In the Classroom 45
Using a Personal Learning Network to Fuel Your Lifelong Learning

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Stan Skrabut: Well, thanks for taking time to listen to this podcast. It certainly means a lot. This week, we are going to take a look at one of my favorite concepts and it's called personal learning networks or personal learning environments. As I looked in trends on Google, it seems that personal learning networks are the more used term, but I've also heard it as personal learning environment. I think they both go hand in hand. One is really a subset of the other. This topic, I am going to probably spread over multiple episodes. I believe I can dissect it into different episodes to really give you a lot of information that will help you on this lifelong learning journey.

I think that personal learning networks are critical to your lifelong learning. It's a way to keep that information coming. As we start on, what we're going to do is define a little bit what these personal learning networks are, a little bit of evolution on how they got started, how I got involved in them, some benefits, and then we're going to really start talking about Seek Sense Share, which I picked up from Harold Jarche, and how we can put this into action. I'm just going to touch on them because I want to dive into them in other episodes a little deeper.

First of all, what are personal learning networks and personal learning environments? I'm going to start with personal learning environments. According to a definition, and I've included a lot of show notes, and these definitions vary, but this is one that I'm going with right now, a personal learning environment is a facility for an individual to access, aggregate, configure and manipulate digital artifacts of their ongoing learning experiences. Basically, you are controlling the stream, you are setting up your environment, your tools to filter and pull information that is relevant to you, that you have an interest in, and then going back and making sense of it and pushing it back out.

A personal learning network is an informal learning network that consists of the people a learner interacts with and derives knowledge from in a personal learning environment. One is really about artifacts, the other is about people, but I think because people create the artifacts, there's definitely a connection between the two. In a personal learning network, a person makes a connection with another person, with a specific intent that some type of learning will occur because of that connection. Basically, you're going out and you're personally selecting the things that you want to learn and the artifacts that you are pulling in for your personal learning.

That's why I think it's great, is that you can set this up any way that you want. Tom Whitby, and once again, you can see this in the show notes, he shared that a personal learning network is a tool that uses social media and technology to collect,

communicate, collaborate and create with connected colleagues anywhere at any time. There is not a specific tool. This is more of a mindset. There is not one specific way to do this. It's really sometimes hard to grasp the idea of this or put your head around it. Ken Ronkowitz, he added that a personal learning network is an informal network in which the learner interacts with and derives knowledge from others.

The network may or may not be built around someone's professional life, and it could be about personal interest. This is what attracts me to the idea of a personal learning network because I've not only created personal learning networks around my work but also around my personal interest. How did this move forward? Well, the idea of personal learning has been around for a long time, but in the latest 1990s, early 2000, there was a discussion of virtual learning environments. These environments were really around communities, communities of learners. They were more formalized.

It could be an institution of higher education or a company or a business that was creating these learning communities, and they had these virtual learning environments or learning management systems, and everything was more controlled in those. In 2006, there was a shift to this idea of using online tools, using Web 2.0 tools to create these personal learning environments. These personal learning environments are a collection of tools that you can use for working, learning, for reflecting, collaborating, creating with others. There's a variety of different individuals who have been studying this, for example, Graham Attwell.

He had an article talking about personal learning environments and Vygotsky, and he indicated that possible functions for a personal learning environment may include access and searching for information, aggregate and scaffolding, and the combining of information and knowledge, the manipulation of these different artifacts, asking questions, reflecting, creating new artifacts, and just a great deal more all tap to this idea of personal learning environments. The key point is where the virtual learning environments and learning management systems were often teacher-centered or institution centered or course centered, personal learning environments are definitely learner-centered.

I've been tracking this idea of personal learning environments and personal learning networks for actually quite a long time now, and according to my records, it goes back to December 2010. I know this because one of the tools I use for my personal learning network is called Diigo, and I had created a bookmark listings starting In December 2010. I'm very confident it went even further back because prior to December 2010, I was using a tool called Delicious and there was rumors and stories that it was going to go out of business, and so I migrated everything to Diigo at that particular time. I'm confident that my list went further back.

I guess the powerful things about personal learning network is that the learner has control of these objects. This is where it separates from classroom tools. In our classrooms, we spend a lot of time with learning management systems, and the library, we can access journals, but the problem is as soon as you stop being a student, you lose access to all that material. Whereas with your own personal learning environment, you can continue using those tools well after and basically for the rest of your life. Some of the tools may drop away, they may go out of business or something like this,

but the odds of you losing your entire personal learning network or not having the ability to transfer it is really small.

For classroom tools, the problem is we spend a lot of time teaching students how to access these journal articles. That's great if you stay in academia and pursue a career, but if you leave, you lose access to all those journal articles and that capability. That's why I'm a fan of the open movement, is I think knowledge and information should be free and we should be able to access it. I also got involved through this idea of connectivism. Stephen Downes, he talks about this idea in his presentation, Beyond Management: The Personal Learning Environment, once again, a link in the show notes.

