Information from people: using your PLN to resource the curriculum

By Tania Sheko

Teacher-librarians are in the business of finding information to resource the curriculum, and so we practise what we preach, exploring a range of resources and evaluating them accordingly.

There was a time when I followed the rule of limiting my trust of information to published and peer-reviewed literature. That was the time we told students that Google and Wikipedia were not as good as the non-fiction and reference books on our shelves. Times have changed. Instead we now embrace the ubiquitous nature of information and teach critical evaluation and information literacies. Of course, we always did that, but now it's even more important with the wealth of timely, relevant and even real-time information in many web formats.

The way I find information has changed significantly. In my daily quest for information I frequently rely on people to find what I need in order to support teaching and learning and create educational resources. My personal learning network (PLN) is my lifeline, and the management of this information network is what I'd like to discuss in this article.

My personal learning network (PLN) is my lifeline . . .

Creating a PLN is initially hard work, and it requires constant maintenance, but it's the best investment you can make as a teacher-librarian. Like many others, I've set up my PLNs in various places, such as Twitter, Facebook, Google Reader (which aggregates the blogs I read) and online communities such as Nings, Wikis, Flickr, etc. Once you start finding people and getting to know them and their work by reading their blogs or following links they've posted, you realise the power of the network as a way of locating the best information and resources. In this way you receive not only factual information but recommendations, reflective evaluations, practical suggestions and shared resources, whether they be lesson plans, videos, slideshows or any other format.

. . . Web 2.0 technologies are all about creating opportunities for sharing and collaboration . . .

Many people talk about the power of Web 2.0 technologies but some miss the point and think that creating a Wiki or Glogster is what it's about. In fact, Web 2.0 technologies are all about creating opportunities for sharing and collaboration, for enabling discussion and interaction; it's about learning from and with others. It might sound like something from a bad science fiction film but it really is about the power of the network; people *are* the best source of information, and we now have so many ways to connect to these people globally.

I don't claim to do anything original, but I will share how I manage my PLN in the event that it helps somebody. There will be many others who do the same, and also those who do it more effectively. This is my way.

My Google Reader is divided into my areas of interest and curricular foci. The list of blogs is growing alarmingly as I continually discover more brilliant and resourceful people, so the solution to the management of this potentially unwieldy resource is to either weed it out or just read selectively without stressing about unread posts. The number of unread posts is displayed in brackets next to the name of the blog, so it's not for the faint-hearted, since this number increases with each new blog discovery. Currently I have several thousand unread posts but that includes news articles which I don't intend to read. Here is a list of my categories with a few examples of blogs within them:

Books/reading

From the editor's desk (The Australian Book Review blog)
http://australianbookreviewblog.blogspot.com/

BevsBookBlog (Bev Novak)
http://novanews19.wordpress.com/

Book by its cover
http://www.book-by-its-cover.com/

Boys, blokes, books and bytes
http://boysblokesbooks.edublogs.org/

Slightly addicted to fiction (Judy Jagger)
http://slightlyaddictedtofiction.blogspot.com/

ANZ LitLovers' LitBlog (Lisa Hill)
http://anzlitlovers.wordpress.com/

Reading Matters
http://kimbofo.typepad.com/readingmatters/

Read Alert (State Library of Victoria)
http://www2.slv.vic.gov.au/services/education/youthlit/readalert/
News
including Google News, ABC News, The Guardian, Time, Wall Street Journal, New York Times, etc.
Authors
John Green, James Roy, Gabrielle Wang, Scott Westerfeld http://scottwesterfeld.com/blog/

Neil Gaiman http://journal.neilgaiman.com/
Art
Art:21 http://blog.art21.org/

Art Knowledge News http://www.artknowledgenews.com/Home/

Art blog by Bob http://artblogbybob.blogspot.com/

But does it float http://butdoesitfloat.com/

Le divan fumoir bohemien http://florizel.canalblog.com/

Tate Shots http://channel.tate.org.uk/tateshots-blog/
Education blogs
Alan Levine
http://cogdogblog.com/

