

Leading the school library as a connected practitioner

By Dr Kay Oddone

Snapshot

Dr Oddone presents a model of connected practice, drawing together the concepts of connected learning and connected teaching, informed by professional learning through the personal learning network (PLN). Oddone explores the role of informal professional learning, through a PLN, offering examples of practice from the school library context.

Editor's Note: This is a referred article.

Introduction

The role of the school library leader or teacher librarian (TL) is first and foremost that of educator.

The role of the school library leader or teacher librarian (TL) is first and foremost that of educator. As vital contributors to innovative learning and teaching across the school, TLs have specialist expertise in curriculum development, information and digital literacies and contemporary pedagogy. The TL is one of the few educators on staff who connects with all members of the school community. They support students in all year levels, and ideally collaborate with teachers in all subject areas, planning and

resourcing curriculum and assessment. This demanding role requires that the TL maintains up to date knowledge of changes and developments in curriculum, pedagogical approaches and learning and teaching technologies. They must also remain abreast of the most recent resource publications, both physical and digital. Not only is the TL a leader of learning and teaching, they are also learners themselves, as they participate in continued professional learning to maintain currency.

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This article presents a model of connected practice, drawing together the concepts of connected learning and connected teaching, informed by professional learning through the personal learning network (PLN). This model provides a basis for designing and enhancing the practice of all educators. In this article, the model will be discussed in the context of the school library and its staff. After introducing the model of connected practice, a review of the literature that informed the development of the model will be presented, followed by a vignette based on my research which reveals how informal professional learning through a PLN is an important support for connected learning and teaching. A discussion of how the model of connected practice aligns with the connected learning framework (Ito et al., 2013) and the concept of the essential school library (Gordon, 2021) will demonstrate how the model can be applied in the school library

context, before addressing how TLs might initiate and expand their PLN within the contemporary social networking landscape.

A model of connected practice

Connected practice embodies three elements – teaching, learning and professional learning through the PLN. This new model (Figure 1) represents the blended nature of learning and teaching in contemporary education environments, where information is abundant and constantly changing. It holistically represents how TLs enact connected learning and connected teaching, based on open connected pedagogies, informed through their PLNs. It also demonstrates how contemporary TLs must continue to engage with professional learning to ensure their practice remains up to date. Through this combination of emerging pedagogical theory and innovative learning practice, the model can be used to explain how TLs can model and scaffold connected learning while maintaining their own professional knowledge via support from other practitioners, even if they are the only TL in their school.

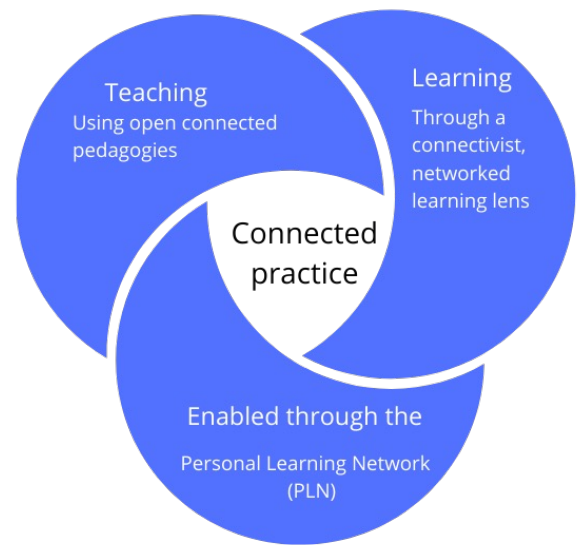


Figure 1. A model of connected practice

Designing the model of connected practice

The model of connected practice builds upon theoretical concepts that inform connectedness and connected learning, and research conducted which explores and demonstrates the PLN. Therefore, the following section reviews the literature that unpacks the theories driving connectedness in learning and teaching, including connected learning (Ito et al., 2013) and the attributes of open pedagogy (Hegarty, 2015) as well as the nature of PLNs and how educators use them (Krutka et al., 2016; Oddone, 2022).

