

Concept: PERSONAL LEARNING NETWORKS

Brief overview of concept:

Forming learning networks, where peers can support each other, has the potential to greatly enhance learning. Peer-based communities of learners can develop their own scaffolding for learning. Scott *et al.* (2014) also observed that by encouraging students to collaborate, and share their resources using collaborative online media, learners felt that their learning was made more-effective. Lee *et al.* (2014) suggested that peer-interactions and self-regulated learning may be mutually supportive, as both potentially develop deep learning strategies and encourage independence and self-criticism. Mercer's (1996) observations of novices learning together suggested the 'intermental development zone', a gap in the knowledge between two novice learners, which is narrowed via discussion and challenging talk.

Collaborative activity in assessment can be a powerful agent of learning (Brown *et al.*, 2016; Evans, 2015). Sub-dimension AF3 of the EAT framework highlights the importance of peer-assessment and peer-feedback on effective engagement with assessment and feedback. Peer-assessment develops shared understandings between learners, and identifies areas of expertise in individuals in a peer relationship.

Though understanding the limits of their own knowledge, and the expertise of others, all learners develop a '**Personal Learning Network**' (PLN, Richardson & Mancabelli, 2011) with which they support their learning. A PLN is the totality of support resources that an individual has to draw on for learning in their professional (or everyday) life. As shown in Figure 1, a PLN will typically include: **People** the individual knows, or has contact with; **social groups** the individual is part of; **technologies** (such as online resources, as well as non-digital sources of information) that are accessible; **actions, choices, and behaviours** the individual undertakes; and set **activities** that are part of their professional or domestic life.

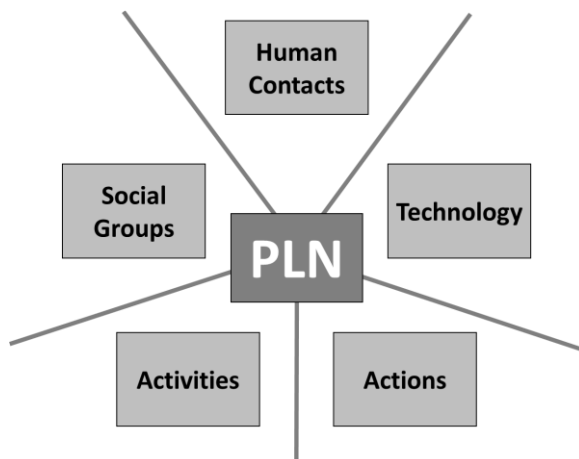


Figure 1: **the constituent elements of a Personal Learning Network**

PLNs can exist as part of a broader structure of a 'Personal Learning Environment' (see Figure 2, Wheeler, 2010) which takes in broader experiences and informal learning experiences through the media and everyday interactions. Intersecting both of these spaces is the individual's engagement with their 'Personal Web Tools' and 'Cloud Learning Environment', which are technology-focused spaces that provide the learner with online sources of information, or connections and collaborations with individuals who can provide support (Rutherford, 2019).

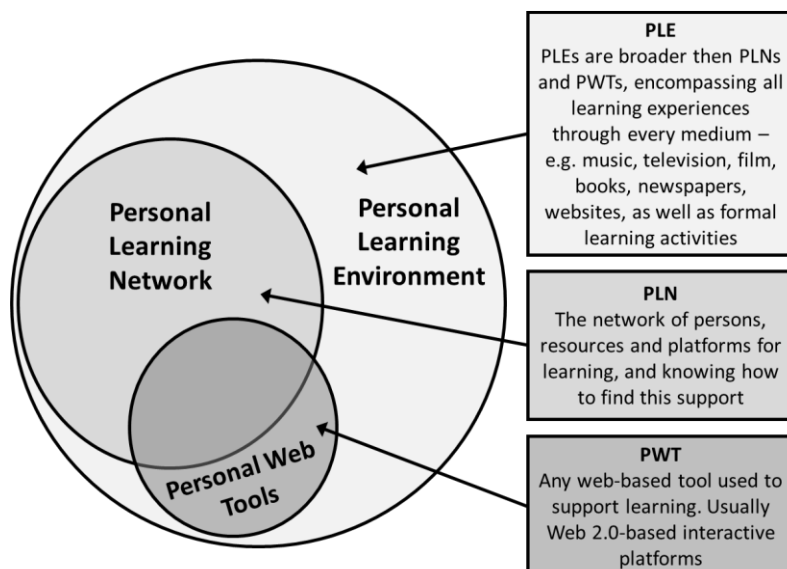


Figure 2 – Interactions between the Personal Learning Environment (PLE), Personal Learning Network (PLN) and suite of Personal Web Tools (PWT). There is overlap between PLN and PWT, however both are constituents of the PLE. Adapted from Wheeler, 2010.

The fundamental aspect of a PLN is the co-construction of the network and its reciprocity. Human members of the PLN (be they face-to-face collaborators or online connections) provide each other with support, but also obtain support from each other. There is therefore a two-way flow of social and digital capital from each part of the network, such as providing support to others, answering questions, providing technical support, or sharing references, ideas and/or online resources. PLNs are self-organising and self-developing, so when the individual changes their environment, or focus for learning, the PLN will – out of necessity – also change, as new social and academic groups are formed, and contacts from the old network disappear.

A key consideration for assessment, therefore, is how do we support the development of PLNs in our educational activities – and in particular through assessment as learning approach. Effective management of the PLN can be developed through assessments which include peer interactions and peer-assessment activities. Properly scaffolded peer interactions can support the development of PLNs and learners expanding their PLN to address unfamiliar problems.

References

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