Angela Maiers
http://www.angelamaiers.com/

Anne Mirtschin
http://murcha.wordpress.com/

Judith Way
http://jway.global2.vic.edu.au/

Dean Groom
http://deangroom.wordpress.com/

Judy O'Connell
http://heyjude.wordpress.com/

Jenny Luca
http://jennylu.wordpress.com/

Marie Salinger
http://mariesalinger.global2.vic.edu.au/

Rhonda Powling
http://rhondda.wordpress.com/

Edna Sackson
http://whatedsaid.wordpress.com/

Angela Harridge
http://angelaharridge.global2.vic.edu.au/

This is a small selection from this category; please don't be offended if your blog is not in this list. Lack of space prevents me from sharing blogs from other categories, eg gifted, history, English, library, maths, photography, and more.

Last year I worked one day a week at Kew High School. To support my role as provider of professional development sessions for Web 2.0 technologies, I created a wiki (http://taniasheko.wikispaces.com) which includes a section entitled 'Build your PLN by subject'. My rationale for this page is to provide the impetus and head-start for teachers to understand the need for a PLN and develop one.

If you appreciate talking to other teachers to gain ideas or information, work through problems, ask advice or for a different perspective, then connecting to these people wherever they are, regardless of geographical location, will expand your horizons. Building a PLN by connecting with people online is just like networking in person – meet one new person and be introduced to many more.

Through my PLN I've connected with experts all over the world. I can read about what they're doing and thinking in their blogs, and I can talk to them and ask them for help on Twitter.

The wiki page is a work in progress; so far I've provided links to people and their blogs for English/ESL and Maths teachers, and I hope to eventually resource this across the curriculum. Here are some of my links:
English and ESL teachers
Jason Renshaw (englishraven)
http://jasonrenshaw.typepad.com/

Michael Stout
http://mrstoutsblog.blogspot.com

Shelly Terrell
http://teacherbootcamp.edublogs.org

Larry Ferlazzo
http://larryferlazzo.edublogs.org

Snarky
http://snarkygrammarguide.blogspot.com

RLiberni's blog
http://rliberni.wordpress.com

Abroadlanguages blog
http://www.abroadlanguages.com/blog

ESL lesson plan
http://www.esl-lesson-plan.com

The road not taken English teaching

http://lk-theroadnottaken.blogspot.com

Kalinago English
http://kalinago.blogspot.com

Burcu Akyol's blog tips and resources from an English teacher
http://burcuakyol.com

The spelling blog
http://thespellingblog.blogspot.com

Russell Stannard ESL/ELT teacher training videos
http://www.teachertrainingvideos.com

Maths

Vi Hart
http://vihart.com/

Jason Dyer
http://numberwarrior.wordpress.com/

Kate Nowak
http://function-of-time.blogspot.com

Dan Greene
http://exponentialcurve.blogspot.com

Jackie Ballarini
http://continuities.wordpress.com/

Chris Higgins
http://www.mrhiggins.net/blog/

David Cox
http://coxmath.blogspot.com

Twitter is a powerful way to build and interact with a PLN. Every day I rely on Twitter to connect me to a rich network of educators/educational specialists that I've built over time.

If Twitter is down, for me it's like the phone has gone dead – I'm without connection to others. Earlier today Twitter was down and I was just about to ask Anne Mirtschin a question. You might ask, Why did I have to ask Anne this question? Couldn't I just research the question or ask someone else? And that's the difference between information searching which is factual and can be researched in a reference book or online, and something you would rather ask a person. For example, if I needed to know what 'borscht' was, I could look it up in a dictionary, an encyclopedia or Google it, and I would find out that it was Russian soup made with beetroot. But if I wanted to know how long to cook it so that it developed a good flavour but didn't completely fade the brilliant colour, then I'd ring my mother. Twitter is this kind of information platform – you know which people are experts in which field, and you ask the right people specific questions you anticipate they will be able to answer better than anyone else.

