

Web 2.0

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Using Social Media as a Personal Learning network

I recently ran a session for the School Libraries Group on using social media to create your own personal learning network (PLN) and I thought that I would shamelessly plagiarise myself (if that's even possible) and cover a few points here as well.

Given that we're all in a position where budgets are being cut, people are expected to work twice as hard for half the salary and there's no money left for anything, let alone training, taking responsibility for your own professional learning and updating is a must. I'm firmly of the opinion that we need to regard ourselves as being self employed in this area, because no-one is going to look out for you except yourself. Of course, this may (and probably will) mean that you have to spend time updating yourself at home in the evenings and the weekends, but that's the price that we have to pay in order to still have a job sometimes! I'll list a few of the resources that I use on a regular basis which keep me up to speed. However, just before I do that, there are three golden rules to keep in mind.

Firstly – using social media is just about communicating. It's 'social' if you're talking to friends, but it's 'professional' when talking to work colleagues. Too many organisations and managers can't understand the difference, I'm afraid. If they're happy

with you talking to other professionals on the phone or via email or at conferences, they should in theory (and I know it's easy to say) be OK with you using other resources to communicate as well. If they don't, it's sometimes going to be necessary to go on the offensive, and stress the value of professional updating. Secondly, there's only so much that you can do by reading or by dipping your toe in the water. Just dive in and start off. No-one will mind if you make mistakes – we all do, it's part of the learning process. If you really are a bit shy, just make up a fake account, play around with it for a while until you feel more confident, and then start another, real account. Finally, it's about sharing. The more that you can share, the better off you'll be. Reputations are now built on the amount that you can help and share with other people, not by holding stuff tightly to your chest.

If you're only going to use one PLN tool, I would suggest using Twitter. It's very quick and easy to start using, and you can quickly locate people who are worth following by allowing Twitter to access your email account to identify contacts who are already using it. Visiting <http://Wefollow.com/> and doing a search for "librarian", or just go to <http://wefollow.com/twitter/librarian> You can also

search for other subject areas of interest and can add yourself to lists as well, so people can find you. It's also worth using Twitter's own search engine, <http://search.twitter.com>, to find people who are talking about things you find to be of interest. Follow people, and just dive in and start chatting. People will soon start to follow you and before you know it you'll be building up your own list of contacts. It's also worth making two further quick points – you can search Twitter without registering, so it's still a useful tool, and it can be used on laptops and desktops – it's not limited to smartphones. If you're still in doubt, do feel free to follow me at <http://www.twitter.com/philbradley> and if you have 'Librarian' and 'UK' in your Twitter biography I'll follow you back. While you're at it, follow the UKeiG account as well (just replace my name with ukeig in the previous link).

If you're looking for good resources to learn stuff, and to identify experts in particular areas, I would recommend taking a look at Slideshare.net, Authorstream.net and Prezi.com, as all of these sites will provide you with instant access to millions of online presentations. They are excellent ways of discovering basic introductions to subjects and to see what advanced work is being done as well. If you register with services such as these you can start to follow people, be alerted to new presentations when they make them available, and of course you can search and then favourite presentations yourself.

I'd also recommend YouTube as a single 'go to' site to learn about almost anything – from plumbing in a washing machine, to installing software and learning about what libraries are doing in a variety of different subject areas. However, while I'm considering multimedia, it's

always worth looking at the TED talks, which are short, interesting and informative. You can find them at <http://www.ted.com/talks>. Not exactly social media perhaps, but I'm happy to take a fairly wide interpretation of the term! If you find those interesting, it's also worth exploring the iTunes University at <http://www.apple.com/education/itunes-u/>, which provide free access to an enormous variety of different presentations in various formats. A combination of iTunes and multimedia does inevitably lead us to podcasts, and if you're the type of person who enjoys their learning in a aural format, you can subscribe to many hundreds via iTunes, or do a simple search for 'podcast directory' to find other examples where people are making their knowledge and expertise freely available.

Obviously we shouldn't forget social networks. The primary example has to be Facebook, of course, and the main problem here seems to be that annoying term 'friends'. I suspect it would be much easier to access in work if we could replace that with 'Professional colleagues'. However, be that as it may, I have found that in the last few months more and more of the information in my news stream is coming from such contacts, and while it's still fun to see what friends and family are doing, Facebook is – along with Twitter – the place that I will look to find someone I can ask, or who will be updating me on useful material. Of course, I also use other social networks, and another good choice would be LinkedIn – not just for the contacts that you can create, but also for the discussion forums. While I still use 'old fashioned' mailing lists I'm a firm believer in going to where the communications are, and these days I find more interesting discussions and learning

opportunities on forums than I do on those mailing lists that I've been subscribing to for years.

If you have specific questions or learning needs, you could always ask a direct question, using a resource such as Quora at <http://www.quora.com/>. This resource styles itself as "a continually improving collection of questions and answers created, edited, and organized by everyone who uses it. The most important thing is to have each question page become the best possible resource for someone who wants to know about the question." There are other similar resources, but this is quite new and has been enthusiastically embraced. Questions are being asked on just about every possible subject, so dive in, ask questions and have a go at answering some! Alternatively, try using Aardvark at <http://vark.com/> which is an answer engine. You simply send it a question, it finds people who have registered with it and who have listed particular interests, Vark sends them the question and if they think they can answer it, they do. You get their response in a few minutes, and can ask follow-up questions as well. This is a service that I've used a lot myself, and it's a lot of fun, both in the asking and the answering of questions.

Bookmarking services such as Diigo at <http://www.diigo.com/> and Delicious at <http://www.delicious.com> allow you to store your bookmarks (and allow others to see them), and you can create your own network – passing on suggested links to colleagues and getting links back yourself. Diigo also offers forums so you can keep in touch with people who have similar interests to your own.

Now, all of this is very good, but there are only 24 hours in any day, and you're probably working 23

of them as it is, so how can you keep up to speed with all of this? Remember that one of the basic tenets of social media is that information should come to you; you shouldn't have to go out and hunt it down. Consequently, an RSS reader such as Google's RSS reader at <http://www.google.com/reader> will be your saviour. Virtually all of the resources that I've pointed at in this column support RSS, so you can simply set up your reader to point to them, and it will quite happily visit on a regular basis and retrieve any new information for you. You can then scan through your listings at your leisure and click on links that are of interest to you. Of course, if you don't know much about RSS, perhaps you could start using your PLN and ask for some ideas and pointers?