With a personal learning network, there is really no product. There's nothing that you're creating except for the learner. The learner is the product, and this idea of learning is really all these connections that you're making, that you're connecting ideas and strengthening pathways in your brain, all tied to this. What are some of the benefits of personal learning network? Well, first of all, this is all about personalizing your learning journey. You can tailor it to your personal needs. You get to select the tools, the content, the strategies, everything is personalized.

Nobody is directing you on how to specifically do it. This puts you very much in charge of your professional development, that you can put this professional development on a fast track. That's what I believe has happened for me, is I have made it a conscious effort or a conscious point to make learning one of my core values of continuously learning, and so, therefore, I've created this personal learning network that will help feed that. As I noted, this is controlled by the individual. There's no one else that's telling me what I have to do and how I have to do it. One of the great things is this spans a lifetime, that it is not just for a specific period of time, not an episodic thing like being part of a course.

That's really frustrating, that even in our courses, if somebody is at an institution for two years, that they lose access to a course in the learning management system, and different places handle it differently, but they lose access to that material. With a personal learning network, you never lose access. With a personal learning network, part of it is this interaction with others, that you can develop connections with others who are following likeminded interests, and you can also do this on a global nature, that you can connect with anyone across the globe about these specific interests.

As I mentioned, also that you can maintain this system across your change in schools, your change in jobs, the fact that learning is multi episodic. That you can have access and change your personal learning network to adapt to what you're learning in the moment. What I was learning 20 years ago is not the same things that I'm learning now. I was able to shape and change my personal learning network to adapt to those new things that I'm learning. It allows me to organize this learning the way I want to.

Basically, you're tapping into the world. This is a portal to the world that you're creating these connections. One of the articles that I read focused on the idea that personal learning networks help develop thought leaders. If you are looking to stay abreast of what's happening in the world, to the point where you can contribute and shape the

discussion, personal learning networks are going to certainly help you do that. It's just a way to stay current. The fact that you can constantly learn 24/7, 365, allows you to do this.

Now, earlier on, I talked about the idea of seek, sense, and share. This is not my idea. Harold Jarche, who is a thought leader in learning in the workplace, that's where I heard the idea first. He just set the framework for me, even though this is what I was doing already. Basically, it allows you to have a way of collecting information, creating meaning from it, and then being able to share that information with others. It's about connecting, collaborating, and contributing to the bigger picture. Let's talk real quick about getting started.

This is probably where I'm going to go in, have additional episodes to talk more in detail, but just give you a brief overview of this.

Jeff Utecht, he talked about the stages of personal learning network adoption, that when you are diving into this idea of personal learning network, it just doesn't happen overnight. He figured out this came into stages. Stage one is emerging, that you're setting up these networks, you're trying to create these connections with other people, that you're finding ideas, you're setting up your queries. You're basically building your network. Then you go into stage two, evaluation, which is evaluating your networks and starting to focus in on which networks you really want to spend your time. You're going to start pruning away, taking away networks that are not valuable, that are not helping your learning.

Then we get into stage three. As you start building this, you become obsessed and you want to know it all. You are spending crazy amount of hours trying to do this and you realize you can't. That's really an important point, is that you can't read everything. You cannot. A lot of people get into Twitter, and some of them are trying to read every single tweet that's out there. It's impossible. It will drain you. It will frustrate you. You just have to understand that this is just a stream of consciousness that's going by and you can tap into it and pick and choose items that you want to be part of or that you want to add to your knowledge base.

Stage four is putting in perspective. You have to put your life into perspective, how much time that you're going to put into it. I would certainly say that you need to dedicate some time, but it doesn't have to be a lot of time, that you can work it into your daily schedule and just focus on a certain time. You got to find, as he said, stage five, balance. Find that balance between learning and living. Those are the different stages. That you're going to jump right in this, probably into the deep end, and at a certain point, it's going to work. It's going to be in part of your life, and that's where you want to get to.

Different ways of getting started. One, on your browser, because a lot of this is going to be web-based, that you're going to tap into digital resources, is I would create a folder on your browser, a bookmark bar. On your bookmark bar, create a folder where you put your personal learning network tools and set them up so that you can quickly access them, run through them, and then move on with the rest of your day. That's how I've set it up. I have a bar that I have my tools that I look at. I go in and I review

these different tools and then I'm done with the day, and then the next day I'll look at them again.

The first place to start is this idea of setting up a listening post. You want a place where you can collect the information. When you probably start on your personal learning network, you're going to do what's called lurking. That you're just going to maybe join or start following some people on Twitter, maybe, or following some blogs, things like this, and you're just going to consume information. You're going to use it for researching and reading and scanning articles, so you're going to set up a listening post. What I would recommend, using various tools, and I'll talk about some of these tools a little bit here, but I'm going to do them in more detail later, is subscribing to RSS feeds.

RSS is Rich Simple Syndication. Basically, you can subscribe to blog posts, and have those blog posts come to you. I use a tool called Feedly. It allows me to group these blog posts by interest. I'm looking at things dealing with informal learning, instructional technology, how to promote my book, publishing, marketing my book. I have a lot of different groups. I also have one for news so I can keep up on the news. I subscribe to various blogs that fit those categories that I have found value in, and so that information just comes to me automatically. Instead of going to 40 or 50 different blogs, not knowing if they've posted something new, I can just go to one place and all that information is right there.