Connected learning

Connected learning is a pedagogical framework, underpinned by networked learning and connectivism. Networked learning describes the type of learning that occurs when people and resources are able to connect with one another for the purposes of sharing knowledge; frequently through the mediation of technology (De Laat, 2019). It emphasises active, dynamic, and social learning, and recognises the role technology plays in enabling this to happen more easily. Connectivism also recognises the role of connections in learning – and suggests that information and knowledge is changing so rapidly that our current state of knowledge is less important than our capacity to make a connection to the information source when and where we need it (Siemens, 2005). A connectivist perspective emphasises the value of making connections, and sees learning as actively constructed, rather than being transferred from one vessel to another.

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While networked learning and connectivism are the theoretical explanations for how learning happens in networked contexts, connected learning provides a framework for how we might bring about this type of learning in practice. Through this pedagogical approach, which is framed around the values of equity, full participation and social connection, learners are challenged to take an active part in their learning, by using technologies to connect with others (Ito et al., 2013). Connected learning is shaped by interest driven learning. Openly networked social technologies provide the opportunity for learners to connect around shared purposes, recognising that expertise may present in many different ways, and through a wide range of perspectives (Gogia, 2014; Ito et al., 2013).

Connected learning is based upon three learning principles and three design principles. The learning principles are that learning is interest powered, that it is peer supported and that it is academically oriented (Ito et al., 2013). When learners are following their interests, working with their peers, they are likely to be engaged and motivated to learn. Most of this learning will have a flow on to academic achievement, whether through direct curriculum links or through the development of skills or knowledge that contributes to academic learning.

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The design principles are that learning is production centred, has a shared purpose and is openly networked (Ito et al., 2013). Students value learning opportunities that are active and hands on, focused on knowledge creation rather than passive receipt and applied in the production of a meaningful outcome. A shared purpose draws learners together rather than similarity in age or skill level, meaning a common goal is what propels the group, not an artificial grouping like year level. As learning is openly networked, connections can be made that ensure work can be shared, enabling authentic learning to take place.

Open pedagogy

Open pedagogy has been described as one part of the larger umbrella term open educational practices (Cronin, 2017). Like connected learning, open pedagogy describes a way that learning opportunities may be planned to encourage active participation, transparency and sharing. Hegarty (2015) outlines eight attributes associated with open pedagogy, namely: people, openness and trust, innovation and creativity, sharing ideas and resources, connected community, learner generated, reflective practice and peer review (Hegarty, 2015). The concept of open pedagogy provides a useful structure to inform the practices of TLs by raising awareness

of the potential offered by sharing, accessibility and co-creation made possible at scale through social technologies.

Open pedagogy encourages the use of participatory technologies which enable communication, content creation and sharing (Hegarty, 2015). These networks and tools are accessed through platforms such as Canva, the Google Suite and various social media including Twitter or Facebook. Within these platforms, connections, knowledge and learning artefacts may be created, experimented with and shared (Hegarty, 2015; Ito et al., 2013). Aligned with participatory learning are the concepts of peer review and reflective practice. These open pedagogies encourage learners to provide constructive critique and peer feedback within a supportive atmosphere and promote reflection on their own and others' work (Hegarty, 2015). When modelling open pedagogy, TLs are likewise challenged to reflect upon their own practice, as they move from broadcast models of teaching towards pedagogies that acknowledge a new environment of information abundance (Seitzinger, 2014).

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Learning and teaching conducted within a participatory and reflective culture allows learners and educators to develop their digital identity, enhancing credibility, and encouraging trust and confidence (Hegarty, 2015). Rather than hoarding scarce resources, contemporary pedagogies encourage sharing, and the development of digital spaces where openness can flourish in an environment of trust. Positive experiences when connecting with others may increase sharing, which in turn increases the bank of collective wisdom.

Connectedness through personal learning networks

In connected practice, participation within open and connected learning environments such as PLNs requires accessing, sharing, creating, trialling and reflecting on experiences across different networks and contexts (Ito et al., 2013). This aligns with research by Krutka et al. (2016), who surveyed over 700 teachers and identified five key common actions for those learning through PLNs: engaging, discovering, experimenting, sharing and reflecting. These activities are fluid and interconnected and inform the TL's roles of learner and teacher.

