Building a worldwide PLN is now easier than ever before—but building a PLN can also be a more overwhelming task than in the past.

Going for PLN Gold in the Professional Development Olympics

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“When we know today is not as important as our ability to continue to stay current. So, if what I know today is going to change because knowledge changes rapidly; if I’m not continually learning, I am becoming obsolete in my particular field or within a particular knowledge space. There are different ways of trying to solve that through courses and through other means of learning but none are really as effective or as adaptive as a network because a network continually evolves and continually reforms itself.”

—George Siemens, “The Network is the Learning” (n.d.)

When I first began teaching twenty-four years ago, my school district required twenty hours per year of professional development. Very few, if any, of those hours were directed specifically at school librarians. The “solo-ers” completed whatever hours they could find in whatever area might be available. We had no debriefs, no conversations, no networking, no reflection.

Fortunately, times have changed. And, more importantly, I have changed. Professionalism has come of age for educators in the twenty-first century, and, along with this maturity, a sharper focus on what lifelong learning is and how it looks in practice. I am no longer content with waiting for professional development opportunities to be offered to me. I proactively seek out new knowledge online and am willing to travel great distances to participate in interesting face-to-face opportunities with colleagues.

As I write this guest editor column the Games of the XXX Olympiad in London draw to a close. I cannot help but generate mental parallels between the Olympic athletes’ motto Citius-Altius-Fortius (Faster-Higher-Stronger) and my continually evolving perception of professional development. As I said in “Releasing Your Inner Leader: Spinning 21st-Century Standards-Driven Evaluations and Professional Development into...
Stronger School Relationships**: "Simply put, professional development is evolving into something new and inspiring in the twenty-first century. Fired by lyrical portrayals of lifelong learning, our imaginations wallow in rich descriptions of how ‘participatory learning processes’ are used in ‘collegial learning environments’ by ‘personal learning networks’ through ‘collaborative conversations,’ all with the goal of enhancing teacher effectiveness and improving student achievement. Professional development is becoming more relevant, more reflective, and, most importantly, more social" (Starkey 2012, 11).

I have come to believe that without a connected social-networking aspect, most professional development lacks the opportunity for new ideas to blossom into true transformational learning. As Samuel Johnson noted in 1751, “the seeds of knowledge may be planted in solitude, but must be cultivated in publick.” George Siemens, proponent of the Connectivism theory of learning, sums up the connection between diverse opinions and learning situations with the statement “the network is the learning.” The authors featured in this issue of Knowledge Quest certainly agree.

In this issue you will find a variety of unique features on personal learning networks for school librarians. The authors, as well as this issue’s columnists, provide useful advice and help us continue our professional development as school librarianship continues to evolve in the twenty-first century.

From defining the term “personal learning network” and exploring the four stages along the PLN developmental path in “Power Up Your Professional Learning” by Jennifer LaGarde and Tiffany Whitehead, to Cathy Jo Nelson’s analysis of the value and importance of having a personal learning network in the uncertain job climate of education today, this issue offers readers a complete overview of personal learning networks and how they relate to professional development. You’ll also find features on building and maintaining a PLN using technology and available resources, how to use data from professional evaluations to design a professional growth plan, using PLNs to build support for school library programs and advocacy efforts, the power and benefits of publishing contributions to PLNs, the effects of district-level PLNs on an extended network, the university’s role in developing PLNs, locally based professional learning communities and even how retirees can continue to contribute to PLNs.

"The most important thing in life is not the triumph, but the fight; the essential thing is not to have won, but to have fought well.”
—Olympic Creed

Building a worldwide Professional Learning Network is now easier than ever before—but constructing it can also be a more overwhelming task than it was in the past. As we create connections and relations within our industry through new technologies and social chains, we should look to the core Olympian values of excellence, friendship, and respect as a model for our own PLNs. Our challenge is to build a network that continues to grow and continues to expand the diverse knowledge of the collective membership.

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Works Cited:


