Building Your

PERSONAL LEARNING NETWORK (PLN):

21st-Century School Librarians Seek Self-Regulated Professional Development Online

Judi Moreillon
info@storytrail.com

Professional Development 1.0

Before the Internet and the introduction of online professional development (PD) and social media tools, face-to-face PD was the traditional method for educator learning. Weekly faculty workshops, monthly or quarterly district-level staff development, summer institutes, and the like were and still are offered. For many school librarians, these traditional PD offerings, which are often focused on concerns specific to the classroom setting, do not meet the unique needs of library professionals. While it is important for school librarians to understand and support PD focused on classroom topics, they also have library-specific learning needs that can and should be addressed.

In larger districts, particularly those with district-level school librarian supervisors, some school librarians participate in monthly meetings designed exclusively for them. These shared learning and networking opportunities are important for building a cohesive cadre of library professionals and for meeting the specific needs of practicing school librarians. However, many school librarians work without a district-level library coordinator and must seek PD on their own. For some school librarians that means participating in library-focused professional development by attending state-level, national, and international conferences. Others, who are unable to secure professional leave or funding, seek out other venues.

"Self-regulated" PD, in which adult learners determine what they want to learn and how they will learn it, is aligned with the theory of andragogy, the science of adult learning. To summarize, adult learners:

- are self-directed and take responsibility for their own learning;

- have prior experiences that can be a positive or negative influence on learning;

- are motivated by an internal need to know;

- and have a problem-solving orientation to learning (Knowles 1990).

Professional Development 2.0

Bringing this model of adult learning into the 21st-century means that effective PD must be "connected to a teacher's (librarian's) own work with students and the teacher's (librarian's) curriculum and school culture, as well as connected with technology to the wider world of learning" (Trilling and Fadel 2009, 138). With the further development of the Internet and rise of social networking tools, educators have many online options in terms of how and where they seek self-regulated PD.

For school librarians, being part of a "connected" community provides support for getting specific needs met, solving personally relevant and meaningful problems, and developing professional expertise. AASL provides many avenues for members of the profession to learn with and from one another. These include AASL and subgroup electronic discussion lists, eCOLLAB for webinars <www.ala.org/aasl/ecollab>, the recently launched blog on the *Knowledge Quest* website <http://knowledgequest.aasl.org>, and the Twitter hashtag #aasl.

State-level, university-based, and independent groups of school librarians have also formed communities of practice (CoP) in the online environment (Wenger 1998). Through regular contact with one another, participants in these CoPs learn from one another, develop shared meanings through exchanging ideas and information, and enculturate one another into the ever-evolving profession of school librarianship. These groups also initiate and develop discussion lists, Webinars, blogs, and social media networks.

Electronic Discussion Lists

Electronic discussion lists have been sources for professional networking and learning since the invention of e-mail. Most list members are job-alike colleagues with common interests and concerns. Organizers and members use electronic discussion lists to disseminate information, share resources, pose questions, and seek expertise, advice, and the collective wisdom of the group. Some lists, such as AASLForum <aaslforum@lists.ala.org>, require that users be members of an organization.

Over time, these groups develop distinct cultures. Most lists have formal rules, and all have cultural norms that members are expected to follow. Some lists have moderators that approve or reject members' posts. Effective electronic discussion lists have protocols for subject lines, posting, responding, and forwarding posts. Some lists have a "chit chat" or social reputation; other lists are more "serious." When members have a shared commitment to each other's learning, lists can be useful PD tools.

Webinars

Webinars, focused on timely and specific topics, can be especially effective PD venues. Prospective webinar participants read the description, learn about the presenter(s), and self-select sessions based on their interests and need

to know. Just as school library services for pre-K—12 students are most effective at the point of need, webinars can meet the just-in-time learning needs of adult learners.

Not all webinars are the same in terms of content presentation, interactivity between the presenter and participants, and among the participants. Some webinar facilitators encourage participation through polls during the session. Some webinars are organized with Q&A throughout the session; others hold the "official" Q&A at the end. Most webinars offer a chat feature for participants to engage in side conversations during the presentation. There is often a moderator who collects the questions posed in the chat or notices chat themes and brings these to the attention of the presenter for discussion at some point during the webinar.

AASL sponsors webinars throughout the academic year using the eCOLLAB tool <www.ala.org/aasl/ecollab/upcoming>. The association also offers an archive of complimentary webinars on a wide variety of topics <www.ala.org/aasl/ecollab/complimentary>. In one such webinar, Patricia Owen discusses AASL's workbook *A 21st-Century Approach to School Librarian Evaluation* (AASL 2012) <www.ala.org/aasl/ecollab/evaluation>, which offers an evaluation rubric based on *Empowering Learners: Guidelines for School Library Programs* (AASL 2009). Some of the complimentary webinars also spotlight back issues of *Knowledge Quest* such as one presented when the *KQ* "Coteaching" issue was published <www.ala.org/aasl/ecollab/coteaching-web>.

Blogs

Blogs abound in the world of school librarianship. Bloggers in our field represent a wide range of interests and variety of perspectives—too many to cite here. In 2014 the School Librarian Certification Degrees website published a list of the "Top Fifty School Library Blogs" <http://tinyurl.com/slibrarianblogs14>. While the stats on the site are not current, this matrix provides a list to consider.

Some school librarian bloggers focus exclusively on issues related to technology tools and trends, some on children's and young adult literature, and some shed light on a wide array of topics and issues. Many school librarians who seek regular PD follow specific blogs and bloggers through RSS feeds, e-mail alerts, and apps that remind them to check in with these thought leaders. Most blogs, however, lack the interactivity that some adult learners need for effective online learning. While blogs feature multiple ways for bloggers and followers to share content via social media, very few blog posts engender comments or vibrant exchanges of ideas.

Blogs that involve multiple bloggers avoid the single perspective of most blogs. Currently sixteen different contributors are providing posts to AASL's *KQ* blog. The 2015–2016 *KQ* blog contributors were selected by the *KQ* Working Group (which included the chairs of the AASL Blog Committee, the *KQ* Editorial Board, and the *Essential Links* Editorial Board Committee). These bloggers are listed on the *KQ* website at <http://tinyurl.com/kqbloggers1516>. Interested in joining these bloggers? Please complete the application at <www.ala.org/aasl/kq/bloggers>.

For school librarians, being part of a **"CONNECTED" COMMUNITY** provides support for getting specific needs met, solving **PERSONALLY RELEVANT** and **MEANINGFUL** problems, and developing **PROFESSIONAL EXPERTISE.**

Table 1. A sampling of state and national Twitter groups for school librarians.

Selected State and National Twitter Groups for School Librarians	
Kentucky	#kylchat
Massachusetts	#msla
North Carolina	#nctlchat
North Dakota	#ndlibchat
Virginia	#vaslchat
Texas	#txlchat
National (Teacher Librarian)	#tlchat
National (Elementary Librarian)	#tlelem

The *Building a Culture of Collaboration* (*BACC*) blog is another group blog <http://buildingacultureof-collaboration.edublogs.org>. This blog is organized around a topic of the month and is facilitated by four school librarian educators (Karla Collins, Lucy Santos Green, Judy Kaplan, and Judi Moreillon) who rotate responsibility for weekly posts. The goal is to share multiple perspectives on each topic. While both the *KQ* and *BACC* blogs seek to stimulate professional conversations, like many other blogs they suffer from the dearth of comments from the field and lack lively exchanges.

Twitter and Twitter Chat Groups

Micro-blogging via Twitter is another way for school librarians to share ideas and information and connect with colleagues. Almost all school librarian organizations use Twitter to reach out to their members at the international level (#iaslonline), national level (#aasl), and state and district levels, too (see table 1). Following professional associations and using additional hashtags such as #librarians or #schoollibrarians can help individuals build a robust PLN.

Individuals also use Twitter to disseminate information. Some tweeters are focused on broadcasting information and collecting followers; others tweet to exchange ideas and make connections. For school librarians who are seeking an online PLN, Twitter chat groups are some of the latest online PD venues. Table 1 shows some of the active state and national Twitter chat groups that, at the time of this writing, meet regularly.

#txlchat Research Study

School librarians who have yet to experience PD via social networks may wonder what they could learn from such activities. Preservice school librarians who know they must plan for continuous improvement may have concerns about how they can continue their learning once they earn their degrees. School librarian educators may question whether or not they should encourage graduate students to get involved in PD-focused social media networks. Like me, these librarian educators may also wonder if venues such as Twitter groups offer information that can help professors keep their fingers on the pulse of the profession and practice lifelong learning.

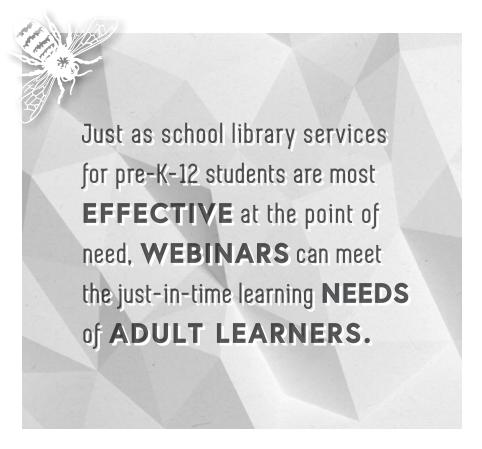With these questions in mind, I reached out to study the #txlchat Twitter group in the 2014–2015 school year. During the academic year this Twitter group meets on Tuesdays from 8:00 to 8:30 p.m. Central Time. The purpose of the study was to thoroughly describe the lived experiences of the cofounders, core group members, and participants. I set out to learn about the #txlchat culture and the value participants place on this online PD experience. In addition to answering general questions about the efficacy of PD via social media, my hope was that this study could provide insights to help other Twitter chat groups create, build, and extend their PLNs.

I collected data via the #txlchat archives, interviews with key informants (cofounders and selected core group members), a survey of participants, and my participant-observer field notes. These are the research questions that guided the data analysis:

What are the procedures and practices of #txlchat?