Then I can review that information and if I like something, then I save it. I use another tool to save those things called Diigo, D-I-I-G-O. This allows me to save that information. Another thing that I do is I follow different people on Twitter. I will create lists of people who tend to post regarding a specific topic. I use a tool called TweetDeck, but there's another one out there that's very good called Hootsuite. These allow you to manage multiple accounts. It allows you to have multiple queries or multiple lists that you're following. You set up those lists or queries around a topic. If you have a specific topic, you can set that query up, and anytime anyone posts around that topic, there it goes.

With that, I set up social bookmarking. I use a program called Diigo. Anytime I find a great article, something that I want to keep, after I read the article, I said, "This will be important to refer to later," I put it into Diigo. Diigo is a social bookmarking tool. It allows me to collect these. One of the powerful things is I will organize these by tags, words that are important to that particular article. It could be online learning, for example, and I have articles collection of online learning or personal learning networks or personal learning environments. I have a tag for that.

I have collected close to 200 articles focusing on personal learning network. The nice thing is, is if somebody else is interested in that, I could just give them that tag reference and they would have access to my article because they're available publicly and I share them publicly. That is certainly a powerful tool. Also for a listening post, I listen to podcasts. I use a program called Pocket Casts. With Pocket Casts, I have a variety of podcasts that I'm listening to, and I gather a crazy amount of information there. I'm always taking notes based on different podcasts that I'm listening to.

Other ways that you can gain information is ad hoc searching, so going on to Google, just doing a search. Anytime I find something, I add it to my Diigo. Conference backchannels. For conferences, a lot of conferences will share a hashtag talking about what's happening at the conference, and people will post things, share things to that backchannel, focusing on that particular conference. I use that all the time. I talked about this in Twitter. I will put that also into the show notes, the link to a previous podcast, where I talked specifically about that, dealing with Twitter.

Twitter is a really powerful tool, and I posted a variety of things on how to use Twitter for learning, how to use Twitter in your classroom. Go check that out. Certainly reading. Books are definitely a place where I go in and consume content. Another place, past the listening post, and this really starts getting into talking with people and communicating with other people, is joining groups and communities. Great places to start doing that is on LinkedIn. There's all kinds of communities. Facebook has different groups that you can go in and connect with. Slack, a lot of the organizations I belong to have a Slack channel where that organization is communicating.

You want to get on there with these other professional organizations and start joining the conversation, start adding your two cents, and start contributing. If you have found an article, feel free to share it, and add some value with this. Tell them why you're sharing this. Other ways to connect are actually face-to-face or virtual events, so like conferences, meetups, tweetups. Tweetups is you do this on Twitter, and they have a meeting for an hour and you share things on Twitter. Lots of great information. There are webinars that you can join, so different ways that you can do this face to face. Then not only do you want to find this information and collect this information, you're going to want to make sense of this information and then start sharing back out to your community.

One of the strategies that I apply is this idea of working out loud or learning out loud. I started this long, long time ago. In my Enneagram, I am a two, I'm a giver, so I'm always sharing content. I'm trying to help people get to the next level. One of the ways that I started doing this was by blogging, and I did this back in 2011. That's when I started my blog, and I've been sharing ever since. It's morphed, it's changed the different things that I'm sharing, but I've had multiple blogs for different reasons. Some for work, some for volunteer organizations, some just for my personal learning journey. That's the one that's been going the longest.

I have a WordPress blog, but there's a lot of other blogging tools, Blogger, Google Sites, different ways that you can do this. I'm a fan of WordPress, that seems to be the big tool of choice. Another way that you can share information is create videos, and I've done that using a YouTube channel. When I have to show somebody how to do something, I use YouTube as a way to do this. It's second use search engine, so I'm trying to put it to use. You may also want to consider creating a podcast. This podcast started in January of this year 2019. It's just a way to share information that I'm finding that I can share a lot more information using this podcast.

Along with podcasts or other tools, Wikis, SlideShare. I use SlideShare a lot, so any presentations I create, I'll go ahead and put them on SlideShare. Other collaborative workspaces you might want to consider Mind mapping tools, Google Docs, if you're

working with other people. I like Google Docs because of the collaborative nature that you can work with somebody else in real-time. I have a lot of other learning tools but I will save those for another episode. One of the things that I want to close with is this idea of going past personal learning networks for just yourself.

This is a great tool or great concept that you can introduce to students. Bernard Bull, he wrote a article helping students develop personal learning network, and he offers suggestions for getting students involved in these. Number one, introduce students to the idea of personal learning networks and have them map out what they're learning network. What tools they're already using, and put this on a mind map or a concept map and have them flesh this out. Then have them every once in a while do a show and tell. Where students can show their network to others explain how they use it, how it helps them.

Number three, create simple challenges where learners find a problem, try to solve it and report back to the group using their personal learning network. Also, show how your network and how their network compare and contrast. Just ways that you would get a student involved in this. Like I said, I think personal learning networks are absolutely critical to lifelong learning. We're going to just dive into this just a little deeper in different ways and I'll do that with future episodes. Until then, I'm going to do a quick plug for my book.