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“Whether we participate in school-level curriculum teams or virtual networks that span the globe, we all have valuable expertise and knowledge to share and much to learn.”

Vendor Support of PLNs — pg 22
Focus on Lifelong Learning through a PLN

Susan Ballard, 2012–13 AASL President

This issue of Knowledge Quest focuses on how school librarians can use personal learning networks (PLNs) for professional development. It is often noted that any people with whom you interact are part of your PLN, whether they are social contacts, professional peers, or experts in their fields. So, wait a minute…isn’t that a rather broad definition and wouldn’t trying to develop an effective PLN be a bit like herding cats? It can be! That’s why this issue of KQ is so important. We have the opportunity to hear from a variety of authors and colleagues who will help us to deconstruct the concept and consider how its development affords each of us a unique opportunity to think, create, share, and grow through the strategic cultivation of a PLN to connect with a variety of different communities as we improve skills and engage in the social aspect of lifelong learning.

When I really stop to think about each of the words represented in the acronym PLN, I am struck by how they truly symbolize what each of us needs to contemplate as we build ours.

**Personal**

First, a PLN is extremely personal because, for the most part, it includes an exclusive combination of the various circles of influence with which we come into contact—either by design, by choice, or by serendipity. While there may be overlaps and crossovers between and among the members of our PLNs and those of other colleagues, ultimately, my PLN is as unique to me as yours is to you. For example, all of us are apt to agree that the workplace represents an environment in which we connect with coworkers who are likewise engaged by our employer for the achievement of organizational goals and objectives, so everyone there is, to a greater or lesser degree, in our spheres and part of our PLNs. However, we also know that we especially enjoy collaborating or working with certain colleagues, and we consciously decide to interact with them more than with some other colleagues.

We also grow our PLNs by choosing to join certain organizations, associations, and any number of social networks, and, again, make conscious decisions about which ones match up with our needs. Once more, within those structures, we make stronger connections with certain individuals than with others.

For me, the personal aspect of a PLN is akin to the fundamental elements of collection development, for while I may share an area of interest in education or school libraries with you, my PLN represents my “collection” of people and resources designed to support my needs and interests, not yours. I have to acknowledge that my PLN is also designed to a degree to support my “agenda,” which is to ensure a greater understanding of—and support for and commitment to—effective school library programs, staffed by effective school librarians.

I am thrilled when we have an opportunity to combine the power represented by our collective networks to achieve that agenda, such as last year when AASL...
president at the time, Carl Harvey, called upon us to gather at least 25,000 signatures in support of his White House petition. We succeeded, and our PLNs were a great part of making that happen. So many librarians were able to give a shout out to others with whom they had fostered good relationships, and those others joined in the effort.

**Learning**

The learning aspect of a PLN is really where the rubber meets the road, giving us traction in the pursuit of continuous professional growth and improvement. We can opt for numerous ways to connect with learning opportunities, and AASL certainly assists us in this endeavor through the provision of a wide variety of learning options. Think about all the possibilities that await us should we chose to participate in:

- Face-to-face, virtual, or backchannel engagement in a national conference or symposium [www.ala.org/aasl/conferences]
- AASLForum electronic discussion [www.alan.org/aasl/about/community/lists/forum]
- AASL sections and electronic discussion lists for:
  - Educators of School Librarians [www.alan.org/aasl/about/community/lists/esls]
  - Independent Schools [www.alan.org/aasl/about/community/lists/iss]
  - Supervisors [www.alan.org/aasl/about/community/lists/spvs]
  - Special Interest Groups (SIGs) [www.alan.org/aasl/aboutaasl/aaslcommunity/aaslinterest/aaslinterest]
  - Information Literacy (in conjunction with Association of College and Research Libraries) [www.alan.org/aasl/about/community/lists/infolit]
- AASL in ALAConnect [http://connect.ala.org/aasl]
- AASL Blog [www.aasl.ala.org/aaslblog]
- AASL Essential Links wiki [www.alan.org/aasl/essentiallinks]
- AASL on Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Google+, Pinterest, and YouTube
- Knowledge Quest polls, podcasts, and vodcasts [www.alan.org/aasl/knowledgequest]
- AASL e-Academy [www.alan.org/aasl/learning/eacademy]
- AASL eCOLLAB [www.alan.org/aasl/ecollab]
- AASL Licensed Institutes [www.alan.org/aasl/conferencesandevents/aasllicensedinstitutes/licensedinstitutes]
- Employing social bookmarking and other tools to curate various AASL web-resources

We engage in our AASL community of practice to learn. We are able to interact with colleagues who have expertise and understandings beyond ours in areas that are critical to the success of our daily practices. The collective wisdom of AASL in the areas of advocacy, legislation, intellectual freedom, instructional design and delivery, assessment, standards and guidelines implementation, resource selection, technology, and more represents a powerful and collaborative learning environment that is second to none in addressing the ongoing professional development needs of the school library community.

**Network**

This brings us to the network component of a PLN, and here is where the real value-added element kicks into gear! Through our participation in a wide variety of communities we are not only able to stay-up-date with what is happening among the members of our PLNs, but we constantly expand their boundaries through the introductions we make and receive, putting us in touch with just the right people at just the right time. My experience confirms for me that the ALA/AASL/Affiliates network has been the most meaningful of my professional life—over time, my investment in it continues to provide daily dividends.

So as you continue to grow your PLN, make sure that you take advantage of the many ways in which ALA, AASL, and your affiliate organization can meet your personal learning network needs. Be part of the conversation and the community—your effort will be rewarded as you think, create, share, and grow along with your students and colleagues.

**Susan D. Ballard** is the president of AASL. She is a school library media educator and consultant, and an adjunct professor in the Simmons College GSLIS/ITL program.
“What 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.)

Going for PLN Gold in the Professional Development Olympics

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“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.

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 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:


The driving force that gives a PLN its power to impact and endure is passion.

YOUR PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

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The school library can be a lonely place. These days, tight budgets and fiscal shortfalls have created a new breed of solo librarians—a group of educators who not only have to do more with less, but who, increasingly, also have to do it all alone. Some school librarians are even serving multiple schools or entire districts—juggling it all just to make certain their students’ needs are met. No matter what the circumstances, however, the feeling of being spread too thin is all too familiar to many of us. Now more than ever, we need support networks: people with whom we can share resources, swap stories, and lend a hand. Luckily, in today’s globally connected world, developing just such a network is easier than ever.

What’s a PLN?

A PLN or “personal learning network” is a group of people who are connected by shared passions or common interests, and who benefit from shared learning. PLNs have been around for a long time. In the past, however, the reach of our PLNs extended no farther than the walls of our schools, districts, or the occasional professional conference. Today, the access that we have through technology enables us to stretch our PLNs beyond the limitations of our physical spaces or cohort of coworkers. Social media afford us the ability to form instant connections with other people globally. At the same time, technology eliminates the necessity of a face-to-face connection in order for us to consider someone a part of our learning network. We live in connected times, and the same technology that affords us the chance to connect our students with other learners or content-area experts from around the world also allows us to build our own networks of learners and experts with whom we get to learn and share.

That said, Twitter, Facebook, Skype, and other forms of social media are not the forces that bind connected educators together. Rather, these are merely the tools that we use to communicate and connect. As important as those tools are to the building of a PLN, they are not the most important element. The driving force that gives a PLN its power to impact and endure is passion. Having shared passions is the glue that binds together any group of people, and personal learning networks are no exception. As school librarians, the list of passions that drive our work is nearly endless: teaching, learning, a love of reading and books, encouraging student engagement, emerging technologies, research and information literacy, and/or the desire to continually improve our craft. The list goes on and on. Whatever that shared element is, however, it is passion that makes these connections both sustainable and meaningful.

At the same time, while technology makes connecting with those who share our passions easier than ever, it also opens the door to connections with a broad spectrum of professionals—teachers, administrators, public/academic librarians, and even authors—from whom we often have much to learn. Unlike the traditional professional-development model that often groups participants by job types, the best and most effective PLNs are made up of individuals who challenge each other’s assumptions and force members to look at the world from new and different perspectives. Indeed, it is this mixture of shared passions and different perspectives that equates to perfect recipe for PLN success!

Path to Your PLN

Although everyone’s journey to building a PLN is unique, almost every story begins with a search. While some states and districts are requiring educators to participate in PLNs, the most effective networks are sparked by an authentic need. Maybe it’s the hunt for new ideas, the desire to feel connected to others who are facing the same challenges, support for a project, data to help advocate for a program, or just the need to fill the vacuum of not having like-minded educators at arm’s reach. Either way, many educators can trace the spark that began their PLNs to an initial quest for information, a hand reached out for support, or a plea for help in solving a real and immediate problem.

Four Basic Stages

Because PLNs are, at their core, personal it probably goes without saying that every PLN is made up of individuals whose journey in creating a learning network is as unique as its members. However, even though each PLN is specialized to its creator, many educators go through a similar process when developing their own personal learning networks.

1. Consumption

One of the wonderful things about social networks is that they provide the participant with a seemingly endless stream of new information. On the other hand, one of the most daunting things about a social media tool is that it provides the user with a seemingly endless stream of new information! Knowing how to get started can be a huge challenge. This reality is why the first step in developing a PLN is often the establishment of a one-way relationship. That is to say, most connected educators start out by simply consuming information.
Whether it’s through Twitter, blogs, or a Google+ hangout, during this first stage, many PLN newbies do little more than lurk, quietly observing what school librarians around the country are doing in their libraries. Perhaps lurkers are seeking ideas for a project or looking for examples of how other school librarians make the most of a fixed schedule. Whatever their motivation, these info consumers are taking it all in, making mental notes and processing how this new flood of ideas can impact their teaching. The thing to remember is that it’s okay to lurk. Simply absorbing all that others have to share is a natural first step. Eventually, however, you may get to the point where merely consuming information is not enough.

2. Connection

Spend any amount of time with someone who has developed a personal learning network, and you’re bound to hear the phrase “life-changing” in some form or another. And it’s true; building a network of like-minded, passion-driven educators with whom learning and sharing is both frequent and meaningful is no less than a life-changing experience. That said, after spending some time learning from others in your network, it’s only natural to want to reach out and connect with those who are having a significant impact on your professional life.

Even if you began your journey with no intention of doing anything more than gathering a few new resources, you may soon find yourself commenting on a blog, attending and asking questions during a webinar, or even responding to others on Twitter. By putting yourself out there you are opening the door to making connections.

These connections may remain little more than an exchange of pleasantries, a heartfelt “thank you” for sharing a resource, or a few more followers on Twitter, but the interactions may also develop into collaborative partnerships, spirited debates, and even full-fledged friendships that blossom in person at conferences or scheduled “tweet ups.” Regardless of how connections grow, however, connecting with others not only builds that sense of empowerment that makes PLNs so amazing, but also helps remind us that we’re not alone.

3. Creation

Another natural result of the PLN process is the desire to apply some of what’s being learned to your own practice. So much of what happens in a PLN is the REcreating of ideas—taking what someone else has already done and building on it in a way that will make it work for you and your students. Even the most talented school librarians have a finite number of ideas and innovative programs up their sleeves. This kind of remixing of ideas, which naturally grows from having a PLN, ensures that your students, staff, and administration will never go without quality instruction, inspired professional development, and skillfully culled data radiating from the library. For everything from lesson plans to school library displays, having a PLN forces even the most skilled practitioners to up their games—a professional bump that others are bound to notice and that you won’t be able to keep a secret for long.

4. Contribution

The inspiration received through a personal learning network is positively contagious. That feeling of needing a high-five after a particularly successful lesson or the
sensation that you might just burst if you don’t tell someone about how the school library program is impacting student achievement seems to grow exponentially with the creation of a PLN. For many, there comes a point where they simply feel compelled and obligated to share. Whether you join a regularly scheduled Twitter chat, create a blog where you reflect on the library’s role in student learning, or manage a wiki where you and others share resources, contributing to the conversation and adding your voice to a chorus of educators who are changing teaching and librarianship through their top-notch work are the completion of the PLN circle. After all, who wouldn’t want to be a part of the grassroots educational revolution in education that’s taking place on Twitter and in the blogosphere. Plus, who knows what kind of impact your work might have on another educator? In some ways, having a PLN is the ultimate example of “paying it forward”: taking information received, crafting it into great practice, and sharing it as a remixed spark of inspiration for someone new. That’s the power of a PLN!

**Tiff’s Story**

I spent my first year in the school library trying not to let myself become too overwhelmed. While it was a busy year with many new challenges, at the end I felt successful. However, I knew that I could grow to do so much better; I just needed the ideas and inspiration. I had recently started blogging about my experiences in the library, the books I read, lessons taught, and activities with my students. I was also doing lots of online reading and researching. While searching for info about elementary school library programs and activities, I came across the TL Ning [http://teacherlibrarian.ning.com]. This became a resource that I used constantly to gather ideas and seek input from others. Links on the Ning and other articles I was reading led me to start following the blogs of numerous other school librarians who were doing amazing things with their students.

The winter of 2009–2010 was the time when I really started to immerse myself in the growing online community of school librarians and ed-tech folks. I became obsessed! I filled up my Google Reader and constantly added to the list of blogs I followed. I joined Twitter and began to understand how valuable it was to be able to be continuously connected to other educators.

Before I really even knew what a PLN was, I had started to build mine at full force. Later that spring my principal asked if I was interested in attending the International Society for Technology in Education conference that summer. I had the opportunity to meet many members of my PLN, educators from whom I had already learned so much. Meeting these friends face-to-face really solidified for me the importance of my PLN. I know I am infinitely better at my job because of the inspiration and camaraderie I glean from my network.

**Jennifer’s Story**

I was a classroom teacher who thought school librarians were irrelevant until someone proved me wrong. That teacher-turned-librarian inspired me to give up my red pen for a book cart and move my practice into the classroom with the most books. What I didn’t realize, however, is that once I got there, not only would I have no idea what to do, but that no one else in my building would know either. In the fall of 2007, wondering if I’d made a terrible mistake, I begin to look to the Web for ideas and inspiration. Soon, I’d stumbled across a few blogs where other school librarians were sharing ideas and thoughts. That same year, I attended my state’s tech conference and discovered RSS feeds, a discovery that immediately ratcheted up my ability to learn from other library colleagues who were willing to share their ideas and thoughts about student learning and the role school librarians had to play in impacting it.

In truth, I had no intention of ever contributing to the resource I was coming to rely on so heavily. But then in 2008 I was fortunate enough to attend the AASL national conference where I learned about Twitter and how it was being used by teachers all over...
the world. At the same time, my state legislature (like so many others) was making some pretty tough choices regarding education funding and, by extension, school libraries and library personnel. In the end, it was the feeling that I could not let school libraries in my state go down without a fight that led me to start my own blog and toss my ideas into the Twitterverse. I didn’t realize it at the time, but I was building a PLN.

Soon, I was overwhelmed by the sheer volume of ideas, inspiration, and pure camaraderie that continues to define my network. What began as purely an advocacy tool has grown into constant, meaningful, real-time professional development that has an immeasurable impact on my practice. While I’ve had the chance to meet only a few members of my PLN in person, their wisdom and friendship continue to inspire me to make a difference for students every day.

WEBINARS

A great way to start to get to know other active online educators is to participate in live webinars. The TL Virtual Cafe (<http://tlvirtualcafe.wikispaces.com>) offers free monthly webinars on topics pertinent to school librarians. Many well-known voices in the library and ed-tech worlds have presented webinars, which are also archived and available for viewing at any time. When participating in a live webinar, you not only get to hear the great ideas from the presenter, but you can also use the chat window to interact and share with the other participants.

NINGS

Ning allows for the creation of smaller, specialized social networks. Joining a Ning gives you access to “friend” other members, send messages, participate in discussion forums, join groups, view and post photos, videos, links, and blogs, and share calendar events. Nings offer a great collection of shared resources and commentary from discussions. Joining and interacting on a Ning is a great place to start if you’re worried about feeling overwhelmed by tools and the idea of building a PLN.

The Ning for school librarians to join: <http://teacherlibrarian.ning.com>

Other educational Ning options: <http://classroom20.com> and <http://edupln.ning.com>

BLOGS/RSS FEEDS

If you are looking for great ideas on programs and activities that others are doing in their school libraries (and aren’t we all?), blogs are a great place to look. Once you start following a few blogs that you really enjoy, your list of blogs can quickly grow as you follow the links from blog to blog. Using an RSS reader such as Google Reader (<www.google.com/reader>) makes following a number of blogs fast and easy. Google Reader allows you to subscribe to many different blogs, streaming all of the updates into one simple feed. In your reader you can create folders for different types of blogs, such as those about school libraries, ed-tech, book reviews, and others.

TWITTER

If you are ready to get serious and develop your PLN, then you need to be on Twitter! A large network of educators is active on Twitter and constantly sharing resources. Spend some time lurking and observing to see what it’s all about, and then gradually become more active. If you are hesitant to sign up for an account right away, you can subscribe to the #tlchat Daily

**ONE OF THE WONDERFUL THINGS ABOUT SOCIAL NETWORKS IS THAT THEY PROVIDE THE PARTICIPANT WITH A SEEMINGLY ENDLESS STREAM OF NEW INFORMATION. ON THE OTHER HAND, ONE OF THE MOST DAUNTING THINGS ABOUT A SOCIAL MEDIA TOOL IS THAT IT PROVIDES THE USER WITH A SEEMINGLY ENDLESS STREAM OF NEW INFORMATION!**
<http://paper.li/tag/tlchat> and receive an e-mail with updates on popular items that school librarians are sharing on Twitter.

Put some thought into choosing the right Twitter handle for you. It should be something that represents you professionally and can reasonably stay with you for years to come. To be as transparent and credible as possible, consider using your real name or some form of your professional title. Once you are ready to take the plunge and become active on Twitter, start following people who have similar passions and share resources that you find valuable. Focus on following people who are sharing quality links and ideas, people who are going to have an impact on your learning and, in turn, impact your students’ learning. Use the “PLN Starter Kit” that is described below to learn how to use Twitter and who to start off following. Make sure you respond to tweets that really grab you! That’s how you start the conversation, get to know the members of your PLN, and spark great collaborative projects.