Remaining connected for professional learning through PLNs requires different levels of interaction, and these interactions have been described as linking, stretching and amplifying (Oddone et al., 2019). To meet pragmatic, immediate needs, TLs engage in linking behaviours, where they make direct connection with other individuals to seek specific answers to problems or questions. For example, to troubleshoot when running reports in a library management system, a TL may link to others in their PLN, asking those with similar experience how they resolved the issue. This type of linking action is the 'bread and butter' of professional learning through the PLN.

More indepth exploration of a concept or gathering multiple opinions to guide decision making is described by the term stretching. Here the TL stretches out to reach a variety of connections

within their PLN, seeking a wide range of information from people and resources. Stretching describes a deeper interaction with the PLN over a longer period. For example, a TL who requests opinions of others in their network to develop a response to challenged items in their collection may be engaging in stretching, as they collate different responses to inform their own.

The action of amplifying through the PLN takes place when TLs share their work and practices with others. Contributing to the body of knowledge within the TL profession and beyond by blogging, distributing resources, publishing photos or videos of practice or otherwise adding new content to the network raises the profile of the individual and builds digital identity. Through amplifying their own work, TLs avail themselves of different professional learning opportunities, such as engaging in professional feedback and discussion or being invited to present at conferences or to publish their work.

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The following vignette depicts the experiences of school library leader 'Leanne'. This example of practice was drawn from a larger study, which examined the experiences of thirteen educators who engage with a PLN for professional learning (Oddone, 2019). The themes arising from Leanne's story demonstrate how the PLN can help build connected practice across the variety of contexts the TL engages with daily.

Leanne is a TL who has over twenty years' experience in education and is based in a secondary public school library in Australia. She sees her PLN as an avenue to push the boundaries of her professional learning, amplifying her learning through sharing content, offering feedback, and mentoring others. With interests in educational leadership and professional mentoring as well as a wide variety of topics related to teacher librarianship specifically, Leanne finds that her PLN enables her to remain up to date with current innovations by allowing for connections with people within and beyond her immediate context and the TL profession.

Leanne consciously implements different strategies for engaging with her PLN depending on her learning goal and the time she has available, choosing to engage with both linking and stretching, which she describes as 'focused searching' and 'serendipitous discovery'. As a connected practitioner, Leanne says her PLN offers her the opportunity to reflect on her own practice by considering others' opinions and ways of working. She also has found that creating and maintaining connections with others has led her to rich learning opportunities that she hadn't even planned for, saying: 'you don't know what you don't know!'

Implementing connected practice in the school library

Figure 2 visually represents how the model of connected practice can be implemented in the school library context. As connected practitioners, TLs can draw on the model to design evidence-

based learning and teaching opportunities that highlight the value of the library and scaffold transformative learning, informed by the framework of connected learning (Ito et al., 2013) and the concept of the essential library (Gordon, 2021).

