Title: **We are not alone: the power of Personal Learning Networks**

Education is changing at such a pace, the prospect of feeling left behind yet not knowing where to start the change in your own practice, can be daunting. Recent government announcements regarding funding for the Knowledge Nation, Digital Education Revolution and other similar projects, herald a new era for primary school libraries in particular, and education generally. The role of the library as an essential component of learning and teaching has risen in focus with the distribution of this funding designed to stimulate learning and the growth of knowledge.

While on one hand exciting, it's possible that hearing deputy prime minister Julia Gillard (2008) announce an 'education revolution' giving 'Australian students access to new education applications such as virtual classrooms, e-books, visual and audio streaming and high-definition video conferencing', may have struck panic into the hearts of some educators. Fortunately, the School Library Association of Victoria responded early to the demands of the new digital landscape by providing professional development opportunities. That training is becoming easier as the resources of the Internet develop and individuals can construct their own learning to suit individual preferences and interests.

A new kind of literacy
Web 2.0 evangelist, Will Richardson (2009), recently spoke of a new class of literacy which he calls 'network literacy' and was acknowledged as a newly defined literacy by the United States, National Council for the Teaching of English last year. They have written into policy, the place of networked digital environments, stating that twenty-first century readers and writers need to:

• Develop proficiency with the tools of technology,
• Build relationships with others to pose and solve problems collaboratively and cross-culturally,
• Design and share information for global communities to meet a variety of purposes,
• Manage, analyze and synthesize multiple streams of simultaneous information,
• Create, critique, analyze, and evaluate multi-media texts,
• Attend to the ethical responsibilities required by these complex environments. (NCTE 2008)

According to Richardson (2009) there is a need to review the perspective of schools as places of 'learning and *learning*' rather than the traditionally accepted 'learning and *teaching*'. That is to say, every member of the school community is categorised as a 'learner'. The nature of the learning landscape is changing and that, in turn is changing the approach to learning and teaching.

Key skills for 21st century

Another leading educator, Bernie Trilling (2008), Senior Director of Oracle, developers of the remarkable Think.com and ThinkQuest initiatives, explains that the representation of ICT as Information, Communications, Technologies within schools has changed. ICT now represents Innovation, Collaboration and Transformation. He defines seven key skills for the 21st century learner in every age group as,

• Critical thinking and problem solving,
• Creativity and innovation,
• Collaboration, teamwork and leadership,
• Cultural understanding,
• Communication and media literacy,
• Career and learning self-reliance.

These audible concerns regarding the relevance of the traditional model of schooling are also being heard far and wide from other acknowledged experts such as Stephen Heppell (UK), Stephen Downes (Canada) and others.

It's an exciting time to be involved in education. Students have access to a world of learning resources where they can act as both givers and takers. They can present their interpretation of a topic to an audience which is no longer limited to the classroom. In a very short time, learning has gone global.

The Internet has revolutionised the concept of learning with the same tools being used for both recreational and formal learning. This impacts significantly on the classroom as student creativity becomes excited by activities engaged in at home while schools are struggling to adapt.

To be effective teachers in this new environment, we need to be able to share the experience of learning and take advantage of the excitement within the global learning environment. It involves building a Personal Learning Network which will become a sandpit for practicing the tools to be used in the 21st century classroom. A Personal Learning Network can be defined as a set of resources, both physical and digital, of your own choice, that is always available and can be used for the growth of the personal knowledge and skills required to thrive in the emerging information environment.

Emerging technology trends
The Horizon Report (2009) K-12 edition by The New Media Consortium has identified the emerging technologies likely to have a 'large impact on teaching, learning, research, [and] creative expression around the globe'. This latest report indicates that the integration of collaborative environments and online communication tools that have become the standard digital toolset of post secondary education, are gradually overcoming access barriers apparent in the K-12 area and are rapidly becoming integrated in the curriculum.

It's a logical conclusion that individuals embarking on the journey to build their learning network will be equipping themselves with an essential skillset for the future. As stated in the Horizon Report (2009), 'increasingly, those who use technology in ways that expand their global connections are more likely to advance, while those who do not will find themselves on the sidelines.'

The School Library Association of Victoria (SLAV) has responded with the SLAV Learning 2.0 program. Other subject associations have taken similar action. They acknowledge

the need to understand the world of today's K-12 learner who has grown up with the Internet always being there and who turns to Google for the answer to all queries. It's essential for each one of us to become digitally literate; to become an explorer of the terrain of the digital landscape who can feel comfortable in the environment and be able to recognise various 'landmarks'. To become in fact, a digital resident rather than simply a digital tourist (Shareski 2008).

Miguel Guhlin (2008) explains that it's not necessarily the keeping up with the growth of technology that is difficult, so much as the understanding of how to leverage it for our own needs. This is particularly important for school libraries as they compete with the resources of the Internet for student attention. The solution, therefore, is to immerse yourself, to build your own network of learning, using it to connect, communicate and converse with like minds. As Guhlin (2008) says 'We need to think of learning as an experience that happens when we connect with others.' Making connections, after all, is what the Internet is all about.

Building your network
So, where do we look for the resources to construct a Personal Learning Network? Forming networks of learning on the Internet are similar to those formed at university, it's a matter of finding people with similar interests and tagging along with them. It becomes a peer based learning community. It's not a prescribed course of learning but rather is something you gradually build for yourself, tailored to your own needs and interests.

Your Personal Learning Network will be a blend of physical and virtual resources. Just as each person is an individual with unique traits, talents and identity, so too is the network of learning they construct. It's a reflection of the individual. It's also a reflection of the professional role that, as a library professional, you may focus on specific tasks such as management, audio visual, digital resourcing, reading or the range of literacies. Research conducted by Sue Waters (2009) indicates, among other factors, the importance of mentor support when building your Personal Learning Network. A mentor may be the person sitting next to you in the staffroom or someone online. The choice is yours.

Essential ingredients for success
Overwhelmingly, however, the two essential ingredients common to the success of all Personal Learning Networks are *ownership* and *commitment* (Warlick 2008). You are the centre of your learning network. You speak in your own voice and can share ideas and opinions in which you believe. It's also an opportunity for self-directed learning; your interests, in your time, at your level of involvement. It's a community that is always available, not restricted by geography or time.

Seely Brown (2008) recommends that in order to develop ownership and commitment, it's essential to clarify what it is for you to learn. For instance one may be: an auditory learner preferring podcasts and audio files; a visual learner to whom videos from YouTube, TeacherTube or TeachersTV are more acceptable or a kinesthetic learner who prefers the hands-on environment of Elluminate, GotoMeeting or SecondLife.

Similar to the students in our classrooms, success in learning for ourselves hinges on identifying a preferred learning style and seeking resources accordingly. There is such a plethora of resources available, that identifying what suits you as an individual, will eventually lead you to what is suitable for your classroom.

Starting local
In analysing one's environment with a view to building a Personal Learning Network, adoption of a process of acting locally before moving globally can ensure that the existing physical personal network is mined for valuable communities of practice. Before going totally global, it's important not to forget the colleague close at hand whose personal conversation can provide clarity and understanding.

So where do we jump in? A generally recommended starting point is to read and comment on blogs or join a professional mailing list. It's likely that you are already reading blogs or 'lurking' on a mailing list so take it to that next step and begin commenting. The 'commenting' function is powerful in that it enables the conversations to build. It's an essential factor in the development of your Personal Learning Network for, as knowledge and ideas are exchanged, interest and connections builds. In authoring a blog, one expects to be criticised. It's part of the process of blogging where ideas are aired and opinions exchanged.

Having gained an understanding of the terrain, it's then time to create your own blog. Wordpress.com or globalteacher.com both provide excellent support. Initially, it may not be a professional activity. It could be a travel blog to record a holiday or a daily journal of activities. Regardless of the topic, your blog becomes a place for reflection and is a constant work-in-progress. Consistent bloggers, in being asked about their audience, will more often than not comment that first and foremost they are their own audience while being aware that they are writing in a public space.