**START YOUR OWN BLOG**

Twitter is great for sharing links and having interactions with other educators in 140 characters or less, but you may want to be able to elaborate more on the things you are sharing. Authoring a blog allows you the opportunity to reflect on your practice, and share your successes and failures. You may want to blog from the perspective that your audience would be other school librarians and educators, looking at your practice through that lens. If you want to get involved in the blogging community, take the time to read and leave comments on other blogs to get a feel for what blogging is all about.

Free blogging platforms include WordPress (<www.wordpress.com>), Google’s Blogger (<www.blogger.com>), and Edublogs (<www.edublogs.org>).

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**Jennifer LaGarde**

(aka library girl!) is the lead librarian for New Hanover Schools and an Educator on Loan for the NC Department of Public Instruction. She is the Social Media Special Committee Chair for the North Carolina School Library Media Association and was a founding member of NCSLMA’s Young Adult Book Award. In 2011, Jennifer was awarded the “I Love My Librarian Award” by ALA, The Carnegie Corporation of New York and The New York Times. She was also named a 2011 “Mover and Shaker” by Library Journal. Jennifer is the author of the blog, The Adventures of Library Girl (<www.librarygirl.net>) where she proves you don’t have to be a superhero to teach middle school, but having a cape sure helps. Follow Jennifer on Twitter @JenniferLaGarde.

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**Tiffany Whitehead**

is the librarian at Central Middle School in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. She earned her undergraduate degree in elementary education and school library certification from Southeastern Louisiana University, and her graduate degree in educational technology leadership from Northwestern State University. She is the president-elect of SIGMS (ISTE’s Special Interest Group for Media Specialists), an organizer of EdCamp Louisiana, and is currently serving on AASL’s Best Apps for Curriculum Task Force. She is active on Twitter (@librarian_tiff) and blogs as the Mighty Little Librarian (<www.mightylittlelibrarian.com>).

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**PLN STARTER KIT FOR THE SCHOOL LIBRARIAN**

Check out this LiveBinder on building your PLN: <www.librarygirl.net/2012/07/pln-starter-kit.html>. This resource (crowdsourced and curated by Jennifer LaGarde) contains links to articles about growing your PLN, as well as lists of active educators on Twitter and in the blogging community. As time progresses, you will be able to further develop your PLN based on your interests and needs, but this LiveBinder provides you with an excellent place to start with some high-quality educators to follow.

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Visit School Library Research at <www.ala.org/aasl/knowledgequest/slr> to read The Relationship Between School Culture and the School Library Program: Four Case Studies, a research study related to personal learning networks!
HELP IS HERE!

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Let me tell you a story. No, not the kind of story you tell children gathered around you on an area rug in a nicely appointed corner of your school library. Rather, it’s the kind of tale you would tell your colleagues at a district professional-development meeting in your efforts to inspire them to move from good to great. Sit back, remember the days when you had time for cautionary tales at professional-development meetings, and consider the careers of three school librarians in one school district—Amy, Brady, and Cindy—who ended up becoming strong, resourceful leaders for their school librarian colleagues and inspiring the creation of new personal learning networks (PLNs) that reached worldwide.

**Amy**

Born to educator-parents, Amy had known she wanted to be a teacher since she began helping her mom put up her bulletin boards before school started each year. Amy was lucky enough to be hired at the same school as her mom, so she had a built-in PLN from day one. This group of seasoned teachers guided her through the trials and tribulations of being a beginning teacher and showed her specific websites to support the school’s curriculum. With this support system in place, Amy flourished to the point that her principal asked if she would be interested in being the school’s librarian to help the school library become more than the book museum it was at that time. The principal wanted the library to be a collaborative space where print and digital resources were used in tandem by teachers and students on a variety of projects. She gladly accepted and took the necessary educational steps to transform her school’s library program.

**Brady**

A devoted husband who worked as an investment banker while his wife completed medical school, Brady entered his graduate-degree program in school librarianship after his wife completed her residency. After being the main breadwinner for his family, he wanted to find a career that would allow him to leave work in time to pick up his children from school and spend each afternoon being a dad. Already a tech-savvy individual, Brady was the first member of his library school cohort to have an iPad, and he routinely presented class assignments on ways to integrate technology into all parts of a school’s curriculum. He was hired by a school district close to the hospital where his wife practiced, and found it easy to get his teacher colleagues and students excited about technology. However, Brady had trouble exciting the central office and school board enough to get the money needed for the innovative technology he wanted to use with his students. So, he began writing a number of successful grant proposals that garnered attention throughout his district and state.

**Cindy**

A former school library paraprofessional whose husband’s promotion precipitated a move across the country, Cindy decided to start a graduate-degree program in school librarianship after getting her family settled into their new home. She had worked with some stellar school librarians in her former role. Cindy wanted to be that type of school librarian now that her family had the resources to allow her to pursue post-graduate education. Her former colleagues cheered her on through text messages, e-mail, and Facebook until she completed her degree and found an exciting job in a district known for commitment to student achievement. As she began her career, she relied heavily on her PLN across the country and on her involvement in AASL and ALA. The AASLForum and ALA Connect online communities allowed her to connect with school librarians across the country committed to raising student achievement.

Visit Knowledge Quest Online at <www.ala.org/aasl/knowledgequest> to view the exclusive feature, “Content Curation and the School Librarian” by Nikki D. Robertson!
Her former colleagues met monthly as a district group and often remarked how critical it was to their continued professional development to have this monthly interaction with fellow librarians. This recommendation inspired Cindy to ask her principal why their district's librarians were not organized into a professional development group. The principal related the history of how the district library coordinator position had been folded into the district technology coordinator position and how this person with a particularly strong personality and a technology background had marginalized the district librarians’ group to the point that they no longer met. This circumstance further inspired Cindy to reach out to her fellow school librarians across the district. 

**A PLN Was Born**

Her principal, Diane, supported Cindy’s guerrilla tactics for forming a district librarians’ group. Diane encouraged Cindy to begin with an e-mail dialogue with her counterparts across the district while Diane garnered support for the group at the central office. Diane warned Cindy compensation for this district-wide effort was unlikely, but Cindy knew from her former colleagues that this activity was too important to her personal learning and longevity in the profession to worry about a stipend.

The e-mail blast began on a Tuesday morning. By Tuesday afternoon Cindy had heard back from all seventeen school librarians across the district. The responses were all positive, but they ranged from Brady’s total enthusiasm to Amy’s mild ambivalence. After a number of e-mail threads, the group decided that Cindy would approach the district’s director of instruction to ask for time during the next teacher-development workday for the librarians to meet face-to-face. With this approval in hand, the meeting date was set.

For the first meeting Cindy made an agenda that included low-key icebreakers and time for the group to brainstorm about what they would like the group to become. Out of the group of seventeen, eleven school librarians had heard of that state’s school library association, and only five were members. Cindy had anticipated this lack of involvement, so she brought promotional materials for the state school library association’s upcoming conference being held about an hour away the next month. She proposed, and the group agreed, that they would all go to the conference to meet face-to-face. With this approval in hand, the meeting date was set.

There are a number of ways to move from good to great, but the choice starts at the personal level. Do not forget to stay inspired personally while you work to inspire your building- and district-level colleagues.

**Look at All the Librarians!**

The state school library association conference attracted over two hundred school librarians. For most of the district’s librarians, this conference was the first time they had ever been a part of workshops that addressed issues of specific concern to school librarians. When the day was over, the group assembled before leaving the conference site. Cindy asked for feedback and found that Amy was the most transformed by the conference. She attended sessions on free databases, deep searching through Google, and building your own personal learning network through Twitter. She excitedly related what she had learned and found that three of the district’s librarians were already active Twitter users.

Brady was next to share. He was most affected by a session on collaboration among statewide groups to leverage buying power for technology, databases, and other library-related products. He learned that the state library association serving all library types has a technology round table with over forty members whose job or professional interest involves technology. Using his iPad during that session, he joined both the state school library association and the state library association, and volunteered to be on a committee for grant writing for the technology round table. It turned out many of the people in his collaboration session needed the tips for success in grant writing that Brady had used to help his school receive the highest concentration of technology in the district. Brady also remarked on how valuable it was to have so many technology vendors in one place at one time, allowing him to most conveniently compare products and prices.
Cindy took Brady’s discovery as the perfect segue to tell the group why she invested in her own personal learning network by being a member of both AASL and ALA. Though the volume of resources available to members was at times overwhelming, her memberships provided her with constant sources of new ideas to try in all areas of her school’s curriculum. She then shared about the wide range of opportunities her former colleagues had in their state. Her former colleagues have a highly functioning district group that includes members of the state school library association, as well as the state library association, AASL, and ALA. Whenever members of that district group attended a conference or professional meeting, they brought back resources to the group and debriefed each other on any new trends or best practices they found at the meeting. Cindy’s fledgling district group agreed that attending the conference had been an excellent decision and they should schedule a meeting soon to further define their group’s future.

**Blended PLN Success**

At the next face-to-face meeting of the district librarians, the group formally elected Cindy to lead the group in its first year. She then began by sharing how she constructed her personal learning network and then asked each librarian to share his/her own construction. While some were still in the planning stages, many had already found levels of personal learning that worked best for them. Many had joined Twitter and remarked how inspiring it was to follow leaders like Joyce Valenza and Kristin Fontichiaro. Others found RSS feeds to be the most engaging way to develop their networks, relying on legends like Doug Johnson and Buffy Hamilton. Still others, inspired by Brady’s comments after the state library association conference, found technology associations to join and were able to share a number of excellent resources their new memberships had allowed them to access. By allowing everyone’s diverse interests to inform their membership decisions and levels of involvement, Cindy and the group developed a haven for idea exchange and personal learning for the school librarians of the district. They went on to receive national recognition as an AASL School Library Program of the Year and used their award money to purchase resources to continue promoting student achievement in the district.

**Moral of the Story**

Now, as I finish my story, I hope you are inspired. So many personal-enrichment resources are at your fingertips with the help of AASL and ALA. We must remember to remind our district-level colleagues in whatever ways we can about the importance of building their own personal learning networks—the help for which they may have been searching is already here.

**Steven D. Yates** is a school librarian at Mountain Brook High School in Birmingham, Alabama. He is past president of the Alabama Library Association and a member of the AASL 2013 Annual Conference Committee.
School librarians are accustomed to their position as a unique species in their school environment. The ratio in a typical school is "everyone else" to one, or perhaps two. On the one hand, being not only the leader of the pack but the sum total of it is a point of pride, serving as "the one" to everyone else. Too frequently the unique position is also a source of frustration since the majority rules in resources, collegiality, and even professional growth. While the better-funded and better-informed school districts offer professional development targeted directly toward the needs of librarians and/or training in a collaborative setting with their teacher colleagues, too many school librarians continue to find themselves shuffled into the generic track on district-wide in-service days. Just how many times can a school librarian recertify in CPR during his or her career as an education professional?

Our move into a Web 2.0 world has changed our communication landscape entirely. Whereas Internet users once accessed the World Wide Web to locate information, with Web 2.0 we look—both personally and professionally—to technology for interaction, involvement, and immersion in the world community. School librarians literally have the knowledge of the world at their fingertips, but they also have access to collaboration, resource-sharing, professional development, troubleshooting, best practices, and the support of a community of their own species—access that was previously nonexistent.

Professional learning communities (PLCs), colleague-driven groups of educators who generally meet...
and collaborate in person and on a local level, are vital to improving student achievement and impacting school learning. Professional/personal learning networks (PLNs) have taken PLCs to the next logical level by creating an online world of communities literally without borders. The communities merge into networks through which school librarians and educators can travel seamlessly, at their own pace, and address their unique needs and interests.

Lesa’s Story

Lesa Parker is a high school librarian in rural northwest Alabama. She works in a low socioeconomic school district in a state that continues to struggle with a major funding crisis for education. In Lesa’s district, as in much of Alabama, the schools receive little or no local financial support, relying primarily on state funding. In her situation, there has been no state library funding for the past half-decade. Lesa has had to rely on fundraising, donations, and grant writing to support her program. Professional development is paid mostly from her personal income.

Lesa’s professional circumstances are representative of a large subpopulation of the students in the School Library Media Master’s and Educational Specialist programs at the University of West Alabama, a rural university located in the southwestern region of the state. Lesa earned her MLIS at the University of Alabama in a face-to-face setting. She then opted to complete her Education Specialist degree in School Library Media online at UWA. Participating in a virtually delivered graduate program gave Lesa the confidence and skills to join the larger online community of library and educator colleagues. The Web 2.0 gateway also increased her interest and personal investment in the profession. While completing her EdS online, Lesa also achieved credentials as a National Board Certified Teacher, travelling two hours from her home each month to attend mentoring sessions. She quickly learned the value of online networking.

Emphasizing that her online university experience gave her a much-needed “confidence boost” to join the world of PLNs, Lesa completed online training to become a certified NBCT candidate-support provider. Lesa recalls, “While I was taking this class online, the tornadoes of April 27, 2011 destroyed parts of our county and disrupted Internet service for days. I drove an hour to Tupelo, Mississippi, to e-mail the instructor about what had happened. Not only was she extremely understanding, she sent a message to my fellow ‘classmates,’ several of whom sent donations to the libraries of the schools that were destroyed. My virtual classmates became supporters and friends in a very real-world way.”

As a result of her early online experiences, through YALSA Lesa has become a virtual mentor to a student in an LIS program. While there appears to be no real “work” involved other than communicating regularly with her mentee, Lesa explains that “it takes structure to guide someone through ‘real life experiences’ when you have never met them.” Lesa’s mentee, who lives hundreds of miles from rural Alabama, graduated with her MLIS and is now a middle school librarian in Maryland. Lesa admits having a sense of accomplishment from having mentored a newcomer to the profession.

Lesa emphasizes that becoming a better professional through participation in professional learning networks takes commitment.

While to colleagues she appears to be “surfing the net,” Lesa is accessing valuable resources, both technological and human, that not only increase her professional knowledge but also bolster her confidence, offer constructive feedback, advise and encourage, network and, of course, “friend.” “Before I completed my EdS online, I had never participated in any type of online experience. My degree completion was a springboard into joining the professional learning networks available without a long drive and much personal expense. It just seemed like a natural progression after my initial—and successful—online experiences.”

Lesa admits that, online, she is still more comfortable as a “lurker” than participant, but she is a member of several listservs (among them LM_NET, a worldwide listserv for school librarians), and monitors professional blogs and library groups. She gains valuable information and leads on free resources that help her to operate a quality school library program despite a severe lack of funding. Through professional learning networks, Lesa learned of several of the grants she has successfully written. This grant information and other ideas on innovative librarianship gleaned from PLNs helped Lesa earn the honor of Julia Tutwiler Educator of the Year in School Library Media at UWA for 2012.

The University’s Role

Whether on-campus or online, LIS programs such as those at the University of West Alabama play a significant role in exposing and committing pre-service school librarians to lifelong professional learning. A primary method is introducing students early in the program to online resources.
and guiding students into the professional learning network stream. While online courses are delivered asynchronously, students communicate with classmates via course discussion boards and virtual presentations. They and their on-campus counterparts share in creating wikis and blogs, and in discussing best practices through these and other social media.

Reluctant at first to create a social presence in the virtual professional world, the majority of students comment by the end of their program that having access to the expertise and camaraderie of other members of their unique species has had a tremendous and lasting impact on their level of interest and investment in their profession. Pre-service librarians’ immersion into professional learning communities and professional learning networks begins early in the program, when they are required to complete a course in instructional technology.

Historically, the University’s instructional technologist focused on teaching users “how to” use multimedia software to create presentations for the classroom or “how to” search the Web for information. Today, educators can access YouTube with a few clicks of the mouse to find video tutorials on almost any subject, and “Just Google it” is a commonly used phrase. Educators no longer need an instructional technologist teaching them “how to” create a presentation, “how to” use a software program, or “how to” search the Web. Today’s instructional technologist’s role is to introduce pre-service school librarians and other educators to the wealth of tools available for collaboration, organization, and presentation by exposing them to new Web 2.0 tools, blogs, and social media such as Twitter and Facebook.

By requiring pre-service school librarians and other educators to read blogs, follow Twitter accounts, and access Facebook groups written by professionals in their content areas, and even to write blogs, tweets, and Facebook posts of their own, we are immersing pre-service school librarians and other future educators in the online world of professional learning networks. This virtual universe offers access to professional experts, providing the isolated librarian or the rural educator an opportunity to network with other professionals from all corners of the world. Our small microcosm of existence with its limited number of experts from which to learn has grown exponentially and is limited only by our willingness to become involved in these online professional networks.

Creating and Joining the Networks

Perhaps the guru of building learning communities and networks is Jeff Utecht, who maintains that engaging regularly with and learning from members of the education profession, wherever in the world they are, can only strengthen your knowledge, skills, and confidence to share what you have learned with your own students and colleagues, modeling for them and helping them to develop their own learning networks. Utecht’s self-published book Reach: Building Communities and Professional Development (2010) is recommended reading for pre-service/in-service librarians and their colleagues who decide to embark on the PLN journey. Utecht’s presence in the Web 2.0 world is far-reaching, and his blogs, wikis, and other social media “homes” are well worth the visit.

During their university training, future librarians immerse themselves almost immediately upon arrival. According to Utecht, deep and wide immersion and exploration is important in beginning the creation of your own learning network. Build your network from any and all of the blogs, wikis, tweets, and other online media that you find helpful, interesting, and important to your professional growth. Be willing to establish a social presence online. You will be amazed by how many paths of experts, authors, and other “famous” names you will cross and with whom you might find yourself in a collaborative relationship.