What are the motivations and characteristics of the cofounders, core group members, and participants in this PLN?

How do participants describe the value of this PLN?

Just as school library services for pre-K-12 students are most **EFFECTIVE** at the point of need, **WEBINARS** can meet the just-in-time learning **NEEDS** of **ADULT LEARNERS.**

The research study, conducted totally online, involved interviews with the three #txlchat cofounders and selected members of the core group of moderators. (The complete study report includes the interviewees' vignettes reported in their own words.) I disseminated a link to an online survey over a six-week period during the chat; twenty-five people responded. I had access to the entire #txlchat archives, which are available to the public at <http://txlchat.weebly.com>. I collected data from forty-five chat archives. After my study was approved by my university's Institutional Review Board, I also collected field notes during my three-month focused participation in the chat.

The three #txlchat cofounders' original goal in launching the chat was to provide a democratic forum in which all participants have an equal voice. These founders held and still hold high expectations for

the chat's reach. From the very first chat in April 2013 through February 24, 2015 (the last chat included in my study), 111 Texas librarians and 121 librarians, authors, and others from out of state participated in the chat. The cofounders hoped that school librarians would get connected for professional learning and networking. As cofounder @sharongullet noted: "If librarians become comfortable with the Twitter chat then they will more likely use the hashtag outside the Twitter chats to stay connected."

The cofounders also hold high expectations for the impact the chat can make on a participant's practice.

In her interview, cofounder @_MichelleCooper asserted that it is important to remain "open to continuous learning and creating, imagining and innovating." This is how she defines her daily practice of librarianship; this is her aspiration for chat participants as well. Cofounder @EdneyLib (Marsha Edney) expressed the hope that participants will "embrace innovations in teaching and increased student involvement in their own learning" because #txlchat participants experience ownership in their own PD in the weekly chats.

A group of twelve moderators, three for each week of the month, determines the chat topic, rotates responsibility for promoting the chat, and facilitates the exchange during the chat. Chats are organized around four or five focusing questions, and there is a protocol for posting the questions and answering them. For example, the first question is posted as "Q.1," and participants begin their responses to that question with "A.1." All posts include the #txlchat hashtag. Chats related to technology tools were the most frequent topics during the period of my study. Some of those included connecting on Skype, being a "connected" librarian, and marketing via social media; these chats were also among the top ten in terms of the greatest number of participants, tweets, and retweets.

In their interviews, core group members expressed the value they place on their participation in the chats. Elementary school librarian @shawnaford1 attested to the benefit she receives from just-in-time learning: "Whether it be participating in a chat or just reading my Twitter feed, I learn something new. I can spend five minutes, 15 minutes, or 30 minutes searching the #txlchat feed and

learn something." @sue_fitz, a middle school librarian, noted: "Many #txlchat participants are eager to share, model, and teach their practices via social media. Chat participants are always amazed at what others are able to accomplish and we eagerly respond with positive encouragement." High school librarian @txlibraryguy suggested: "When school librarians and classroom teachers have more experience with social media, they will be able to integrate social networking tools more effectively into instruction for students."

The #txlchat cofounders and core group members have created a "democratic" context for the chat and are committed to ensuring that participants' voices are heard. Everyone I interviewed and those who responded to the survey noted the benefits they receive from learning from others and from sharing their knowledge and experience with the group. @debramarshall summed up her experience this way: "I am a better librarian because of Twitter."

Ryan D. Visser, Lea C. Evering, and David E. Barrett (2014) found that K–12 teachers who use Twitter for self-directed PD highly value the relationships they form and the information they share and receive via this tool. This is also true for the participants in #txlchat. My complete study report has been published in *School Libraries Worldwide*, volume 21, issue 2.

Self-Regulated Online Professional Learning

School librarians have many ways to build their PLNs. In addition to the venues discussed in this article, Facebook, Nings, Google+ communities, and more offer PD venues for "connected" school librarians to "think, create, share, and grow." While AASL's Learning4Life initiative motto is intended for pre-K–12 students (see more at <www.ala.org/aasl/learning4life/school-librarians>), it can and should apply equally to school library leaders who are charged with continuous learning and sharing their learning with others.

When you are searching for self-regulated PD, I hope you will check out some of these resources.

Determine what works best for your learning needs and your schedule. Get involved and participate. Post your comments in response to blog posts and use Twitter hashtags to build connections, community, and your PLN. Share your new knowledge with students, classroom teacher colleagues, and administrators. Be a "connected" lifelong learner school librarian leader.

Judi Moreillon *is an associate professor in the School of Library and Information Studies at Texas Woman's University. She has served as a school librarian at every instructional level. She currently researches online professional development networks for school librarians and the roles of school and public librarians in literacy communities. Judi has written books, numerous articles, and several book chapters focused on the school librarian's instructional partner role. Judi is also the author of two recent professional books for school librarians and classroom teachers focused on coteaching reading comprehension strategies. Judi has been an AASL member for twenty-five years. She currently serves as the chair of AASL's Student Bridge Scholarship Program Committee and is the chair of ALSC's journal* Children and Libraries *Advisory Board. She tweets @CactusWoman.*

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