

Chapter 14

Personal Learning Networks: Implications for Self-Directed Learning in the Digital Age

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ABSTRACT

Twenty-first century information communication technologies are enabling learners to create personal learning networks (PLNs) tailored to individual learning goals, needs, and interests, with implications for self-directed learning in the digital age. New, readily available digital media tools, open courseware, and other Web 2.0 technologies are changing how learners interact online, creating a participatory culture of knowledge sharing and content creation that is very different from early uses of the Web for accessing content. As learners participate in the multiple virtual communities of practice that comprise a PLN, they require new skills that merit reconsideration of the role of the educator in helping learners to become self-directed in both formal and informal learning contexts.

INTRODUCTION

Learning from experience has a distinctive place within the literature on adult education ever since Dewey (1938/1963) first made us aware of the importance of using everyday life experiences as the basis for learning. Scholars have explored the role of informal and incidental learning and the role of the adult educator in supporting learners in their quests for knowledge in both formal and informal learning contexts. This chapter attempts

to address the question of how information communication technologies are contributing to adult education by exploring the concept of a personal learning network (PLN) and its implications for self-directed learning (SDL).

Personal learning networks are based on the premise that learning occurs through interaction with multiple people and in multiple contexts through virtual communities. Informal membership in each Web-based community is initiated by the individual learner, who interacts through a variety of communication technologies and digital media. By engaging with others who share

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similar interests and motivations for learning, the learner develops a network of contacts and resources to solve problems and access learning when and where needed. The PLN functions as a self-designed, self-initiated system for lifelong learning.

It is the changing nature of the World Wide Web itself that has brought the PLN into existence and given it its distinctive form. As the Web has evolved from a place where learners go to access information and acquire knowledge to become a place of participatory culture in which ordinary individuals can construct knowledge (Jenkins, 2006), the PLN has evolved as a 21st century social network focused on learning rather than other types of social exchange. This participatory culture has arisen with the advent of Web 2.0, defined by a host of new open source technologies that have appeared in the last few years: blogs, wikis, social bookmarking services, and social software for communicating, writing, and interacting on the Web. By implication, Web 2.0 also refers to the practices that are shaped by the use of these technologies. These practices allow anyone to collaborate, create, and share information online, resulting in a flexible and dynamic environment with the potential to link people to resources in ways only recently possible (O'Reilly, 2005).

A PLN is created through the learner's participation in multiple communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998; Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002) to access learning resources when needed. Within each community that a learner participates, newcomers are socialized into the practices of the community by adopting its norms, culture, and distinctive meanings for language use. Initially, participation is "legitimately peripheral" (Lave & Wenger, 1991), but as individuals become contributing members, sharing ideas as well as resources, they gain increased access and status as members of an informally organized network of learners. The tools associated with participation include many different types of digital media, as well as

a vast and growing array of open source tutorials, podcasts, and video resources. Many of these are available through iTunes University (<http://www.apple.com/education/mobile-learning/>), the OpenCourseWare Consortium (<http://www.ocwconsortium.org/>), the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) OpenCourseWare Project (<http://ocw.mit.edu/OcwWeb/web/home/home/index.htm>), and other sites of freely available resources that can be accessed anytime, anywhere. The very nature of such ubiquitous access changes how adult educators should think about learning in the digital age, with implications for their roles as facilitators of SDL.

The scholarly roots of a PLN are multi-disciplinary, grounded in traditional concepts of adult education and sociology. Adult learning concepts that describe the nature of formal, informal, and incidental learning, as well as the substantial literature on self-directed learning, are at the core of a PLN. The definition and function of a PLN derive from social network theory (Freeman, 2004; Granovetter, 1983). The literature on communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998; Wenger et al., 2002), which views learning as informal, socially situated, and sustained by a body of common practices, describes how adult learners create, maintain, and grow a network of relationships to nurture self-initiated learning.

In this chapter, we begin by locating SDL within the broader field of adult education, describing the nature of formal, informal, and incidental learning and exploring the role of the adult educator as first articulated by Knowles (1975). We will then illustrate how a PLN works in practice through a vignette typical of a 21st century learner who has developed the skills to maximize learning in the digital age. Next, we will describe the theoretical underpinnings of a PLN and the rise of a participatory culture on the Web, exploring what a PLN looks like in practice through the use of social media, digital tools, and open source learning resources. Finally, we will present a rationale for the adult educator to model development of

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