If you are a student, then, as part of your school library studies, seek out opportunities, and ask colleagues and your professors to introduce you to professional organizations that welcome student memberships—organizations such as ALA <www.ala.org>, AASL <www.ala.org/aasl>,
Be willing to establish a social presence online. You will be amazed by how many paths of experts, authors, and other “famous” names you will cross and with whom you might find yourself in a collaborative relationship.

and International Society for Technology in Education <www.iste.org>, among others. These organizations offer professional involvement and immersion as well as professional development via webinars (frequently at no cost) and other online means of delivery.

A particularly interesting group that posts links to free webinars is WebJunction <www.facebook.com/WebJunctionNews>. Another site, among many, that provides free professional development via webinar is edWeb.net <www.edweb.net/plc.html>, which even provides professional continuing education certificates.

Inquire about on-campus organizations and/or university electronic discussion lists available for pre-service and in-service librarians. Also consider adding world-renowned e-lists to your network, including LM_Net <http://lmnet.wordpress.com>.


In other social media, the library world is alive and very well on Facebook. Again, you will find most major library organizations are members of the community, including ALA, AASL, and ISTE. If you are a Twitter follower, all the major library organizations have a tweeting presence, including ALA (@ALA Booklist, @AtYourLibrary, and @ALATechsource). Additionally, you may share tweets with “famous” members of the profession including Stephen Anderson, Jeff Utecht, Joyce Valenza, Vicki Davis, Buffy Hamilton, and Gwyneth Jones, to name only a few. Another Twitter resource that offers librarians frequent updates as well as emerging resources is @liswire. For a list of school librarians on Twitter, access <http://listorious.com/ReadCloud/teacher-librarians>.

Pacing Yourself

School librarians, as with the population at large, approach technology with varying degrees of self-confidence and competence. It is the goal of the university LIS program to accept students where they are on the technology ladder and facilitate their climb. While many in the class will scale the ladder in an amazingly short time, others will test their steps rung by rung, perhaps reaching a secure plateau for a time before continuing the journey. The important point to remember, to twist a cliché, is that the climb is as least as valuable as the destination. By joining fellow travelers in professional learning networks, no matter what the variety of skills and levels involved, the climb will at least allow those isolated librarians go beyond yet another recertification in CPR.

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Reenay Rogers is an assistant professor and online liaison in the Department of Instructional Leadership and Support at the University of West Alabama. In addition to instructional technology, she also teaches educational research and statistics.

Lesa Parker is the librarian at her alma mater, Hamilton (AL) High School. She was previously director of the Winfield (AL) Public Library, and currently serves on the board of trustees for the Clyde Nix Public Library in Hamilton. She is a National Board Certified Teacher in Library Media.
FEATURE

VENDOR SUPPORT of PLNS

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Most, if not all, school librarians concur that funding has been our major problem in recent years. State and local budgets have been slashed, grant money is spread thin, yet still the bar remains high for school librarians to remain on the cutting edge of information trends, issues, and technology, and to provide training for teacher colleagues in our buildings. Vendors are among our greatest resources as we all work to reconcile this imbalance.

**Facilitating Events at the Local Level**

In Alabama many librarians are fortunate to have a strong relationship with a few choice vendors who truly go the extra mile to meet our needs. One example (of many) is David Burrow of Burrow Library Services. In addition to filling what limited orders we can place at this point, David and his wife Brenda also strive to plan workshops and events at which school librarians can acquire knowledge about emerging trends and resources related to our field.

Each year Burrow Library Services offers at least two professional-development sessions targeting school librarians. The sessions are designed with the newest trends in librarianship in mind, and are also responsive to needs assessments and evaluations from previous workshops. Obviously, vendors benefit from cultivating close relationships with school librarians, but the relationships are mutually advantageous as librarians are able to grow as professionals (at very low cost), and pass along new knowledge to fellow librarians and teachers in our districts and schools.

At these events, school librarians oftentimes have opportunities to network with one another to tap into the absolute best resource we have—one another! Whether it’s conferring with a “go-to” person on your school level over lunch or making an acquaintance new to
For those on the blogging circuit, using an individual or group blog to share information taken from the workshops can spread the resources much farther and wider than the limited audience in physical, real-time attendance at the events. If only one school librarian from a district can attend a workshop but then writes a reflective post for the blog created for all librarians in the district, those resources are shared effectively.

An additional way of sharing information and materials gained through attending vendor-sponsored events is in face-to-face settings. Many schools have formed curriculum-specific professional learning teams. The faculty members share leadership, giving everyone an opportunity to reciprocally teach and share what they have learned from events sponsored by vendors. The shared leadership allows team members to participate in the decision-making and lead in collaboration. As a result, all team members develop an interest in their own and their colleagues’ professional development.

Vendor sponsorship of conferences through direct contributions and renting exhibit booth space helps defray conference costs and enables more librarians to attend. Burrows Library Services and Follett Library Resources sponsor the Alabama School Library Association (ASLA) District 1 Fall Conference each year. Their sponsorship provides lunch for attendees and ensures a door-prize bag containing at least one new library book and other goodies for each person in attendance. Because of sponsorship by these vendors, conference expenses are significantly reduced, allowing the use of district funds to award grants to members. District 1 members may apply for grants to help fund library projects or to purchase books for their school libraries.

Another way to share information gained from vendor-sponsored workshops is to create subject- and grade-level-specific Web portals, and post them on the library or school website. Posting the information gives faculty direct links to information. While portals do provide links to information, they do not offer a way for input or collaboration. Creating a wiki provides a collaborative platform where all members can share and access resources and information gained from vendor-sponsored events.
Offering Webinars and Direct PLN Support

Many vendors offer professional-development in-service sessions onsite or via web-conferencing. Customized professional-development sessions provide a unique way for vendors to assist in building PLNs as the sessions link school librarians and faculty to experts in their fields. Vendors also provide information through webinars. Webinars provide the opportunity to expand PLNs as those attending exchange ideas and make new connections. At this writing, vendors are preparing their webinar offerings for the 2012–2013 school year. Contact sales reps or watch vendor websites, e-mail notices, and message boards for specific vendors’ information. Also consider the following:

• Follett Library Resources offers webinars about their resources. Registration information for the “Introduction to Titlewave” webinar can be found at <www.surveymonkey.com/s/YZ3CSJF>.

• Information about OCLC WorldCat webinars is at <www.oclc.org/worldcatlocal/support/registration.htm>. An archive of webinars that were offered by OCLC is at <www.oclc.org/research/events/webinars.htm>.

• edWeb <www.edweb.net> is a professional social network for educators; edWeb hosts many PLNs and free webinars. Sponsors like ATT Education and Follett, among others, enable edWeb to host free webinars.

Vendors also support PLNs through sponsorship of PLN sites and resources. For example, the Alabama Department of Education created ALEX, the Alabama Learning Exchange <http://alex.state.al.us/index.php>, to support and encourage PLNs in Alabama. ALEX depends on the support of both local sponsors, such as the University of Alabama at Birmingham, and national sponsors, like Thinkfinity and the Verizon Foundation, to maintain the site. ALEX houses lesson plans, podcasts, resources for a variety of PLNs, links to Web resources, state curriculum, and also provides personal workspaces for teachers. Additionally, ALEX hosts the Alabama Library Media Online site and online discussion list, providing school librarians across the state with a way to stay informed, collaborate, and network.

As school librarians strive to remain on the cutting edge and exceed expectations, vendors will remain a valuable asset. Whether through backchanneling, online conversations, webinars, or face-to-face training, librarians will continue to rely on vendors as a go-to source for information. In a 1997 speech to the American College of Trial Lawyers Phil Condit quoted a button a friend (a teacher) had given him: “None of us is as smart as all of us.” Within that statement is the strength of PLNs. Whether we participate in school-level curriculum teams or virtual networks that span the globe, we all have valuable expertise and knowledge to share and much to learn. Resources that vendors supply or support can help us share and learn.

Michelle Wilson is now serving at Hueytown (AL) Middle School after ten years of working with elementary students. She is a past president of the Alabama School Library Association, director-elect of Region V for AASL, and has recently been selected as recipient for the John & Ella McCain Award for Outstanding Leadership and Service to Colleagues (Jefferson County) as well as the Lois Henderson Award for Outstanding Contributions to Library Service and to ASLA (Alabama School Library Association).

Molly Ann Bates is the librarian for Russellville (AL) Middle School where she is also the Scholars’ Bowl Coach and instructional strategy trainer. She has been a school librarian for nine years and an educator for twelve years. She is the recipient of the 2012 Distinguished Service Award for School Librarians presented by the Alabama School Library Association.

Works Cited:

In the championship playoffs of professional learning tools, there is a clear-cut victor. Customizable, platform-agnostic, able to circumvent filters—both browser and network-imposed—what professional learning tool is the best? RSS! RSS!

**Wendy Stephens**
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Why RSS?

Are your browser bookmarks littered with all the great sites you mean to visit? Do you find yourself forgetting about entire blogs for years at a time? Imagine aggregating your colleagues’ Twitter updates, your friends’ Flickr photostreams, and your children’s Tumblr and Posterous microblog feeds in a single place, with any updates to any of those sites passed along to you instantly and transparently.

Reading sites via RSS has appeal for those of us who want the raw information. The experience might feel less like Web 2.0 and more like a Usenet forum or a text-based e-mail client, but the ability to read your chosen information sources across platforms in a lowest-common-denominator format removes much of the work from keeping up professionally.

RSS feeds are built on XML, the musculature that underpins the Web, an invisible layer that makes sites with updates work across platforms and devices. Marcella Genz, my cataloging professor at the University of Alabama, prophesied about the end of MARC as a record for description more than a decade ago. The future, as she saw it, was in the Dublin Core and in the flexibility offered through XML metadata. XML has changed my life, enabling me to keep current—on my own terms—with my personal and professional reading, and in touch with friends around the world. The ability of XML to enable the transfer of data, regardless of content, makes it both elegant and powerful. Since much is stripped out to make sites accessible for so many reader apps, the interface is correspondingly spare, forgoing much of the visual noise of the Web. For people overwhelmed by the multiple sites you must monitor for both personal and professional news, a couple of hours spent subscribing to and organizing RSS feeds might end up being an investment in 21st-century sanity.

I worked from 1996 to 1998 as a weather producer for a local television station, where I experienced access to subscription news feeds. That’s the only thing to rival the incredibly vibrant, always-updating landscape of knowledge crafted within my RSS readers. It’s an intoxicating flow of information. Other mechanisms are evolving to tap into that firehose, which is now filtered and delivered largely through purpose-built applications. But the stock ticker and sports updates are just the tip of the iceberg. Using a robust, independent piece of software will enable developing individualized current-awareness mechanisms.

The identification and accessing of a changing range of information sources demonstrate our own developing resiliency as learners, exemplifying the importance of continued growth. And the immediacy of the reader updates is addictive in and of itself. Because many sites delay their social-media updates, it becomes entirely possible to read about something big via RSS before it hits a Twitter feed.

Choosing an RSS Client

The real heavyweights among cloud-based reader services seem to be Netvibes and Google Reader (and some people built Google Reader pages unknowingly when they added widgets to their iGoogle accounts, or followed blogs through the Blogger interface). Bloglines was another favorite, until it went defunct.

Numerous readers have been devised to be optimized within browsers, but do be forewarned that, especially in networked environments, browser updates might force you to re-subscribe from scratch, so keep a backup of your feeds. One limitation to be aware of involves general non-compliance for Flash, though that is less of an issue as more sites avoid Flash because of the uptick in iOS mobile access.

As someone who has transitioned from a locally installed RSS client to two successive web-based ones, I can attest that the RSS reader software itself is somewhat immaterial. Good interfaces will have tools for identifying particulars about the feed, exemplifying how often it is updated. Other features like navigation using keyboard commands can help you read even more feeds in less time. You will want to get to know those features for whatever reader you choose. The ability to “save” favorite posts within a reader is a useful feature; see figure 1.

And be ready to take your RSS feeds and jump ship. Fortunately, most...
RSS readers make it easy to export and import your subscriptions, another nice feature of XML. Like any free product, the web-based readers have their own agendas. In an attempt to move users towards the Google+ social networking platform, Google Reader recently stopped sharing within the reader, which was unfortunate as I had found some of my most interesting feeds that way.

**Finding Feeds**

How do you populate your reader with subscriptions? Well, once you start noticing them, the orange RSS icons appear everywhere. And RSS helps you think about publications and authorship in new ways. You can follow an entire publication, but the specificity of RSS allows you to follow a writer, a section, a particular tag. If you have a particular interest in a story, you can follow the comments (or even a particular commenter) via RSS. My own reader contains hundreds of feeds, ranging from cartoons to street art to interiors and other areas of personal interest, as well as the more predictable news and publishing and library resources; see figure 2. Whenever you see the RSS icon, you can hover with your cursor and copy the shortcut rather than opening the hyperlink to navigate to another page.

To subscribe, most reader software applications make it easy to copy-and-paste the RSS feed, or even detect a feed from a blog or other XML-compliant website. Like one particular podcast but always forget to download it from iTunes? Have it pop into your RSS reader whenever a new podcast episode is available. Want to keep up with new titles? Subscribe to the review feed from one of the major publications. You can follow publications that you can’t even purchase locally, and often can read the articles before the stories hit the presses. But don’t forget about bloggers and independent media. One advantage of using a feed reader is a subversion of the usual playing field in an electronic environment. When you access the Web via RSS, niche publications get the same reach and treatment as do major media outlets. Browser plug-ins can create RSS feeds from even non-XML compliant webpages, so you’ll be alerted to new content. And for sites with only occasional but important updates, RSS is an excellent way to be sure you catch any changes. You can also save a Google News alert as an RSS feed. Don’t be surprised if colleagues become convinced you have extrasensory perception. Bundling and sharing your favorite education-related feeds and individual posts via RSS can share the excitement.

**Building Your Own Filter Bubble**

With a well-honed professional learning network delivering itself via your RSS reader, the chore of monitoring a diverse array of blogs and websites becomes a luxurious learning experience. And since using RSS allows you to personalize your news consumption so precisely, it is entirely possible to excise the mainstream media (if not the blowback from those new stories). As information professionals, we esteem balance, and as we create our own filters, we must maintain awareness of the limitations of our filters, too. Modeling an efficient and productive way to manage professional awareness while taming information overload will give your faculties something to aspire toward.

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**For people overwhelmed by the multiple sites you must monitor for both personal and professional news, a couple of hours spent subscribing to and organizing RSS feeds might end up being an investment in 21st-century sanity.**

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**Wendy Stephens** is a high school librarian and district media coordinator in Cullman, Alabama. She is also a doctoral candidate at the University of North Texas.
Making the Most of Professional Learning Communities

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As more and more schools implement professional learning communities (PLCs), school librarians often ask: What is the role of school librarians in PLCs? What should we be doing to contribute? What are my colleagues in other schools doing?

In this article we explore these questions by first describing eight potential roles for school librarians as members of PLCs: information specialist, staff developer, teacher and collaborator, critical friend, leader, researcher, learner, and student advocate. Then we report the findings of a research study conducted by one of the authors; the study examined what school librarians are actually doing in PLCs, as well as the barriers that prevent their full participation. Our goal is to help school librarians make the most of PLCs.

Visit Knowledge Quest Online at <www.ala.org/aasl/knowledgequest> to register for the “Making the Most Out of Professional Learning Communities” webinar based on this feature! It takes place December 12 at 7:00 PM EST.

The Science PLC at Mulberry High School is concerned about the inability of many of their ninth-graders to comprehend the textbook. During one of the PLC meetings Hal, the school librarian, offers to identify some articles and books the team can read to help them better understand the reading processes involved in comprehending nonfiction texts. Prior to the next meeting, Hal creates a wiki that contains an annotated bibliography of recommended books and articles, as well as a description of some of the most common strategies recommended by experts in the field of reading education.

The most obvious role for school librarians is information specialist. As a member of the content area PLCs, the school librarian is in a prime position to be asked to gather information for the group, or to be proactive and suggest that gaps in student learning might be better addressed if the PLC considered some current research on teaching and learning. Being an information specialist should not stop at simply compiling a list of resources. By taking time to read, analyze, and synthesize the literature, the school librarian can “jump start” the discussion and also determine how the school library program might support the PLCs’ efforts to address particular challenges. Coming to a PLC meeting with strategies and ideas already formulated helps to strengthen the connection between the school library program and student learning.

In May the School Improvement Team at Hartley Middle School decided that a primary goal for the upcoming school year would be to incorporate more Web 2.0 tools into teaching and learning at the school. Liam, the school librarian, and Vanessa, the technology facilitator, volunteered to take the lead on helping the faculty and administrators understand the opportunities and challenges of achieving this goal. Before school started Liam and Vanessa consulted with several of the content-area PLC leaders to develop a staff-development plan. Liam and Vanessa decided to hold a workshop on one of the staff-development days prior to the beginning of school to introduce the initiative. They also created a wiki that would serve as a place for teachers to share their successes, collaborate with their colleagues, and work through their challenges. Throughout the year the duo planned to meet regularly with each PLC to identify members’ specific needs and to help design appropriate instructional experiences.

When schools adopt the PLC model, staff development becomes an ongoing job-embedded conversation focused on pushing teachers to act in different ways and to make changes in their practice that improve student learning (DuFour 2004).
Staff development in this context is focused, sustained, collaborative, and results-oriented. This perspective opens up a myriad of opportunities for school librarians to provide ongoing, personalized, just-in-time staff development.

The differences between this kind of staff development and the traditional staff development school librarians are often asked to provide are striking. Ongoing, focused support, as described in the vignette, allows time for discussion, observation, and reflection, thus increasing the teachers’ capacity to use technology in authentic ways to achieve the school’s instructional goals.

Furthermore, the use of the wiki coupled with the fact that the school librarian and technology facilitator move between PLCs, sharing what has worked and hasn’t worked, strengthens the collaborative culture of the school, builds teacher capacity, and helps sustain improvements in support for students’ learning.