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Once you have a substantial Twitter network, it's important to manage it so that it is useful rather than overwhelming. There are various ways of doing this, but I've chosen to use Tweetdeck to manage the tweets. This allows me to create columns which separate the tweets into areas of interest. Currently my columns are All Friends, Mentions (tweets directed to me or mentioning my Twitter name @taniatorikova), Direct Messages (private between me and one other Twitter person – this has to be someone I follow), gifted education, art, reading, library, language, music, and hashtags #australiaseries, @gtasyd (Google Teacher Academy Sydney).

Twitter and **Facebook** often get a bad rap; they are associated with facile messages and time wasting. For me, Facebook is another way of connecting with people and educational and cultural organisations, and consequently information and knowledge. Facebook is more visual than Twitter so you can see the images and videos associated with posted links.

You might be thinking – why do I need Facebook when I have Twitter? That's a fair question, and the answer is, firstly, that some people will prefer one platform over the other, so there might be a different network of people on each, and also because I get updates on Facebook from organisations like:

- The Metropolitan Museum of Modern Art,
- The Guggenheim Museum,
- The Wheeler Centre for books, writing and ideas,
- Powerful Learning Practice, and the
- National Gallery of Victoria,

to name a few. I also enjoy reading status updates of authors, many of them Australian, and it really is a window into their lives, or at least the parts of their lives they don't mind sharing. Facebook enables discussion which is easily read and, since posted links and comments are quite short, it is easy to scan the Facebook page to get an overview of what's new. I like the Facebook updates, informing or reminding me about resources and events, for example, The Australia Series shares announcements of scheduled webinars. Facebook can also be used to organise and moderate events – an easy way to communicate with a large number of people. And yet Facebook remains blacklisted in schools despite its potential. As with many Web 2.0 tools, the best aspects, the connections with people outside the classroom or school, are those most feared. It's the same for mobile phones – they are frequently banned in schools even though they are a powerful technology which students could use in a controlled way, moderated by the teacher.

In his blog, *The unreasonable man*, (http://www.unreasonableman.net/), Ian Yorston asks:

> *Why are we spending so much money on ICT in schools and then blocking everything and putting it down? Why don't we just use the mobile technologies that kids already have instead of banning it? Even last year's smartphone will operate as a calculator. And a book reader. It will translate the Bible from the original Hebrew and can differentiate Sin(x). It can pinpoint both the Battle of Hastings and the Belt of Orion. It will act as a word processor, a piano and a spirit level. Not bad for a bit of kit that your school didn't purchase and doesn't maintain. Schools don't need ICT. It's coming through our doors every day. We just need to adopt and adapt a little bit.* (Full article here http://www.atl.org.uk/publications-and-resources/report/report-2010/feature-schools-ict.asp).

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And lastly, I would like to mention the bookmarking tools, **Diigo** and **Delicious**. There are so many reasons why I would recommend using these Web 2.0 tools; for example, they provide a quick and easy way to bookmark links to resources so that they are accessible on any machine wherever you are. But the best part of Delicious and Diigo lies in their networking capabilities. Not only can I see what someone in my Delicious network is reading and saving, I can also see an alphabetical listing of their tags, their tag bundles and their lists. This means I have an insight into the way they're thinking, what's important to them, and the direction they're taking. Diigo enables shared highlighting and commenting – so useful in the classroom and also for global collaboration.

The way we go about finding and sharing information and knowledge is changing – has changed – although some would prefer to ignore this. Social media enables this new people-centred way of becoming informed and learning.

Is your information-seeking behaviour changing? Are you, as a teacher-librarian, making the most of Web 2.0 technologies in resourcing the curriculum?

Tania Sheko is a teacher librarian and Coordinator of Learning Enhancement at Whitefriars College, Donvale. She is a Google Certified Teacher. Her blog, Brave New World, can be found at http://tsheko.wordpress.com and her wiki at taniasheko.wikispaces.com. You can contact her on Twitter @taniatorikova or by email at tsheko1@gmail.com.

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