BECOMING A SOCIAL LEARNING PRACTITIONER

BY MICHELLE OCKERS

How many conferences or other events have you attended where you have heard that learning and development practitioners must become social media savvy – both for their own professional development, and to use these tools in their organisational roles? What goes through your head when you hear this?

For several years I was stuck at the conscious incompetence stage. I had set up a Twitter account, but did not know what to do with it. I wanted to blog, but thought I had nothing of value to share. I was not sure what other tools to try or what I should be doing with them. I felt overwhelmed, and did not know how to get started.

If you can relate to this, then I recommend Jane Hart's *'Social Learning Practitioner Program'* (SLPP). I enrolled in the SLPP in February 2014. In conjunction with Harold Jarche's *'40 Days to Personal Knowledge Mastery'* it has transformed my approach to both my professional development and to supporting social learning in my organisation.

The SLPP is an on-demand self-paced program offered by Modern Workplace Learning. The program, consists of 25 practical activities to do on your own or with your work team. These activities develop your social learning skills and enable you to work and learn collaboratively with your team. The first activity is to set up a blog to record completion of program activities.

The Social Learning Handbook and *A Practical Guide to the Top 100 Tools for Learning* are program reference materials. The *Handbook* identifies a range of ways in which people use social networks for learning. Completing SLPP activities has enabled me to effectively learn in all of these ways. Many of the activities are things that I had not previously done.

Build a trusted network

A Personal Learning Network (PLN) is the people you are connected to for the purpose of your professional learning.

My PLN online has grown in numbers, diversity and quality. I have been using Twitter to:

- find others with similar interests;
- share resources with them;
- have discussions with them;
- join real time facilitated discussion of specific topics (called 'Twitter chats');
- participate in conference 'backchannel' discussions (with or without being physically present); and
- search for specific information.

I reviewed the composition of my PLN using a question-based tool and linked online resources. This helped me to identify opportunities to improve diversity in my network. After considering my professional development needs, available time and potential benefits, I drew up a three month action plan. The three months is nearing a close, and I have done about 70 percent of the things on the plan.

Another SLPP activity is to participate in three Twitter chats. These are fast-paced one hour events where participants respond to a series of questions on a topic using a specific hashtag. Participants comment on each other's responses, ask questions and explore views. I have found #lrnchat and #ozlearn valuable. These are a great way to learn about a specific topic (e.g. reflective learning, L&D benchmarking), expand your PLN, and have some fun.

Ironically, building an online PLN has expanded and enriched my face-to-face network. I met several people from my PLN in person at the AITD Conference, and through Third PlaceMeetUps, extending ongoing online conversation. I am also better connected to people who were already part of my face-to-face network and are now in my online network.

'Learn the new' and keep up with professional trends

I check my Twitter feed in the morning and favourite items to read later, or respond to messages and interesting comments. In the afternoon I read blogs, aggregated using an RSS feeder.

References

Hart J, 2013, *A Practical Guide to the Top 100 Tools for Learning,* Centre for Learning and Performance Technologies.

Hart J, 2014, *Social Learning Handbook 2014* Social Learning Practitioner Programme, http://modernworkplacelearning.com/activities/social-learning-practitioner-programme/

I bookmark items for future reference using Diigo.com. Once or twice a week I review LinkedIn posts. I aim to spend at least two hours per week reading favourited and bookmarked items. With bookmarking these resources are always available in my moment of need. It is important to take time to read, observe and think about the content I have filtered - to combine it with my experience and prior knowledge to make my own sense of it.

In this way I can keep up to date with what others are doing and thinking. Where they 'Work Out Loud' by discussing what they are working on and how they are doing it, I learn even more from them. One topic I have learned a lot about is supporting knowledge sharing and learning through Enterprise Social Networks (ESNs). This is an example of an emerging practice that it would be difficult to learn about quickly in traditional ways.

Participate in wider open educational opportunities online

SLPP requires completion of a Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) and reflection on the experience of participating. I completed the Social Media for Active Learning MOOC. It ran for four weeks with topics on curation, social media lessons, PLNs and privacy and ethics. I found the curation module particularly useful, and now using Scoop.It and Storify to create collections of online resources that interest me or support my work.

Share with others

It is amazing how open and willing to share people are both publicly on the internet and in online communities. Watching others share has helped me to learn when and how to this. When I find a useful article or resource on the internet I share link to it on Twitter with a comment. Similarly, I share links to my own blog or Storify posts on Twitter and, sometimes, LinkedIn. Commenting on things that others have shared

A Social Learning Practitioner is a learning professional who encourages, enables and supports knowledge sharing and collaboration across their organisation. He/ she is a role model, showing the business what it is to be social, and modelling the new knowledge sharing and collaboration practices.

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or published has also helped me to reflect on my own experience, develop opinions, learn with others, and build my PLN.

Find solutions to performance problems

Most of us already use social tools and networks to solve performance problems. We ask a colleague for help. We search for 'how to' materials on the internet or view videos, screencasts on sites such as YouTube and Slideshare. Through the SLPP I have learned new ways of finding solutions.

I now use Twitter to search for information and find experts or fellow seekers with similar professional interests and challenges. I have created Twitter lists of 'go to' people on specific topics, and use others' Twitter lists to see who they follow.

A spirit of generosity exists in my PLN. By actively participating on Twitter, sharing resources, writing a blog, commenting on others' blogs, and meeting people in my PLN I have developed relationships. Others have a sense of who I am through what and how I share and interact. People have answered my questions, and met in person or via Skype to discuss a challenge. For example, in response to a question I posted on Twitter about how to best structure ESN sites, someone referred me to a helpful video and another person set up a phone discussion with a relevant expert.

Support collaboration

I am experimenting with different ways of collaborating within my organisation to work and learn. My team has started curating content together using Diigo and Scoop.It. I post several times a week on our ESN about my team's work, and encourage others to 'work out loud'. A larger project is the consolidation of ESN sites to make it easier for people to find internal experts, share documents, ask questions, and help each other to solve problems – in other words to collaborate.

Undertaking the SLPP has been like learning a language through immersion. It has radically altered my approach to my professional development, and equipped me to learn more fluidly. I am better equipped to encourage, enable and support knowledge sharing and collaboration across my organisation in new ways. Along the way I have met new people - and, I am having fun.

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