Although the fixed schedule at Mei-Lin’s elementary school library prevents her from attending grade-level PLC meetings, she is able to stay informed and collaborate with teachers because each team is required to post agendas, meeting minutes, and action items to the school intranet.

When Mei-Lin plans library instruction, she bases it on each grade-level team’s goals, employs strategies teachers report as working most effectively with their students, and designs assessment tools that yield data that can be used to make informed decisions about teaching and learning.

Via e-mail she shares her unit plans with each PLC team leader and also posts them to the intranet for additional teacher input. When she completes a unit, in addition to posting the assessment data to the intranet, she schedules a meeting with the PLC team leader to discuss the unit and assessment data.

The reality of many school districts’ budgets and organizational structures, as well as misperceptions about the roles of school librarians, make implementing collaborative planning and flexible scheduling difficult for many elementary school librarians. However, as the vignette demonstrates, the PLC structure with its emphasis on shared responsibility for student achievement and open communication makes it possible for school librarians, regardless of the library schedule, to align instruction in the library to classroom learning goals and to do it in a collaborative, although not ideal, way. By capitalizing on the record-keeping requirements of PLCs, using curriculum maps, sharing unit plans and assessment results electronically for back-and-forth dialogue, and meeting with the PLC team leader, school librarians are able to move from library lessons that are tangential or irrelevant, to those that are directly tied to the school’s educational goals and priorities.

Another potential benefit of responding proactively and creatively to the challenge of fixed scheduling is that teachers and administrators see the school librarian as a teaching partner in meeting the school’s strategic learning goals and are more likely to recognize the educational value of alternative scheduling models.
At Anne’s school, all of the sixth-, seventh- and eighth-grade students are separated into teams with two to four teachers per team.

When working with an entire grade level on a project, the beginning team usually blazes the trail for the other teams. One semester, the sixth-grade social studies teachers developed a RAFT project where the students choose a Role, Audience, Format, and Topic. Allen, the head of the first team, worked with Anne, the school librarian, to plan the project. As the unit progressed they used a rubric to assess the students’ progress and the effectiveness of the plan. They also gathered feedback from the students.

At the end of the project, they met to discuss and debrief: to discuss what worked, what could be improved, and what needed to be eliminated from the project next time. Based on their conversation, Allen and Anne decided that the students needed more direct instruction on creating inquiry-based research questions. They also realized that the strategies they had developed to differentiate for multiple learning styles and abilities needed refining. Anne and Allen’s reflections helped them make corrections for the next team’s implementation of the project.

To promote and improve student learning, educators “must be able to make mistakes and grow from them in front of their colleagues and their supervisors” (Zmuda and Harada 2008, 35).

PLCs not only provide a framework and space for educators, including school librarians, to embed reflective practice into their daily work, PLCs demand ongoing reflection.

As shown in this vignette, working collaboratively to examine what is and is not working at various times during the unit provides the means for continuous improvement for student learning. This reflection also allows the school librarian to improve the quality of collaborative efforts and to hone professional relationships in the school. Partnering with one teacher may begin the process of continuing a model of collaboration and reflection across the grade levels for all content-area teachers. This reflective practice benefits the students, and builds stronger teacher and school librarian partnerships, thus strengthening the prospects for future collaboration.

Lia is currently the chair of the sixteen-member School Improvement Team (SIT) at Williams High School. The SIT is responsible for establishing school-wide goals concerning student growth. The goals address any gaps or problem areas that show up in student data.

Lia facilitates the SIT monthly meetings, and leads the team in collecting and analyzing data, developing action items, and implementing changes. She works closely with the principal to make sure information is communicated in a timely manner and that deadlines are met.

Taking on the role of chairperson for a PLC, as Lia has done, provides a school librarian with the opportunity to build relationships and influence change. By facilitating discussions within PLCs about data, student growth, standards, assessment, and other concerns, school librarians increase their overall knowledge of the instructional process, build relationships that support planning and partnering with grade-level PLCs, and demonstrate the connection between the school library program and student learning.

School librarians taking on leadership roles also gain confidence in their leadership skills and in their ability to lead discussions about critical instructional issues at the school, district, and even state level.
Sustained Silent Reading (SSR) has been a critical component of literacy instruction at Percy Academy since the school began ten years ago. Since then, teacher turnover has been high and some of the newer teachers have begun to question the need for SSR.

Andrea and Terry, the school librarians, work with the English Language Arts PLC on an action research project aimed at determining the value of SSR for the school community. They develop a survey, conduct interviews, and analyze the scores on the End-of-Grade Reading Proficiency tests to gather evidence that will help the school community make an informed, evidence-based decision about whether to continue SSR.

As the vignette shows, action research requires educators to move beyond anecdotes, guesswork, and hunches, and to systematically examine their practice to assess its impact on student learning and to plan more effective instruction—a central goal of PLCs. Engaging in action research, especially in partnership with other teachers, establishes school librarians as leaders in teaching and learning, and demonstrates to the community the value that school libraries bring to learning and achievement (Todd 2003). Engaging in action research also offers school librarians the opportunity to hone their own research skills, thus modeling the research process to their colleagues and to students (Gordon 2007).

Continuous learning is a hallmark of professionalism in any field, especially one devoted to learning (McTighe 2008, 6). As the vignette demonstrates, effective school librarians use the supporting structure of role-alike PLCs to “invest the time to carefully examine what research says about real learning” (Harada 2010, 18) and to continuously transform their library programs into productive and successful places of learning for students.

Miguel and five other school librarians in his district have formed a PLC they call “Learning Team Middle.” The six of them meet monthly after school to discuss issues related to teaching and learning.

This year they focused on two related topics: school librarians’ responses to the implementation of the Common Core, and how they can better promote inquiry.

At their end-of-the-year meeting the district supervisor informed them that next year each of them will be partnered with a language arts teacher and included in professional development focused on 21st-century skills, the Common Core, and standardizing research skills.

Continuous learning is a hallmark of professionalism in any field, especially one devoted to learning (McTighe 2008, 6). As the vignette demonstrates, effective school librarians use the supporting structure of role-alike PLCs to “invest the time to carefully examine what research says about real learning” (Harada 2010, 18) and to continuously transform their library programs into productive and successful places of learning for students.
Effective school librarians approach continuous learning in a number of ways.

Sometimes they become actively engaged in school librarian PLCs that are sponsored and supported by the district. In other cases, they form their own librarian PLCs that meet after school hours. In all cases, they recognize that ongoing inquiry and learning with their colleagues are critical to building and strengthening their own capacities to respond to school-reform initiatives and to develop quality learning experiences for students. Many school librarians also actively develop online personal learning networks that include colleagues from around the country in exploring and sharing new ideas.

As the vignette suggests, when school librarians participate in district-wide role-alike PLCs they are often recognized as leaders by school district personnel and are selected to be part of initiatives usually reserved for classroom teachers or administrators.

One of the benefits of organizing a school into PLCs is the opportunity they provide for the staff to “provide context to each other about what they have come to know about the learner” (Zmuda and Harada 2008, 53). While classroom teachers understand the issues in their own classrooms and in their PLCs, school librarians have a wider view of the school and can use that view to advocate for students, whether this advocacy is about teaching or learning as illustrated in this vignette, or about other issues such as bullying.

PLCs establish relationships of trust and comfort, making members feel free to share information across PLCs, to talk honestly about student needs, and to offer critical suggestions for better practice that will support all students.

The Specialist PLC at Shelia’s school includes the English Language Learner and special education teachers, reading specialist, school counselor, technology facilitator, and her (the school librarian).

Participation in these meetings has deepened Shelia’s understanding of research related to differentiated instruction and learning styles, and the social and emotional needs of specific children at her school. She not only incorporates this knowledge into her own teaching, but she also suggests alternative strategies at content-area PLC meetings to ensure that all children are successful learners.

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Actual Roles

The vignettes presented offer specific ways school librarians can make the most of PLCs. But what are school librarians actually doing as members of PLCs? In 2011 Amanda Brasfield invited subscribers to AASLForum and LM_NET to participate in an online survey that asked about their experiences with PLCs. Some portion of the survey was completed by 210 participants; 169 completed the entire survey. The respondents were, on average, experienced school librarians with a mean career length of 12.4 years. They were evenly distributed across grade levels, and represented a range of school sizes and student demographics.

1 This section is an abridged version of Amanda L. Brasfield’s Master’s thesis (2011).

Participation in PLCs varied with 42 percent reporting that PLC participation was optional, 39 percent that PLC involvement was mandatory, and 19 percent that there were no PLCs at their schools. Of the respondents who reported optional PLC participation, 57 percent indicated that they belonged to at least one PLC at their schools. School librarians with five to nine years of experience, as well as those with flexible scheduling, were the groups most likely to participate in PLCs. Librarians working in high school libraries were more likely to participate in PLCs than their elementary or middle school counterparts. Table 1 shows the PLCs in which the librarians reported active participation. Seventy-four percent also indicated that they participate in a librarian PLC.

Table 1. Types of PLCs within their schools to which librarians belong (n = 110).

As table 2 shows, when asked what tasks they perform as members of PLCs, respondents indicated that the most frequently performed tasks involved acting as an information specialist, and the

Table 2. Percentage of respondents selecting “often” or “sometimes” for PLC tasks (n = 110).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PLC TASK</th>
<th>OFTEN/SOMETIMES PERCENTAGE</th>
<th>AFFILIATED ROLE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Provide knowledge to PLC members by providing relevant professional literature and research</td>
<td>84%</td>
<td>INFORMATION SPECIALIST</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Take responsibility for extra assignments from the PLC, above and beyond what is normally expected</td>
<td>76%</td>
<td>LEADER</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help teachers integrate technology into their instruction</td>
<td>74%</td>
<td>INFORMATION SPECIALIST</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide honest, positive, and/or critical feedback to PLC members regarding instruction or planning</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>CRITICAL FRIEND/REFLECTIVE LEARNER</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prepare for meetings by reading professional literature to anticipate topics or “jump start” conversation</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>INFORMATION SPECIALIST</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coplan a unit with teacher(s) in a PLC</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>COLLABORATOR &amp; TEACHING PARTNER</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offer alternative teaching strategies or assessment strategies to address different learning styles or needs</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>STUDENT ADVOCATE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teach a portion of a unit coplanned with a teacher</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>TEACHER AND COLLABORATOR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide mini-lessons or training to a PLC at their request to address a specific need</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>STAFF DEVELOPER</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meet with the PLC after completion of a collaboratively taught unit to refine lessons/make adjustments to the unit plan for the future</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>CRITICAL FRIEND/REFLECTIVE LEARNER</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Create assessment(s) with a PLC</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>TEACHER AND COLLABORATOR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Set the agenda for a PLC meeting</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>LEADER</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
least-performed tasks were those related to staff developer. The librarians at urban schools and those with schools with greater than 50 percent eligible for free/reduced-price lunch were more likely than their peers to report performing tasks related to the student-advocate role.

When respondents were asked to indicate what they perceive to be the biggest obstacles to PLC participation, the top two were “time” (46 percent) and “demands of the media center” (38 percent). Of the respondents 24 percent also believed a lack of familiarity with potential librarian roles in PLCs was an obstacle while 17 percent cited a lack of administrative support, and 11 percent saw fixed scheduling as a problem.

Other obstacles included lack of interest (7 percent), lack of past success (3 percent), and lack of confidence (2 percent). Responses to the “other obstacles” category included non-acceptance of librarians in teacher PLCs and the demands of covering classes while the teachers participated in PLCs.

**Conclusion**

As the above discussion shows, school librarians can and are performing a variety of roles as members of PLCs. While obstacles to librarians’ participation exist, many of the obstacles can be overcome through persistent, assertive, and confident advocacy with district and school-based administrators, teachers, and parents (Gilmore-See 2010, 116). When school librarians actively participate in PLCs they are able to engage in collaborative planning and teaching, promote inquiry, participate in reflective practice, and become effective change agents—all roles encouraged by the AASL national guidelines.

We are firm believers in the power of school librarians to play central roles in PLCs; to help rethink, reshape, and revise what learning looks like; and to transform school library programs to ensure that all children succeed. We challenge school librarians not to wait for others to define their roles in PLCs, but to identify and take personal steps to move the PLC process forward in their schools and districts.

**Works Cited:**


So, as school librarians we’ve documented our effectiveness, met with our administrators, and received our summative evaluation. What do we do with the data? What do we do with our ratings? We use the data collected to drive our professional growth.
Teacher observation and teacher evaluation are given in our schools, and Charlotte Danielson’s work in teacher effectiveness and professional practice has guided evaluation efforts for many years. There is a new, big kid in town, however. As Race to the Top requires documentation of student growth and research shows that teacher effectiveness is a key factor in student learning, we see full implementation of performance-based teacher–evaluation systems in states and school districts across the nation. The goal of performance-based teacher evaluation is actually two-fold: first, to document teacher effectiveness and, second, to guide professional growth. We mustn’t lose sight of the second goal, professional growth, in our focus on the first; in fact, teacher effectiveness is a logical outcome of quality professional growth. Well-prepared teachers fully involved in professional learning are more effective teachers.

The National Comprehensive Center for Teacher Quality (n.d.) asserts that it is critical that we align teacher evaluation with professional learning. If we are to generate greater teaching effectiveness, we must focus on several factors: shared understanding of effective practice in our schools and in our teaching, evidence-based feedback that documents the job that we do, and credit in the evaluation process for learning and collaboration. If we are to link teacher evaluation and learning, we must provide high-quality professional-growth opportunities for teachers, professional-growth opportunities that are strategically based on evaluation feedback.

Looking across the nation, states are at various stages in the development and implementation of performance-based teacher evaluation for school librarians. For example, Ohio has just begun the process of developing a state-wide school librarian evaluation (Harper 2012). Missouri spent the last year developing new standards and a continuum of performance expectations for school librarians (Antrim 2012). North Carolina has developed new professional standards for school library media coordinators (school librarians) and will have a new performance-based evaluation instrument ready for use by January 2014 (North Carolina Dept. of Public Instruction n.d.). Tennessee, in its first to the Top efforts, has instituted the Tennessee Educator Acceleration Model (TEAM), which includes school librarians and involves “a combination of frequent observation, constructive feedback, student data and meaningful professional development” (Tennessee Dept. of Ed. n.d.). When the formative performance-based assessment system EDUCATEAlabama was introduced in Alabama in 2009, a group of librarians worked with the state’s Department of Education to revise the continuum to create the EDUCATEAlabama Continuum of Practice for Librarians (Starkey n.d.). Librarians self-assess on indicators that encompass the state’s teaching standards and select two to five of these indicators to address in their Professional Learning Plans (PLPs) (EDUCATEAlabama 2011).

In Virginia, our Guidelines for Uniform Performance Standards and Evaluation Criteria for Teachers are in effect as of July 1, 2012. Based on these Guidelines for Uniform Professionalism and Student Progress are to be evaluated on seven standards: Professional Knowledge, Instructional Planning, Instructional Delivery, Assessment of and for Student Learning, Learning Environment, Professionalism, and Student Academic Progress (Virginia Dept. of Ed. 2011). Evaluations will be based on a preponderance of evidence from multiple data sources: observations, both formal and informal; student surveys; portfolios/document logs; self-evaluation; and student achievement.

To determine an overall rating of Unacceptable, Developing/Needs Improvement, Proficient, or Exemplary on each standard, evaluators use sample performance indicators and the four-point performance rubric. Based on the four-point rubric, an experienced teacher is expected to perform at the Proficient level; Exemplary is to be noted as truly exemplary. In the larger scheme of things, each of the first six standards (Professional Knowledge, Instructional Planning, Instructional Delivery, Assessment of and for Student Learning, Learning Environment, and Professionalism) is weighted at 10 percent toward the summative evaluation; Student Academic Progress is weighted at 40 percent toward the summative evaluation.

Now What?

So, as school librarians we’ve documented our effectiveness, met with our administrators, and received our summative evaluation. What do we do with the data? What do we do with our ratings? We use the data collected to drive our professional growth. Working toward continuous improvement, we closely examine standards at which we are rated Proficient and identify what is needed to...
As school librarians, we often fly solo in our buildings. Most schools contain multiple English teachers, multiple math teachers, multiple fourth-grade teachers, but usually just one librarian. To survive and thrive professionally, therefore, we’ve had to build personal learning networks (PLNs). When I first became a school librarian in 1980, my PLN consisted of librarians in my school district; as I grew professionally and became involved in my state organization, my PLN expanded to colleagues in my state. I wholeheartedly embraced LM_NET in the 1990s and the AASLForum when it was created. I was connected!

Fast forward another decade or so, and we have Web 2.0 tools through which we can connect. In his blog post “Personal Learning Networks for Educators: 10 Tips” Mark Wagner’s first four tips are Connect, Contribute, Converse, and Request (2012). Wagner argues that we must actually connect with people in our PLNs—that reading, listening, and watching are not enough; that we must contribute and share our experiences and expertise; that we must participate in conversations to develop relationships; and that we can then make requests. As librarians we have an abundance of tools to use as part of our PLNs to facilitate professional growth. We can make use of older tools such as e-mail and listservs to accomplish these activities as well as our newer Web 2.0 tools. We can regularly read blogs of school library professionals, and we can follow via Twitter. In her “PLN Starter Kit” Jennifer LaGarde (2012) provides librarians with excellent links to both blogs and Twitter accounts. We have Nings for school librarians, and webinars abound. AASL has just opened eCOLLAB, a collection of webcasts, podcasts, and other resources from professional-development events, allowing us to immediately connect with and learn from experts in our field.