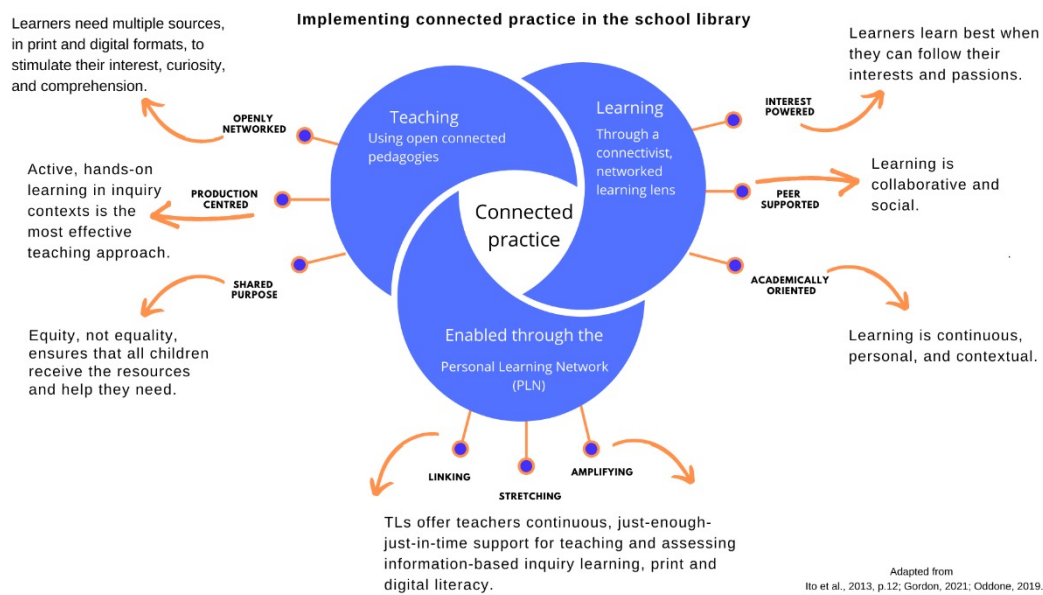


Figure 2. Implementing the model of connected practice in the school library

Despite findings that identify the transformational potential of collaboration between the TL and teachers (Montiel-Overall, 2005), these opportunities remain rare and surface level (Garrison & FitzGerald, 2022; Mardis, 2017; Merga, 2019). Although this is far from ideal, collaborative relationships between TLs and teachers can evolve over time and may be inspired through innovative resourcing of the curriculum and modelling connected teaching and learning through library based programs. The following examples demonstrate just some of the ways that connected practice may be implemented by the school library team.

Designing digital resources that are openly networked

If opportunities to have direct input into curriculum and assessment planning are limited, strategic design of openly networked digital resources can be a way to model and scaffold the use of open, connected pedagogies. Using digital content curation, the TL can design and develop online pathfinders or research guides which are tailored to students' research tasks. These guides can enable direct access to a range of physical and digital resources, model information literacy skills and offer learners opportunities to connect with others and share their thoughts through embedded platforms such as Padlet or Google Forms.

An [example of such a research guide](#) has been shared with permission by Kathleen McDonogh, Teacher Librarian at Kincumber High School. This guide was created when McDonogh completed the CSU Master of Teacher Librarianship subject ETL501: The Dynamic Information Environment. The research guide is designed for Year 10 students investigating Rights and Freedoms (1945 onwards) as part of their Modern History studies (McDonogh, 2022).

This research guide directs students to physical and digital resources available through the

library and online. It also scaffolds information literacy skills by including tasks associated with the resources and encourages further exploration and sharing through embedded [Padlets](#), digital pinboard spaces where students can contribute other resources they have discovered. Students are also given a voice to share their own opinions about the learning resources, through embedded Google forms. Designing tailored digital resources such as research guides can be a powerful way that the TL not only influences the connected learning and teaching happening in the school but also demonstrates the ways in which the TL can offer support to teachers with curriculum even if time is not allocated for collaborative planning.

Creating opportunities for production centred learning with a shared purpose

Makerspaces have been a popular way for school libraries to provide access to production centred and interest driven learning for students. Through makerspaces students are drawn together by their shared interests, as they seek to pursue personal interests and discover new ones, learn and develop different skills and socialise with like-minded others (Li & Todd, 2019). However, makerspaces are not the only ways that the connected school library leader can model and scaffold connected learning and teaching. Recognising the school library as a third space where academically oriented learning can take place through a variety of avenues, school libraries can play host to a range of connected learning opportunities, limited only by student interest and the time and energy of the school library staff.

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Teacher librarian Bel Cameron has used connected learning as the underpinning pedagogical framework to help her students make connections locally, nationally and globally based on their interests and learning needs (Cameron, n.d.). The approach is made explicit on the library home page, shared with permission, which [leads with the banner](#) 'Welcome to our Connected Learning Library' and includes an explanation of the driving principles behind the many projects the library undertakes. These projects are shared via the [school's library website](#) where students, teachers and parents can access resources and where student learning is shared. Whether it is the Origami Kings sharing their creations through film, using colouring books to connect to libraries and their collections all over the world or a Hogwarts digital escape room and games night with green screens and whomping willows, the students are engaged with activities building social, civic and academic skills.

Offer interest driven, academically oriented learning opportunities

Modelling inquiry learning through connected practice can involve drawing explicit links between the learning happening within the library through different clubs and activities and curriculum

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outcomes. After instigating a Dungeons and Dragons club in her school library, TL Madison Dearnaley comments that she 'watched in awe as their (students) ability to talk about and dissect the novels they were reading increased. They became a lot more critical of storylines and characters, and their writing improved significantly' (2022 para. 3). This relationship between the tabletop game, which is largely based on text and oral expression (storytelling) has been recognised in research as fostering the development of literacy, critical and creative thinking and ethical understanding skills (Kaylor, 2017; Sidhu & Carter, 2021). Opportunities for action research to build evidence of improved student academic performance after the introduction of groups such as this allows school library staff to demonstrate the ways in which connected practice has positive outcomes for learning and teaching.