Blogging, however, is not for everyone. Wikis are becoming a preferred tool for many as they provide a group space where all contributors write to the same space. Being more about the sharing of information than reflection on ideas, this function alone is often an encouraging factor in their use. Wikispaces, pbWiki and Wetpaint are all excellent wiki platforms.

Beginning the journey
Once the journey begins, like any trip, it's easier if you're organised, therefore, the use of a personal portal space can be a lifesaver. While the options are numerous, amongst the most popular are, iGoogle, Netvibes and Pageflakes.

In a very short time, Ning has developed into the most popular platform for group communication. It's a particularly valuable means of gaining access to a large community of like-minds where you have your own space while also accessing all the members of the community. Classroom2.0 and Librarian2.0 are perfect examples of Ning in action.

Without doubt, the most valuable Web 2.0 tools for teacher librarians are social bookmarking and RSS feeds. They have revolutionised the process of accessing, storing and distributing information. Delicious and Diigo are the primary bookmarking sites on the web. They work as a team in that sites bookmarked in Delicious can be imported into Diigo for sharing within groups but Delicious is the easier place to begin. Their value to information professional is that the service you provide to clients is one that is coming, not just from you as an individual, but from you and the members of your PLN. You are no longer working alone. RSS feeds are also a valuable means of *pulling* information to you via an aggregator such as Google Reader. A tremendous time saver.

Support of the association
Subject associations and school administrative organisations are working hard to support members, so should be an early checkpoint at the commencement of the learning journey. They are important in providing a regional launching platform for teachers in what can, due to the nature of the Internet, be United States centric environment. In Australia, the Education Network Australia (EdNA) provides an important regional perspective for educators with EdNA Groups and space for a personal portal on me.edna.edu.au. This personal portal (me.edna.au) is another excellent starting point as it is specifically for educators and provides a blogging space with easy access to other educators.

What about Twitter?
The latest activity to take the digital world by storm and bring a new definition to networking is 'microblogging'. This involves the use of applications such as Twitter and Plurk to communicate with messages up to a maximum length of 140 characters (the limit of a mobile phone text message). While the question 'what are you doing now?' has stimulated a peak in the growth of the social networking platform Facebook, the simplicity of Twitter is its attraction and key to success. It's not for every beginner but if you wish to build your Personal Learning Network with a shot of adrenalin, set up a Twitter account as part of the journey.

Without doubt, spending time online is essential if you are to build the technical and social skills to operate with confidence. You need to take the time to wander off on new leads as they appear on your radar. The very nature of hyperlinking means that this could be in the midst of reading a document, so be it. Learning is a process of following those links that attract your attention. Certainly, they may lead you away from the initial path that was the focus of your attention. It leads nevertheless, to the serendipity moments of new discovery. Stephen Downes (2007) refers to personal network building as *connectivism*, meaning that knowledge is distributed across a network, therefore, he says learning consists of the 'ability to construct and traverse those networks.' John Seely Brown (2008) likens it to 'tinkering'. Spending time to discover and play around with new knowledge.

Don't limit your network
One final word of advise from David Warlick (2009) is worth considering. As noted, this is a *journey* and as such it is possible to limit oneself within what will become comfortable boundaries. He warns of the need to acknowledge the potential weakness of Personal Learning Networks in that we can limit ourselves within the networks with which we become comfortable. Thus, mindfulness is encouraged to develop an awareness for diversity, seeking out less significant players for alternative opinions. Therefore, identify your preferred learning guru, that professional with whom you can relate and consciously grow from there.

To conclude, John Seely Brown (2008) states 'mastering a field of knowledge involves not only 'learning *about*' the subject matter but also 'learning *to be*' a full participant in the field. It involves understanding and experiencing the practices of the field. He compares the learner in the social network of the Internet to the apprentice who learns the trade and emulates the actions of the experts around them. This is the foundation of a Personal Learning Network.

More than ever before, the role of the teacher librarian is as facilitator of learning. Success in this role is founded in our own personal level of competency in digital network literacy. Library professionals would be advised to step aside from daily practice and take time to

reflect on how your library service is reaching every single member of the school community. Reading and information literacy skills programs will be more effective when you yourself have the experience and support of a vibrant Personal Learning Network.

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