How then do we effectively use our PLNs as part of our professional growth plans? We must be specific, strategic, and deliberate. Using data from our summative evaluations to determine areas in which we need to grow, we must be specific and focused on our area of need. Next, we must be strategic; we must choose and connect with those who evidence best practice in this area. Finally, we must be deliberate. We must be completely committed to the validity of using our PLNs in this manner. Most likely, those who evaluate us will not be experts in the field of school librarianship. We may have to convince them that working through our PLNs will provide the most appropriate targeted learning opportunities for us.
From Theory into Practice

Let’s suppose I am a school librarian in Virginia, and my summative evaluation indicates that I need improvement for Standard 4: Assessment of and for Student Learning. I carefully examine the performance indicators under this standard to determine what I need to do to improve. I focus on the following:

- 4.3 Uses a variety of formative and summative assessments that are valid and appropriate for the content and students, and
- 4.7 Uses student achievement data to assess the effectiveness of instruction and adjust teaching (Virginia Dept. of Ed. 2011, 10).

I know that Empowering Learners: Guidelines for School Library Programs (AASL 2009) suggests regular assessment of student learning, but perhaps this entire concept of assessment in the school library is something new to me, and I’m not sure exactly where to begin. I may post some queries on my state list serv, LM_NET, and AASLForum. My colleagues direct me to the work of Vi Harada <http://www2.hawaii.edu/~vharada/Books.htm>. I read her Assessing for Learning: Librarians and Teachers as Partners (2010) and find not only ideas about what to assess but also sample checklists and rubrics that I can use.

I’d also go to Kristin Fontichiaro’s blog at School Library Monthly <http://blog.schoollibrarymedia.com/index.php/category/assessment> and read everything she’s posted there in the category of Assessment. I find posts that deal with inquiry, and formative and summative assessment. I write the use of these tools into my professional growth plan.

I’d connect with Buffy Hamilton’s Unquiet Librarian blog and find that in one of her posts on assessment she has forms to share best practices/examples and links to results/responses—more helpful material for me to use <http://theunquietlibrarian.wikispaces.com/assessment>. I’d then use what I’d found to write my goals for my professional-learning plan. Through my actions, I’ve been specific (focused on the area in which I need to grow), strategic (used my connections to identify best practice), and deliberate (used what I’ve discovered to set appropriate learning goals for myself).

As school librarians, we are connected educators. Our personal learning networks are rich and deep. In this time of performance-based evaluation, we can use our PLNs strategically for professional growth.

Audrey Church is an associate professor of school library media at Longwood University in Farmville, Virginia. She is the author of Leverage Your Library Program to Raise Test Scores (Linworth 2003), “The Instructional Role of Library Media Specialists as Perceived by Elementary School Principals” (SLMR 2008), and “Secondary School Principals’ Perceptions of the School Librarian’s Instructional Role” (SLMR 2010). She currently serves as the Educators of School Librarians Section representative to the AASL Board of Directors.

Works Cited:


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USING YOUR PLN

TO BUILD SUPPORT FOR

THE SCHOOL LIBRARY PROGRAM
In my small school district of about 1,450 students and over 150 staff members, I am considered a local expert on all things social media. I have a minor presence on many of the social-media platforms including Twitter, Blogger, Pinterest, and Edmodo, and more accounts that I can remember. Interacting daily with my personal learning network (PLN) is part of my operating system now, but it wasn’t always that way.

My mentor and coach for my introduction to social media was not a library colleague, but a math teacher with an interest in educational technology. He helped me set up my self-paced training with digital learning, starting with educational blogs and RSS (Really Simple Syndication). Later on he demonstrated the power of Twitter connections and recommended a few accounts to follow. My original intention was to just throw my line into the vast pool of resources to fish for great links that I could share with the staff and students in my K–12 district. My expectations were fairly modest. However, after lurking for awhile and observing the amazing synergy between the wide variety of blogs and tweets in my network, I started wondering if I might get more out of it by participating myself. The question was: What could I have to share that could possibly be of interest to anyone else? The answer was: more than I might think. And what gave me the courage to share? The realization that what is obvious to me is amazing to others.

And what gave me the courage to share? The realization that what is obvious to me is amazing to others.

Because I have always published examples of student work and maintained a strong Web presence in my school district, starting to share links on Twitter and on blogs was easy. Commenting on blogs became something I now felt qualified to do. During a period when I was feeling professionally fatigued and a bit stagnated, the interaction with my PLN stimulated my creativity and reenergized my practice. I found the synergy highly motivating.

Being the only school librarian in my district was still a challenge, but I didn’t feel alone anymore. My colleagues weren’t limited to those I might see at meetings once or twice a year. Suddenly, I had access to the expertise and sometimes even the personal attention of those I admired and followed.

For example, when Library Journal’s list of “Movers and Shakers” came out in 2010, I added Ernie Cox (@erniec) to my list of Twitter “follows.” We used our 140-character tweets to discuss a few topics of mutual interest, like whether to commit resources to doing annual inventories. Months later, Ernie actually ended up relocating to a spot within minutes of my school; while we have been able to meet face to face, we still use our PLN tools to communicate and plan collaborative projects. And because of another PLN link, I consider a 2011 “Mover and Shaker” John Schumacher (@mrschureads) a valued colleague. As a result of Twitter discussions with him, I now maintain YouTube playlists for book trailers, our classes have read to each other during World Read Aloud Day, and my students loved voting on his “road trip” mascot this spring.

Much to my surprise, one of the benefits of my PLN has been an increase in administration support for the school library program, as the recognition of outside entities has given it credibility. I could not have anticipated that my PLN activity would lead to opportunities in the world of academic journals, conference presentations, and newspaper coverage.

And what gave me the courage to share? The realization that what is obvious to me is amazing to others.

Figure 1. “Obvious to you. Amazing to others.” A video by Derek Sivers.
Because I tweet, our school library program has been featured several times in the local media. And one of those articles resulted in an invitation to write an article for *Teacher Librarian*.1

Because I tweet, our "Appy Hour" was highlighted in a full-page article in *School Library Journal*.2

Because I am active on social media, in 2011 I was asked to present an "Ignite" presentation at a local educational forum sponsored by our local media conglomerate.3

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Because I tweet and blog, I have been invited to present at regional- and state-level conferences.

But most importantly, the staff from my own district sees the school library program and my team of associates in a different light. We are not just collections and resources; we are part of the larger educational community, interacting and sharing with educators from around the world. What we do is valued and even emulated by colleagues beyond our district boundaries. How wonderful does it feel to hear your superintendent describe the school library program as "the best in the state" (more than once!)? Pretty wonderful.

Getting administrators excited about the power of the PLN seemed like a natural progression and has been an ongoing goal of mine. After a couple years of sending blog examples to our middle school principal and gently suggesting that he would be a great blogger, he finally asked for some help setting up a blog. He is indeed an articulate and thoughtful writer, and has thanked me numerous times for the guidance. (Check out *Books, Blogs and Balls* at <http://mikeherdliska.blogspot.com>.) I helped him set up the background image in the media center!) And this last year, this same principal provided time and instruction so that the entire middle school faculty could register for Twitter accounts. Many of those faculty members are now active and sharing (see figure 2).

At the high school I have collaborated with business education teacher Jodi Leimkuhler to build three days of class time into her technical writing class to introduce students to the concept of a PLN. I facilitated sessions during which

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Figure 2. Example of a Twitter conversation.

Figure 3. Matt Townsley, Mike Herdliska, and Kathy Kaldenberg (left to right) at Solon Community School District.
the high school principal spoke to the class about the impact that his PLN has had on his career and also arranged to have a local newspaper reporter participate via video conference to discuss the etiquette of blogging. Students set up RSS readers to follow blogs relating to their personal interests, such as Minecraft and sports teams.

And remember the math teacher who mentored me through the development of my PLN? That would be Matt Townsley, who is now the district’s director of instruction and technology, and also my supervisor (see figure 3). Working together we have introduced new library software, increased the overall budget, implemented Google Apps for Education, piloted e-book collections, maintained school library staffing levels, trained teachers in the use of new technology tools, and presented together at state conferences.

The 2011–2012 school year was my ninth at Solon Community School District, and it was my best because of the increased support and the very positive recognition our school library program has received both internally and externally. Was this due to the effectiveness of my PLN? I don’t know that for sure. But I do know that without the support of my PLN colleagues, I might not have challenged myself to push my creative limits.

Kathy Kaldenberg has served the Solon (IA) Community School District in the role of K–12 media specialist/librarian since 2003. She currently serves as Professional Development Committee chair for the Iowa Association of School Librarians.

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### Tips for Using Your PLN TO BUILD SUPPORT

#### WITH ADMINISTRATION

Subscribe to a few of the e-mail lists that your administrators follow, such as eSchool News, ASCD SmartBrief. Be prepared when they ask you about the next big thing that is making the rounds in their professional literature.

Follow the thought leaders that administrators are following on Twitter. (Check their “following” list and the tweets they have “favorited.”)

If your school or district does not have a district hashtag for Twitter, be part of that discussion and then use the hashtag to promote your program.

When administrators are attending a conference, attend vicariously and know what the “buzz” is. Find the Twitter hashtag and follow the conversation.

Offer to help with all things PLN, such as recommending bloggers or explaining how to use a Twitter client, like TweetDeck.

#### WITH TEACHERS

When you share resources, let teachers know how they were obtained. (I sometimes include a screenshot of the Tweet. Your colleagues might want to follow that person for inspiration.)

Demonstrate that teachers can use resources like Twitter, Pinterest, and blogs for teaching as well as for personal interests.

“Archive” the resources you share. (I created Diigo lists for individuals and groups, so I can quickly relocate links that have been lost or document the amount of activity I have with a particular grade-level team.)

Keep track of staff blogs in an RSS reader folder. Create a “bundle” so you can easily share that list with new staff members.

Create a Twitter list of staff with Twitter accounts. Share that list with new Twitter users so they can get an idea of how their colleagues are using the tool.

#### WITH COMMUNITY

Create Twitter and Facebook accounts for your school library, and use them for announcements and general information.

Check to see if your local media have reporters assigned to the education beat. If so, do they have Twitter accounts? If you re-tweet relevant stories, they will notice.

#### WITH STUDENTS

Find opportunities to introduce students to the concept of a PLN.

Demonstrate that they can use resources like Twitter and Pinterest for academic as well as personal use.
The following 1,400 words will blow your mind because they reveal how two “Wonder Twins” met through the power of social media, threw a simple idea into the air, and saw it land with the most epic win, shattering into engaging challenges, enviable prizes, and innumerable opportunities to learn and connect with like-minded educators and professionals.

Press START
Like all great ideas, Level Up Book Club grew out of a genuine need, the spontaneous firing of a few brain sparks, and the kind of luck that comes from being “in the right place at the right time.”

By mid-June 2011 Matthew Winner and Jennifer LaGarde were already bona fide wonder twins—two educators who, although they’d never met, had stumbled upon each other through social media and found in one another an educational kindred spirit with whom to collaborate and make mischief. Matthew (a school librarian in Columbia, Maryland) had inspired Jennifer (a school librarian in Wilmington, North Carolina) to use the Nintendo Wii as an instructional tool. Gaming soon became a central topic of discussion, and late one evening in the Twitterverse Matthew suggested that Jennifer read Reality is Broken by Jane McGonigal (Penguin 2011), a book that challenges readers to rethink work in terms of a video game, with badges, challenges, and opportunities to level up. This concept, commonly referred to as gamification, had sparked an interest in Matthew, and who better to share it with than his twin?

Before they knew it, not only was the list of books they wanted to read growing, but so, too, was the number of people who were angling to join the conversation. There was only one thing to do: start a book club! But this couldn’t be just any old book club. Immediately, our heroes saw the opportunity to take everything they were discovering about game-based learning and use it to power an online book club adventure. They knew their book club had to be full of meaningful conversation, exciting challenges, and many, many opportunities to level up! And thus, the Level Up Book Club was born!

Ready Player One
Given that over 1.7 million students drop out of school every year while over 5 million people admit to playing 45 hours (or more) of video games each week (Knewton 2012), building a guild of educators ready to embark on an epic journey of discovery—in which the most motivating and popular elements of video games are unearthed and then applied to the world of education—seemed a worthy and important goal. Further, Matthew and Jennifer wanted to model some of the key elements of gamification in the club itself, the idea being that the club would give both its creators and members a chance to see some of these elements in practice.

Progress Bar
One of the key elements of good game design is immediate and continuous feedback. Gamers know immediately if a strategy has paid off or if they need to double back and rethink the next move.

One of the key elements of good game design is **immediate and continuous feedback**. Gamers know immediately if a strategy has paid off or if they need to double back and rethink the next move.
design, Jennifer and Matthew put their heads together to develop weekly challenges, points, wins, and even a Leader Board where all #levelupbc members could track their progress, cheer on other readers and talk smack when necessary. Week after week the book club is reinvented as new challenges are posted, and the Leader Board evolves to reflect the current standings.

Weekly winners have won video shout-outs, customized 8-bit-style profile pictures, custom-made Level Up buttons, and even a personalized voice message inspired by NPR’s *Wait Wait...Don’t Tell Me!* Each week Level Up Book Club members immerse themselves in a challenge that both adds to their individual understanding of gamification and builds the guild’s combined strength.

To the victor goes the spoils, and Level Up readers are no exception. Weekly winners have won video shout-outs, customized 8-bit-style profile pictures, custom-made Level Up buttons, and even a personalized voice message inspired by NPR’s *Wait Wait...Don’t Tell Me!*

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**Knowledge Quest | Personal Learning Networks**

**Reality is Broken by Jane McGonigal:** Level Up’s first summer read!
Diigo group regularly curating resources, a LiveBinder of incredible tools and sites shared by fellow Level Up readers, and a monthly group culmination via a Twitter chat. Level Up even earned a nod from Reality is Broken author Jane McGonigal herself when she tweeted that our “Epic Win” challenge “rocked”! With so much positive energy and momentum, it’s not hard to imagine the impact this book club will have on the lives and success of thousands of students.

Press START to Continue

As the Level Up Book Club continues on its quest for truth and knowledge in gamification, we look to the strength of the guild for support, for ideas, and for the motivation it will take to challenge the way students attain knowledge.

Are you up for the adventure? Visit <http://levelupbc.blogspot.com> and join other school librarians and like-minded educators in making a positive change to how we approach instruction. Maybe you’re considering introducing educational games into your instruction or perhaps you’re wondering how restructuring your entire instructional practice to mimic that of a video game could impact your teaching. No matter where you land on the spectrum, there’s a place for you at Level Up!

Jennifer LaGarde
(aka library girl!) is the lead librarian for New Hanover Schools and an Educator on Loan for the NC Department of Public Instruction. She is the Social Media Special Committee Chair for the North Carolina School Library Media Association and was a founding member of NCSLMA’s Young Adult Book Award. In 2011, Jennifer was awarded the “I Love My Librarian Award” by ALA, The Carnegie Corporation of New York and The New York Times. She was also named a 2011 “Mover and Shaker” by Library Journal. Follow Jennifer on Twitter @JenniferLaGarde.

Matthew Winner
(aka the “Busy Librarian”) is a teacher-librarian at Longfellow Elementary School in Columbia, Maryland. The Maryland Society for Educational Technology (MSET) recently named him the 2012 Maryland Outstanding Educator Using Technology. He is currently co-writing a professional resource on using the Nintendo Wii to support math instruction, to be published by the International Society for Technology in Education. He is also the author of the Busy Librarian blog, where he logs his school library adventures in exploring best practices, embracing new technologies, discovering new books, and celebrating the role he was born to play. Follow Matthew on Twitter @MatthewWinner.

Follow Jennifer LaGarde’s “Adventures of Library Girl” blog at <www.librarygirl.net>, where she proves you don’t have to be super hero to teach Middle School, but having a cape sure helps.

Follow Matthew Winner’s “Busy Librarian” blog at <www.busy librarian.com>!
In their book *The Social Life of Information*, John Seely Brown and Paul Duguid quoted Hewlett-Packard chairman Lew Platt as saying about the company, “if only we knew what we know” (2002, 123). They paint a scenario of copier technicians working out in the field, isolated, each tackling tricky copier repair problems not covered in the training manual. Each individual repair technician had a body of knowledge built up through trial and error, and years of experience in knowing how to apply the right fix to the right situation. It was information crucial to the success of the entire community and the
company. Because of the nature of the job, though, it was hard for information to spread from one copier technician to another. It was fairly easy for information to flow smoothly from top to bottom, or for company-approved solutions to find their way into the repair manual. Information could flow the other way as well, with feedback loops built into training and customer service so that information about the technicians and their tasks would filter up to company executives. What was much harder, though, was to have the information flow sideways, from one technician to another so that experimental solutions that worked could become standard procedure.

The solution, developed by the technicians themselves, was to form a community of practice (CoP). CoPs focus on sharing information to solve problems related to improving practice. The technicians formed networks to learn from each other and share information that sometimes was directly opposed to what was printed in the official repair manuals. They shared stories, asked for advice, and kept a record of solutions they might need to remember in the future. The network they formed could be considered an ideal model of a professional learning network organized around direct improvement of practice.

School librarians are a lot like the copier technicians in the above story. The copier technicians were trained in classrooms to learn just the basics of copier repair far removed from the stress of broken-down copiers in isolated offices, and then sent out on the job with another technician for more intensive training. After that, new technicians functioned on their own. School librarians are taught by people who in many cases used to be school librarians, but moved...
on to other positions. Prospective school librarians take their coursework in college classrooms, and although most programs try very hard to simulate the situations their students will face on the job, it is still a sanitized simulation. Rarely does a simulated storytelling experience get interrupted by snow days or teacher absences, or cancelled because events deemed to be more important took precedence. Even the best field-experience situations cannot cover every situation in a busy school library. When school librarians are hired, most of them will find positions as the only librarian in the school. Their training, their ideals, and what was once a clear vision of the profession can become murky when removed from their classrooms, their professors, and their peers. New school librarians can look for help in the district policies and procedures manual, or in the national standards and guidelines. They can even ask their professors, their district supervisors, or find mentors. What would help most, though, is to have help from a variety of people who are in the same positions, have faced the same or similar students, and have handled the same situations.