Opportunities where school library staff can enact connected practice should be driven by student voice. Based on students' interests, school libraries can offer workshops, fairs or expos by inviting community groups and professionals to present online or in person (Ogawa, 2015). School libraries are going further, by developing 'human' or 'living' libraries to create connections between students, their community and, with the advent of video-conferencing, the world (Pope, 2021; Schijf et al., 2020). Designing learning opportunities that go beyond the boundaries of the school grounds and that invite real world expertise to complement the curriculum has always happened – but the school library is well placed to overcome subject and age-based boundaries, recognising and building capabilities and connections that are not always possible in the classroom.

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Setting up and managing a PLN

For a lone connected practitioner leading from the library, these undertakings may seem overwhelming and beyond possibility. However the third aspect of connected practice is support and continued learning through the PLN. Strong and weak ties within a strategically developed PLN can offer a source of inspiration and ideas that never runs dry, as well as collegial encouragement and advice when needed (Oddone et al., 2019). Developing a PLN takes time but is an essential element of the model of the connected practice. To teach in a connected way,

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the educator must also engage with connected learning themselves, developing their own capacities and essentially practicing what they preach. Advice for developing a PLN abounds, however for those yet to take the leap into this

mindset, it may appear to be a monolithic task. The good news is that as a personal learning network, driven by the individual, the process can be taken at any pace needed. What follows are four simple steps to get started on the journey.

Firstly, as the PLN is based upon individual learning needs and interests, the first step should be to take some time to think about your professional goals and areas of strength and need. Although there is an element of serendipity in the development of a PLN, being clear about the purpose of the network can ensure it doesn't become cluttered with irrelevant or problematic connections that distract from the learning. Secondly, consider different online spaces and the social networking platforms where you feel most comfortable and confident. Twitter has always been a popular starting point for developing a PLN, although recent developments may guide you towards other sites such as Instagram, Mastodon or LinkedIn. Facebook can be a useful source of professional learning, however keeping a professional identity separate from a personal one can be useful when developing your PLN, and this is almost impossible on this platform. It is at this point that you should consider the privacy and boundaries you are comfortable with. Many prefer to have 'professional' accounts quite separate from 'personal' accounts, while others are happy for contexts to blur and for professional and friendship connections to mingle. Making a decision early about your professional digital identity is important and helps to inform how you approach communications within your PLN. Thirdly, strongly consider developing a space of your own online. Whether this is a blog or a website, as an information professional it is vital to recognise the ownership and access implications of engaging purely through platforms hosted by others. The practice of maintaining control over one's personal digital infrastructure is promoted by the 'Domain of one's own' movement (A domain of one's own, 2022), a philosophy that originated at the University of Mary Washington in the United States. Owning a domain ensures any content you produce remains under your control, which is vitally important as your engagement with your PLN develops and you begin contributing more to the learning of others.

Finally, begin interacting! While there is value to be found in lurking - the term used to describe entering online spaces without announcing your presence - this type of one-sided engagement can limit the learning possible through a PLN. Although not everyone is comfortable or has the time to become active contributors within their network, opportunities for feedback, support and advice are lost if the only type of participation is passive. Shifting from lurking to participating can be challenging, however simple actions such as liking contributions or sharing others' posts can be a positive way to start. Professional confidence builds through successful interactions with others, and the PLN operates most effectively when there is two-way communication and reciprocity.

Conclusion

Leading the school library as a connected practitioner is challenging, and certainly requires resilience. The model of connected practice described in this paper is one way that school library staff can enact the powerful synergy created through the intersection of education and information management. This model offers a conceptual framework which draws together connected learning and teaching, open pedagogies, and the essential school library prototype,

informed by continued learning through the PLN to describe how school library staff add value to the learning community. Future research into how school libraries are developing these concepts is needed, as we continue to build a body of evidence through action research to capture and communicate the critical role school libraries play in every school community.

Editor's Note: This is a referred article.

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