decide how, when, and where to responsibly share with others their success, their ideas, and their creations so that they maintain a healthy constructive public profile. The thoughtful intentional design and construction of a PLE requires planning and know how, but inventiveness and creativity will keep the PLE fresh and exciting.

INDICATORS OF LEARNER SUCCESS

How do teacher librarians and other adult coaches determine if the PLE is making a difference and preparing students for college and careers? Besides asking how effective our own PLEs are in helping us manage our own learning environment, we can put out a few indicators of success for those we teach.

We need to remember that Personal Learning Environments are not just a good idea for learners and their adult coaches. They should also have an outcome that pushes everyone toward mature habits in the information and technology world we currently inhabit. The diagram below provides some assessment points of what we might really value.

And who is the judge of the traits listed in fig. 1? The major judge is the creator of
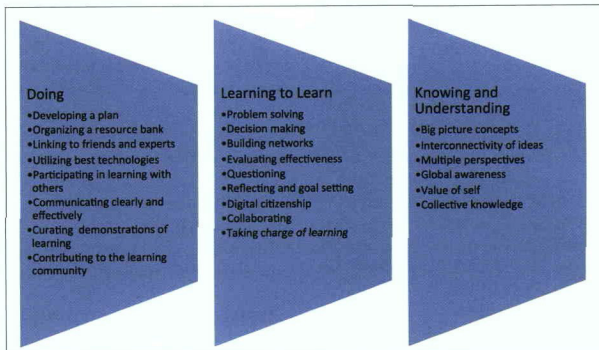

Figure 1.

the PLE. Is your PLE bringing yourself into command of your own information world? Do you have a PLN that connects you to information sources that are stretching your mind? Have you assembled the tools that help you learn both as an individual and as a group? And, are you building a true picture of what you know, understand, create, and can exhibit?

A second judge or advocate or mentor is the teacher librarian as the principal information coach in the school. While working with individuals, the teacher librarian begin to notice the bending of social networking skills over into academic skills. They see kids and teens opening sharing expertise with each other and with the adults in the building. They see sophistication in information and technology tools as learning problems and projects are presented. They watch both personal expertise and collaborative intelligence arise and grow as the school year progresses. Most importantly, they develop the program of the Learning Commons in such a way that the PLE becomes foundational

SYSTEMS AND NETWORKS THAT SUPPORT PERSONAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

In the early years of high tech, many school districts made the assumption that the district would have to purchase the computers, the networks, the learning management systems, and control every-

thing from a central location in order to "protect" the children and teens. Those expensive systems are in decline, and more open and affordable solutions are emerging. In this YouTube video, a young sprout educates a traditional teacher about this new world of open personal learning networks: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a9zSd5Gs6Mw

Instead of locking systems down, many school districts and individual schools are joining Google Apps for Education, a free and safe environment that works in the cloud and on many personal devices.

Google Apps for Education has over 50 different tools that can be used for knowledge building centers, personal learning environments, enclosed e-mail systems, and the building of portals and portfolios. These systems can be used 24/7 and can be exported to follow the various learners and teachers if they move. Such more open and cost effective systems are coupled with the teaching of digital citizenship in order to meet the challenges of state and federal requirements of safety. It just takes a tech director who is willing to experiment with and willing to participate in the creation of tech systems that actually boost learning rather than simply continuing with a locked down system that prevents many types of learning.

Many districts are opening up networks to staff and students so they can use their own personal mobile devices at school. BYOD (Bring Your Own Device) is popular

ADULT BOOKS FOR TEENS

GONE

Mathilda Savitch. Victor Lodato. Farrar, Straus and& Giroux, 2009. $25.00. 978-0-374-20400-6. Grades 9-12. Reeling from the death of her beloved sixteen-year-old sister Helene, Mathilda affectingly relates what it's like to mourn, cope with growing up, and deal with grief-stricken parents.

The book of lies. Mary Horlock. Harper Perennial, 2011. $14.99. 978-0-062-06509-4. Grades 9-12. Fifteen-year-old Cat Rozier, lifelong resident of the island of Guernsey, tries to make sense of a friend's death. Cat's diary entries, interspersed with her deceased father's reports of Guernsey's Nazi occupation, reveal the many aspects of loss.

Sister. Rosamund Lupton. Crown Publishers, 2010. $24.00. 978-0-307-71651-4 Grades 11-12. Lupton's debut is a literary suspense novel about two sisters, one single, pregnant, and missing in snowy London. Written in the form of a letter by Beatrice as she searches for her sister Tess, the strong characters and a shocking ending make for a solid page-turner.

Songs for the missing. Stewart O'Nan. Viking, 2008. $25.95. 978-0-670-02032-4. Grades 9-12. Kim Larson, seventeen and college bound, vanishes on her way to work. Part suspense novel, part family portrait, this book ably illuminates the effects of the disappearance on family, friends, and community.

The end of everything. Megan Abbott. Little, Brown, 2011. $23.99. 978-0-316-09779-6. Grades 11-12. Thirteen-year-old Lizzie Hood and best friend and neighbor, Evie Verver, are inseparable until Evie disappears. The dark side of growing up is revealed in this tense and haunting novel.

for professional meetings and conferences. All learners would benefit from the immediacy of having the world in their pocket whenever they need it. If that learner now is empowered by a well organized effective PLE then the the notion of 'anytime, anywhere learning' is realized. However the school networks have to be open enough to function this way. Stephen Abram comments on this topic at: http://stephenslighthouse.com/2011/09/10/preparation-for-living-in-a-public-world/

BRIGHT IDEAS TO BUILD ON

Check out the PLN journey of one perpetual beta principal who understands that effort reaps rewards: http://lynhilt.com/effort-in-reward-out/

See this example of a group PLN in action: http://edupln.ning.com/

Experiment with creating a visual resume: http://signup.vizualize.me/74xzi

See how professional learning environments are changing: http://jeffhurtblog.com/2011/08/25/ten-learning-shifts-for-conferences-events-associations/

SOURCES

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Curation for Learning : how people are curating, utilizing, and sharing information - a digital curation example using Scoop It by Buffy Hamilton http://www.scoop.it/t/curation-for-learning/p/529594589/digital-curation-education-in-practice-catching-up-with-two-former-fellows-gregory-international-journal-of-digital-curation

One interesting article that addresses digital curation is "How Can Web 2.0 Curation Tools Be Used in the Classroom?", at http://mindshift.kqed.org/2011/08/how-can-web-2-0-curation-tools-be-used-in-the-classroom/ A good example of curation for a specific purpose is *Technology Integration*, curated by Robin Sellers at http://www.scoop.it/t/technology-integration

Finally, check out the public face of Eric Sheninger, Principal of New Milford High School, NJ at: http://ericsheninger.com/esheninger/videos