How can school librarians working solo know whether things they were so sure about in library school—such as unlimited checkout for every student, removing the barriers to access, and encouraging serendipitous computer use—are the right things to do? When ideals meet reality, trying new ideas can meet with shock and even anger from clerical staff, faculty, and administrators. Each situation becomes a case for wondering why the training situation does not meet reality. Mentorship can help alleviate this situation, but it is still a one-on-one learning experience, and the amount learned is dependent on what the mentor knows. Strength

Five Tips for Writing

1. CAN’T GET STARTED? Pretend you are giving a presentation. Once you have the outline of what you will say, you have the bones of a great article.

2. GETTING STUCK? Use a writing nudge such as <www.750words.com> to get you in the writing habit. No one can write “blah, blah, blah” 750 times, and your 750 words may contain a gem of an idea that gets you started.

3. WORRIED ABOUT GRAMMAR, SYNTAX, OR SPELLING? Don’t be. Editors are looking for great ideas. If your writing isn’t perfect, no worries—that’s what editors are for.

4. NOTHING TO WRITE ABOUT? Think over the last few months. What is the most exciting thing that you did in your school library? What do you tell your friends about your job? Figure out what is close to your heart, and write about that.

5. NOT AN EXPERT? No one is. The fields that make up our wonderful profession are moving far too fast and in too many directions for anyone to build perfection. You have a starting place, and many drowning colleagues would be happy to learn what you know. Throw them a lifeline.
can come from learning the stories of other librarians, in other schools and districts, who have successfully implemented exactly the changes needed.

Communities of practice and evidence-based practice are based on the principles of the basic scientific method. The last step of all of these professional learning methods is the same: to share the results with others. It’s a professional responsibility to share the learning.

**The New Definition of Publishing**

School library preparation depends on communication and the application of research-based best practices to school library procedures and processes. School library preparation, by its nature, is based on writing-intensive coursework that over the years has transitioned from writing multipage research papers to reporting on projects, writing short responses, and commenting on the work of others. Publishing in the 21st-century has also moved from being defined only as writing articles. Publishing can also mean commenting on blogs and creating or replying to e-mail posts on discussion lists. To get started in writing, the first step is to begin sharing ideas or commenting on posts of others, whether sharing a similar situation or asking for advice. In many ways, this writing is a natural step from the kinds of required responses school-librarians-in-training make in library school. Transferring these comments to the professional learning community is a natural step and one that is easy.

The easiest first step comes with responding to a request for information on specific programs or resources that you have used successfully. Make thoughtful positive comments.

**Next Step**

Keeping the momentum going is also easy, and the two best places to start are writing reviews, and submitting lesson plans to the AASL Lesson Plan Database.

By submitting a lesson plan, a school librarian is calling positive attention to the school and district. In essence, this action is saying that this school librarian is a skilled teacher, a sound planner, and skilled in the development of assessments. Principals long for positive attention for their schools and will use any excuse to highlight teachers. The AASL Lesson Plan Database is a national peer-reviewed repository for standards-based instructional plans. When a school librarian publishes a lesson plan, the concept of the librarian as teacher is reinforced with the building principal, and also with the faculty and others in the school community. Sharing a lesson plan at the national level is a form of advocacy that will reap benefits for a library program and the school. Sharing a lesson plan is also an excellent way to “pay it forward.”

Writing reviews for print publication also has several rewards. First, it provides new materials for the school library collection. Reviews are not necessarily only of books, but can also be assessments of nonprint, electronic, or web-based resources. Second, reviewing again publicizes the school library program, the school, and the district. Reviewers get their names beside their reviews, and each gets a copy of the magazine to share with friends and coworkers. Many established authors with a long list of books and articles started out by writing reviews. And, of course, carefully considered reviews benefit fellow librarians.

**Moving into Articles**

University professors, living under the sword of “publish or perish” have long heard two adages: “Every presentation is a paper” and “Every paper has a home.” The first adage does not mean that presentations should be read. Nothing is more deadly dull than a conference speaker reading the presentation—especially when the presentation is read from the slides. Creating a presentation requires organization and a logical flow. So do articles. Therefore, a great way to write your first article is to start with your first presentation. Basically, you are simply mentally reviewing the slides and writing what you would say in a presentation. This strategy also ensures that the right

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If you find yourself stuck when writing, go to <www.750words.com> to get some help. The site offers a way to get in the habit of writing while tracking your word count.
tone comes through. Practitioner journals require a conversational tone, while more scholarly journals need more formality. The way that you would present a topic is a good guide to how it should be written.

The second adage is harder to transform into reality. A paper may be rejected for one of many reasons, and only one of them is that it is poorly written. Maybe the article isn’t the type published in that journal, or there simply isn’t room, or another article on exactly the same topic has just been published. Every paper has a home, so revisiting a rejected paper to make changes and sending it somewhere else is perfectly fine. Just make sure that you have been rejected by one publication before sending the paper to another. Submitting the same article to two different places simultaneously is unethical.

Publishing as a Professional Responsibility

If only school librarians knew what school librarians know. Individually, school librarians have solved a lot of the problems plaguing practitioners in the field. Somewhere, somebody has implemented BYOD policies in a fresh and exciting way, made decisions about how to use wikis instead of websites, found fun and exciting strategies to encourage middle school students to read more, and achieved exciting gains in a host of other areas of the field. Right now, probably quite a few school librarians are working to implement Common Core assessment strategies at the building and district levels.

But unless those school librarians are engaged in the professional community of practice by publishing and sharing their knowledge, the field will never know what they have learned. That knowledge is forever locked into one school library program and the head of one school librarian. Advocacy begins at the building level and is not just creating a community of supporters outside the school library world. Advocacy also means accepting the responsibility to join in the professional community of practice by sharing what you have learned.

Publishing is one way to influence the next generation of school librarians. Students have reasons to scour the literature for new and exciting articles. Your article about something you thought was just a new way to encourage ninth-graders may be the inspiration that starts a dissertation.

Moving from being the library hero in one school to joining in the professional community of practice can be humbling. Here are some caveats to keep in mind when you enter the fray.

1. **YOU COULD BE WRONG.** Our profession was built by hard-eyed practical realists and dewy-eyed visionaries, somehow coming together to make the modern school library. You may have learned from the best, but you could be wrong.

2. **YOUR SCHOOL MAY BE DIFFERENT.** Every school has different principals, teachers, students, parents, and administrators. Recognize that any one of those factors might make the key difference that made your program successful.

3. **PRESENTING A SOLUTION WORKS BETTER** than critiquing the solutions of others. There are many ways to present a solution that worked for you. Explaining the choices that led to your solution can be done without implying that what others have done is wrong (even if you are very sure that it is).

4. **FACED WITH LIMITED TIME, ENERGY AND FUNDS,** school librarians do the best they can with what they have. Everyone has to choose the battles that they know they can win, or that they feel are most important for students and teachers.
Building a Personal Learning Network for Intellectual Freedom

JOIN THE CONVERSATION

Annalisa Keuler
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Building a personal learning network (PLN) for intellectual freedom has long been an important role of a school librarian; however, in the steadily increasing onslaught of digital information that we face today, and in the future, the task has become mission-critical. Personal learning, it stands to reason, requires an appropriate dialogue to occur. For that to happen, we must initiate the proper conversation.

Intellectual freedom is a foundation upon which school librarians operate, as well as one of ALA’s core values. The advent of the Internet has dramatically expanded the responsibility of school librarians. No longer are we primarily dealing with potential book challenges. Today we must also include: confronting issues related to online privacy; filtering in schools; and copyright issues for e-books, music, and films (in addition to print resources). All of these issues potentially have far-reaching implications.

So, how do we make sense of it all? What stand should the school librarian take in dealing with these concerns at the school level? These and other questions necessitate the establishment of a PLN for intellectual freedom. This article offers suggestions for building a personal learning network, thereby creating a toolkit as well as a repository of experts and resources to learn from and call upon when needed. I’ll begin with an examination of available ALA and AASL resources, and then focus on social networking tools such as Diigo, Facebook, and Twitter, including experts to follow in the library community who can help facilitate the intricacies of a conversation on issues related to intellectual freedom.

**ALA and AASL Resources**

ALA has numerous resources to assist in building your intellectual-freedom network. The most important of these is the Office for Intellectual Freedom (OIF). The OIF is charged with educating and supporting librarians on key issues. The OIF sponsors Banned Books Week, held in September of each year, and Choose Privacy Week, a newer initiative highlighting the importance of online privacy, held in May of each year. Anyone can call the OIF for assistance with a challenge, filtering issues, or privacy concerns. The OIF also sponsors IFAction, a news-only e-list. To subscribe to this list, go to <http://lists.ala.org/wws/subscribe/ifaction>.

The Freedom to Read Foundation (FTRF) is the legal defense organization for ALA. Librarians needing legal support with censorship issues may reach out to the FTRF for assistance in defending the right to read. FTRF staffers also compile a list of news stories on the home page <www.ftrf.org> to help librarians monitor occurrences of censorship.

ALA’s Office for Information and Technology Policy (OITP) assists librarians in ensuring that digital access to information is open, thereby upholding patrons’ right to free access to information. This office focuses on copyright and access as related to digital content, including e-books and e-reader content. As librarians navigate the ever-changing landscape of e-books and copyright issues, and increasingly incorporate more digital content, the OITP <www.ala.org/offices/oitp> can prove an invaluable resource. A related resource is *American Libraries’* blog, E-Content. This is the official blog of the Digital Content and Libraries Working Group. Subscribe by going to <http://americanlibrariesmagazine.org/e-content>.
AASL’s intellectual-freedom network includes the Intellectual Freedom Committee, which gathers and communicates information related to intellectual-freedom issues. Following AASL’s forum and blog will provide access to pertinent committee information. The committee also maintains AASL’s Essential Links in issues of censorship, privacy, filtering, and intellectual freedom. These lists include links to other sites and organizations that can be of assistance to members. A subcommittee of the Intellectual Freedom Committee plans activities and resources for Banned Websites Awareness Day during Banned Books Week each year. For these resources, go to <www.ala.org/aasl/bwad>.

Lastly, at the state level, seek out the state library association’s intellectual freedom chair for a local contact when intellectual-freedom issues arise. Volunteering to be on the local committee or to become a state chair is also an excellent way to build your PLN. Through participation in education efforts and conversation on the state and local levels, individual learning opportunities increase exponentially.

Diigo, Facebook, and Twitter

As previously mentioned, building any PLN requires joining the conversation. Whether reaching out to knowledgeable parties for answers to questions, or seeking platforms for sharing knowledge to help others in need, 21st-century social-networking tools make these professional networks easier than ever to establish. So where do we begin?

Social bookmarking has become an important way to organize your personal learning on the Web. With sites like Diigo <www.diigo.com>, all relevant resources can be arranged in one place. Diigo also allows for communication with other librarians. It is simple to locate and tag resources for easy searching and sharing. Once a Diigo account is set up, select “Get Started” to begin creating a personal library. Install the Diigo bookmarklet to begin adding webpages to your library. Compiling a list for intellectual freedom is quick and easy, as is building onto the network as relevant articles and resources become available. These lists may be shared with others, who in turn may contribute to the compilation.

Many people use Facebook <www.facebook.com> daily for personal contacts and communications. But don’t forget about the educational value it represents, as well. When clicking “like” on a Facebook page dedicated to topics about intellectual freedom, make note of the people who frequently post there. This action will provide an even larger network to draw from.

Twitter <www.twitter.com> is another tool that will contribute to building a successful PLN. Twitter users can follow organizations involved in intellectual freedom. These organizations will also follow other users with similar interests and expertise. Accessing “follow” lists of experts allows Twitter users to find even more experts. Some experts to follow include: Rebecca MacKinnon (@rmack), an Internet-freedom activist and author of Consent of the Networked: The Worldwide Struggle for Internet Freedom (Basic Books 2012); Kenneth Crews (@kcrews), the founding director of the Copyright Advisory Office and coauthor of Copyright Law for Librarians and Educators (ALA 2006); and Buffy Hamilton (@buffyjhamilton), a 2011 Library Journal Mover and Shaker, and an expert on using e-books in school libraries.

Using these tools, librarians can communicate about and research issues related to intellectual freedom by means of hashtags and chats. Some common tags to use include: intellectual freedom, intellectual property, censorship, banned books, privacy, and First Amendment, among many others.

Join the conversation to grow a healthy PLN. If you have a question, ask an expert. If you see something to share, use one of these tools to share it. In so many cases, school librarians are the only ones in the building who have the expertise to deal with intellectual-freedom issues. And when materials come under attack, it is essential that we work together to defend the freedom to read in every situation.

Annalisa Keuler

has worked as a school librarian at Homewood (AL) High School since 2005. She is the current AASL Intellectual Freedom Committee chair and has served on the committee for three years. She also served on ALA Council and was a 2008 ALA Emerging Leader.

Visit AASL’s Essential Links <http://aasl.ala.org/essentiallinks> to view articles, websites and additional information on Intellectual Freedom.
Here are some ALA organizations & groups to “like” and/or follow to assist in starting the conversation.

**ALA Office for Intellectual Freedom**
The OIF is a clearinghouse where librarians can find information about all issues related to intellectual freedom of library users.
<www.ala.org/offices/oif> / Twitter: @OIF

**Freedom to Read Foundation**
Freedom to Read Foundation was established to assist librarians with legal issues dealing with censorship.
<www.ala.org/groups/affiliates/relatedgroups/freedomtoreadfoundation> / Twitter: @FTRF

**Intellectual Freedom Round Table**
The IFRT is an excellent source for your PLN: a forum for all issues related to intellectual freedom and gives librarians a place to discuss their concerns over censorship, privacy, etc.
<www.ala.org/ifrt> / Twitter: @IFRT_ALA

**Privacy Revolution**
Privacy Revolution, which sponsors Choose Privacy Week, is the privacy initiative—especially active in the area of cyber-privacy—for ALA’s Office for Intellectual Freedom.
<www.privacyrevolution.org> / Twitter: @privacyala

**ALA Washington Office**
The ALA Washington, DC, office represents libraries and library concerns to people on Capitol Hill. You can follow the office’s blog, District Dispatch, at <www.districtdispatch.org>.
<www.ala.org/offices/wo> / Twitter: @ala_wo_leginfo
Networking at Conferences: Developing Your Professional Support System

Michelle Kowalsky
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The complexity and scale of any large library, education, or technology conference can sometimes be overwhelming. Therefore, spending time reviewing the conference program and perusing the workshop offerings in advance can help you stay organized and make the most of your time at the event. Planning in advance will help you manage potential time conflicts, find the fastest route between two sessions, and allow time for meals and flexible conversation with others.

Organizing Your Favorites

You will notice that several sessions that seem interesting to you at a conference may all be held during the same time slot. This situation often cannot be helped; conference organizers do their best to avoid these overlaps in content, but with many sessions on hot topics, and only so many rooms to assign, it is not always possible to sequence sessions perfectly. Yet, this situation also presents an interesting opportunity for you: to partner with a friend and “split up” to attend different simultaneous sessions and then get back together to share your experiences.

Plan ahead of time which sessions each person will attend, and then agree on a meeting place immediately afterward to exchange extra copies of the handouts, to blog about important information you have learned in the session, or to text each other the URLs and significant points from the session speakers and participants. Although some librarians will wait to share their findings until they meet up later in the evening for dinner, this is sometimes too late in the evening when everyone is tired—the inspiration may have escaped you!

Your early impressions of this new knowledge, and your attempts to integrate what you have learned into your own school structure or programs, are vitally important to your learning at a conference. Spend some time early and often to engage with new ideas and people, rather than stuffing materials or business cards into your bag and promising to review them later. We all know what it feels like to come across good articles, notes about cool projects, or new resources long after their usefulness has passed. Instead, spend just a few minutes after each session jotting down some notes to yourself and sharing your impressions of the session with others. In this way, you are able to start to digest what you have learned; you are able to articulate the usefulness of these ideas for your own library. Indeed, this is time well spent, especially when you have so many librarians in one place, for the same purpose.

Serendipitous meetings are also one of the most fun parts of any conference, and they are most certainly some of the most valuable memories in developing your personal learning network (PLN).

Meeting New Collaborators

But a PLN does not happen only by chance; it is up to you to take necessary steps to find colleagues who are both similar to you and most unlike you. One strategy to connect with others who have similar interests is to identify in advance a few speakers whom you’d like to meet. These can be local librarians or even big-name speakers; most presenters are excited to talk to others with whom they share passions in common.

By using this strategy, you will avoid spending time in the lines at the rest rooms, and instead engage in meaningful conversation with peers who also have that topic on the top of their “to do” lists. You may meet practitioners that you will want to add to your personal learning network. Sometimes presenters get ready for their sessions early, and you may be in the right place at the right time. As an early attendee, I’ve had time to talk with conference organizers, to receive a few free goodies from the speakers’ home institutions, and to practice putting names to faces of popular presenters and identifying their famous friends who “stop by to say hi.”
To find others with complementary skills or those who have new skills that you’d like to learn, just to ask for recommendations from those you meet. Casually ask around among other attendees, “Know any libraries that doing a lot with e-books?” or “Have you met any librarians here who are experts on graphic novels?” These are often welcome conversation-starters and help build friendships along the way. And, of course, thank these recommenders for their leads, especially in a follow-up message; good communicators will value feedback on whether their pointers led to meaningful relationships in your career or brought up good ideas that you implemented after the conference was over.

Another method is to e-mail a favorite speaker two or three weeks in advance, explaining that you’re interested in his or her work and would like to meet up briefly over coffee. If you time your request correctly, you’ll be able to connect with presenters at the conference a day or two before their sessions, thus avoiding the queues of eager participants lining up at the podium after a session has ended. You’ll also connect with these association leaders well before their pre-travel rush to and from the conference, and prior to their final preparation of their PowerPoint presentations or posters. Some may even thank you for giving them ideas for their upcoming talks!

Try to trace the work of any presenters or workshop leaders through their webpages and bibliographies. Even if you cannot attend a particular session, becoming familiar with the work of library leaders in the field can be a useful conversation-starter among attendees. In addition, noting the sources and professionals who are quoted by conference presenters may lead to a larger professional network of similar and related professionals in a variety of fields. This research will enable you to discuss current topics confidently, and even drop a few names in conversation—sooner or later, someone you are chatting with will certainly know the featured speakers and offer to introduce you!

Keeping the conversation going on a particular topic requires connecting with new folks, and then continuing to share information.

Virtual Participation
Increasingly, conferences are offering ways for participants to engage without physically traveling. Some events allow attendees to view streaming videos of sessions, while others use a webinar format to share the presenters’ PowerPoint slides and audio. Other organizations and associations archive their “live” events for viewing asynchronously after the conference is over. These videos, webinars, and archives make it easy to participate even if a conference destination is far away, or if you are unable to get days off from school for professional development. Inquire at your school or district about using professional-development funds for virtual participation.

Presenters often have similar options at many conferences; experts can sometimes present a poster or a workshop session remotely, either via local broadcast (i.e., present to other attendees in that particular session via prerecorded or one-way video) or via interactive video (i.e., allowing exchange of questions and answers with attendees via a Skype or videoconference connection). Although some of these options may seem like they are one-way conduits for information, quite often much of the discussion happens online both before and after the “live” event. Spur on the interaction by asking questions and asking for clarification from both the thought leaders and the practitioners.

As we often say in school, teaching something to others is one of the best ways to learn; the same is true for teaching and learning with our school library peers. You have many good ideas, strategies, and resources
to share, so investigate doing remote presentations as a way to broaden your circle of professional contacts beyond your county or state and to move toward a more national conversation.

Maintaining Momentum

Just as you have now made a commitment to not let handouts languish in your tote bag or lose URLs in a yard-long list of “favorites,” but instead to talk about them with someone at the conference, you now need to make a concerted effort to keep the conversation going after the conference. Creating your own inexpensive business cards to hand out at the conference—maybe even ones with your photo on them—will help you exchange contact information with other attendees and speakers.

When you receive a card from another attendee or a speaker, write on the back of the card something you talked about and make up a deadline for yourself to get back in touch with the person. This “due date” should be realistic, usually a week or two after the conference, but not more than three. The same is true for the tech-savvy; use your favorite app to actually schedule an event or alert for yourself, so that you remember to take the five or ten minutes to compose a message or catch up with each of the colleagues whom you have met. As before, show your appreciation for their time and their engagement, and, by being the nicest and most persuasive version of yourself, request a little more of their time and engagement by starting up an e-mail, blog, article, or event on a topic of mutual interest. Remember, there is no need to contact everyone on the same day or to talk about the same things with each person. The primary idea is to keep conversations going and to draw in your existing network of professionals, as well as the friends and colleagues of your new “conference friends.” As your interests and theirs are communicated and shared, you may become part of others’ learning networks or professional groups. You can involve each other in your professional lives in both informal and formal ways (by getting together periodically, or by volunteering for a committee or association workgroup). And if any of your contacts fizzle, don’t be too disappointed; everyone is busy, and sometimes the timing just isn’t right for a conversation. Instead of stalking your new contacts, use your own research skills to surf the Web and journal articles for recommended professional organizations or committees, for phrases and terms that came up in discussion, and for authors who are writing about topics that interest you. Then figure out when and where you can connect with your “conference friends” next!

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PERSONAL LEARNING NETWORKS FOR RETIREES

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Personal learning networks (PLNs) are important for retirees because PLNs fulfill the desire for lifelong learning, keep retirees active, and increase satisfaction with retirement. If PLNs are important for advancement and support while working, then PLNs are equally as important post-employment. Retirees need to actively seek out PLNs that meet their needs in this new phase of learning and adventure. These needs for retired school librarians can be met by participation in the AASL Retirees Special Interest Group (SIG) and the ALA Retired Members Round Table (RMRT). Retired librarians make up a unique group that ALA/AASL should satisfy with programming and opportunities developed just for them.
Lifelong Learning

As school librarians tout lifelong learning for students, then it follows that lifelong learning applies to educators as well. Learning does not stop in retirement; however, the learning is different. The emphasis changes from professional development to more personal development. Although retirees may not need professional activities to add to resumes, they should have pursuits that fit their new lifestyles.

The AARP Survey on Lifelong Learning found that adults 50+ enjoy lifelong learning activities that are “personally meaningful” and that are conducted in “environments which provide a direct learning experience.” Adult learners also want to have “control over all aspects of the learning process” and do not want to spend much money on these experiences (2000, 3).

Retirees in AASL and ALA take ownership of their lifelong learning just as they did when they were working. The lifestyle, not the person, has changed. Members take charge of personal learning activities by serving on committees and taking leadership roles that focus on their current needs and desires. New committees are formed, and old committees are broadened. Members can volunteer to serve on committees that are more in line with their new interests, or they can make their voices heard on established committees, broadening a committee’s outreach and purposes. One example of this changing landscape is the newly formed Retired Members Round Table. This committee continues the work of the ALA New Members Round Table <www.al.org/rmrt>, which began the “pattern of lifetime professional networking” (ALA 2012). AASL and ALA provide retired members with opportunities to make this lifelong learning transformation beneficial to both the individual and the organization.

AASL Retirees SIG and RMRT

ALAs recent forays into PLNs for retirees are encouraging. The newly formed Retired Members Roundtable (RMRT) <www.al.org/rmrt> and the AASL Retirees Special Interest Group (SIG) <http://connect.ala.org/node/157745> are two significant developments that enable librarians to stay active during retirement and contribute to an organization that many were meaningfully involved in before retirement. AASL and ALA recognize the importance of PLNs for retirees, and offer new communities and avenues to fulfill retirees’ need to learn, stay connected, and contribute to an organization that they have been a part of during their working years. After less than a year of existence, the RMRT has 110 members on ALAConnect <http://connect.ala.org/node/157745> and the AASL Retirees SIG has 54 members. The presence of retirees at conferences and within the organization’s structure is growing, and retirees will request programming and governance that impacts their membership satisfaction within the organization.

Both AASL and ALA offer benefits to retired members that make membership affordable and educational. Dues are reduced 50 percent or more. Retiree dues are $46 (ALA) and $25 (AASL). In fact, ALA offers a free lifetime membership after twenty-five years of consecutive membership. Registration fees for conferences are less expensive than when a member was employed. Conferences provide the hands-on learning environment retirees seek and are a source of enjoyment for meeting old friends and making new ones—all in the space of a few days. And, members continue to receive discounts on auto and homeowners insurance, discounts on FedEx shipping, and access to low-interest credit cards.

PLNs are vital in retirement and are made up of friends, family, and former colleagues. Many of these contacts are maintained conveniently
through the Internet. Social networking becomes increasingly significant to sustain and reconnect these links. Recognizing this dynamic form of communication, AASL has responded with more virtual participation in activities and committees. The AASL Retirees SIG operates mainly as an online community with participation at conferences as optional. Through ALAConnect members can join the retiree groups and enjoy a virtual relationship.

RMRT and the AASL Retirees SIG enable retired members to continue their membership in ALA and make sure that their needs are known. PLNs such as these keep retirees active and increase their satisfaction with their new role in the library community.

The Retired Members Round Table mission statement reads that it “shall exist to develop programs of particular interest to retired persons from all types of libraries and all forms of library services, including formal opportunities for continued involvement and learning; a variety of leadership training and opportunities for mentoring; lifelong professional involvement and networking; and active engagement in the American Library Association and the profession of librarianship” (ALA 2012).

Membership in RMRT is $20, and enables members to vote and participate in the activities of the group. Members can apply for the annual Norman Horrocks Award sponsored by Scarecrow Press. Norman Horrocks was a member of the ad hoc committee that worked to establish the RMRT. The $1,000 travel award goes to an RMRT member who is retired from full-time paid employment and has a record of active involvement in ALA prior to retirement. The selection process is based on a 250-word statement that elaborates how the recipient will benefit from and contribute to participation in Annual Conference. Nicholas Spillios received the first award. He plans to strengthen ties with the RMRT and with the Association of Library Trustees, Advocates, Friends and Foundations (ALTAFF).

Therese G. Bigelow, president, and Carolyn A. Caywood, president-elect, are the new officers of RMRT, which met for the first time face to face at ALA Annual Conference in Anaheim. Plans were made and subcommittees formed to look at mentorship possibilities. RMRT sponsored the program “The Legacy of Library Elders—What Could, Should, Would It Be?” at
ALA Annual. This program by Arro Smith featured video stories of former librarians. Participants were introduced to the Capturing Our Stories: A National Oral History Program of Retired/Retiring Librarians website <www.ischool.utexas.edu/~stories>.

RMRT offers school librarians the opportunity to connect with retired persons from all forms of libraries, thus broadening their PLNs. School librarian retirees or those close to retirement can solidify their presence in the AASL retiree community by becoming a member of the AASL Retirees SIG. The AASL Retirees SIG is a product of the AASL Retirees Task Force chaired by Irene Kwidzinski, and I’m happy to say that I was elected (virtually) as the first chair of the SIG. AASL/ALA members may join the SIG at no additional cost. Currently the SIG is forming groups in four crucial areas: public relations, membership support, social and mentoring. A form for future involvement in the SIG is on ALAConnect.

Snapshot of a Retiree

The retirees that are looking at PLNs within AASL/ALA are a special group. They have certain needs and a specific makeup. Looking at statistics from the Bureau of Labor Statistics’ American Time Use Survey—2010 respondents over age 65 spend two more hours a day enjoying leisure activities than the general public and some spend about an hour a day working at a paid job. Retirees are looking for leisure activities, and they live on a retiree’s income. While they spend considerably more time volunteering than younger groups, the time spent on educational activities is negligible (U.S. Dept. of Labor 2011). However, retired librarians are educators who are involved in their local PLNs often as workshop presenters.
and are looking for educational activities that keep them up to date on the latest learning strategies and technological advances. As lifelong learners, they desire programming that allows them to continue to grow.

The longitudinal study of health, retirement, and aging from the University of Michigan entitled Growing Older in America: The Health and Retirement Study found: “More than one-third of those who retired between 2000 and 2002 said that spending more time with their families was a very important reason for retirement, and roughly one-fourth also cited ‘wanting to do other things’” (2007, 47).

Through the formation of the RMRT and the AASL Retirees SIG, and the hard work of its members, ALA will continue to support and broaden its outreach. Retirees are seeking leisure activities and new meaning in PLNs that are practical, creative, innovative, and affordable. The future of PLNs for retirees is open for development and expansion. AASL members need to be on the frontline when it comes to these new PLNs. By embracing these PLNs, both the organization and the retirees benefit.

Ann Marie Pipkin retired in 2011 after thirty-two years of teaching, nineteen-and-a-half of which she served as the librarian at Hoover High School and the Alabama School of Fine Arts in Birmingham, Alabama. She is active in the ALA retiree community and is presently serving as the chair of the AASL Retirees Special Interest Group, the AASL/ALSC/YALSA School/Public Library Cooperation Committee, and the Emerging Leaders Program Sub-Committee. She served this past year on the AASL Retirees Task Force, the Leadership Development Task Force, and was chair of the AASL Research Grant Committee. She is a member of the Retired Members Round Table and has a strong desire to see retirees active in mentoring those new to the profession and involved in interdivisional activity.

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RIF or VIP?

Having a PLN Can Help

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How many school librarians have we met or read about who have been pink-slipped? Do you worry and stress that you are the next sacrificial lamb for the budget in your district? With school budgets shrinking every year, tough decisions are made by those powers that be, and you very well may be the next RIF (reduction in force) waiting to happen.

Sadly, those school librarians who have stopped learning, who have become stale in their role as librarian, or who feel the newer tools and ways of doing the job are not necessary have placed themselves in greatest danger of becoming RIFed. The school library is a place where the direct connection to student learning is not always clear, especially to administrators who make budgeting decisions. Therefore, school librarians everywhere must strive to have dynamic, relevant programs—and make sure administrators know about them—to increase the odds that their jobs and libraries don’t suffer from devastating cuts in school budgets.

**We Are Singletons**

As school librarians, I jokingly tell those who have a “team” in our school that the library is a team of one—or in a few cases two or more if a school is lucky enough to have additional certified librarians on staff. Let’s face it; for the most part we are singletons in our buildings. Day to day, we don’t have a team to turn to for advice, ideas, inspirations, venting, and more, while the average classroom teacher has a group of people in the building who can usually meet all those needs. Working with a group of like-minded educators can be key to building and maintaining a dynamic program vital to your school.

**PLN—A Buzzword in Education Circles**

The term “PLN” has become a fairly popular buzzword in educational networks, journals, and literature. Some refer to the resource as a “personal learning network” or “professional learning network,” while others think in terms of a “professional learning community (PLC).” No matter what words you attach to “PLN” or the concept represented, learning networks are defined by the purpose they serve. The acronym PLN is, simply put, an educational spin on networking. Those who use PLNs can be described as people with similar goals. These people may be friends, though friendship is not essential. The members of a PLN seek to connect through various methods for the purpose of learning—connecting, gathering information or resources, and perhaps even creating and finally sharing what has been learned. Generally, the outcomes are relevant to the entire group, and often have far-reaching implications to other groups or PLNs.

**PLN Explained in Its Simplest Terms**

A PLN can be defined simply as a group of people who interact for the purpose of learning, and who give and take with the goal of sharing, growing, and being an active participant for a greater cause—in my case, making learning relevant to today’s youth.

**How Do PLNs Connect?**

Many tools, particularly Web 2.0 tools, help groups cultivate a PLN. My first foray into developing a PLN came from reading blogs. When I discovered the world of blogging as a way to learn from the experts in my field (school libraries and educational technology), I suddenly had a connection to those I had respected for many years, including experts, professionals, and leaders in my career field. Not only could I read about their thoughts, current interests, issues they were exploring, and reactions to their learning, but I could also interact by commenting on their blogs. This is a common medium to discover best practices, examples of innovation, and to learn from professional experiences of both novice and veteran educators. Initially, I began as a lurking reader, but soon I jumped into the conversations, often adding my own experiences and even on occasion getting pushback on my thoughts or opinions. It was exciting to be “in” on the conversations around topics in which I was so dearly interested. Lurking and commenting progressed into writing my own blog, now six years old, and sharing what I learn from my PLN.

**It’s More Than Just Reading Blogs**

While the blogging world introduced me to many like-minded educators, it also introduced me to movers and shakers as well as new voices to expand my thinking. These same influences taught me to take another look at tools I initially dismissed, like Twitter and Facebook. In my own at-home/in-school professional learning and staff development, these two tools were talked about in the most negative tones. Local school leaders dwelled on the dangers and how these tools were not for educational purposes. Interacting, though, with my developing PLN, I suddenly realized Twitter and Facebook were exactly right tools to stay connected with members of my PLN.

Through my PLN, I realized that it’s not what the tools do; instead, what matters is how they are used.
My first look at Twitter had me extremely confused. I felt like I was at a fair surrounded by people who had their own friends and agendas. Being there just watching did not seem productive or helpful in any way. But by interacting with my PLN I discovered that those tools (Twitter and Facebook) worked as vehicles for my learning only if I “followed,” “friended,” “circled,” or interacted with people who had similar interests and goals. Then, and only then, would I see the tools as useful additions to my learning toolkit.

**Are PLNs Limited to Just Social Networks and 2.0 Tools?**

Absolutely not! PLNs crop up in many places and take many forms. I would suggest that a listserv is a very unfocused form of a PLN. The folks who use listservs definitely learn from one another. As I reflect on my own listserv use, I can share that I would never skip or delete without reading the posts made by certain people. The nature of give and take allows a listserv to be defined as a PLN tool—one can read as well as respond. So listservs are a very basic PLN-like tool.

If you attend certain conferences every year and strive to see the same people at those conferences, that behavior is also a loose form of a PLN. The group of teachers at your school who eat lunch together every day can be considered a PLN. A team or department that works together, sharing ideas, also fits the definition of a PLN.

A PLN is not limited to a tool or even a physical place. It can occur in your school, face-to-face, online, at conferences, or through reading, reflecting, and sharing through a variety of media. A PLN can include members you know personally as well as members who are just virtual acquaintances “seen” only online. Strangers can be your teachers in a PLN environment (Richardson 2011). A PLN can even have international membership—and often does in educational circles.

**PLN—Don’t Limit Yourself to One Way to Connect**

The Internet has revolutionized and forever altered the many ways we connect. Don’t limit yourself to one or two methods for connecting to educators with similar goals. Instead, explore many methods and use the various tools for the sake of your own learning. Using these tools will help you build your own schemata for how they work. As you gain experience and develop comfort with these tools, you will begin to see how they can be beneficial in a classroom setting as well. But you must first wrap your own mind around the tool for your own personal learning (Richardson 2011).

Try them out and stick with at least three or four for the purpose of growing a PLN! Make it a personal mission to harness the power of the tools and develop your own PLN that is accessible whenever, wherever.
So What Does a PLN Have to Do with Saving Our Jobs?

The many PLN avenues and tools available can introduce you to cutting-edge ideas, to movers and shakers in the field, and to a constant supply of resources, thought-provoking discussions, knowledge, leadership strategies, methods for successfully integrating technology, and most importantly, advancing your own learning and student learning. Don’t dismiss the power of PLNs. In a time when school leaders are cutting budgets and positions, becoming active in a PLN will help you find ways to make yourself a vital part of your school, curriculum, and staff through learning and sharing. Don’t become a RIF (reduction in force) casualty. Instead grow into a VIP (very important person) in your building—a knowledgeable contributor who can impact learning for today’s students and teachers.

Just recently I was quoted online with my own sentiment about those who are dragging their heels on learning new tools and methods (Ishizuka 2012). My thinking has shifted from those being at risk in the profession to those putting me at risk. They need to get on board, get up to speed, or they are going to cost me my job.

Want to Get Started?

Many articles about cultivating a PLN are available online. My recent favorite comes from school librarian and NC neighbor Jennifer LaGarde, who recently wrote about this very topic in her blog, The Adventures Library Girl <www.librarygirl.net/2012/07/pln-starter-kit.html>. Visit her post to get some user-friendly tips for PLNs and the role they can play in your own personal learning, and then use her LiveBinder link to get started. Her LiveBinder (see figure 1) will help you find a few school librarians and other cutting-edge educators with whom to connect using a variety of tools. You can suggest to Jennifer tools and tips to add, as the blog forum allows users to interact around ideas, and she welcomes suggestions for additional content and graciously credits others for their contributions.

Having a PLN allows you to focus on how technology and networking connections with like-minded educators can deliver more personalized, relevant, passion-based learning. Not actively seeking a PLN in today’s educational circles puts you in the at-risk column for becoming a RIF. Remove your name from that potential budget-cut column by proactively seeking circles of passionate educators to learn from and learn with! Bring that learning to your teaching in your library program at all levels, including students, fellow colleagues, and even administrators and community.

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A group of high school students are about to crowd into the school library to do a social studies project. The library carts are filled with books that the school librarians have carefully set aside. Databases and online encyclopedias have been added to the school website. The school librarians are standing by, all eager to answer burning questions. There’s no query they aren’t prepared for, whether it’s looking up an old New York Times article from the 1930s or finding biographical information. The students enter the library, start turning on computers...and all of a sudden, the databases and books seem forgotten in the sea of Google search results and Wikipedia pages.

This is an all-too-common scene in many school libraries. Though school librarians work tirelessly to find appropriate sources that will be beneficial for their students, it seems that their efforts are in vain when students would rather use Google to complete their school assignments. But some educators are likely wondering: Why is this use of Google a problem? Isn’t it great that students can find information with such ease?

Though, in theory, search engines offer us a wealth of information, in actuality, there’s little organization or structure to the search results. Results are ranked by how often people click on them, not by how useful they may be for a particular user. Students’ reliance on commercial search engines is a big issue in school libraries, where librarians have chosen to subscribe to databases for real reasons. When we steer third-graders doing reports on desert animals towards encyclopedias like World Book Kids, we do so because the content and writing style of the entries are simple and easy to read. When we direct high school students writing position papers to a database like “Facts on File: Issues and Controversies,” we do it so they’ll read a fair and balanced viewpoint on hot-button issues. Above all, the sources we choose are well-researched and written by experts. When we let students rely on Google, we’re turning them loose into informational chaos.

It’s all too tempting some days to simply put a blanket ban on Google. Some educators prohibit students from using outside websites when doing research, with some teachers going so far as to state that students will lose points if their bibliographies include sites like Wikipedia. But it’s doubtful that prohibiting Google will be effective. Students told not to use search engines will usually turn to Wikipedia on their own but won’t cite it. There’s no way to turn back the clock; Google is here to stay. We school librarians can’t ignore it—and not because it’s completely impractical to do so—but because helping students learn to use commercial search engines is part of our duty to students. As school librarians, one of our primary

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The Google Solution

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A group of high school students are about to crowd into the school library to do a social studies project. The library carts are filled with books that the school librarians have carefully set aside. Databases and online encyclopedias have been added to the school website. The school librarians are standing by, all eager to answer burning questions. There’s no query they aren’t prepared for, whether it’s looking up an old New York Times article from the 1930s or finding biographical information. The students enter the library, start turning on computers...and all of a sudden, the databases and books seem forgotten in the sea of Google search results and Wikipedia pages.

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goals is to teach students how to think critically and evaluate information. Search engines are one of the most common ways people of all ages discover information about the world.

Many librarians have written about ways that we can refine Google searches, using Boolean operators and other tips to make sure that students get more relevant results. The activities described in Katrine Watkins and Kathleen Elder’s article “The Google Game” (2006) is one example of a librarian and a teacher collaborating to make more-strategic use of Google seem both fun and relevant. Though school librarians like Watkins are right to embrace search engines, rather than fear them, some educators don’t go far enough. School librarians need to be thinking about the next step: What happens when users obtain these results? How do they know that they’ve stumbled upon information they can trust?

It’s understandable that students might see a search engine as the answer to their prayers. However, it’s crucial that they look at a page of Google results not as the final stage of research but as the first stage of inquiry. Here, a lesson unit on determining currency and relevancy of search engine results would be useful. In one such lesson plan, from Coteaching Reading Comprehension Strategies in Secondary School Libraries: Maximizing Your Impact (Moreillon 2012), a school librarian gives students a sample question such as “Do raisins promote tooth decay?” to answer using search engines. Students then conduct searches and, using a worksheet, list the five hits they get using two different search engines. Finally, learners also write down how current each website is, based on when it was last updated and how relevant it is in terms of answering their questions. This lesson teaches students to examine, to critically analyze information rather than accepting it. But perhaps more importantly, it forces them to realize that a list of Google search results is not the final step in research; rather, it’s only the beginning.

In an age when anyone can create a website in minutes, learning how to question sources should be a significant part of every student’s education. When print books and the occasional database made up the bulk of a bibliography, developing skepticism in our students wasn’t a priority for teachers and school librarians. But now appropriately applied skepticism is crucial.

One way to emphasize the need to be wary of online sources is by having students participate in the creation of content themselves. Platforms like Weebly and WordPress make it simple to create and upload websites. School librarians have the opportunity to point out the responsibilities that go along with the creation of this information. Are students using copyrighted images without permission? Is the text that they write accurate? And most importantly, if someone else came across this website through a quick Google search to gather information for a research paper, would this website be a valid resource to cite in a bibliography? Many platforms make it easy to edit content; if students make a mistake on a page that they correct a few minutes later, how can they be sure that someone else hasn’t already seen that information and used it? By showing students how few restrictions apply to creating online content, they can see firsthand that not everything they come across on the Web is authoritative.

As we move forward, we must grapple with even more issues. For example, most teachers would feel comfortable letting a student cite an online article from CNN. But how do we prepare students for a website that mimics the interface of cnn.com? And can a reputable news site ever make a mistake? These are all difficult questions that we as school librarians need to be thinking about as we move forward.

Solving the “problem” of Google doesn’t mean shielding students from the morass of unorganized, uncontrolled information in search engine results by offering learners only vetted, preapproved encyclopedias and printed sources. Though we need to be sure students have access to these authoritative sources, we also need to be sure we are cultivating students who are critical thinkers, and who are skeptical of unsupported or biased information. In a world where we’re constantly surrounded by information, helping our students develop appropriate skepticism is the only way to make sure our students are truly prepared.

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Works Cited


B eing a school librarian can be a very lonely job. That is a reality I didn’t expect. The school librarian is always surrounded by people. How could she be lonely? Honestly, though, no one else in my building “spoke” library—no one to share my successes, no one who would understand my challenges, no one to help guide me or tell me when I screwed up, and no one to vent to or with whom I could talk through problems. I desperately needed (and still need) allies. My first real “tribe” member was a book-vendor representative. She is amazing and a wonderful resource that I am not sure enough people take advantage of. She understands my colleagues and my challenges; her job is to stay current with libraries; and she celebrates with me. She was the beginning of my PLN before I had any idea what that meant.

To me, having a PLN (personal learning network) means surrounding myself with people who will help me Think, Create, Share, and Grow. It means not only having people who are like me and will understand what I am talking about, but also having people with whom I can clash, therefore, learn from—through frustration comes creativity. Having a PLN is my way of taking control of my professional development and staying current on school library issues, Web 2.0 tools, lesson ideas, new products, conferences, books, and finding answers to the questions I didn’t even know to ask.

My first conscious step toward creating my own PLN was after meeting “The Daring Librarian” Gwyneth Jones at the Midwest Education Technology Conference. She became my idol and who I want to be when I grow up. I started following her blog on my Google Reader. Then I researched a few of the people she was following, and I found the same names kept popping up. I then began following people Gwyneth was following and all of Library Journal’s 2011 Movers and Shakers.

After following all of these people, I found that the key to success for me was keeping my list of blogs manageable by deleting the ones that did not help me. I still get overwhelmed sometimes, especially if I have not read my blogs in a while, but I simply start over. If I miss a great idea, I am sure that it will come back around.

I have found that I like using Twitter on a daily basis. I follow many of the same people whose blogs I monitor, but I also follow a few other people, as well as many companies, vendors, and other
libraries. I find that Twitter is manageable and points me to blog entries and other articles that I really need to read. I don’t usually go back to read the days I miss. The idea is to make my life easier and give me new ideas, not to overwhelm me. I want all of the knowledge, but I also want to keep my sanity.

Getting involved with ALA has started a new part of my PLN. I am one of ALA’s 2012 Class of Emerging Leaders. Many of these people are not in school libraries, so they offer a different perspective on my problems or questions. The networking at Midwinter Meeting, on ALA Connect, and at Annual Conference has been amazing this year. Learning about AASL’s Learning4Life has reinforced my awareness of my need to continue to Think, Create, Share, and Grow.

While I know that we are all very busy people, I must say that the little time that I take every week to keep up with my “experts” saves time in the long run. Keeping up with my PLN also gives me tons of resources to quickly forward to teachers in my school.

My next steps are to make my PLN more interactive. I have been too “stalker-like” with my PLN: mostly watching and not much contributing. I was initially very overwhelmed and humbled by the amount I’ve learned from these people. I want to be brave enough to share my thoughts, even if someone else already had a similar thought or if I am wrong or don’t know everything on the topic. I think that so many of us do not share our successes because we think someone out there has done even better. But I am going to remember there are also people who have not tried yet and might need some inspiration that I could provide.

Here are a few resources to help you get started:

- My Twitter handle: @mrsw80
- My school library’s website: <www.shimmeringlyawesome.com> (newly launched and in need of work—all suggestions welcome!)
- My e-mail address: mrsw80@gmail.com
- On Twitter try #tlchat, #edchat, #edtech hashtags, or Google “education twitter hashtags” to find one that fits your personal needs.

The AASL website contains a wealth of resources. Don’t forget to check out these resources:

- eCOLLAB: <www.ala.org/aasl/ecollab>
- Learning4Life: <www.ala.org/aasl/guidelinesandstandards/learning4life>
- Lesson Plan Database: <http://aasl.jesandco.org>
- Some of the blogs I recommend:
  - <www.freetech4teachers.com>: A great place to find resources, but it can be a little overwhelming!
  - <www.thedaringlibrarian.com>: A fun and educational blog by Gwyneth Jones, middle school librarian and innovator, that I find inspiring.
  - <www.onlinecollege.org/2012/07/10/100-best-blogs-school-librarians>: I follow twenty on this list of one hundred best blogs for school librarians. (Three of my PLN members told me about this list while I was writing this article.)

Kelly Werthmuller has been working at Brittany Woods Middle School in St. Louis Missouri for ten years—the last five in the library. She is one of ALA’s 2012 Class of Emerging Leaders, is a blog follower, and is always trying to learn.
The environmental topics I write about can be every bit as thrilling as a zombie attack or a pigeon riding a bus, especially to those who are part of my personal learning network.

PLNs from Authors’ Perspectives

Alison Formento
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Young adult authors have multitudes of blogging crowds anxious to gab about the newest zombie or steampunk hottie. In the picture book world, a very fancy girl and one spunky pigeon make news whenever they appear in a new book or as a new plush toy. Though it’s hard to compete with zombies and spunky pigeons for the spotlight, picture books with social, historical, or environmental topics (trees, bees, and seas in my case) can still benefit from social networking through personal learning networks, or PLNs, in a big way. PLNs consist of people and networks that a learner interacts with, derives knowledge from, and shares information with. This sharing and learning can occur through an online environment such as blogs, Facebook, Twitter, site-specific chatrooms, and the like, and may also include in-person social contacts, professional peers, and experts.

My books (This Tree Counts!; This Tree, 1, 2, 3; These Bees Count!) feature green topics about the importance of taking care of our natural world. For me, developing a strong PLN must begin at the ground level or (pun-intended) grassroots, where interest in my books will sprout and grow. Librarians, teachers, and parents are like farmers—they nurture reading in children, and I want to connect with educators and parents in any way possible. With every picture book I write, I first talk face-to-face with librarians and teachers—who are often parents, too—about their wish list for new books. Next, I begin an extensive search on these suggestions to see if there is an interest or need in the general market, too. That initial search is one that helps spark the flame under my story idea, and I bookmark and connect with websites that will help me expand my story as I begin the first draft. Forming a personal learning network like this is exactly how I met my expert oceanographer for my upcoming book These Seas Count! (Albert Whitman 2013).

A personal learning network is an essential tool for authors, especially for the latest information and up-to-the-moment buzz about important topics such as colony collapse disorder or ocean pollution (which I’ve been following for my new book on seas). I’ve linked up to various environmental organizations such as American Forests and Oceana, as well as every buzzing and honey-sweet site possible for These Bees Count! These are online links, but real connections are a vital part of most authors’ personal learning networks. I’ve connected with amazing botanists, oceanographers, and apiarists, including the White House beekeeper.
Like most authors, I follow library and publishing news, but I also follow environmental news about places starting a “green team” or some kind of green initiative in their schools and communities. Several of my author friends also published through Albert Whitman & Company have worked hard, albeit through different and unique paths, to create their own personal learning networks.

Mike Allegra edits and writes for an alumni magazine. He is also the author of Sarah Gives Thanks (Albert Whitman 2012). When asked about PLNs, he responded:

“PLNs are a big reason why I love my work. I get paid to learn new things and meet interesting people. [For the alumni magazine] I’ve written feature stories on agriculture, aviation, technology, the Middle East, and solar power to name a few—that’s where the PLNs come in. For my article on agriculture, for example, I consulted with farmers from all different walks of life: corn guys, cattle guys, tomato guys, apple guys, and many others.

The process behind writing my picture book biography, Sarah Gives Thanks, was not much different from my agriculture example. My PLN, in this case, consisted mostly of historians, librarians, and archivists. I even consulted with a librarian who was an expert on the history of fashion, which was invaluable as Sarah Hale, the subject of my book, was the editor of a women’s magazine.”

Ann Malaspina has written numerous picture books. Her newest, Heart on Fire: Susan B. Anthony Votes for President (Albert Whitman 2012), is a fresh look at Anthony’s quiet determination and courage as she worked to secure a woman’s right to vote. Ann shared:

“People love to help authors with picture books, especially if the topic has a personal connection for them. I’ve always found people willing to give me time and information for my picture book research. By targeting groups and people with a special interest or expertise in the topic, children’s authors not only get a chance for extra publicity and sales, but also find the enthusiasm and support that is so helpful in what can be a long, lonely journey to publication.

When I was researching Touch the Sky: Alice Coachman, Olympic High Jumper I reached out to Olympic historians, the U.S. Olympic Committee, and the International Olympic Committee, as well as to local track and field coaches. They gave me little-known facts about the 1948 Summer Olympics in London where [Coachman] won her gold medal, information about the high jump, and details about Alice’s career and performance that I couldn’t have found anywhere else.

For my latest book Heart on Fire: Susan B. Anthony Votes for President, I found a lot of support in Rochester, New York, where Anthony lived. The staff at the National Susan B. Anthony House, a museum and national historic monument dedicated to Anthony, was very helpful when I had questions about her clothing, where she went to vote that day, and the house itself, which plays a part in the story. Rochester-area historians were also very enthusiastic in supporting my research. The librarians at the University of Rochester and the Central Library of Rochester and Monroe County were invaluable in helping me find photos and primary sources.

Alison Formento’s books, This Tree Counts! (Albert Whitman, 2010), These Bees Count! (Albert Whitman, 2012), and These Seas Count! (Albert Whitman, March 2013), bring environmental issues to life for kids.
I’m planning to send copies of the book to all these people, in appreciation. I hope that they’ll pass it on so that Heart on Fire will find a readership among people who might not have known about the book otherwise. I’m doing the same for women’s history and voting rights organizations.”

Jacqueline Jules, author of several picture books and chapter books (Zapato Power series), clearly understands the importance of connecting with librarians.

“As a former school librarian with an MLS, I have developed personal learning networks through library organizations such as ALA, VAASL (Virginia Association of School Librarians), and other state library organizations. Through the Children’s Book Guild and my website, I have made contacts with local literacy organizations like Reading Connection, Turning the Page, Literacy and Prose, Partners in Print, Hope for Henry, Literacy Council of Northern Virginia, and For Love of Children. All of these organizations create literacy programming and/or provide books to children who have limited access to reading material in the Washington, DC, area. Last Thanksgiving, I went to Georgetown Hospital to read Duck for Turkey Day to the children in the Hope for Henry program. I’ve also done guest posts on Duck for Turkey Day for IRA (International Reading Association) and other literacy blogs. In general, I reach out and try to connect online whenever I am asked or see an opportunity.”

My fellow-author friends and I have learned that PLNs are an important tool, particularly because of the unusual topics we cover in our books. My personal learning network led me to several oceanographers for These Seas Count! Without the help of Dr. Thomas Grothues at the Institute of Marine and Coastal Sciences at Rutgers and the cooperative help of the other marine scientists with whom I connected, my new picture book would not have the accuracy and authority required to show how seas really do count in our world. Because of these connections, exciting plans are in the works to share my new book on World Oceans Day on June 8, 2013. The environmental topics I write about can be every bit as thrilling as a zombie attack or a pigeon riding a bus, especially to those who are part of my personal learning network.

Alison Formento is the author of This Tree Counts! (Albert Whitman 2010), This Tree, 1, 2, 3 (Albert Whitman 2011), These Bees Count! (Albert Whitman 2012), and These Seas Count! (Albert Whitman 2013). She is a former journalist whose work has appeared in the New York Times, Writer, Parenting Magazine, New Jersey Monthly, MacDirectory magazine, Parent Paper, and several other publications. She lives in New Jersey with her family.